

**Homily in the Crypt Chapel
of Blessed Louis Brisson
Troyes, France
September 24, 2012**



Luke 8:16-18

Jesus said to the crowd:

*"No one who lights a lamp conceals it
with a vessel or sets it under a bed;
rather, he places it on a lampstand
so that those who enter may see the light.*

*For there is nothing hidden that will not become visible, and nothing secret that will not be
known and come to light.*

Take care, then, how you hear.

*To anyone who has, more will be given,
and from the one who has not, even what he seems to have will be taken away."*

It is a tremendous honor to be here in the presence of all you Oblate confreres, many of whom I haven't met before or only briefly, Oblate Sisters and friends of our mutual communities. Here in this sacred place where the earthly remains of our founder lie, something very special unites us as members of one spiritual Salesian family. I appreciate the privilege of being asked to break open Word and Sacrament. I owe my inspiration to Father Dirk Koster, our Dutch confrere, and his wonderful biography of Father, now Blessed, Louis Brisson. The assigned scriptures for today's liturgy, both from the Book of Proverbs and Luke's gospel, are a series of seemingly unrelated sayings from which I'll try to draw some cohesive insight. Although I do feel like Father Brisson when he once wrote to his parents from the sanitarium at Plombieres (or what we'd call a health spa today) with his friend Father Noel:

"The pastor at Plombieres," he reported to them, "has welcomed us very warmly and has invited me to preach on Sunday. Send me the sermon on the Eucharist. Mama knows where to find it. I am a little nervous about this sermon and it is going to disorient me a bit. For the first time I am going to take a sweat bath."

Well, I was disoriented after I agreed to John McGee's request to preside at this liturgy and I don't have a Mama to call, so I have been sweating over this a lot.

The brief sayings from chapter 8 of Luke's gospel are better understood when we recall what came before them and what follows them. The passage preceding today's gospel is Luke's version of the parable of the sower and the seed -- the seed being the Word of God and the different soils being the varying degrees of responsiveness to God's Word, from allowing it to wither away, to choking it off, to giving it full bloom in the rich soil of a faithful disciple's heart. "Listen, anyone who has ears to hear," Jesus warns. The passage following today's text relates the scene of Jesus' family trying to get to see him and being soundly dismissed. "My mother and my brothers," Jesus declared, "are those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice." So this entire chapter of Luke's gospel is a meditation on God's Word -- how we allow it to touch us, penetrate us, stir something within us and move us to new depths of conversion.

To me these three short verses name three gospel traits or three invitations to conversion presented to each of us and, with which Blessed Louis Brisson struggled mightily throughout his life.

The first is a challenge to be **luminous**. "No one who lights a lamp conceals it... He places it on a lamp stand so that those who enter may see the light." Between bouts with poor health, personal self-doubt, and anxiety about what direction his life should take, it seems that Father Brisson was not always a ball of fire. And he was a "mama's boy" who longed for peaceful security. As Father Koster writes: *"He had thought that his days as rector would be a pleasant time for him, in the shadow of a peaceful convent and the peaceful security of his own home with his parents."* How mistaken he was! He had to really hear and respond to the Gospel demand that hiding one's light is not the way of discipleship. "To whom much is given, much is expected." And look at the grace that came from his conversion to become light for others. Even the Troyes tourist office's brochure acknowledges our Founder as "inventor, chef, architect, property developer, caterer... and clockmaker."

The second challenge presented by the gospel warns against a "closed door policy" in our lives. God calls us to be **transparent** in our dealings with each other, our communion with God and in our honesty with self: "What is hidden will be seen. And what is out of sight will be brought into the open and made known." The tug-of-war between the Good Mother and Father Brisson was nearly a life-long battle of wills. From the moment of their first encounter and the Good Mother's bold assertion that God had wondrous plans for young Louis which he had to bring to completion, his reaction was more of resistance than agreement. "She sees all my sins," he said. With his rational "animus," always finding it difficult to share his innermost feelings, and with her intuitive "anima," upfront and visionary, it took years for Father Brisson and Mother Chappuis to come to a mutual appreciation and shared understanding. Father Brisson explained in a letter he wrote to Father Perrot how his own life opened up: "I felt an absolute aversion and did not want to pay any attention to what my logical mind was telling me was the imagination of a devout sister." What amazing humility and example of dying to self in finally accepting God's will for him revealed through Mother Chappuis. Thanks be to God that the Spirit moved Father Brisson's heart and it became transparent, or we wouldn't be here celebrating today. And what a long, hard road he walked with so much closed up inside. When, on her

deathbed, Brisson finally told the Good Mother about the affirming vision of Our Lord which he received when he ultimately surrendered to God's will, she smiled and could only say: "How could you have kept this hidden for so long?" The Word of God will triumph in the end. "What is out of sight will be brought into the open and made known."

The third call to conversion offered in today's gospel is an invitation to be **dynamic**. In other words, there is no "standing still" in our movement toward God - either we grasp and move ahead or we lose our footing entirely. "If you have something, you will be given more. If you have nothing, even what you seem to have will be taken away." Our founder was a brilliant individual -- a scientist and inventor. His was a restless and very creative mind. He had to learn to apply his mental curiosity to his spiritual life as well, and to the task of founding the Oblate sisters and priests - a task he so ardently resisted. Once he finally accepted what the Good Mother, for thirty years, had been trying to convince him to do, he became fully alive. His inner light flared to fullness when brought out from hiding.

Father Brisson was truly energized as he undertook the highlight of his life - founding two religious congregations. The marvelous growth of the Oblate Sisters and Oblate Fathers only increased his enthusiasm, nor was it diminished by internal struggles, suppression by the State or troubles with those in authority in the Church. That enthusiasm for life stayed with him, so that even as death neared he could say: "Do you know why I am always so happy? When you get old it is easy to become a complainer. But that's not so fine for God or for other people. So I try to be as happy and jovial as I was when fifteen." "If you have something, more will be given." Our founder had it, and he "got" it because, in fact, he learned to give it for the sake of others.

So how does this Salesian spirit, born of another era and culture, and incarnated in our founders, speak to us today as American Catholics? What impetus for deeper conversion does today's gospel offer us in light of Father Brisson's beatification, especially if this event is meant to be a gift, not just to Oblates, but to the entire Church? Is this a call for the Church to let her **light** shine more brightly? There's no doubt that our light has grown dim. After many years of scandals, the credibility of the Church has diminished in the public eye. The "culture wars" so heavily emphasized by Church leaders, pitting Church against society, make us seem like gloomy harbingers, rather than heralds of the joyful optimism so evident in the writing and teaching of St. Francis de Sales. The lack of **transparency** in the interactions of the Church -- the silencing of creative theologians, the suspicion of women religious and women in general, mandates made about liturgy and choices in leadership without dialogue or consultation among the People of God who are most affected. These "secret" decisions ought to be scrutinized with openness and honesty under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who has been given to the entire Church. Our Salesian charism of mutual respect between men and women, as witnessed by the complementarity between Father Brisson and Mother Chappuis, is a gift we Oblate Fathers, Brothers and Sisters can offer to enlighten the Church and call her to greater transparency so critically necessary at this time in the Church's life. This significant grace was affirmed and validated at Father Brisson's beatification and stands as a challenge for his sons and daughters whom he guides and inspires.

Finally, as you and I have felt the **dynamic** power of the Spirit in this special time and place, the gospel calls the Church to ongoing conversion, to let the fire of the Holy Spirit inflame her again, freely and unencumbered. Before his death last month, the esteemed Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Martini, offered a bold, even scathing assessment of the Church he faithfully served. He said the Church in Europe and America is tired; it has been left behind for two hundred years and must pursue a path of radical change. The Cardinal asked: "Can you

remove the ash from the fire so as to revive the flame of love? First we have to look for this fire. Where are the individuals full of generosity like the Good Samaritan? Who has faith like the Roman centurion? Who are enthusiastic as John the Baptist? Who dare to be new as Paul? Who are as faithful as Mary Magdalene?" Today, as Salesian pilgrims in the city of Troyes, we can proudly answer the Cardinal's question. That flame of love still burns brightly for us and for the entire Church in the hearts and living memory of de Sales and de Chantal, Aviat and Chappuis and in our beloved Father, Louis Brisson. We are now called to be the ones in whom the fire is kindled into full flame and who live out of the gift of his legacy.

Picture in your mind that wonderful portrait of Father Brisson unveiled at the beginning of the Beatification ceremony in the Cathedral of Troyes. Picture the twinkle in his eye, the smile on his lips, the warm glow of his face. In light of his life and inspiration, I'll suggest a motto as an expression of today's gospel, not to replace "Vive Jesu"/"Live Jesus", but to flow from and interpret it for us and for our Church and world which are in desperate need of our Salesian charism:

BE RADIANT! BE OPEN! BE ALIVE!

John Kasper, OSFS