

Venerable LOUIS BRISSON (1817-1908)

French priest and founder of the Oblates and Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales

Tenui nec dimittam

(Song of Songs 3:4)

“I have taken hold and will not let go” – so says the shepherd girl about the bridegroom for whom she ardently longs in the biblical Song of Songs. After searching for him in vain, she suddenly comes upon him; she desires to hold him and promises not to loosen that metaphorical grip. Hers is a fervent affection toward him, an unceasing thought about him, an ardent passion for him.

For Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Bishop and Doctor of the Church, that biblical story narrates the salvific history of God’s love for the world. The divine solicitude for human life gives each of us a reason to hope, for the God who has taken hold of humanity in the Incarnation of his Son will not, through the power of the Resurrection, ever let go. And this hope becomes a motive for us to persevere, in faith and hope and love, throughout the course of our lives.

The Venerable Father Louis Brisson appropriated this Salesian insight through his life-long relationship with the religious order founded by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal – the Visitation of Holy Mary. As chaplain to the monastery in Troyes, he learned this divine-human love story by interacting with those who lived it each day. It is no small wonder, then, that this biblical wisdom would later provide him with a motto for his own religious congregation.

But even before his monastic encounters, Father Brisson followed this dictum in his own life. We see it in the early days of his seminary training. For an only child, going off to seminary was a difficult decision. Arriving there only to find that he was left back from his class was painful experience for a young man. Then, in his second year of studies, he was actually sent home for a time due to his failing health. Still, he knew that his vocation was God’s way of taking hold of him, and that God would not let go.

So, too did Father Brisson hold on to God. After having been ordained a priest, he suffered from such frail health that on four separate occasions he had to spend time in a sanitarium. Yet, despite his exhaustions, he persevered. This “not letting go” would come to characterize even more strongly his future endeavors.

That future was shaped, in no small part, by Father Brisson’s association with the “Good Mother” Marie de Sales Chappuis, the religious superior of the Visitation monastery in Troyes. Steeped in the spirit of the founders of the Visitation, she would exemplify, in a humble and gentle way, the “taking hold and not letting go” that would give rise to Father Brisson’s greatest works. In 1844, following her return to Troyes from the monastery in Paris, she began a long series of conversations with him about the realization of her “project” of founding a religious

community in the spirit of Saint Francis de Sales. Her inspiration took hold, and for the next thirty years she would not let him go, until at last he acquiesced.

With a complete trust in divine Providence, Father Brisson founded the two congregations of the Oblates – the Sisters in 1868 and the Fathers in 1876. In doing so, he came to the full realization of what that biblical verse meant. With the aid of Saint Leonie Aviat, he took hold of a plan to provide catechesis and pastoral care for the influx of young working girls in the burgeoning textile industry. Soon after, he took hold of a school in Troyes, then a mission in Africa, and the second Oblate congregation began to blossom.

Having taken hold of the inspiration to establish these religious works, Father Brisson also gave witness to the virtue of perseverance in not letting go of God's will despite the grave difficulties that attended the early years of their development. On the one hand, he demonstrated humble courage and gentle forbearance in dealing with local struggles over finances, personnel, and jurisdiction. On the other hand, he exemplified the steadfastness of the biblical lovers when the French government, in 1903, abolished the religious orders and closed their apostolic works. Forced into a state of abject poverty, with even his familial home auctioned away, Father Brisson nevertheless clung to his faith and confidence in God's will for himself and his spiritual children. Now, more than a century later, the two religious congregations of the Oblates have not let go of their founder's charism, as they continue the work of Catholic education throughout the world.

Father Brisson's life and work testify to that confidence in God of which he spoke to the Oblates in 1891: "If everything seems lost ... and everyone has already surrendered his hope, the Lord will show his might and influence. Then it must become clear to everyone that the decision lies only in His hands and we are capable of nothing." He knew and lived the conviction that God had taken hold of him and would not let go. May the holy example of this venerable priest now be an inspiration for others also to know the beauty and comfort of the biblical song of divine love.

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