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.¹

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.²

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

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

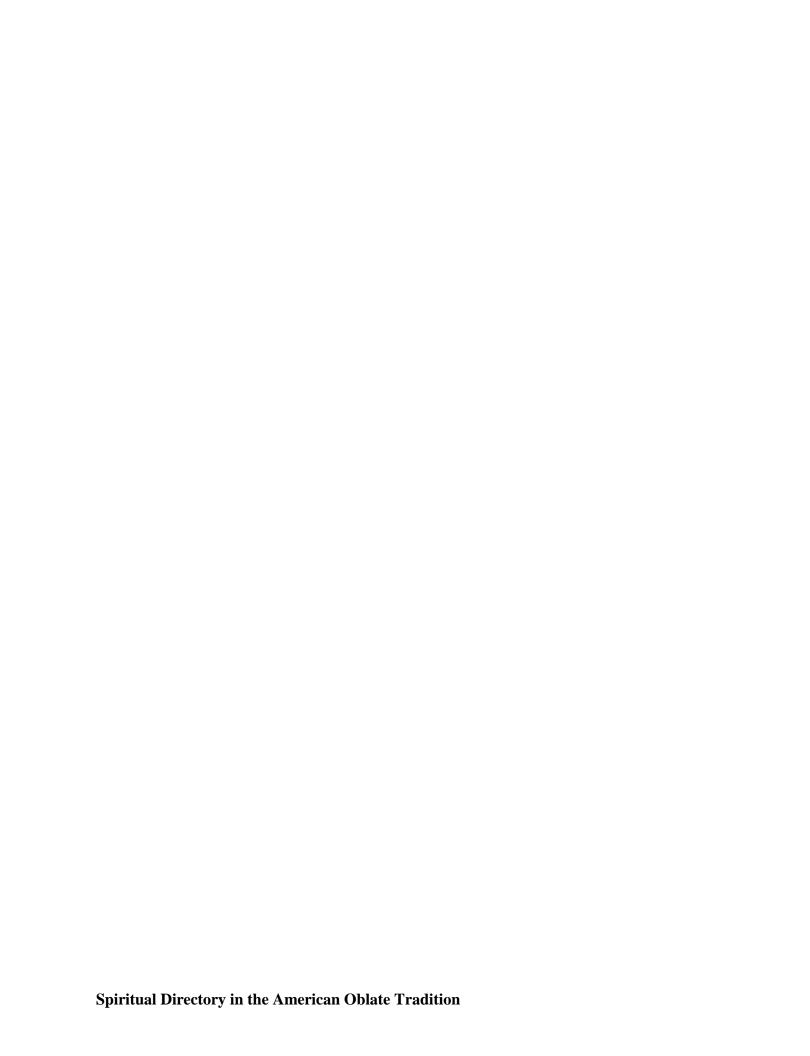
Comments and observations on the Spiritual Directory, in one form or other, are pervasive in the first volumes of the *Echo*. We will note some of the more important ones. An exhortation on the First Particular Wish of the Directory is introduced by a poem of Henry Vergeiner, paraphrasing this wish. 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.¹⁰ 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, not withstanding 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.¹¹

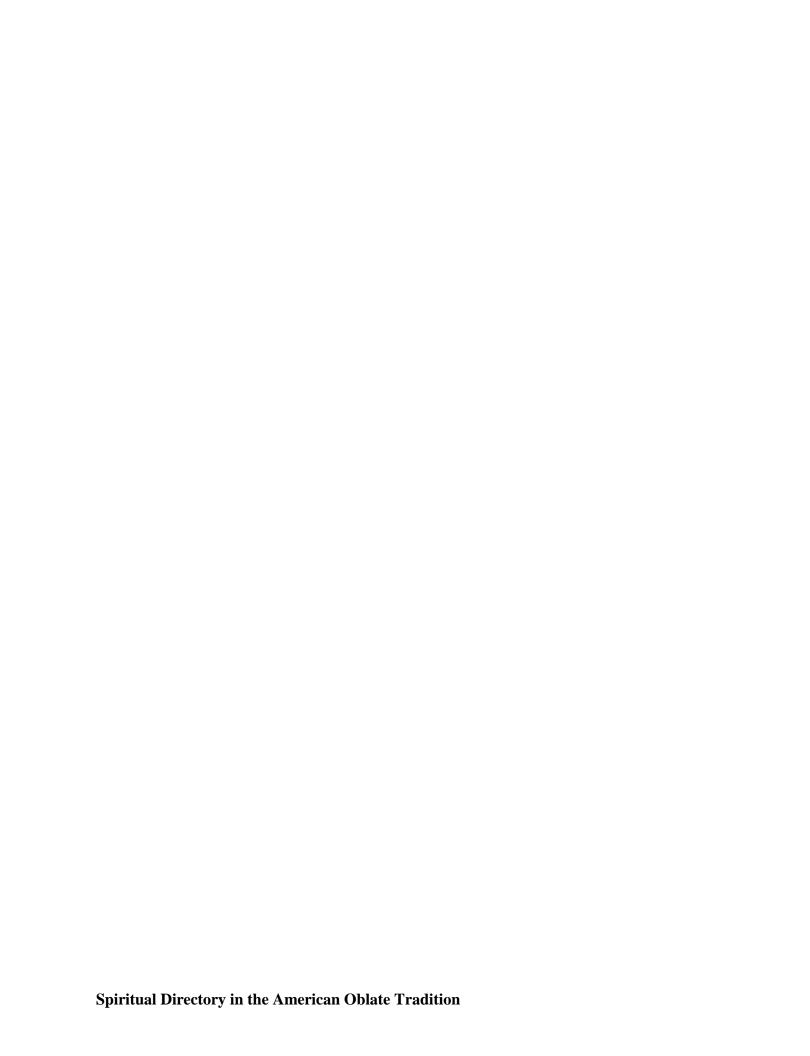
this little book in the United States. We have already pointed out several significant observations of Fr. Brisson on the absolute importance of the Spiritual Directory for the Oblate. To get a better understanding of this tradition, it will be helpful to give additional examples.

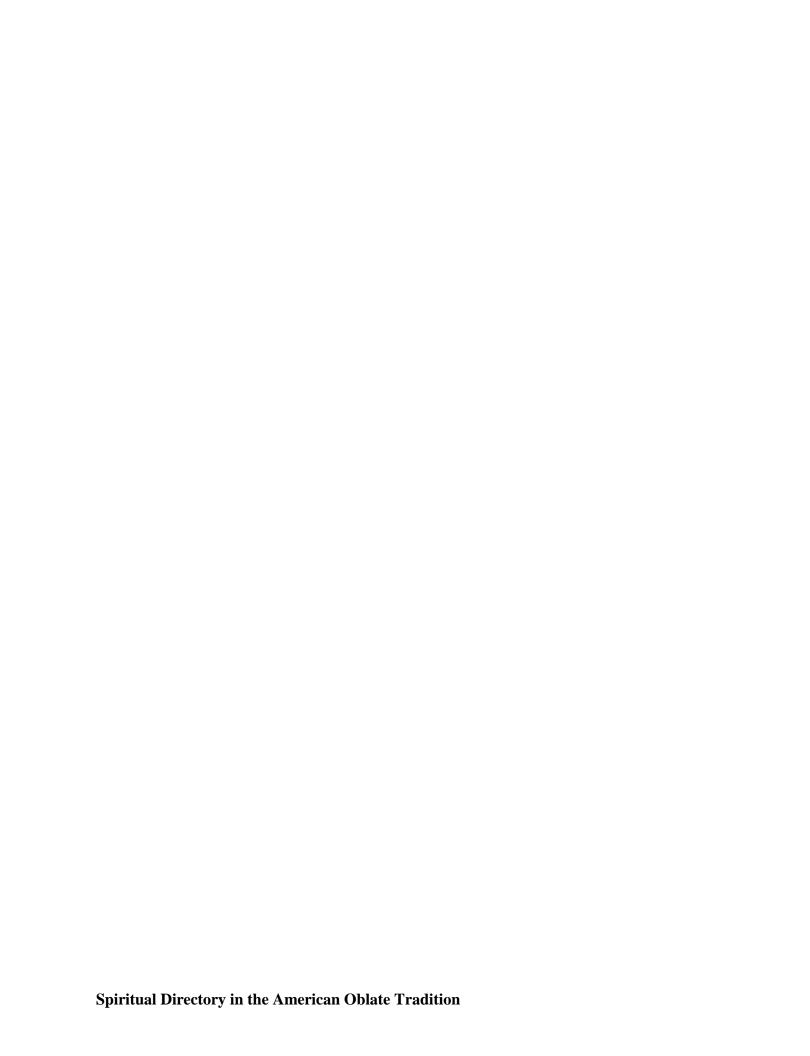
Understanding full well, that the Directory proposes a multiplicity of interior actions, Fr. Brisson, reflecting the mind of St. Francis de Sales, explains the purpose of this multiplicity: "All of us, especially the beginners, must be formed in this mold [that of St. F



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. 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).





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

The Oblates of the Wilmington-

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ Anthony Dougherty, OSFS, "Pioneers of the American Province of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales,"

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

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 s 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)



¹² 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.

¹³ 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 all 1\(\mathbb{E}\)ecoasid5(t)-13(n6(n)6(4) TJE10(B)-76.0)6(is)4()-2(m)19(3(it)-(.)-2()-5(p)k()-135(

²⁰ Salesian Light, (January-February, 2000), 1.

²¹ As cited by Herman Schalück, "Religious Life on the Threshold of the Third Millennium," *Theology Diges*t, 47, No. 1, (Spring 2000), 45.