Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS

"Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales: an historic transition"

The Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, who have served here in the Diocese of Toledo since 1943, have announced that they will unite their two provinces, Toledo-Detroit and Wilmington-Philadelphia, to form one North American Province in January 2027. They have selected Toledo native and St. Francis de Sales School Class of 1999 alumnus, V. Rev. Michael Newman, OSFS, to serve as its first provincial. Because this is such a significant moment for the Oblates, I asked the present Provincial Rev. Joseph Newman, OSFS, to share with us information about this transition. I'm so glad to offer here, Father Joe's message:

"In his Apostolic Letter Totum Amoris Est, Pope Francis reflected on the enduring relevance of St. Francis de Sales, noting that the gentleman saint taught "there was no better place to find God, and to help others to find him, than in the hearts of the women and men of his time." Throughout their ministry in the Diocese of Toledo, the Oblates have faithfully embodied this vision. As they form a united province, they will continue their ministries in the Diocese of Toledo, committed to their patron's conviction that "God is the God of the human heart," bringing Christ's gentleness, hope, and love to all they serve.

The Oblates of St. Francis de Sales were founded in France in 1875 by Blessed Louis Brisson, who was inspired by the life and Salesian teaching of Venerable Mother Marie de Sales Chappuis, a Visitation Sister. Faithful to the vision of St. Francis de Sales, Bl. Brisson established a community dedicated to proclaiming the Gospel through gentleness, humility, optimism, and the universal call to holiness. Today, the Salesian spirit is alive in Toledo and throughout the Diocese, where the Oblates embrace and share their patron's vision to "Live Jesus."

The first Oblates arrived in the U.S. in 1893 to serve the Sisters of Divine Compassion in New York. The congregation's presence steadily grew, and by the 1940s, the American Province had extended its ministry into the Midwest, where Toledo emerged as a center of Oblate life and mission. Bishop Karl Alter invited the Oblates to come to Toledo in 1943 to teach at Central Catholic High School. The first Oblates quickly gained a reputation for academic excellence, pastoral availability, and the distinctive Salesian approach to forming young people through gentleness, encouragement, and personal attention.

In 1953, the Oblates again answered the call to serve the Diocese of Toledo. At the invitation of Bishop George Rehring, they established St. Pius X Parish and became its first pastors while continuing their educational ministry. Later, the Oblates began ministry at Gesu Parish. Today, Fr. Craig Irwin, OSFS, serves as pastor of St. Pius X and Gesu, and the St. Pius rectory is home to the Oblate Novitiate, where future Oblates begin their formation.

The success of the Oblates' ministry at Central Catholic led Bishop Rehring to ask them to establish a Catholic college preparatory high school for boys. St. Francis de Sales High School was founded by the Oblates in 1955 and quickly became, and remains, one of the premier Catholic educational institutions in northwest Ohio. The school develops students academically, spiritually, socially, and physically in the spirit of Salesian Spirituality, guiding young men to know and love God and through St. Francis' invitation to "be who you are and be that well."

For generations, St. Francis de Sales School has fostered a brotherhood rooted in faith, tradition, and the commitment to transform boys into Christian gentlemen. The school continues to thrive with strong enrollment and an ambitious vision for the future. Led by Fr. Joe Newman, OSFS, President, the school is expanding athletic facilities, modernizing classrooms, and enhancing performing arts spaces. Alumni are leaders throughout the nation, embodying faith and Salesian values in their personal and professional lives.

The Oblates' commitment to forming young people extends beyond the classroom. For decades, Camp DeSales, located in the Irish Hills of Brooklyn, Michigan, has welcomed thousands of young people for retreats, camps, and faith-filled experiences. Among its signature programs are Salesian Leadership Camp (SLC) and Catholic Youth Camp (CYC), attended by students from parishes across the Diocese. Camp DeSales is also home to Charity on Fire, a community of full and part-time missionaries serving Catholic youth.

Another more recent Oblate apostolate for the youth of the Diocese of Toledo is Live Jesus Ministries, developed in partnership with the Diocese. This is an innovative approach to youth evangelization centered on small-group discipleship. Guided by trained adult mentors, young people regularly gather within their parishes to develop authentic friendships and meaningful relationships with Christ. Live Jesus Ministries is renewing youth ministry across the Diocese by forming young disciples who are rooted in Christ and equipped to share a lifelong relationship with Him.

While the Oblates staff St. Pius X Parish, Gesu Parish, and Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, their ministry extends well beyond these communities. Throughout the Diocese of Toledo, they generously assist parishes by celebrating Mass, administering sacraments, preaching missions, and collaborating with diocesan clergy. They also maintain a longstanding and cherished ministry with the Sisters of the Visitation, serving as their chaplains by celebrating daily Mass, administering the sacraments, and providing spiritual direction, continuing the rich heritage shared by the Visitation Sisters and the Oblates.

The establishment of one province has been more than an organizational undertaking; it has been a profound journey of spiritual renewal for the community led by V. Rev. Joe Newman, OSFS, Provincial, Toledo-Detroit Province, and V. Rev. Jack Kolodziej, OSFS, Provincial, Wilmington-Philadelphia Province. "This spiritual renewal asks us to open our hearts to the roots of our congregation, recall our mission, and respond once more to Fr. Brisson's directive 'To reprint the Gospel on our hearts, so the Savior will be seen walking again on earth.' This effort will not only renew our own hearts, but also impact the way we lead, minister, and live," said Fr. Newman. When, in January 2027, Fr. Michael Newman assumes the role of provincial for the new North American Province, he will lead this refounding and reconfiguration effort."

The formation of the new Oblate North American Province is a grace-filled moment for the Diocese of Toledo. As the Oblates renew their commitment to this local Church, they do so with confidence in the Holy Spirit and a renewed faithfulness to their mission. Rooted in the Salesian virtues of gentleness, humility, and joyful optimism, they will continue to accompany God's people and proclaim the Gospel. I am so very grateful for their fidelity to consecrated religious life and look forward to our continued partnership in the mission of Christ and His Church. May God richly bless them as they begin this new chapter among us.

+Daniel E. Thomas

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