

Salesian Imaging of God's Love Without Equal

Eunan McDonnell, SDB

Francis de Sales' Use of Imagery

In an effort to grasp the ineffable truths of what God might be like, the best that images can do for us is to give us a glimpse or rather a glancing impression. Thus, before we enter into a study of Francis de Sales' use of imagery, we have to bear in mind his own warning that:

Our mind is too weak to form a concept that would represent so immense an excellence... hence in order to speak of God in some manner, we are compelled to employ a great number of names. We say that he is good, wise, omnipotent, true, just, holy, infinite, immortal, invisible and we do indeed speak with truth. God is all this together, because he is more than all this. That is, he is all this in so pure, so excellent, and so exalted a way that he contains the power, strength and excellence of all perfection within one most simple perfection.¹

It is through analogy that we attempt to speak of God, remembering that God is always greater than our human understanding. This is eminently true of our human reasonings. Reason alone is insufficient to bring us to a satisfactory understanding of God. It cannot penetrate the darkness, it cannot plumb the deep recesses of the human heart, or climb the mountains of the human mind, let alone fathom the abyss of God.²

¹ S. François de Sales, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, in *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales*, Edition Complète, Tome 4 (Annecy: J. Niérat, 1894), 89. The primary source for our study is the "Annecy Edition" of the complete works of St. Francis de Sales: *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales, Évêque et Prince de Genève e Docteur de l'Église*, Édition Complète, 27 vols. (Annecy: J. Niérat, 1892-1964), here after abbreviated as: *OEA*. Translations into English, unless otherwise noted, are our own.

² Cf. *OEA* 4:287.

Francis is well aware of this, which explains why he has recourse to imagery that belongs to the realm of symbol and poetry, is open-ended, and allows for a contemplative experience of the divinity. Francis uses imagery so as "to reach the irrational and even unconscious part of the soul."³ In a letter dated October 5, 1604,⁴ he gives his theory on the use of images in preaching. He advises natural stories which sing of the Creator, images drawn from the Bible to "enlighten understanding and to move the will."⁵ In this regard, he is a true disciple of Ignatius of Loyola⁶ who through the introduction of imagery in the spiritual exercises "opens up the possibility of the kataphatic route of mysticism."⁷ The image, then, has the potential to reach into the deepest recesses of our being and to evoke a response:

In the *Treatise* more than fifty-six per cent of each page is in images. He searches to make himself understood through comparisons, but he doesn't stop there. He wants the suggestive images to touch the sensibility, the heart, the will, that is, he is a bit of a poet.⁸

In his detailed studies of Salesian imagery, Henri Lemaire points to Francis' overwhelming use of biblical imagery. Such images are not mere biblical citations, but indeed, developed by him.⁹ Through images, he does not address us with the words of theologians "cold and without any perfume" but with words "full of warmth, gentleness, and loving perfumes."¹⁰ It is the main reason for his success. The reader is not put on the defense. Through images he talks about

³ H. Lemaire, *François de Sales Docteur de la Confiance et de la Paix* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1963), 211.

⁴ Cf. Letter to Monseigneur André Frémyot, Archbishop of Bourges, October 5, 1604 in *OEA* 12:299-325.

⁵ *OEA* 12:303-304.

⁶ Cf. A. Liuima *Aux sources du Traité de l'amour de Dieu de saint François de Sales. Première partie: Les Sources de l'idée d'Amour de Dieu; Deuxième partie: Les Sources des moyens d'expression de l'idée d'amour de Dieu* (Rome: Librairie Editrice de l'Université Grégorienne, 1959), 1:101. "The Jesuits recognized the importance of the imagination in education. They recognized that emotion is educatively more effective than abstract concepts. The theater influences all the faculties and is an excellent teacher as regards morals. André Schimberg esteems the theater so important in the system of Jesuit education that he sees it as a prolongation of the class and the chapel."

⁷ D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 286.

⁸ H. Lemaire, *Les Images Chez François de Sales* (Paris: Editions A.G. Nizet, 1962), 65.

⁹ Cf. H. Lemarie, *François de Sales Docteur de la Confiance et de la Paix* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1963), 207. Here is the order of frequency for 3765 sources: Bible 89.4% (O.T. 57.8 %, N.T. 31.4%), Ancient Classics 4.7%; Fathers of the Church 4.4%; Religious Writers 0.4%; Liturgy 0.3%.

¹⁰ *OEA* 4:305.

the inscrutability of God's judgments, of his incomparable kindness which, outside of himself, exercises itself in no more perfect place than our humanity. Indeed, in describing the difficulties we experience, the tests that come from God, he uses very little reasoning, but rather a series of images.¹¹

The key images are those that bespeak the tender love of God: St. John resting on the breast of Our Lord; the child held by the Father, the child at the Mother's breast. As a devout humanist he penetrates as deeply as possible into what is truly human to discover Christ, "the firstborn of all creation" and therefore, the love of God. Thus, the theology of the image of God suggests that we find God by true "Christian materialism."¹² It is our intention in this essay to explore Francis' use of such imagery. A distinct portrayal of God as *love without equal* emerges from that usage.

A Love that Draws

In his great intellectual and spiritual crisis of Paris, Francis wrestled with the mystery of the enigmatic relationship between the divine initiative and our free response. The solution that he finally adopts "is not presented in theological terms, but in a literary form, through image-symbols accessible to everyone."¹³ Amongst the image-symbols used to capture this sense of being drawn by God's tender love, those that recur most frequently are the "perfumes of God" and the "breath of God."

Draw Us to the Odor of Your Perfumes

It is quite obvious that the source for the refrain, "Draw me, we will run after the odor of your perfume," is the Canticle of Canticles.¹⁴ This use of olfactive imagery is commonplace in Oriental poetry, and rampant in the Canticle of Canticles. Francis uses the image of being drawn by "the odor of your perfume" to evoke the idea that God draws us paternally, but never forces our will.

In the year 1586, in a rule which he made for himself regarding the reception of the Holy Eucharist, we find this beautiful commentary on a verse of the Canticle of Canticles:

¹¹ Cf. *OEA* 5:112; 137-163.

¹² K. Leech, *The Social God* (London: Sheldon Press, 1981), 25-38.

¹³ A. Ravier, *Initiation à la Lecture du Traité de l'Amour de Dieu de Saint François de Sales* (Paris: Labat, 1986), 43.

¹⁴ Cf. Canticle of Canticles 1:3. This refrain recurs throughout the *Treatise*. Cf. *OEA* 4:132-133; 4:162; 5:13-14, 15, 20. It is in the *Treatise* itself that Francis reveals how he has been introduced to the Canticle of Canticles through the scholarly work of Gilbert Générard, cf. *OEA* 5:277.

If I cannot make the sacramental communion...I will comfort myself with a spiritual communion...like ones who are nourished with the scent of fragrant and vaporous things...intoxicating themselves in the unique scent of such a powerful and strong wine...and though not receiving the unction, I will not stop running to the scent of the sweet perfumes of the Lord.¹⁵

In the *Treatise* this image is taken up and developed by Francis to express the gentle nature in which God continuously draws us to himself:

"Draw me," says the sacred spouse. That is, make the first start since of myself I cannot awaken, nor can I move myself unless you move me. But when you have moved me, then, O beloved spouse of my soul, "we run," we two. You before me, ever drawing me forward, and for my part I will follow in your path by consenting to your call. Let no man think that you drag me after you like a forced slave or like a lifeless cart. Ah, no! You draw me "to the odor of your ointments." If I follow you it is not because you pull me along but because you allure me. Your ways of drawing are mighty, but not violent, since all their strength consists in sweetness. Perfumes have no power to draw us to them except their sweetness. And how can what is sweet draw us unless it does so sweetly and pleasantly?¹⁶

In the above quotation, we can clearly see the centrality of the idea of being "drawn" as the word recurs six times in this short paragraph alone. However, what also must be borne in mind is that this "drawing" is affiliated with "sweetness" and therefore, in direct contrast to any use of force.¹⁷

When talking about being drawn by God's perfumes,¹⁸ it is more than probable that Francis is not simply referring to the physical sense of smell which attracts us, but also to the spiritual sense of smell. Within the tradition of the Fathers of the Church, it has been acknowledged that there are spiritual senses which correspond to the physical senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell.¹⁹ Thus, through smell which is a sort of touch, "God can be breathed, seized in a gentle embrace... and become the embalmed air that we breathe."²⁰ As Francis himself says:

¹⁵ *OEA* 22:13. Cf. also 4:335.

¹⁶ *OEA* 4:132-133.

¹⁷ Cf. *OEA* 4:133.

¹⁸ Cf. *OEA* 4:132; 4:162; 5:15.

¹⁹ This idea is also very much present in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius invites the use of the spiritual senses to "smell and taste with olfaction and with relish the infinite sweetness and gentleness of the divinity" (Spiritual Exercises 1:24).

²⁰ H. Lemaire, *Les Images Chez St. François de Sales* (Paris: Editions A.G. Nizet, 1962), 44.

When the heavenly bride wishes to express how infinitely sweet are her divine spouse's perfumes, she says to him, "your name is a spreading ointment," as if to say: "You are so well perfumed that you seem to be all perfume, and that it is proper to call you ointment and perfume itself rather than say you are anointed and perfumed."²¹

The image of God as perfume is evocative of his infinite goodness, beauty, sweetness, but above all, of his love, i. e., of his desire to give of himself, to pour himself forth. This is evident in the following quotation where this kenosis of God is described in terms of "diffusing" and "flowing" into the heart:²²

Theotimus, note that the soul would not pray unless it were aroused to do so. However, as soon as it is aroused and feels those attractions, it prays that it may be drawn forward. When it is drawn, it runs, but still it would not run if the perfumes that draw, and by which it is actually drawn, did not enliven the heart by the power of their precious odor. As its course grows swifter and it approaches nearer to its heavenly spouse, it ever feels in a more delightful way the sweetness he diffuses, until at last he himself flows into that heart like an ointment that is poured out.²³

It is "the scent of the divine Beloved"²⁴ that has the capacity to arouse and draw us. This is a scent that "is poured out"²⁵ ceaselessly and not dependent on our response. It follows that the perfume of God precedes our response, indicating the unconditional nature of the divine initiative. The only power God exercises over us is his gentleness because "perfumes have no power to draw us to them except their sweetness."²⁶ This, in turn, reveals two important characteristics of God's love towards us: In the first place, it reveals his amazing respect for our freedom. In the second place, it reveals the superabundance and unconditional nature of his love, a *love without equal*.

The Breath of God that Inspires

In order to capture the gentle stirrings of God's love at work in our life, Francis makes use of the image of "breath."²⁷ The image of breath is synonymous with the grace of God that awakens us and puts us on the path to conversion. Francis talks of a "wind" that comes with "sweet violence," "raises...our thoughts and

²¹ OEA 5:78.

²² Cf. OEA 4:162.

²³ OEA 4:162.

²⁴ OEA 5:323.

²⁵ OEA 4:162.

²⁶ OEA 4:133.

²⁷ Cf. OEA 4:116; 4:129; 4:207.

pushes...our affections into the air of divine love."²⁸ Thus, the breath of God blows on "the sails of our spirit" and "gives movement to the ship of our heart,"²⁹ revealing the invisible action of God which inspires without constraining us.

Like the previous image of perfumes, this image captures consummately the idea of the intangible, ethereal nature of God's gentle promptings. Both perfumes and breath appeal to the spiritual senses and not simply to a visual reality, therefore, it is by their effects that we *smell* and *touch* the love of God. In Book three, chapter thirteen, he states:

Because the Father and the Son who breathe have an infinite essence and will by which they breathe and because the goodness of which they breathe is infinite, it is impossible that their spiration should not be infinite. Because it cannot be infinite without being God, therefore this Spirit breathed forth from the Father and the Son is true God.³⁰

Thus, there is a real interplay of love within the Godhead. The "breath" within God reveals the communication within God, and the breath that emanates from God, reveals his desire to communicate with us. The Father breathes "sweet allurements" by means of which he draws us to himself;³¹ the Son breathes inspirations so as to "not only knock at the door of the human heart but to call the beloved soul to him."³² However, it is above all, to the Spirit of God, the exchange of love between Father and Son, that this image of breathing is applied:

But with regard to God's breath, not only does it warm but it gives perfect life, since his divine Spirit is an infinite light. His vital breath is called inspiration because by it supreme goodness breathes upon us and inspires in us the desires and intentions of his heart.³³

The notion of "warmth" and "light" obviously recalls another of Francis' images, the sun,³⁴ to evoke this sense of being "inspired" by God. Francis reiterates that man is free to allow himself "to be awakened"³⁵ by God or "to continue sleeping."³⁶ It is through "inspirations" that the Father draws us to himself and this is the special mission of the Holy Spirit. Francis emphasizes the role of the

²⁸ Cf. *OEA* 4:116; Also, 4:129.

²⁹ *OEA* 4:234.

³⁰ *OEA* 4:207

³¹ *OEA* 4:126.

³² *OEA* 4:117.

³³ *OEA* 5:90.

³⁴ Cf. The parable of the Travellers in the forest *OEA* 4:229-230. Also, cf. *OEA* 4:136.

³⁵ Cf. *OEA* 4:117.

³⁶ Cf. *OEA* 4:128.

Spirit in our creation and recreation. It is the same "breath of God" that breathes life into our soul at creation and then, "breathes and infuses into our souls the inspirations of supernatural life" that we may become a life-giving Spirit (1Cor.15:41) "that is a spirit that makes us live, move, feel, and work the works of grace."³⁷ The inspirations of God's Spirit are always available to us, but their fruitfulness depends on our consent:

In the same measure as our heart expands itself or, to put it better, in the same measure that it permits itself to be enlarged and expanded and does not deny to God's mercy the room made by its consent, his mercy ever pours forth and increasingly spreads out its holy inspirations. They keep on increasing, and they cause us to increase more and more in sacred love. But when there is no more room and we no longer give consent, this mercy comes to a stop.³⁸

There can be no love without liberty. "The basic law of this attraction rests on liberty: it is by love that the heart is moved, and, in the domain of the heart love is liberty."³⁹ Francis, in underlining the idea that the divine goodness wants to give of itself, consistently states that God never forces us but draws us, attracts us:

In spite of the all-powerful strength of God's merciful hand, which touches, enfolds and bends the soul with so many inspirations...grace has the power not to overpower but to entice our heart.⁴⁰

Thus, nobody is drawn unless he so wishes, "but when God attracts our liberty is at stake in a dramatic fashion."⁴¹ However, we can always disengage ourselves from this bond of love because God does not draw us "with iron chains, like bulls and buffaloes, but by seduction, a delightful appeal, a holy aspiration, which are really Adam's chains and human chains, that is, chains proportionate and suited to a human heart to which freedom is natural."⁴²

It is, above all, in the fable of the Apodes⁴³ that Francis manages to convey in picture form, rather than at a conceptual level, this interplay between God's inspiration and our free response. Citing Aristotle, he tells of the existence of a certain species of birds, Apodes, whose legs are so short and feet so weak that once they land they are unable to take off again. They remain there "motionless

³⁷ OEA 5:90.

³⁸ OEA 4:122-123.

³⁹ E.M. Lajeunie, *St. François de Sales et l'Esprit Salésien* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1962), 2:370.

⁴⁰ OEA 4:126-127.

⁴¹ Lajeunie, 2:370.

⁴² OEA 4:126.

⁴³ Cf. Book II, ch. 9, ch. 12.

and perish unless a wind favorable to their weakness sends its gusts over the surface of the ground, catches hold of them, and lifts them up."⁴⁴ He traces the delicate way in which this wind encourages and invites the Apodes to risk flight:

The wind that lifts up the apodes first blows upon their feathers, since they are the lightest parts and most susceptible to its agitation whereby it gives an initial movement to their wings. It spreads them out and unfolds them in such wise as to provide itself with a hold by which to seize the bird and lift it into the air.⁴⁵

It is God who takes the initiative, whose "breath" as a favorable wind seeks to raise us aloft. However, we can resist this "gentle force":

However, if in the same measure as it pushes us forward we push against it so as not to let ourselves go with its movement, then we resist. So also when the wind has seized our apode birds and raised them aloft, it will not carry them very far unless they spread their wings and co-operate, lifting themselves up and flying through the air into which they have been launched. On the contrary, if they are allured by some green growth they see beneath them, or weakened by their stay on the ground, and instead of responding to the wind keep their wings folded and cast themselves back down on the earth, then they actually received the motion of the wind but to no purpose since they did not avail themselves of it.⁴⁶

In the above citation, one is again struck by the frequent recurrence of the words "wind" and "blowing" to indicate the activity of God. The words emphasize that God does not constrain us, but inspires us, leaving our freedom intact.

It is God's fidelity in the midst of our resistance and infidelity that attests to his incomparable love. He is faithful in attracting to himself sinful mankind:

Indeed this rich, full, and plenteous sufficiency of means which God freely bestows on sinners so that they can love him is seen almost everywhere in Scripture. See, this divine lover is at the gate. He does not merely knock, but he remains there knocking. He calls to the soul, "come, arise, make haste, my love," and "puts his hand into the lock" to try if he can open it.⁴⁷

There is nothing lacking in the generosity of God which is "rich, full, and plenteous."⁴⁸ His inspirations are motivated by a love which is not only generous

⁴⁴ *OEA* 4:115.

⁴⁵ *OEA* 4:129.

⁴⁶ *OEA* 4:128.

⁴⁷ *OEA* 4:114.

⁴⁸ Cf. *OEA* 4:114.

but which ceaselessly seeks our good, for "if he utters his voice in the streets, he does not simply speak but he goes about crying out, that is, he continues to cry out."⁴⁹

It follows, then, that the inspirations breathed by God into our being are a visible manifestation of his superabundant love for us. This is never more true than in his inspirations which lead us to repentance and conversion:

In fact, we would rightly deserve to remain abandoned by God, since by this disloyalty we have thus forsaken him. But his eternal charity does not often permit his justice to impose such chastisement, but rather arouses his compassion and stirs him to rescue us from our misery. He does this by sending out the favoring wind of his most holy inspirations. It comes into our hearts with a gentle force; it seizes them and moves them; it lifts up our thoughts and thrusts our affections into the air of God's love.⁵⁰

If God is provoked by our sinfulness, it is his compassion, more than his justice, that is aroused. This compassion is manifested in his inspirations which graciously entice us by their "gentle force." The gentleness of these inspirations is indicated by the following verbs: his charity "seizes" our hearts, "lifts up" our thoughts, and "thrusts" our affections.⁵¹ He actively seeks out the sinner and liberally bestows his gratuitous inspirations—inspirations which precede our repentance and indeed, which make possible our repentance. Yet not only do they awaken us to repentance, they "stimulate, urge, and attract us to holy virtue, holy love, and good resolutions, in short, to everything that sends us on our way to our everlasting welfare."⁵²

A Fatherly-Motherly Love

Probably the most striking images that express the love of God in the *Treatise* are those which evoke the Fatherly-Motherly tenderness of God. Francis moves naturally from male to female images in an attempt to capture the wholeness of God's love which is like that of a father and that of a mother:

Our Lord...is like a good father or a good mother who allows his child to walk alone when he is in a meadow or large field because if he falls, he will not come to much harm; but in dangerous and rugged paths, he is carried carefully in his arms.⁵³

⁴⁹ OEA 4:114. This is an obvious allusion to the *Canticle of Canticles* II,10, V,4.

⁵⁰ OEA 4:116.

⁵¹ Cf. OEA 4:116.

⁵² OEA 3:108-109.

⁵³ OEA 6:183-184.

This image of being “carried” expresses both the concern of a father and a mother for their child and hence is used frequently by Francis.⁵⁴ At one point he states “O God, Father eternal, what is there that your children, chicks that live under your wings, have to fear?”⁵⁵ However, earlier he has used the same image to describe the maternal quality of God’s love, like that of a jealous mother hen protecting her chicks:

The hen is merely a hen, that is an animal without any courage or spirit whatsoever, as long as she is not yet a mother. But when she becomes a mother, she takes on a lion’s heart, always holds her head up, always keeps her eyes on watch, always darts glances on every side for no matter how small a sign of danger to her little ones. There is no enemy at whose eyes she will not fly in defense of her dear brood, for which she has constant care that causes her to go about constantly clucking and complaining.⁵⁶

It is interesting to note the phrases that embody this maternal love which reveals an almost “masculine” strength. For example, it is a love which has a “lion’s heart,”⁵⁷ “defends,”⁵⁸ and is “constant.”⁵⁹

The question at issue is not one of gender because God is beyond male and female sexuality. However, it is by combining both the male and female experience that Francis attempts to reveal something which is analogous to the infinite love of God. It is the totality of a mother’s and father’s love that best approximates the superabundance of God’s parental love. Hence, as we have already stated, Francis moves without difficulty from masculine to feminine images to evoke this reality. The following citation is a good example of this juxtaposition of female and male imagery:

A mother is not satisfied with feeding her babe with her milk, which is her own substance, unless she herself gives her own flowerlike breasts to her child’s mouth. This is so that it may not merely receive its mother’s substance from a spoon or some other utensil, but from her own substance and in her own substance. Thus the mother’s own substance serves both as vessel and as nourishment received by her beloved child. In like manner, God our Father is not content to make us receive his own substance into our

⁵⁴ The image of being “carried” is one that goes beyond the boundaries of sexuality to indicate the loving tenderness of God. Hence, it refers to God as both Father and Mother. For example, cf. *OEA* 4:126-127, 200, 243-244, 333; 5:6, 204.

⁵⁵ *OEA* 5:313.

⁵⁶ *OEA* 5:216-217.

⁵⁷ *OEA* 5:216.

⁵⁸ *OEA* 5:217.

⁵⁹ *OEA* 5:217.

mind, that is, to make us see his divinity. Out of the depths of his mercy he himself applies his substance to our minds, so that we no longer understand him by means of a representation or image but in his very substance and by his very substance.⁶⁰

In such a portrayal we are not dealing with a dualistic representation of God in which female imagery is used to soften a rather strict, paternal figure. On the contrary, the female and male images describe a single reality, that of the tender love of God. However, this tenderness can best be imaged by appealing to the diverse experiences of fatherhood and motherhood which help to give different shades to the portrait of God's love. What is common to both is that they embody the tender love of God.

Concretely, this tenderness of God's love is manifested in the manner in which he does not give us a "representation," but rather his very "substance,"⁶¹ just as a mother feeds her child with "her own substance."⁶² This maternal-paternal "nourishing"⁶³ finds its supreme expression in the eucharistic Jesus who nourishes us with his body, "the perpetual feast of divine grace."⁶⁴

It seems apparent, then, that by having recourse to maternal-paternal imagery, Francis is keen to emphasize the relational nature of God. Not only is God in relation to us, but he is in an intimate relationship with us which can best be imaged by the bond that exists between father-mother and child. It is his intention to arouse the reader to respond to the love of God:

Who could not love his royal heart, so fatherly maternal towards us.⁶⁵

Having demonstrated the Salesian use of female and male imagery to convey the tender love of God, it is now our intention to proceed to examine them separately in order to discover the nuances that they bring to a portrayal of God's love as a *love without equal*.

A Fatherly Love

The conception of God as Father bespeaks a complex reality which includes, at one and the same time, tenderness and reverence. Francis borrows language from the courtly tradition⁶⁶ to express the majesty, sovereignty of God as Father:

⁶⁰ OEA 4:201-202.

⁶¹ OEA 4:201.

⁶² OEA 4:202.

⁶³ Cf. OEA 5:35.

⁶⁴ OEA 4:202.

⁶⁵ Letter to Sr. Marie-Aimée de Blonay February 18, 1618 in OEA 18:171.

⁶⁶ Cf. The parable in Bk.III, ch. 7.

When a prince walks among blind men, they do not see him so they do not honor him. When told about him they acknowledge him, but soon forget him, because they do not see him. Unfortunately, we do not see God, so we often forget he is there, or hold back on the honor due to him...prostrate yourself before his Divine Majesty. Acknowledge that you are unworthy to appear before such sovereign majesty.⁶⁷

This idea of the legal relationship and idea of God as king, prevalent in the Ignatian system of thought, is also present in the Salesian imaging of God.⁶⁸ However, whereas for Ignatius it is through contemplating on the divine majesty of God that will awaken love, Francis from the first moment considers love to be the central point. In his use of the kingly image,⁶⁹ it is less a question of authority than love:

The gentle king marries the soul which becomes his beloved or daughter, no longer his servant or slave; the heavenly king yields himself to our recreation.⁷⁰

This love is made supremely visible in the kenotic act of the King's Son who dies for us, revealing the infinite condescension of the divine monarch, "resigning his throne of incomprehensible majesty."⁷¹

The sovereign majesty of God provokes a certain "fear" which comes from "the natural knowledge which God has providentially given to us, and makes us recognize how completely we are dependent on his all-sovereign power by arousing us to implore his help."⁷² Francis is careful to distinguish this type of *fear* from our normal understanding of fear. Here, is intended the Biblical notion of fear in the sense of filial respect:

Therefore those men fear God with filial affection who fear to displease him purely and simply because he is their sweet, most benign, and most loving Father.⁷³

Such filial fear does not exclude the idea of an all-loving, tender father, as imaged in the return of the prodigal son:

⁶⁷ Cf. *OEA* 3:74-77.

⁶⁸ Cf. H. Lemaire, *François de Sales: Docteur de la Confiance et de la Paix* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1963), 177.

⁶⁹ Cf. *OEA* 4:260.

⁷⁰ Letter to Jane de Chantal November 30, 1605 in *OEA* 13:123.

⁷¹ *OEA* 5:230.

⁷² *OEA* 5:301.

⁷³ *OEA* 5:304-305; cf. also, 5:293-294.

Thus, in addition to the thousand caresses that the prodigal son received from his father, he was established anew and in an even better way in all his privileges and in all the graces, favors, and dignities he had lost.⁷⁴

The motive for such lavishing of affection on a wayward son, is quite simply the prodigal love of the father who "although the prodigal son returned naked, filthy, stinking, his fond father takes him into his arms, kisses him lovingly, weeps on his shoulder because he was his father and a father's heart feels for his child."⁷⁵ It is this Biblical notion of fatherhood, of the tender love of Abba-Father that dominates the writings of St. Francis:

God who calls us to himself is watching to see how we are faring and will never allow anything to happen to us which is not for our greater good. He knows who we are, and will hold out his fatherly hand to us when we stumble, so that nothing may stop us... He has watched over you till now; all you have to do is keep a tight hold on the hand of Providence and God will help you in all that happens, and where you cannot walk he will carry you in his arms. What need you fear, my very dear daughter, since you belong to God who has told us so firmly that "to them that love God all things work together unto good?..." What can a child fear in the arms of such a father? Really try to be a little child, my very dear daughter; and as you know, children don't have a lot of things to worry about because they have others to think for them; they are really strong if they stay close to their father. So do this, my very dear daughter, and you will have peace.⁷⁶

Throughout the *Treatise* God is imaged as a tender, loving Father who desires that we clasp his hand in filial abandonment so that he can lead us to happiness.⁷⁷ In book nine, chapter fourteen, he distinguishes between two ways of conforming to the will of God:⁷⁸ The first, is to allow ourselves to be led by God our heavenly Father by holding his hand; The second, and more perfect way of abandonment, is to allow ourselves to be "carried by his divine good pleasure, just as a little child is carried in its mother's arms."⁷⁹ This juxtaposition of pa-

⁷⁴ OEA 5:281.

⁷⁵ Cf. *Advertissemens aux Confesseurs* in OEA 23:281-298.

⁷⁶ Letter to madame de Veysillieu January 16th in OEA 13:343, cf. also, 4:126-127, 243-244; 5:204.

⁷⁷ Cf. M. Mueller, *St. Francis de Sales* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1936), 134. With St. Thomas Aquinas love stands in the background as the source and cause of holiness. In the foreground is the Lord of heaven and earth to whom man owes devotion and homage. With Francis this picture of Lord and servant is completely cut out in favor of the idea of the loving Father who awaits his child.

⁷⁸ OEA 5:152-155.

⁷⁹ OEA 5:152-153.

ternal and maternal love leads us naturally to examine in detail how Francis images divine tenderness through the use of female imagery.

A Motherly Love

The image of mother and child to express the tender love of God is one that pervades the *Treatise*.⁸⁰ By imaging God in this way, Francis is well within the Biblical tradition.⁸¹ It is also to be found in many monastic writings, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux, Anselm of Canterbury, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and, of course, Teresa of Avila. The biblical and Catholic tradition provide a rich heritage for Francis to draw upon, but one cannot help but think that his own life experience is an important source for this image. Being the eldest of a large family, Francis must have constantly witnessed his mother with a baby at the breast or a toddler at her knee. It is from reflecting on this human experience that Francis concludes that a mother's love embodies the deepest form of unconditional and active love:

Maternal love is the most urgent, the most active, and the most ardent of all forms of love, since it is an indefatigable and insatiable love.⁸²

In describing this paragon of love, we should note the adjectives he uses: "active," "ardent," "indefatigable," and "insatiable." If these are characteristics of a mother's love then how much more are they expressive of the divine love.

It is with the eye of an artist that Francis observes the relationship between mother and child as being indicative of God's tender love for us:

Consider, then, a beautiful little child to whom the seated mother offers her breast. It throws itself forcibly into her arms and gathers up and entwines all its little body on that beloved bosom and breast. See how its mother in turn takes it in, clasps it, fastens it so to speak to her bosom, joins her mouth to its mouth, and kisses it. Watch again how that little babe is allured by its mother's caresses, and how on its part it co-operates in this union of its mother and itself. As much as it possibly can, it fastens and presses itself to its mother's breast and face. It seems as if it wants to bury and hide itself completely in the beloved bosom from which it came. Theotimus, at such a moment there is a perfect union; it is but a single union, yet it proceeds from both mother and child although in such wise that it depends entirely on the mother. She drew the child to herself. She first clasped it in her arms and

⁸⁰ Cf. *OEA* 4:200, 333; 5:6, 10-11, 69, 191.

⁸¹ Cf. Hos 11:8 God's womb (*rachaim*) is moved to compassion; cf. also Is 49:15; 66:12-13. Francis quotes the text from Hosea in the *Treatise*, cf. *OEA* 4:126.

⁸² *OEA* 4:192.

pressed it to her bosom. The child's strength was never sufficient to clasp and hold itself so close to its mother.⁸³

An analysis of this quotation reveals the "active" nature of a mother's love and consequently, God's love. It is a love which "offers," "clasps and fastens" us to his bosom, and "kisses" us.⁸⁴ Once again the image reveals a theological reality that God's love, which is without measure, always precedes our response. It is the Mother who actively leads, nourishes and holds her child. It is the supreme image of selfless love and complete self-giving. It is an image which serves to vividly capture the reality of God's "need" to give and our need to receive:

The suckling child is urged on by its need, while the mother who gives him her milk is urged on by her own abundance.⁸⁵

A mother quite simply rejoices in the fact that her child is content.

Henri Lemaire, in speaking of Francis' use of maternal imagery, states that "the image teaches us, but above all it wants to arouse us, to seduce our whole being."⁸⁶ After the evocation of the maternal attentiveness of God we are asked to have a firm trust in that gentleness:

Therefore a hundred times during the day we should turn our gaze upon God's loving will, make our will melt into it, and devoutly cry out, "O good of infinite sweetness, how amiable is your will and how desirable are your favors! You have created us for eternal life, and your maternal bosom, with its sacred breasts swelling with incomparable love, abounds in the milk of mercy, whether to pardon penitents or to make perfect the just. Ah, why do we not fasten our wills to yours, like children who attach themselves to their mothers' breasts, to draw out the milk of your eternal blessings!"⁸⁷

The image of being carried by the Mother seeks, above all, to arouse us to filial abandonment. Emphasis is placed on our need for a childlike disposition⁸⁸ to receive that which God seeks to give:

⁸³ OEA 5:6.

⁸⁴ OEA 5:6.

⁸⁵ OEA 4:75-76.

⁸⁶ H. Lemaire, *Les Images Chez St. François de Sales* (Paris: Editions A. G. Nizet, 1962), 63.

⁸⁷ OEA 5:69.

⁸⁸ Cf. P. Serouet, "François de Sales" in : *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique: Doctrine et Histoire*, tome 5 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1964), col. 1088. "Salesian Spirituality is centered on abandoning one's soul into the hands of God. Francis de Sales compares willingly this abandon to the attitude of a small child between the arms of its mother, an image which he'll borrow from the great Castillian

We simply let ourselves be carried by his divine good pleasure, just as a little child is carried in its mother's arms, by a certain kind of admirable consent which may be called the union, or rather the unity of our will with that of God. This is the way in which we should strive to let ourselves be borne forward in the will of God's good pleasure. The effects of this will of good pleasure proceed purely from his providence.⁸⁹

This image of the child resting in its mother's arms expresses a fundamental theme in the works of St. Francis de Sales, that of loving conformity to God's will.⁹⁰ It is an image familiar to us, but we must not forget that in Francis' epoch the most predominant images to express our relationship with God were those of the Judge, or Master with his servant. This difference is significant.⁹¹ Perhaps it is the most revolutionary aspect of the *Treatise*, as Buckley points out:

Perhaps the most startling development, in the *Treatise*, has passed unnoticed. It lies with his understanding of God. The divine Majesty has given way to a God who is profoundly maternal.⁹²

It is this use of maternal imagery that best conveys the tenderness of an all-loving God and therefore, adds a certain distinctiveness to the Salesian vision of God's love as a *love without equal*. If God is *Mother* for Francis, then, it is impossible for him to think of God as a distant or forbidding judge who seeks to condemn or destroy the creation which He has made.

Christ Our Mother

Perhaps even more startling than the envisaging of God's love as Mother is Francis' depiction of Christ as our Mother.⁹³ At the beginning of Book three, chapter four, he says:

mystic. But Teresa of Avila does not develop the image, her love for the Lord was that of a spouse, she emphasizes fidelity and intimacy; the summit of spiritual ascension is 'marriage.' We must situate Francis within the long tradition of spiritual writers who before St. Therese of Lisieux have presented the relationship between the soul and God under the aspect of spiritual childhood."

⁸⁹ *OEA* 5:152-153. Cf. also, 5:10.

⁹⁰ This theme is analyzed by Francis in Book One of the *Treatise*, cf. *OEA* 4:23-85.

⁹¹ Cf. H. Lemaire, *François de Sales Docteur de la Confiance et de la Paix* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1963), 27.

⁹² M. J. Buckley, "Seventeenth Century French Spirituality: Three Figures" in *Christian Spirituality Post-Reformation and Modern*, edited by L. Dupré and D. Saliers (New York: SCM Press, 1989), 39.

A tender mother leads along her little child, helps him and holds him up as long as she sees need for it, and lets him take a few steps by himself in places that are very level and not too difficult. Now she takes him by the hand and holds him steady; now she takes him up in her arms and carries him. It is thus too that our Lord himself takes constant care to lead forward his children, that is, those who possess charity. He enables them to walk before him.⁹⁴

Once again, we recognize the characteristic features of this "active" love. A love that "takes constant care," "leads" and "enables" us to walk.⁹⁵ To understand Francis here, it is important to recognize what he is *not* saying, for example, that there is either maleness or femaleness in the Trinity, or that we should think of the Father of Christ rather in female terms. He is rather making a statement about the nature of our creation and salvation in Jesus Christ. He proceeds to describe the love that Christ our mother bears us:

Yes, this is certain, an expectant mother prepares the cradle, the linen, the swaddling clothes, and even a nurse for the child that she hopes to bring forth, although it is not yet in the world. So also our Lord, since his bounty is fruitful and heavy with you and since he designs to bring you forth to salvation and to make you his child, prepared all that was necessary for you upon the tree of the cross: Your spiritual cradle, your linen and swaddling clothes, your nurse, and all that was needed for your happiness. Such are all those means, all those attractions, all those graces by which he leads your soul and seeks to bring it to perfection.⁹⁶

In the *Treatise*, this idea of Jesus as the "loving nurse"⁹⁷ involves all the following connotations of "forming," "taking up into his arms," "giving life" and of

⁹³ Cf. C. Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the Highest Middle Ages* (London: University of California Press, 1982), 110-169. The theme of Christ as mother is not unique to Francis de Sales. The late medieval world witnessed a new more *feminized* devotional atmosphere that spread through Christian culture, with the rapid rise of devotional language utilizing images derived from woman's experience: maternity, birth, lactation and nurture. This feminized devotional language, which was evident both in conceptions about the nature of God and humankind's relationship with God, must be seen against a wider picture of a generally humanized piety which began in about the eleventh century and which focused upon the humanity of Christ, utilized analogies from human relationships and developed a sense of God as loving and accessible.

⁹⁴ OEA 4:180.

⁹⁵ OEA 4:180.

⁹⁶ OEA 3:358.

⁹⁷ Cf. OEA 5:34. One can see more clearly from the French text, the link between *nourrice* (nurse) and her function of *nourissage* (rearing) and *nourrir* (nurturing). This

course, "nourishing."⁹⁸ For Francis, then, Christ is our mother because he has given us birth and also re-birth.⁹⁹ In the incarnation, our flesh is permanently bonded to God, and we are created in Christ.¹⁰⁰ In the cross and resurrection, we are re-born and perfected.¹⁰¹ Christ, as mother, is the most apt image to evoke the unity between creation and salvation viewed as a single process of drawing the soul into God, or as Francis would say "we draw God's heart into our own."¹⁰² Understood in feminine terms, God gives birth to us in creation and re-birth through Christ.

Thus within Christ's maternal breast his divine heart foresaw, disposed, merited, and obtained all our benefits not only in general for all but for each one in particular. His breasts of sweetness prepared for us that milk which is his movements, his attractions, his inspirations, and the dear delights by which he draws, leads, and nourishes our hearts into eternal life.¹⁰³

In book five, chapter two, he proceeds to unite this maternal image with a kingly image. He says, "The king of our heart" invites us into his chambers and what are these chambers but "his breasts which abound in various sweetness and delight."¹⁰⁴ Continuing he says, "the mother's bosom and breasts are storerooms of treasure for the little infant."¹⁰⁵ Like a true mother, Christ seeks to take our pains from us by bearing them himself. It is in the flesh of Christ that God embraces us, seeks to heal us when we fall into sin, and to unite us with his divine nature.

The eucharistic Jesus, in particular, is depicted in terms of motherhood:

"Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her that you may draw out milk and be filled at the breasts of her consolation, that you may suck and find delight at all the abundance of her glory. You shall be carried at the breasts, and upon their knees they shall caress you."

Such is infinite happiness, Theotimus, and it has not only been promised to us but we have a pledge of it in the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist, the perpetual feast of divine grace.¹⁰⁶

idea of *nourissage* is applied in a special way by Francis to the eucharistic Jesus.

⁹⁸ *OEA* 5:34.

⁹⁹ Cf. *OEA* 5:344.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *OEA* 5:230.

¹⁰¹ Cf. *OEA* 5:346.

¹⁰² *OEA* 4:260.

¹⁰³ *OEA* 5:344.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *OEA* 4:261.

¹⁰⁵ *OEA* 4:261.

¹⁰⁶ *OEA* 4:202. Cf. also, 4:262, 332-333; 5:6-7.

For Francis, Jesus is like a mother feeding her infant, and this is especially true of his gift of self in the eucharist. It is an image which emphasizes the superabundance of his love for us, a continual outpouring of self. In this image of Christ as Mother we have an echo of the themes treated so far, emphasizing, above all, the "active" nature of God's love in giving Himself so abundantly to us, expressive of His *love without equal*.

The Heart of Love

If "love is the abridgment of all theology,¹⁰⁷ then, as Francis insists, it can be said that the heart, in particular the pierced heart of Christ, is the abridgment of all Salesian imagery on the love of God. Indeed, "if all the heart symbolism given articulation in the Salesian world is visualized, one sees the great tender heart of God undergirding all created life. Access to that heart is through the hidden doorways of the hearts of men and women. At this entry-way, this crossroads between two realms, one finds the heart of Jesus crucified."¹⁰⁸

We shall begin with an examination of the human heart as a reflection of the divine heart, and then, proceed to examine the divine heart proper. We shall conclude our study with an exploration of Francis' use of imagery to evoke the crucified heart of Jesus, at once human and divine.

The Human Heart

Made in the image of God, the *raison d'être* of our being is to love:

Love is the life of the heart. Just as weight gives movement to the movable parts of a clock, so love gives to the soul whatever movement it has.¹⁰⁹

The seat of love, then, is the heart. The human heart expresses what is central to human nature and how it resembles the divinity:

The heart refers, as it does in the Bible, to that which is most profound, inalienable, personal and divine in us; it is the mysterious center where each person meets God, responds to his call or refines it.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ OEA 5:62.

¹⁰⁸ J. Power and W. Wright, *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal, Letters of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 59-60.

¹⁰⁹ OEA 5:309.

¹¹⁰ A. Ravier, *Un Sage et Un Saint: François de Sales* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1985), 128.

It's true that the rest of creation bears the traces of "God's footprints"¹¹¹ but only humanity is made in the image of God. This likeness is especially visible in the human heart:

As soon as man gives a little attention to the divinity he feels a sweet emotion within the heart which testifies that God is God of the human heart...This pleasure, this confidence that man's heart naturally has in God assuredly comes from nowhere but the congruity between God's goodness and our soul...we are created to the image and likeness of God.¹¹²

However, Francis also acknowledges the paradox that while it is our heart that most resembles God, it is still only a pale reflection of the infinite love of God:

No, Theotimus, we can never comprehend him (God), for, as St. John says, "He is greater than our heart."¹¹³

Nevertheless, God is "God of the human heart."¹¹⁴

The centrality of the human heart in the divine human drama is highlighted by the incarnation. Through the incarnation God reveals his intention to unite human nature to his divinity and he achieves this union through the heart.¹¹⁵ The human heart and the divine heart unite in Jesus:

He saw that among all the different ways of communicating himself there was none so excellent as that of joining himself to a created nature in such wise that the creature would be engrafted and implanted in the Godhead so as to become with it one single person.¹¹⁶

This union of hearts, between God and mankind, is consistently symbolized throughout the *Treatise* by the image of a kiss.¹¹⁷ It is through this kiss that God draws us to himself and this union will be fully consummated in heaven:

We will join our will to God to savor and experience the sweetness of his incomprehensible goodness, for at the top of this ladder God bends towards us, gives us the kiss of love, and makes us taste the sacred breasts of his sweetness, which are "better than wine."¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ *OEA* 4:197.

¹¹² *OEA* 4:136.

¹¹³ *OEA* 4:90.

¹¹⁴ Cf. *OEA* 4:136, 187, 256.

¹¹⁵ Cf. *OEA* 9:423.

¹¹⁶ *OEA* 4:99.

¹¹⁷ Cf. *OEA* 4:51-52, 188-189; 5:293.

¹¹⁸ *OEA* 5:293.

For Francis, we can receive presentiments of this "nuptial kiss" in the present world, because God has invited us to participate in his divine friendship. God is not only "God of the human heart" but also, "friend of the human heart."¹¹⁹ We are called, then, to seek the divine heart and bring about "a conformity of our heart to that of God."¹²⁰

Francis makes use of the image of Jacob's ladder in order to illustrate how the various levels of ascent can bring about this union of hearts. Among the various *rungs* of ascent, he acknowledges the importance of prayer, the sacraments and the virtues.¹²¹ In talking about prayer, Francis says:

When you prepare to pray you must say with your whole heart and in your heart, "O my heart, my heart, God is truly there."¹²²

Prayer, for Francis, is "heart talking to heart."¹²³ It is a movement of love between hearts in which the devout heart is united to God and transformed.¹²⁴ As well as prayer, the sacraments are understood by Francis as an interaction of hearts. The sacraments lead to union, and therefore, are best understood in terms of the heart.¹²⁵ The final element in "Jacob's Ladder" as the "true picture of the devout life" is the virtues.¹²⁶ In the Salesian understanding, the virtues are dependent on the communication of charity between the Heart of God and the devout heart.¹²⁷

¹¹⁹ OEA 4:163-164.

¹²⁰ OEA 5:64.

¹²¹ Cf. OEA 3:18.

¹²² OEA 3:74.

¹²³ OEA 4:340.

¹²⁴ In describing the various degrees of prayer, Francis has recourse to the image of the heart to express the diverse degrees of union that arise from prayer. He describes four degrees of prayer: 1) *Vocal Prayer* which is "an overflowing of the heart in words" (4:52); 2) *Mental Prayer* which is a "prayer of the heart" that helps us to "ruminate" on the various aspects of the divine heart (4:310); 3) *Contemplative prayer* (prayer of simple regard) which allows "the heart to drink" liquid nourishment which finds its source in the divine heart (4:324); 4) *Prayer of Quiet* in which the devout heart rests on the divine heart as exemplified by John the evangelist resting on the breast of our Lord at the last supper (4:332-333).

¹²⁵ Cf. OEA 4:337.

¹²⁶ OEA 5:240.

¹²⁷ Cf. OEA 5:266-267,

The Divine Heart

The supreme movement within God is love (1Jn. 4:8), which, according to Francis arises from his divine heart.¹²⁸ Love is the source of divine life and the seat of all actions within God and of all operations flowing from God:

God's heart so abounds in love and his good is so great and infinite that everyone may possess it while no one person thereby possesses less of it. This infinite goodness can never be exhausted, even though it fills all the spirits in the universe. After everything has been filled with it, his infinity remains always complete and entire within him without any lessening whatsoever.¹²⁹

The divine heart is a continual movement of love. The Father begets and brings forth the Son and the Son, as "true image" of the Father, also possesses a divine heart endowed with the movement of divine love. This continual "going forth of the Father and the Son and their return to the unity of the divine essence form the systole and diastole of the divine heart."¹³⁰ As Francis says:

What is worthy of love and longing if not friendship. If friendship is a thing to be loved and longed for, whose friendship can be such in comparison with that infinite friendship which obtains between the Father and the Son and together with them, is one and the same most unique God? Theotimus, out of awe for the beauty and sweetness of the love this eternal Father and this incomprehensible Son divinely and eternally exercise, our hearts will themselves be absorbed in love.¹³¹

The friendship emanating from the divine heart reveals to us that "God, who is sole, is not thereby solitary because he is Father and Son in two persons."¹³² This distinction of personhood and yet union of nature is captured by the image of the heart as "union belongs only to the heart which alone can produce true substantial love."¹³³ This friendship of the Father and Son, in turn, is itself another divine person, the Holy Spirit. The simultaneous action of the Father and the Son in breathing forth the Divine Spirit, is the operation of equally loving divine hearts:

¹²⁸ There are abundant references to the heart of God. For example, cf. *OEA* 4:52-52; 4:210; 4:260; 5:64; 5:78-79, V:215, 337.

¹²⁹ *OEA* 5:215.

¹³⁰ Cf. C. F. Kelley, *The Spirit of Love* (New York: Harper, 1951), 40.

¹³¹ *OEA* 4:208.

¹³² *OEA* 4:204.

¹³³ *OEA* 4:59.

The divine love of the Eternal Father for his Son is practiced in one sole aspiration sent forth reciprocally by the Father and the Son, who in this manner remains united and joined to one another...as this love is an act that proceeds, reciprocally from the Father and the Son it must necessarily be a third divine person, who with the Father and Son is but one sole God. Because this love is produced by way of breathings or spirations, it is called the Holy Spirit.¹³⁴

The Holy Spirit, then, is understood by Francis as the "air of divinity"¹³⁵ breathed forth from the heart of God. Citing Genesis, he identifies the Holy Spirit with "warmth" and "light":

When God formed the human body out of the slime of the earth, he breathed the breath of life into it, and man was made into a living soul... This same eternal God breathes and infuses into our souls the inspirations of supernatural life to the end that they may become a "life-giving spirit." Man's breath warms things it enters into... But with God's breath, not only does it warm but it gives perfect light, since his Spirit is an infinite light. His vital breath is called inspiration because its supreme goodness breathes upon us and inspires in us the desires and intentions of his *Heart*.¹³⁶

Continuing the imagery of breath finding its origin in the divine Heart, Francis calls the Holy Spirit a "favorable wind" which lifts up the "wings of the heart to allow the person to take flight toward the Divine."¹³⁷

Another image used by Francis to depict the divine Heart is that of a fountain:

Deep in God's mighty *heart* there lies the fount of life, and therefrom takes its rise that flood of love and hope and sure delight which, with each living wave, will still make bright our darksome minds, and to our souls will bring new birth in life's immortal Lord and King.¹³⁸

The Spirit expresses the movement of God's heart within the Trinity and then, pouring itself out into creation. Thus, creation, as noted earlier, is seen as the fruit of the overflowing and abundant love of God's heart. This love that proceeds from the heart of God "does not operate like the love intellectual creatures have for one another or for the Creator."¹³⁹ It is a love which is eternal and without equal.

¹³⁴ OEA 4:207.

¹³⁵ OEA 4:212.

¹³⁶ OEA 5:89-90.

¹³⁷ OEA 4:129.

¹³⁸ OEA 4:210.

¹³⁹ Cf. OEA 4:169.

The Crucified Heart

It is the heart of Jesus, perfectly human and perfectly divine, that holds pride of place in Francis' description of the heart of God. Our Savior's heart is "the true oriental pearl, uniquely unique and of priceless value."¹⁴⁰ He says:

Yes, truly, Theotimus, God's love is seated within the Savior's heart as on a royal throne. He beholds through the cleft of his pierced side all the hearts of the children of men. His heart is king of hearts, and he keeps his eyes fixed on our hearts. Just as those who peer through a lattice see clearly while they themselves are only half seen, so too the divine love within that heart, or rather that heart of divine love, always clearly sees our hearts and looks on them with his eyes of love, while we do not see him, but only half see him.¹⁴¹

This image emphasizes the mediative role of the heart of Jesus. The heart of Christ is not only the place from which God views the world, but is also the place from which we can see God. His heart brings "a life more perfect and more pleasing to God, a life which will render [us] capable of uniting ourselves more clearly to divine goodness."¹⁴² Thus, the heart of Jesus is more than a mere vantage point, it gives us access to the Father. "In this sense de Sales teaches that the heart of the crucified Christ is the meeting place of God and man and the means of man's rising to his divine vocation."¹⁴³

Abruzzese notes that Francis "understands the heart of Jesus to have a dual role: it is the divine/human womb which gives spiritual birth and nourishment and it is the human means of access to the Heart of God."¹⁴⁴ Once again Francis makes use of the image of Jacob's ladder to communicate this reality:

[On the Savior's redemption] is based that whole mystical ladder of the greater Jacob, both at its end in heaven, since it rests upon the loving *bosom* of the eternal Father, in which he receives and glorifies the elect, and

¹⁴⁰ *OEA* 4:344. Cf. also, *OEA* 4:161; 4:185; 4:272; 4:294-295; 5:69; 5:344. Indeed these references to the heart of Jesus prepare the way for the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Margaret Mary. St. Francis, in a letter, gave for a coat of arms to his daughters a heart surrounded with thorns and surmounted on a cross; cf. Letter to President Brulart September 1613 in *OEA* 16:63. The date of this letter is to be noted. It will be the same liturgical date that will produce much later the principal apparition of the Sacred Heart to the Visitation sisters of Paray le Monial, the Friday in the octave of the Holy Sacrament.

¹⁴¹ *OEA* 4:294-295.

¹⁴² *OEA* 6:89.

¹⁴³ J. Abruzzese, *The Theology of Hearts in the Writings of St. Francis de Sales* (Rome: University of St. Thomas Aquinas, 1985), 158.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 143

at its end on earth, since it is planted in the *bosom* and pierced side of our Savior, who for this cause died upon Calvary.¹⁴⁵

The heart of Jesus, then, is the meeting place for this exchange of love between God and mankind and love of mankind for God. Making use of the Savior's own words, Francis sees the giving up of one's life as the "masterpiece of charity."¹⁴⁶ It is in the crucified heart of Jesus that we can catch a glimpse of his pure love, his "simplicity of heart."¹⁴⁷ This purity of heart reveals a singularity of intention—total abandonment to the Father's will. His heart "burns" with love for "both the Divine Creator and his base creature."¹⁴⁸ Indeed, Francis envisions this pure love as a holocaust in which Christ on the cross is consumed by the fire of holy love. In this, he fulfills his mission "to cast fire on the earth."¹⁴⁹ It is his heart, more than the cross, that is the altar:

He commands that the fire on his altar shall always burn and never be extinguished to show with what ardor he desires that the fire of his love should always be burning on the altar of our hearts.¹⁵⁰

When Francis states that "we draw God's heart into our own,"¹⁵¹ he emphasizes not only the mediative role of the crucified heart of Christ in our relationship with God, but also its transformative role. We quite literally participate in the divine heart by means of Christ's heart because "love makes lovers equal."¹⁵² The devout heart takes complacency in the heart of Christ and therefore, is drawn into the divine life. This mystical union is described by Francis as the rhythmic action of two hearts beating as one:

The spouse [Christ] pours his love and his soul into the bride's heart and the bride in turn pours her soul into the spouse's heart.¹⁵³

This union leads to a oneness or unity of hearts. A vivid example of such unity is visible, for Francis, in the early Christians where all are said to possess "one heart," that is, the heart of Christ:

¹⁴⁵ OEA 4:185. The original French expression *sein* is often translated as bosom, but can also figuratively express the heart.

¹⁴⁶ OEA 5:195.

¹⁴⁷ OEA 6:209.

¹⁴⁸ OEA 5:35.

¹⁴⁹ OEA 5:231.

¹⁵⁰ OEA 6:90.

¹⁵¹ OEA 4:260.

¹⁵² OEA 4:273.

¹⁵³ OEA 4:345.

The first Christians were said to have only one heart and one soul because of their perfect mutual dilection, if St. Paul no longer lived himself but Jesus Christ lived in him because of that most close union of his heart with his Master's whereby his soul were as if dead in the heart it animated so as to live in the Savior's heart which it loved. Then, O true God ! How much truer is it that the Sacred Virgin and her Son had but one soul, but one heart and but one life.¹⁵⁴

The pierced heart of Christ is, therefore, the source, means and fulfillment of this union. It speaks the silent language of love which prevails over all other language because "heart talks to heart, and the tongue only talks to the ears."¹⁵⁵ In short, only the crucified heart of Christ can express a love which is a *love without equal*.

Summary

Francis de Sales' use of imagery is an acknowledgment that reason alone is insufficient to plumb the mysteries of God's love and certainly, unable to stimulate us to respond to the passionate love of God. Images and symbols, on the other hand, can reach every level of our existence, rational, affective, unconscious, etc. They can evoke what is truly human and therefore, permit us to penetrate the depth of human experience, which in turn, leads us into the realm of the divine. It is Francis' intention to arouse us through his use of imagery, to evoke a response to the love of God.

Central among the images that describe God's love are those that evoke God's power to attract us, to draw us. They are chiefly olfactive images appealing to our spiritual senses, allowing us to relish the beauty and love of God. However, this attraction never forces, it is always an invitation, its power lies in sweetness and not force. This, of course, reveals God's love as vulnerable because it is open to rejection. Nevertheless, despite our infidelity, God is always faithful and never ceases to draw us. Relying heavily on the *Canticle of Canticles*, he makes use of olfactive images to describe the courtship between God and human person. Drawn to God's perfumes, it is always God who takes the initiative and continues to ceaselessly invite us to the fullness of life. These images manage to convey the unconditional nature of the love of God who magnanimously respects our freedom while alluring us with his perfumes and inspirations.

Another group of images that evoke God's love in the *Treatise* are those which pertain to the parental world. The image of mother and father are both used, separately and interchangeably, by Francis to express the love of God. Both give expression to the tenderness of God and, above all, to the parental aspect of

¹⁵⁴ OEA 5:50-51.

¹⁵⁵ OEA 12:321.

nurturing life. God not only gives life, but like a good mother or father continues to nurture that life which has been created. The fatherly images used by Francis evoke a sense of filial respect and reverence for God. Yet, this does not detract from his tenderness or convey the impression of an autocratic or distant father. The fatherly images are always consonant with the biblical image of God as Abba. These images manage to convey, at one and the same time, the strength and the tenderness of a loving father.

The feminine images of motherhood quite naturally express the supreme tenderness of God and underscore the idea of our being nurtured, carried by God. The question at issue is not one of gender because God is beyond male and female sexuality, but it is rather an attempt to convey the totality of God's love that includes both feminine and masculine characteristics. Indeed, both the feminine and masculine images bespeak one reality, the tremendous tenderness of God's love and yet, they manage to give various shades to this sole portrait. Of interest too, is Francis' description of Christ as our mother. Once again, he is emphasizing the nurturing quality of God's tender love and how we are re-born through Christ.

It is in the image of the Heart of God that the crescendo of Salesian imagery depicting the love of God reaches its apex. Both the ideas of God's love as drawing us (olfactive images) and nourishing us (parental images) are synthesized in the image of the heart which performs this twofold function of drawing and nourishing.

The human heart and that of God are made for each other. The diastolic and systolic rhythm of the human heart pulses in concert with the heart of God. Herein consists the greatness of humanity and its resemblance to God. Here we receive both our human and divine vocation to love. However, our created love is far removed from the abyss of God's infinite love—a love which is superabundant, excessive, *without equal*.

The Divine Heart reveals the friendship within God, a community of persons with one nature. God who is sole, is not thereby solitary. There is an intercommunion of hearts, a continual movement, a continual giving and receiving of love between the hearts of the Father and the Son. This divine friendship is itself another person, the Holy Spirit who flows from their heart into the human heart. Thus, Jacob's ladder unfurls from heaven to earth so that we have access to the Divine Heart. This access is made possible through the heart of Christ which is both fully human and fully divine. It is the pierced heart of Christ that is the meeting place for this exchange of love. However, the role of the crucified heart is not simply one of mediation, but also of transformation. Through his heart, we are bonded to God in a unique way and quite literally participate in the divine heart. Thus, to paraphrase a famous quote of Schillebeeckx, the crucified heart of Christ is "the parable of God and the paradigm of humanity." It speaks the silent language of love and is God's ultimate invitation revealing the depth of His

thirst for our love. It bespeaks a love that is superabundant, excessive and *without equal*.