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'Because She Has Shown Great Love'

Female Figures of the Gospels

in St. Francis de Sales' *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* ¹

by Suzanne C. Toczyski ²

Introduction

One need only glance at a few pages of St. Francis de Sales' *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* to recognize that the saint's elaborate study of humankind's natural inclination toward love of the divine is imbued with and enriched by countless scriptural references. Citing passages from Genesis to Revelation, Francis makes sophisticated and creative use of his biblical sources, not always quoting them directly,³ but rather accommodating their language to his own in order to illustrate his account of the birth,

1. I am most grateful to have had the opportunity to present this work at the Salesian Scholars Seminar held at the De Sales Resource Center, Stella Niagara New York, October 20-23, 2016.

2. Suzanne Toczyski is Professor of French at Sonoma State University (California). A seventeenth-century scholar by training, she has published articles on the dramatists Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine, the novelist Madeleine de Scudéry, the moralist Blaise Pascal, and Jean-Baptiste Labat, a Dominican missionary to Martinique. After a brief foray into the work of modern Caribbean authors Gisèle Pineau and Patrick Chamoiseau, she is now working on a project that centers upon representations of women in St. Francis de Sales' *Treatise on the Love of God*.

3. Francis himself states clearly in the preface of the *Traité*, "I sometimes cite Holy Scripture in terms other than those found in the ordinary edition [i.e. the Vulgate]" ("Je cite aucunes fois l'Écriture Sainte en autres termes que ceux qui sont portés par l'édition ordinaire") (340). Editor's note: Please note that, unless otherwise indicated, all references to Francis' *Traité* are from the Ravier Pléiade edition, and are the author's own translation; all references to this source will appear in the text between parentheses, with the original French in the corresponding footnote. See St. François de Sales, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, préface et chronologie par André Ravier, textes présentés et annotés par André Ravier avec la collaboration de Roger Devos (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969).

progress and most significant characteristics of our love for God and God's love for us. As Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S., and others have made clear, Francis' interpretation of Scripture "reflects a legitimate exercise in biblical theology by witnessing to an experiential mode of hermeneutics consistent with the patristic and medieval traditions," and thus constitutes "a valid appropriation of the text in a manner beneficial to contemporary theology."⁴ In the *Traité*, biblical texts offer Francis a variety of concrete images that can be juxtaposed with the complex theological concepts he would like his readers to grasp; setting these side by side, often including multiple scriptural references at once, Francis allows readers a new and imaginative entry point into Christian doctrine around the subject of *l'amour sacré*, or sacred love.

Among the books of the Bible most frequently cited by Francis are the Song of Songs and the Psalms, two eminently poetic and image-rich texts whose style no doubt appealed to Francis' baroque sensibilities. Yet a careful examination of the *Traité* also reveals Francis' interest in more traditionally styled biblical narratives, the so-called "bible stories" whose details would have been very familiar to his contemporary audience. Within the broad range of characters from such stories evoked by Francis in the *Traité*, we find Joseph and Benjamin, David and Jonathan, and saints Peter and Paul, among others. However, on equal footing with these eminent patriarchal male figures of the Old and New Testaments we find a core group of biblical women, including but not limited to Sarah and Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Hannah and Judith (from the Old Testament), as well as Mary, the mother of Jesus, Elizabeth, Martha and Mary / Mary Magdalene (from the New Testament). Not surprisingly, perhaps, Old and New Testament stories each offer Francis distinct and very particular advantages in his theological exploration of sacred love. As I have discussed elsewhere,⁵ Francis' use of the stories of female

4. Thomas F. Dailey, "A Song of Prayer: Reading the Canticle of Canticles with St. Francis de Sales," *Studia Mystica* 15.4 (1992): 65-82, at 66. See also André Ravier, "Saint François de Sales et la Bible," in *Le Grand Siècle et la Bible*, ed. Jean-Robert Armogathe (Paris: Beauchesne, 1989), and Philippe Legros, *François de Sales, une poésie de l'imaginaire: Étude des représentations visuelles dans l'Introduction à la vie dévote et le Traité de l'amour de Dieu* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004).

5. This article, entitled "Je cite aucunes fois l'Écriture Sainte: Women of the Old Testament and the Scriptural Imagination in St. Francis de Sales' *Traité de l'amour*

figures from the Old Testament is largely imaginative, invoking various aspects of womanhood as a means by which to give carefully constructed expression to humankind’s relationship with God; stories of women from the Hebrew Bible thus serve primarily to *figure* (in metaphorical terms) the love we have for God and God’s love for us. When he turns to stories of the women of the New Testament, however, the saint’s work has a very different point of departure, given the distinct nature of the women who were Jesus’ contemporaries.

What distinguishes the women of Jesus’ time from their biblical predecessors? In a very unique way, the women of the Gospels⁶ whose stories Francis cites are noteworthy in that they, to varying extents, enjoyed a personal relationship with Jesus himself, and thus with God. Their understanding of sacred love is therefore particularly profound. Named or unnamed, these women knew Jesus, experiencing Jesus’ love with an immediacy that we can only hope to realize in perfect union after death. Thus, to the extent that it is possible for human beings, they knew firsthand and are the embodiment of all Francis suggests is attainable in our relationship with divine love during human lifetime. Now, imaginative readings of New Testament women’s stories do figure in the *Traité*, and should be read in that light. However, when describing the sacred rest for which the believer strives during contemplation (in Book VI, chapter 9), Francis also reminds the reader that, in certain circumstances, “The soul no longer has any need of the imagination, for what need is there to represent to oneself as an image, whether it be exterior or interior, him whose very

de Dieu,” is forthcoming in a *Festschrift* in honor of Alexander Pocetto, O.S.F.S., to appear in June 2017.

6. By my reckoning, all of Francis’ references to women in the New Testament come from the four Gospels; women such as Lydia, Priscilla, and Junia, who can be found in Paul’s letters, for example, do not seem to have Francis’ attention in the *Traité*. Note that I am limiting my exploration of stories of the women of the New Testament in the *Traité* primarily to those instances where Francis actually cites, directly and sometimes indirectly, from Scripture. Francis’ remarks on Mary the Mother of Jesus, for example, are far more extensive, and/but, to a great measure, refer to extra-biblical accounts of Mary’s life. Actual biblical references to Mary are relatively few, of course, so this is logical. However, nearly all major events in which Mary takes a direct part (the primary exception being Cana and the more oblique references to “my mother” in Mark 3:33. Matthew 12:48 and Luke 8:21) have been woven into the *Traité*, and are eminently relevant to the saint’s exploration of humankind’s relationship with God.

presence one enjoys?” (636).⁷ Consequently, in Francis’ references to the Virgin Mary, Elizabeth, Martha and Mary (Magdalene), and others, the mediation of the figural is at times (although not always) eclipsed precisely by the immediacy of experience of those women fortunate enough to have known directly the presence of God on earth.⁸

New Testament Women’s Experience of Jesus

Thus, it is examples of the real experiences of women in varying degrees of relationship with Jesus that are Francis’ first concern when evoking the stories of female figures of the New Testament in his *Traité*. And, while Francis does at times invoke such stories to illustrate a particular virtue – especially in the case of the Virgin Mary⁹ – establishing a compendium of women’s virtues is not his primary goal.¹⁰ Rather, women’s stories of the New Testament are of particular significance to Francis in his theological

7. “[L’âme] n’a pas aussi besoin de l’imagination, car qu’est-il besoin de se représenter en image, soit extérieure soit intérieure, celui de la présence duquel on jouit?” (636).

8. Hélène Bordes cites all of these stories of New Testament women as bearing characteristics of the “petit mystère joyeux” that is the Visitation, as they all involve “un choix du dessein de Dieu dans une fidélité répondant à la sienne.” Hélène Bordes, “La méditation du mystère de la Visitation par François de Sales et l’esprit de l’ordre de la Visitation,” in *Visitation et Visitandines aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Actes du Colloque d’Annecy 3-5 juin 1999*, ed. Bernard Dompnier et Dominique Julia (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 2001), 69-88, at 84.

9. As Joseph Chorpenning, and others have shown, Francis’ *oeuvre* reflects “one of the principal trends of his age, the primary role of Mary and the saints as models of virtue to be imitated.” Joseph Chorpenning, “Mother of Our Savior and Cooperator in Our Salvation: *Imitatio Mariae* and the Biblical Mystery of the Visitation in St. Francis de Sales,” in *Marian Studies* 53 (2002): 63-85, at 80-81. As this topic has been treated in detail by Chorpenning and others, I will not revisit it here. See also Edward J. Carney, “Mary in the Life and Thought of St. Francis de Sales,” in *Salesian Living Heritage* 3.1 (1988): 17-26; Wendy Wright, “The Ambiguously Gendered Ideal of a Seventeenth Century Community of Women Religious. The Visitation of Holy Mary,” in *Journal of Religion & Society*, Supplement Series 5 (2009): 103-113; and James S. Langelaan, “Mary: The Most Beloved and Loving Mother. The Mariology of Saint Francis de Sales,” in *Marianum: ephemerides mariologiae* 38 (1976): 257-287. Interestingly, Victoria Brownlee and Laura Gallagher note that, in the early modern period, “the Bible’s female figures could operate as exemplars for men as well as for women.” See “Overview: Reading New Testament women in early modern England,” *Biblical Women in Early Modern Literary Culture, 1550-1700*, ed. Victoria Brownlee and Laura Gallagher (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2015), 131-145 at 136.

10. The woman who gave two coins (Mark 12:42, Luke 21:2) is also cited by Francis as an example of how the least of our good works is nonetheless pleasing to God (485).

explication of the notion of dilection (and the complication of sin and penitence in relation to it); in his ongoing exploration of human desire for God and recognition of God’s presence; in his development of the practice of contemplation (as related to loving reverence or *recueillement amoureux*, sacred rest, and quietude); and in the ineffable concept of perfect union. We shall discuss each of these in turn.

In the *Traité*, dilection refers to what Francis calls a “love of election” (*amour d’élection*, 393); it involves an active choice,¹¹ a gesture of preference: “If we love a friend, without preferring him to others, the friendship is simple; if we prefer him, then that friendship is called dilection” (393).¹² Francis also distinguishes between simple dilection, *dilection d’excellence*, *dilection éminente*, and *dilection incomparable* (393), this last being charity, a word Francis reserves to express love of God. Evoking the Song of Songs, Francis speaks frequently throughout the *Traité* of God “drawing us” to himself (450, 672, etc.¹³), but the saint notes that it is up to us to accept this invitation, to *elect* to love God more than any other, to exercise the will and participate in *dilection*. Francis’ myriad examples demonstrate that all of humankind (male and female) is drawn to God through God’s action alone,¹⁴ but our individual purposes for electing to seek union with God are manifold. In Book VII, chapter 3, Francis includes many women of the New Testament among the extensively developed list of those so drawn to God who accepted the invitation: the woman with a hemorrhage, for example, elects to approach Jesus “in order to be healed,” Martha, “in order to serve,” and Mary Magdalene (who, in Francis’ understanding, is

11. From the Latin, *dis-* + *lego*, to choose or take. See also Book X, chapter 6.

12. “Si nous aimons simplement l’ami, sans le préférer aux autres, l’amitié est simple; si nous le préférons, alors cette amitié s’appelle dilection” (393).

13. Song of Songs 1:3 (in the Vulgate; 1:4 in the NAB).

14. “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him” (John 6:44). Jesus himself is also said to practice the love of dilection, in Book X, chapter 17: “He often admired [individuals] by dilection, as he did the Centurion and the Canaanite woman” (866), neither of whom is Jewish and both of whose faith Jesus praises (Matthew 8:10 and 15:28).

the sister of Martha),¹⁵ to anoint him with perfume (“pour le parfumer,” 672) as part of both a penitential rite and the last rites of Jesus himself.¹⁶

This last example is one of the more extensively developed of New Testament women in the *Traité*: in addition to being identified as Martha’s sister, *la Madeleine* who anoints Jesus in John 12 is equated by Francis with the unnamed penitent woman who anoints Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Like other penitents discussed in the text (David, St. Peter, St. Mary of Egypt), this composite Magdalene is seen as having temporarily foregone dilection through sin and is said to have “remained for a time outside of the love of God” (428);¹⁷ Francis credits divine love as having done the work necessary to operate her (and others’) conversion: “But in *la Madeleine*, in St. Mary of Egypt, in the good thief and in one hundred other such penitents who had been great sinners, divine love, finding no virtue, carried out the function and works of all the virtues, making itself patient, gracious, humble and generous in them” (896).¹⁸ In addition to the act of anointing, the penitent’s tears become highly significant to the return to a state where dilection is again possible. God first places sacred love in her heart, Francis explains; “then this love is converted into the water of many tears, which, by a second transformation, are converted into an even greater fire of love” (468). In this way, the *Madeleine*’s tears become the medium through which love itself is sublimely transformed: “Thus, the famous repentant lover first loved her Savior, and this love was

15. Only John identifies Mary the sister of Martha as “the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil” (John 11:2; see also John 12:3); like many of his era, Francis names this woman “*la Madeleine*” or sometimes simply *Madeleine*, and assumes that all of the stories about the penitent woman who anoints Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels are also references to this same individual. Modern scholars, however, do not generally espouse this confluence of identifications.

16. “Ainsi plusieurs s’approchent de Notre-Seigneur: les uns pour l’ouïr, comme *Madeleine*; les autres pour être guéris, comme l’hémorroïsse; les autres pour l’adorer, comme les Mages; les autres pour le servir, comme *Marthe*; les autres pour vaincre leur crédulité, comme saint *Thomas*; les autres pour le parfumer, comme *Madeleine*, *Joseph*, *Nicodème*” (672).

17. “Tels furent les Apôtres, *David*, *Madeleine* et plusieurs autres, qui pour un temps demeurèrent hors de l’amour de Dieu” (427-428).

18. “Mais en *la Madeleine*, en sainte *Marie Égyptiaque*, au bon larron, et en cent autres tels pénitents qui avaient été grands pécheurs, le divin amour ne trouvant aucune vertu fit la fonction et les œuvres de toutes les vertus, se rendant en iceux patient, doux, humble et libéral” (896).

converted into tears, and these tears into an excellent love: of which Our Lord says that *many sins were forgiven her, because she had loved greatly*” (468). Such tears are an element of the sorrow operative in salvation;¹⁹ the Madeleine, like others, “cried for [her] sins” (942),²⁰ thereby becoming an example, again along with St. Mary of Egypt, of incomparable penitence. Converted once and for all, receiving mercy from Jesus himself, Francis notes, Mary Magdalene remains “confirmed in grace until death” (428).²¹

Having returned to a permanent state of grace, this very selfsame Mary (“Magdalene”), the sister of Martha, can then serve Francis as a sublime example of dilection, choosing, as Jesus notes in Luke’s Gospel, “the better part” (10:42).²² Unlike Martha, who approaches Jesus so as to serve, Mary is drawn “to listen” to Jesus (672), seated at his feet, never allowing herself to be distracted from the love she receives in the presence of the Lord, choosing only – by dilection – a love that “nothing can take from her”

19. “...puis cet amour se convertit en l’eau de plusieurs larmes, lesquelles, par un second changement, se convertissent en un autre plus grand feu d’amour. Ainsi, la célèbre amante repentie aima premièrement son Sauveur, et cet amour se convertit en pleurs, et ces pleurs en un amour excellent: dont Notre-Seigneur dit que *plusieurs péchés lui étaient remis, parce qu’elle avait beaucoup aimé*” (468). In Book XI, chapter 21, Francis states, “[T]he great Apostle said: *The sorrow given by God produces the penitence that is useful to salvation; but worldly sorrow produces death.* [2 Cor 7:10] There is thus a *sorrow given by God*, which is practiced... by sinners in penitence...” (“le grand Apôtre dit ainsi: *La tristesse qui est selon Dieu opère la pénitence stable en salut; mais la tristesse du monde opère la mort. Il y a donc une tristesse selon Dieu, laquelle s’exerce... par les pécheurs en pénitence...*”) (941). In the case of the penitent women, “tears speak of remorse over sin,” see Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus’ Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1984), 55. Brownlee and Gallagher note that, for many writers of the early modern period, “Mary Magdalene’s faith was understood to be visibly manifested in her tears, and her weeping emerges as a significant devotional trop across a spectrum of confessionally diverse writings.” Brownlee and Gallagher, *Biblical Women in Early Modern Literary Culture, 1550-1700*, 133.

20. “pleur[a] pour [ses] péchés” (942).

21. “confirmé[e] en la grâce jusqu’à la mort” (428).

22. Witherington states that, “Luke is intimating to his audience that Mary is a disciple and as such her behaviour is to be emulated.” Witherington adds, “It should be noted also that this is something that the Evangelist intimates Mary chose for herself.” Witherington also states that, “Interestingly, Mary is the only woman in the Gospels whom Jesus defends twice for her devotion and desire to serve her Master.” Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 101, 103, and 115 respectively.

(708), but that can be reinforced solely through “perpetual exercises and advancements” (708).²³ Although this dilection on sister Mary’s part is not as purely motivated as that of Jesus’ mother Mary – whose desire to be close to Jesus is entirely strong and pure, Francis notes (672) – it is an important step on the way to the tomb, where Mary Magdalene will, with single-minded desire, experience Jesus’ love and presence in powerful and profound ways.

Yet, long before the tomb, the desire for and the capacity to recognize Jesus’ presence is also featured as a moment in the womb. *In utero*, John the future Baptist is not the only one whose spirit Francis notes as quivering with contentment at the presence of the Lord in Mary’s womb (630); Elizabeth herself is said to “enjoy admirably the fruits of the divine presence of the Savior, without seeing him, on the day of the most holy Visitation” (636),²⁴ as Francis no doubt surmises from her comment on the divine presence Mary carries within her: “Blessed is the fruit of thy womb” (Luke 1:42). Mary, too, experiences profound happiness while carrying Jesus: “Ah, the Mother of God, Our Lady and Mistress, while pregnant, could not see her divine Child, but sensing him in her sacred womb, true God, what contentment she knew within!” (636).²⁵ The experience is a corporeal one: Jesus’ “divine grandeur” is depicted by Francis as having “contracted and condensed itself within her virginal womb,” such that “her *soul* grew and magnified the praise of this infinite goodness, and her spirit *trembled* with contentment within her body” (630).²⁶ In a community

23. Mary chooses love, and “rien ne le lui ôte.” Francis also indicates that virtues are said to give “beaucoup d’occasions à l’amour céleste de se renforcer par des continuel exercices et avancements” (708).

24. “Et sainte Élisabeth, ne jouit-elle pas admirablement des fruits de la divine présence du Sauveur, sans le voir, au jour de la très sainte Visitation?” (636).

25. “Hé, la Mère de Dieu, Notre-Dame et Maîtresse, étant grosse, ne voyait pas son divin Enfant, mais le sentant dedans ses entrailles sacrées, vrai Dieu, quel contentement en ressentait-elle!” (636).

26. “[À] mesure que la divine grandeur s’était, par manière de dire, rétrécie et raccourcie dedans son ventre virginal, son âme agrandissait et magnifiait les louanges de cette infinie débbonnairété, et son *esprit* tressaillait de contentement dedans son corps” (630).

waiting anxiously for the Messiah, such revelation of the divine presence in a woman’s womb could only be a source of great joy and wonder.²⁷

Francis captures another instance of human perception of God’s presence in the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4. Although she does not know Jesus before her arrival at the well and cannot therefore choose to love him immediately by dilection, the Samaritan woman’s exchange with Jesus illustrates for Francis that, even to the uninitiated or to foreigners, the attraction Jesus exerts on human beings is significant. Francis seems particularly taken with the conditional status of verbs in this dialogue, which illustrates the role of free will in opting into relationship with Christ:

See, I pray of you, Theotimus, the Savior’s remark, when he speaks of his appeal:²⁸ *If you knew*, he means to say, *the gift of God*, no doubt you would be moved and enticed to ask for *the water of eternal life*, and *perhaps you would ask for it*; as if he were saying: You would have the power and would be provoked to ask, and nevertheless you would not be forced nor required to do so; but only *perhaps you would ask for it*: for you remain free to ask for it or not to ask for it.²⁹

Elsewhere, Francis equates dilection itself to this water of life: “Holy dilection,” he states, “is the salutary water of which Our Lord said, *He*

27. Although elsewhere Francis suggests that Joseph accompanied Mary during her pilgrimage to see her cousin. See Joseph Chorpenning, “The Guidance and Education of His Divine Infancy: The Holy Family’s Mission in St. Francis de Sales,” in *The Holy Family in Art and Devotion*, Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 1997), 38-52., Jesus’ adopted father is not mentioned as present at the Visitation in the *Traité*.

28. I believe there is a play on words here, as Francis speaks of “le trait du Sauveur, quand il parle de ses attrait” (445): *trait* can refer generally to an isolated remark, and *attrait* to an individual’s more attractive characteristics, but there is an underlying sense of flirtatiousness in the formulation, which might better be translated as, “the Savior’s witty remark, when he speaks of his charms.” The use of the familiar *tu* adds to this slightly flirtatious atmosphere. Later in the same sentence, Francis also uses the related word “attirée,” or “attracted,” which contains the root verb, *tirer*, or to draw (someone to something).

29. “Voyez de grâce, Théotime, le trait du Sauveur, quand il parle de ses attrait: *Si tu savais*, veut-il dire, *le don de Dieu*, sans doute tu serais émue et attirée à demander *l’eau de la vie éternelle*, et *peut-être que tu la demanderais*; comme s’il disait: Tu aurais le pouvoir et serais provoquée à demander, et néanmoins tu ne serais forcée ni

who will drink of the water I give, he will never thirst" (937),³⁰ such that all emotion (desire, fear, hope, courage, joy) may be channelled into love for God alone. Thus, the Samaritan woman's exclamation, "Give me that water!" becomes, in the *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, shorthand for the expression of human longing for God, as Francis notes, for example, in the stories of St. Catherine of Genoa and St. Teresa of Avila, who, "like spiritual deer, gasping and dying of thirst for divine love, gave voice to their emotion" with the Samaritan woman's own words: "Ah! Lord, give me that water!" (952).³¹

Mary Magdalene will echo the Samaritan woman's imperative urgency with her own entreaty at the tomb, an expression of unmitigated longing for Jesus' presence. Angels hold no interest for her, Francis tells us, nor does the misidentified "gardener" when she sees him: "she wants no flowers, nor, therefore, any gardener; she holds within her heart the Cross, the nails, the thorns, she seeks her Crucified [Lord]" (586), and fears the gardener may have planted him in the flowerbed "like a crumpled and wilted lily" (586). And so, Mary's desire pours forth: "tell me!" (*dites-le-moi*, 586) expresses her tenacious longing, her unwavering yearning for Christ present to her, even if only as a corpse: "tell me quickly and I will take him away" (586).³² Interestingly, just as the child present in her womb prompts Mary the Mother of Jesus to "perpetually magnify God" (585),³³ Mary Magdalene's very desire for Jesus' presence with her in the garden³⁴

nécessité; ains seulement *peut-être tu la demanderais*: car la liberté te demeurerait pour la demander ou ne la demander pas" (445).

30. "Car en somme, cette sacrée dilection est l'eau salutaire de laquelle Notre-Seigneur disait: *Celui qui boira de l'eau que je lui donnerai, il n'aura jamais soif*" (937).

31. "Telles saintes Catherine de Gênes et la bienheureuse Mère Thérèse, quand, comme biches spirituelles, pantelantes et mourantes de la soif du divin amour, elles lançaient de cette voix: Hé, Seigneur, *donnez-moi cette eau!*" (952).

32. "[E]lle ne veut point de fleurs, ni par conséquent de jardinier; elle a dedans son cœur la Croix, les clous, les épines, elle cherche son Crucifié: Hé, mon cher *maître* jardinier, dit-elle, si vous aviez peut-être point planté mon bien-aimé Seigneur trépassé, comme un lis froissé et fané, entre vos fleurs, *dites-le moi* vitement et moi je *l'emporterai*" (586).

33. Francis refers to "la très sainte Reine et *Mère d'amour*, de laquelle l'âme sacrée magnifiait et agrandissait perpétuellement Dieu" (585).

34. It is fascinating to note that, echoing the Song of Songs 5:1, Francis will also refer to Mary's "very pure, very humble and very sweet womb" as a "garden" into

is in itself, according to Francis, a gesture that “magnifies her sovereign Beloved” (587),³⁵ and a model for all Christian souls to emulate in their own ongoing longing for God’s presence.

Scripturally Imaginative Use of New Testament Women’s Stories

Having explored many of the experientially significant stories of New Testament women’s relationships with Jesus, to wit, those chosen by St. Francis de Sales to illustrate the notions of holy longing and dilection (particularly Mary as mother/womb, Mary of Bethany as a disciple at the feet of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, both tearfully penitent and at the tomb), we will now return to Francis’ more scripturally imaginative use of New Testament women’s stories; one of the most significant examples can be found in Francis’ extensive use of maternal imagery wherein God is depicted as mother to the the human soul. We find this image developed in detail in Francis’ invocation of the nursing mother and her child, a topic that I have examined in detail elsewhere.³⁶ But images of motherhood are not limited to nursing; indeed, the whole of the mother-child relationship is a fruitful source of reflection for Francis. For example, the maternity of both Mary and her cousin Elizabeth is referenced in Book IX of the *Traité*, which is dedicated to the ways in which human will is united to God’s good pleasure. In the event, the actual scriptural reference pertains only indirectly to Mary, issuing from a woman in the crowd surrounding Jesus in Luke 11: “Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts

which Jesus enters at the moment of his conception (626), such that the Incarnation is the first gesture of Redemption, while Mary Magdalene’s recognition of Jesus in the garden takes place just after the Resurrection, the fulfillment of the promise of Redemption. Francis makes reference to the significance of Mary in the Incarnation in Book II, chapter IV: “and among all the women whom he could choose for this purpose, he elected the very holy Virgin Our Lady, by whose intervention the Savior of our souls would be not only a man, but a child of human origin” (*enfant du genre humain*, 421; one also hears an echo of Luke in “among [all the] women.”)

35. Like the Shulamite of the Song of Songs, Francis suggests that Mary Magdalene seeks Jesus in the garden “pour encore mieux magnifier ce souverain Bien-aimé” (587).

36. See Suzanne Toczyski, “Blessed the Breasts at Which You Nursed’: Mother-Child Intimacy in St. Francis de Sales’ *Treatise on the Love of God*,” in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 15.2 (fall 2015): 191-213.

you sucked” (799).³⁷ Oblique though it may seem, this “womb” reference is especially significant, in that Francis is suggesting that, when Jesus was carried in his mother’s womb, like John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth,³⁸ the babies left all care of their conduct to their mothers; likewise, the Christian should make himself “pliable and malleable to divine good pleasure,” (800) allowing God “to want and to do for us” (800) as it pleases him.³⁹ In other words, Francis depicts God as a pregnant mother, bearing the soul in his womb, caring for all its affairs. The reference to Luke 11 comes at the end of a rather long dialogue in which Francis rather imaginatively describes the post-partum relationship of mother and child as one in which Jesus also gave himself entirely over to the will of his mother Mary when he was a child, allowing her not only to walk for him but even to “want” (*vouloir*) for him: “her will suffices for her and for me,” Jesus says (799).⁴⁰ Thus, even beyond the womb, Francis suggests, God may be imagined as a mother making every decision for her child.⁴¹

Of especial interest to St. Francis de Sales is the devout soul’s prayer life, and it is here that we find his most extensive, and perhaps most

37. “Ô que bienheureux est le ventre qui vous a porté et les mamelles que vous avez sucées!” (799) In the Latin Vulgate, Luke 11:24 reads, “*beatus venter qui te portavit et ubera quae suxisti.*”

38. See 800. The association of Elizabeth with Mary here would come naturally to Francis, given his strong affiliation for the story of the Visitation, for which he named the religious order he founded in 1610.

39. “Théotime, nous devons être comme cela, nous rendant pliables et maniables au bon plaisir divin, comme si nous étions de cire, ne nous amusant point à souhaiter et vouloir les choses, mais les laissant vouloir et faire à Dieu pour nous ainsi qu’il lui plaira” (800).

40. “[S]a volonté suffit pour elle et pour moi” (799). Carney notes that, “Mary’s care of Jesus is also used to show union of wills. As a mother she sometimes carried him in her arms and sometimes allowed him to run around. Christians can associate with the Savior after this double fashion. They can let themselves be carried by Him. They can be active, in a sense walking with him, by conforming their will to his.” Carney, “Mary in the Life and Thought of St. Francis de Sales,” 22.

41. The image carries beyond the womb, transcending gender specificity, however. In Book VII, Francis notes in passing that both Mary and Joseph “carried [Jesus] many times, and especially during their passage from Judea to Egypt and from Egypt to Judea” (“[ils] l’avaient porté maintes fois, et spécialement au passage qu’ils firent de Judée en Égypte et d’Égypte en Judée”) (702). This event is described in Matthew

imaginative, invocation of New Testament women's stories. Francis employs such stories in order to explicate in great detail his teachings on prayer, particularly contemplation, through the related notions of loving reverence (*recueillement amoureux*), sacred rest (*repos sacré*), and quietude.⁴² While these actual women's stories hold value in and of themselves, as we have seen above, the Virgin Mary, Elizabeth, and Mary (Magdalene), among others, are presented by Francis simultaneously as *figures* (or metaphors) of contemplation and as actual model contemplatives or prayers, complicating in interesting ways the place of women's stories in the *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*.

In Books VI, entitled "Of the exercises of holy love in prayer," and VII, "Of the union of the soul with her God, which is perfected in prayer,"⁴³ Francis explores the many facets of prayer as an act of *complaisance*, an orienting of the self toward God. Undertaking a study of meditation and contemplation (in its many states) in Book VI, Francis gives particular attention in Book VII to the varying degrees of union with God made possible through prayer (states he refers to as suspension, rapture or ecstasy, and, in extreme cases, death itself). Walking with Theotimus through what is essentially a prayer journey, Francis focuses on the relational aspect of prayer, wherein the prayer speaks directly to God and

2:13-14 and 2:20-21, although the Evangelists of course make no precise reference as to how the child was "carried." As Chorpenning, notes, this is an example of the parents' "humble submission to the will of God," one of many "services which Joseph and Mary rendered the Christ Child." Joseph Chorpenning, "The Guidance and Education of His Divine Infancy: The Holy Family's Mission in St. Francis de Sales," 38-52, at 43 and 44, respectively.

42. Francis' extensive elaboration on prayer in the *Traité* is not surprising, given the strong emphasis placed on inner or inward prayer in Francis' establishment of the Visitation Order. It was also a sign of the times, a movement Wright has called "a more spiritualized understanding of faith" marked by "inward prayer, introspection, moral convictions, and vital personal appropriation more than on external means of communicating with God." Wright, "The Ambiguously Gendered Ideal of a Seventeenth Century Community of Women Religious. The Visitation of Holy Mary," 106; see also Chorpenning, "Mother of Our Savior and Cooperator in Our Salvation" and Wendy Wright, "Saint Francis De Sales (1567-1622) and the Conception of the Virgin Mary," in *Marian Studies* 55 (2004), 135-158. For more detail on the various states of contemplative prayer in Francis' *oeuvre*, see Langelaan, "Mary: The Most Beloved and Loving Mother. The Mariology of Saint Francis de Sales," 267-270.

43. In French, these titles read, "Des exercices du saint amour en l'oraison" (605) and "De l'union de l'âme avec son Dieu qui se parfait en l'oraison" (661).

hears God's voice in the very depths of the heart; prayer thus becomes "a continual conversing," a "colloquy" (610) or dialogue between lovers that best takes place, at least initially, when the two are alone together, speaking heart to heart.⁴⁴

Of the two principal forms of prayer that interest Francis in Book VI, meditation, in which the prayer actively engages in attentive thought or "mystical rumination" about God (chapter 2, 614-615), is seen as preparatory to contemplation, in which active effort is rendered unnecessary in favor of a simple but all-consuming and permanent attention to God's divine goodness (chapter 3). This more unified and immediate awareness or knowledge of God constitutes the "quintessence of affection," also qualified as "contemplative affection" (chapter 5, 624), and is "the necessary unity and the better part that [Mary] Magdalene chooses, which will not be taken away from her" (624). Mary seated at the feet of Jesus, "immersed in this sovereignly unique perfection" (624), thus offers an imaginative posture for the contemplative-in-training to embrace during prayer.⁴⁵

In whatever way we enter into or move toward contemplation, Francis writes – whether through consideration of one of God's perfections, or

44. Hélène Bordes noted that, for Francis, meditation "est toujours dialogue et deviendra, dans l'oraison, 'colloque', 'devis', 'conversation' amoureuse, où Dieu et l'homme s'entretiennent 'réciproquement'" ("La méditation" 80). On a related note, Francis makes an interesting, although not, technically speaking, scripturally precise reference to the Samaritan woman at the well in the first chapter of Book VI, when he reveals that "Blessed Mother Teresa of Jesus at first found the mysteries where Our Lord is alone to be more beneficial, as in the garden of Olives, and when he was waiting for the Samaritan woman, for [Teresa] was of the opinion that, being alone, [Jesus] would more likely permit her to be with him" ("[L]a bienheuree Mère Thérèse de Jésus trouvait plus de profit, au commencement, ès mystères où Notre-Seigneur fut plus seul, comme au jardin des Olives, et lorsqu'il fut attendant la Samaritaine, car il lui était avis qu'étant seul il la 'devait plus tôt admettre auprès de lui'" (610). (In John 4, there is no sense that Jesus was necessarily waiting for the Samaritan woman, only that he is tired and sits down at the well.) For Francis, the one-on-one nature of prayer was central. On the role of the heart in Salesian spirituality, see Wendy Wright, *Heart Speaks to Heart: The Salesian Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 2004.

45. "...et les perfections se séparent et partagent à mesure qu'elles sont éloignées de Dieu, qui est leur source; mais quand elles s'en approchent, elles s'unissent jusques à ce qu'elles soient abimées en cette souverainement unique perfection, qui est l'*unité nécessaire et la meilleure partie*, que Madeleine choisit, laquelle ne lui sera point ôtée" (624).

by taking in a more general view of God’s goodness all at once, or by reflecting upon a single act or work of God (chapter 6) – the contemplative state involves an interjection of love (*une certaine saillie d’amour*, 626) like, for example, Mary Magdalene’s “*Rabbouni!*” at the tomb.⁴⁶ Giving voice to love of God thus seems to be an integral yet effortless⁴⁷ step in the passage from simple consideration of God’s perfections or goodness or acts to an intense state of pleasure taken in God himself, a “holy and sacred inebriation” (627) that takes us “out of ourselves so that we might be all in God” (627).⁴⁸ Yet, as Francis is careful to explain in chapter 7 of Book VI, the loving reverence (or, *recueillement amoureux*) of contemplation is not a state we elect to enter, but a grace we receive, a presence we perceive as a kind of gentleness already put in place by God and present within us. For all that Mary Magdalene might concentrate her thoughts and affections for Jesus at the tomb, it is not her word, “*Rabbouni*,”⁴⁹ that marks her attainment of the state of loving reverence, but Jesus’ gracious proffering of her name:

All the affections of Magdalene and all her thoughts were poured forth around the sepulcher of her Savior as she went seeking him here and there; and though she had found him and he spoke to her, she continues to be scatterbrained,⁵⁰ because she did not perceive his presence;

46. Francis also cites St. Thomas’ “My Lord and my God!” and verses from Psalm 118 and the Song of Songs as further examples of this “sally [or sudden outburst] of love.” The word *saillie* (from the verb, *saillir*), has at once the double implication of a physical projection (of something into space) but also a sally or witty remark, hence my choice of “interjection” to capture both qualities of the noun.

47. Chapter 6’s title reads, “That contemplation is done without difficulty...” (“Que la contemplation se fait sans peine...,” 625).

48. It is a “[s]ainte et sacrée ivresse” such that “on soit tout hors de soi-même pour être tout en Dieu” (627).

49. Note that if we take Francis’ development of the progression of contemplation to be a linear journey in this chapter, as I have done here, the order of events as he presents them (first, “*Rabbouni*,” then the mention of Mary’s name) is somewhat problematic, given that John 20:16 reads, “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘*Rabbouni*,’ which means Teacher.”

50. Literally, Francis says, Mary Magdalene “does not cease to allow [her affections and thoughts] to be scattered” (“elle ne laisse pas de les laisser éparées,” 630); thus, it seems her inability to focus is rather scatterbrained. Also note the present tense of the verb *laisse* and also, in the long quote above, of *gathers*, *attaches* and *puts*, which add to the sense of instantaneous transformation in the text.

but as soon as he had called her by her name, see how she curls up and attaches herself entirely to his feet: a single word puts her into a state of reverence. (630)⁵¹

For all that we ceaselessly seek a state of holy reverence, only Jesus' action – for example, calling us by name – allows us to enter into such a state; Mary's dialogue with the Lord in the garden thus figures the soul's profound desire to converse with the Beloved who dwells unceasingly within, and the moment of transformation at which such a colloquy is made possible by God.

Evoking the notion of divine indwelling then allows Francis to incorporate the example of Jesus' mother Mary as a contemplative soul during the nine months of her pregnancy,⁵² a mother-to-be who, while she continued to live an outward life of prayer, was in fact utterly absorbed in contemplation of the divine presence growing within her womb:

Imagine, Theotimus, the very holy Virgin Our Lady when she had conceived the Son of God, her unique love. The soul of this beloved Mother undoubtedly curled herself up entirely around this beloved Child, and because this divine Friend was within her sacred womb, all the faculties of her soul retreated within her, like holy bees in the hive where their honey is located; and to the extent that the divine grandeur had contracted and condensed itself within her virginal womb, her *soul* grew and magnified the praise of this infinite goodness, and her spirit *trembled* with contentment within her body (like saint John in that of his mother) around her God whom she sensed within. She did not thrust either her thoughts or her affections outside of herself,

51. "Toutes les affections de Madeleine et toutes ses pensées étaient épanchées autour du sépulcre de son Sauveur qu'elle allait quêtant ça et là; et bien qu'elle l'eût trouvé et qu'il parlât à elle, elle ne laisse pas aller de les laisser éparses, parce qu'elle ne s'apercevait pas de sa présence; mais soudain qu'il l'eût appelée par son nom, la voilà qu'elle se ramasse et s'attache toute à ses pieds: une seule parole la met en recueillement" (630).

52. As Wright notes, "it was [Mary's] heart, her interiority, the specific inner qualities that made her imitable," inspiring devotion to Mary's heart in the seventeenth century. Wright, "The Ambiguously Gendered Ideal of a Seventeenth Century Community of Women Religious. The Visitation of Holy Mary," 106.

since her every treasure, her loves and her delights were in the midst of her sacred womb. (630)⁵³

This depiction of Mary’s absolute concentration on the God dwelling within her is creatively imagined by Francis as a holy, almost protective embrace that allows her mental faculties to be suspended in favor of all-engrossing contemplation, and the praise that ensues as Mary magnifies the Lord seems to be projected fully inwardly as well, resulting in “contentment within her body” and completely focused on the God “within.”⁵⁴ However, unlike Mary Magdalene, who requires a dialogue of exchanged names (Rabbouni/Mary) before the contemplative state is attained – and she is once more, as in Luke 10:39 (but not, in fact, in John 20) at Jesus’ feet, utterly immersed in contemplating his presence – Jesus’ mother Mary’s new Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), initially sung in the presence of Elizabeth, is internalized, eliding the presence of her cousin

53. “Imaginez-vous, Théotime, la très sainte Vierge Notre-Dame lorsqu’elle eut conçu le Fils de Dieu, son unique amour. L’âme de cette Mère bien-aimée se ramassa toute, sans doute, autour de cet Enfant bien-aimé, et parce que ce divin Ami était emmi ses entrailles sacrées, toutes les facultés de son âme se retirèrent en elle-même, comme saintes avettes dedans la ruche en laquelle était leur miel; et à mesure que la divine grandeur s’était, par manière de dire, rétrécie et raccourcie dedans son ventre virginal, son âme agrandissait et magnifiait les louanges de cette infinie débonnairété, et son *esprit* tressaillait de contentement dedans son corps (comme saint Jean dedans celui de sa mère) autour de son *Dieu* qu’elle sentait. Elle ne lançait point ni ses pensées ni ses affections hors d’elle-même, puisque son trésor, ses amours et ses délices étaient au milieu de ses entrailles sacrées” (630).

54. As mentioned above, Francis will invoke this image again in Book VI, chapter 9, where he describes, “Comme ce repos sacré se pratique” (“How this sacred rest is practiced”): “Hé, la Mère de Dieu, Notre-Dame et Maîtresse, étant grosse, ne voyait pas son divin Enfant, mais le sentant dedans ses entrailles sacrées, vrai Dieu, quel contentement en ressentait-elle! Et sainte Élisabeth, ne jouit-elle pas admirablement des fruits de la divine présence du Sauveur, sans le voir, au jour de la très sainte Visitation?” (“Ah, the Mother of God, Our Lady and Mistress, while pregnant, could not see her divine Child, but sensing him within her sacred womb, true God, what contentment she knew within! And saint Elizabeth, did she not admirably enjoy the fruits of the divine presence of the Savior, without seeing him, on the day of the most holy Visitation?”) (636). The reference to Elizabeth is echoed in chapter 10, when Francis makes reference to the “incomparable contentment” the soul derives “from feeling, by certain interior graces, that God is present to her, as happened to saint Elizabeth when Our Lady visited her” (“[le] contentement incomparable de sentir, par certaines douceurs intérieures, que Dieu lui est présent, comme il advint à sainte Élisabeth quand Notre-Dame la visita”) (640).

so as to present a one-on-one encounter more conducive to the experience of pure contemplation.

Francis returns to Mary (la Madeleine) at the feet of Jesus in his elaboration of holy rest or the prayer of quietude. When the soul is sufficiently collected unto itself (*recueilli*, which connotes for Francis a state of reverence), she is able to rest entirely in God such that her attention to him “is nearly not attention, so simply and delicately is it exercised” (632).⁵⁵ It is in this state of calm (*accoisement*⁵⁶, 632) and rest that the soul enjoys the divine presence without, however, any awareness of its own joy (*jouissance*, 633). Francis describes Mary’s contemplation at Jesus’ feet as follows:

Such was nearly the quietude of the very holy Magdalene when, *seated at the feet* of her Master, she *listened to his holy word*. See her, I beg of you, Theotimus: she is *seated* in profound tranquility, she says not a word, she does not cry at all, she does not sob, she does not sigh, she does not move, she does not pray. Martha, so eager, passes to and fro in the little room; Mary thinks of her not at all. And what is she doing, therefore? she does nothing, but listen. And what does that mean, she listens? that is to say, she is there, like a vessel of honor, to receive drop by drop *the myrrh* of sweetness that *the lips* of her Beloved were distilling in her heart. And this divine Lover, jealous of the loving somnolence and rest of his beloved, scolds Martha who wants to wake her: *Martha, Martha, you are busy with many tasks and are flustered about many things; only one thing is required: Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her*. But what was Mary’s part or portion? to remain in peace, in rest, in quietude beside her gentle Jesus. (634)⁵⁷

Like St. John who will rest his head upon the breast of Jesus at the Last Supper, Mary knows the perfect delight (*délices*, 634) of contemplation; her

55. The soul is so attentive to the goodness of God, Francis says, “qu’il lui semble que son attention ne soit presque pas attention” (632).

56. By the end of the seventeenth century, the term was limited to use in a medical context, as in “l’accoisement des humeurs” or “the calming of humors,” i.e. bodily fluids thought to be responsible for moods, etc. *Dictionnaires d’autrefois*, accessed 2 September 2016. <<https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois>>.

57. “Telle fut presque la quiétude de la très sainte Madeleine quand, *assise aux pieds* de son Maître, elle écoutait sa sainte *parole*. Voyez-la, je vous prie, Théotime: elle est

tranquil attention to the words of the Lord is depicted here as an entirely receptive act, an acceptance of the sweetness (*suavité*) Jesus distills directly in her own heart, which is a “vessel of honor.”

It is in the context of this example of Mary at the feet of Jesus in Book VI, chapter 9, that Francis suggests, as mentioned above, that there is no need for the imagination in the act of true contemplation, for “what need is there to represent to oneself as an image, whether it be exterior or interior, him whose very presence one enjoys?” (636).⁵⁸ Nevertheless, a soul striving to reach the apogee of contemplative prayer clearly needs imaginative models or frameworks to help her attain that goal. Book VI of the *Traité* evokes major female figures of the New Testament as exemplars of contemplative practices while simultaneously placing the soul herself in the very locus of prayer: the soul can carry Jesus in her womb, as Mary did, or seat herself at the feet of Jesus, like Mary the sister of Martha; longing for Jesus’ presence, she can also seek him in the garden, and know true reverence when she finds him, or more precisely, when he speaks her name.⁵⁹

Not surprisingly, the examples of Mary (Magdalene), sister of Martha, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, continue to be of service to Francis in Book

assise en une profonde tranquillité, elle ne dit mot, elle ne pleure point, elle ne bouge point, elle ne prie point. Marthe, tout empressée, passe et repasse dedans la salette; Marie n’y pense point. Et que fait-elle donc? elle ne fait rien, ains écoute. Et qu’est-ce à dire, elle écoute? c’est-à-dire, elle est là comme un vaisseau d’honneur, à recevoir goutte à goutte la myrrhe de suavité que les lèvres de son Bien-aimé distillaient dans son cœur. Et ce divin Amant, jaloux de l’amoureux sommeil et repos de cette bien-aimée, tança Marthe qui la voulait éveiller: Marthe, Marthe, tu es bien embesognée et te troubles après plusieurs choses; une seule chose néanmoins est requise: Marie a choisi la meilleure part, qui ne lui sera point ôtée. Mais quelle fut la partie ou portion de Marie? de demeurer en paix, en repos, en quiétude auprès de son doux Jésus” (634).

58. See note 7, above.

59. Such prayer falls squarely within “the tradition of imagination meditative prayer” espoused by Francis and his contemporaries; see Joseph Chorpennig, “Pilgrimage with the Redeemer in the Womb: St. Francis de Sales’ 1610 Meditation on the Biblical Mystery of the Visitation,” in *Festschrift Pedro Campa In Nocte Consilium. Studies in Emblematics in Honor of Pedro F. Campa*, ed. John T. Cull and Peter M. Daly (Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner, 2011), 323-340, at 325. It is also, Thomas F. Dailey has suggested, “necessary in one’s prayer life.” Thomas F. Dailey, “Playful Prayer: Imagination and the Task of Theology in the Salesian Perspective,” in *Salesian*

VII of the *Traité*, which explores the union of the soul with God that is the result of prayer. Making the point that union does not involve mere proximity or closeness, Francis describes the union of the soul with God as a state in which the heart is “transplanted from the world into God by celestial love” (666);⁶⁰ it is a union that increases as prayer grows ever stronger, affecting not only the heart but also the will and spirit, such that the soul senses God’s goodness spreading within her. Francis suggests that Mary Magdalene’s words in the garden, “Ah, *my Master!*” express her “holy awareness of the presence of God” (667).⁶¹ Citing extra-scriptural tradition, Francis will later imagine Mary Magdalene’s death in a cave in the Sainte-Baume mountains of Provence, at which point she “gave up her blessed spirit, which once again went forever *to the feet* of her Savior, to enjoy the *better part* that she had already *chosen* in this world” (697).⁶² Having spent time in prayerful contemplation at the feet of Jesus, Mary is acknowledged, in death, as attaining perfect union with him in heaven.

Of all the women Jesus knew during his life on earth, none so enjoyed near perfect union with him as his mother Mary, whose own *better part*, Francis tells us, lies in choosing “the love of her Son” (708), which no one can take from her, even in death.⁶³ Louis Comte notes that “Mary was predestined to be the instrument of an intimate and fundamental union of humanity with God.”⁶⁴ Wendy Wright states that “Mary was the one human being, besides her divine-human son, whose heart, preserved

Spirituality: Catalyst to Collaboration, ed. William Ruhl (Washington, D.C.: De Sales School of Theology, 1993), 169-188, at 180.

60. “transplanté du monde en Dieu par le céleste amour” (666).

61. “Mon Maître!” (667) is Francis’ translation of “Rabbouni!” (John 20:16); it is a reaction to “le sacré sentiment de la présence de Dieu” (667).

62. “[E]t tôt après elle rendit son bienheureux esprit, qui derechef alla pour jamais *aux pieds* de son Sauveur, jouir de la *meilleure part*, qu’elle avait déjà *choisie* en ce monde” (697). Francis re-imagines Luke 10:42 in composing one of a series of brief prayers to be used in the exercise of union with God: “Ô Dieu, vous êtes le seul *un* et la seule unité *nécessaire* à mon âme!” (“Oh God, you are the only *one* and only unity *necessary* to my soul!”) (675).

63. “[E]lle a *choisi* l’amour de son Fils, et rien ne le lui ôte” (708).

64. Louis Comte, “St. Francis de Sales and Vatican II on Mary,” *Salesian Living Heritage*, 3.1 (1988): 36.

from sin, beat most closely with God’s”,⁶⁵ and Joseph Chorpensing has elaborated upon the “mystical union of Mother and Son”⁶⁶ embodied by Mary’s maternity; that union will endure to the cross. Like the *Madeleine* who seeks a place at the feet of Jesus in her sister Martha’s home, Francis notes, the Virgin Mary will choose proximity to her beloved Son even at the most dolorous moment of his Passion,⁶⁷ and not for any reason but communion with him:

So was the glorious Mother beside the cross of her Son. Ah, what do you seek, oh Mother of life, on this Mount of Calvary and in this place of death? I am looking, she would have said, for my Child who is the life of my life. And why do you seek him? To be near him. But now he is among *the sorrows of death*. Ah, it is not joys that I seek, it is himself; and everywhere my loving heart makes me seek to be united with this lovable Child, my dear Beloved. (673)⁶⁸

Early in Jesus’ life, Mary had of course been told by the prophet Simeon that she herself would be pierced by a sword during the lifetime of Jesus (Luke 2:35); recalling John 19:25 – “Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala” – Francis situates this moment of unspeakable anguish predicted by Simeon at the cross, where Mary’s “sacred breast” is pierced by the pitiless blade of pain at seeing her Son crucified.⁶⁹ Francis first cites

65. Wright, “Saint Francis De Sales (1567-1622) and the Conception of the Virgin Mary,” 153. Wright notes, “For [Francis], the reciprocal love of God and humankind is paradigmatically discovered in the union of the hearts of Mary and Jesus”; Mary is thus “intimately bound to [Jesus] in his suffering,” 156-157 and 157 respectively.

66. Chorpensing, “Mother of Our Savior and Cooperator in Our Salvation”, 83.

67. “It should not be objected that it is historically unlikely that Mary or these women would be near the cross, for evidence shows that relatives and close friends might be permitted to stand near a crucifixion.” Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 94.

68. “Ainsi fut la glorieuse *Mère auprès de la croix* de son Fils. Hé, que cherchez-vous, ô Mère de la vie, en ce mont de Calvaire et en ce lieu de mort? Je cherche, eût-elle dit, mon Enfant qui est la vie de ma vie. Et pourquoi le cherchez-vous? Pour être auprès de lui. Mais maintenant il est parmi *les tristesses de la mort*. Hé, ce ne sont pas les allégresses que je cherche, c’est lui-même; et partout mon cœur amoureux me fait rechercher d’être unie à cet aimable Enfant, mon cher Bien-aimé” (673).

69. Francis uses this scene as a image central to prayer both for the gentleman who dies for love of Jesus on the Mount of Olives (Book VII, chapter 12, 700) and for St. Francis of Assisi, whose stigmata recall the wounds of Christ, but whose internal pain

this scene as one of “loving condolence” in which Mary, participating in Jesus’ own pain (576, 577) declares her love for her Son:

But most importantly, consider how love draws all the sorrows, all the torments, all the travails, the sufferings, the pains, the wounds, the passion, the cross and even the death of our Redeemer into the heart of his very sacred Mother. Alas, the same nails that crucified the body of this divine Child also crucified the heart of the Mother, the same thorns that pierced his head transfixed the soul of this utterly gentle Mother; she experienced the selfsame anguish of her Son through commiseration, the same pains through condolence, the same sufferings through compassion; and in sum, *the sword* of death that transfixed the body of this most loving Mother: of which she could very well say that it was, for her, a *bouquet of myrrh between her breasts*, that is to say in her chest and in the middle of her heart. (577)⁷⁰

For Francis, Mary’s suffering concurrently with her Son is a powerful testimony to the union the two have shared throughout his lifetime, an

he likens to that of the Virgin Mary: “Seeing on the one hand the vivid representation of the wounds and injuries of his crucified Lord, [St. Francis of Assisi] felt in his soul that pitiless *sword* that pierced the sacred breast of the Virgin Mary on the day of the Passion, with as much internal pain as if he had been crucified with his dear Savior” (“voyant aussi d’autre part la vive représentation des plaies et blessures de son Sauveur crucifié, il sentit en son âme *ce glaive* impiteux qui transperça la sacrée poitrine de la Vierge Marie au jour de la Passion, avec autant de douleur intérieure que s’il eût été crucifié avec son cher Sauveur”) (657).

Regarding this scene, Francis also asserts, again, extra-scripturally, that, “[Mary] did not faint out of love nor out of compassion beside the Cross of her Son, although she is taken with the most ardent and painful attack of love one can imagine; for, although the attack was extreme, so was it also at the same time both equally strong and gentle, powerful and tranquil, active and peaceful, composed of an sharp but sweet heat” (Mary “ne pâma pas d’amour ni de compassion auprès de la Croix de son Fils, encore qu’elle eût alors le plus ardent et douloureux accès d’amour qu’on puisse imaginer; car, bien que l’accès fût extrême, si fut-il toutefois également fort et doux tout ensemble, puissant et tranquille, actif et paisible, composé d’une chaleur aiguë mais suave”) (707). As Laura Gallagher has demonstrated, this reserve would have been in keeping with other early modern depictions of Mary at the cross. Whereas medieval representations of Mary at the cross dramatically portray her pain and suffering, after the Reformation, Gallagher suggests, “Mary was generally refigured in the early modern period as a sorrowful but silent and controlled witness.” See Gallagher “Stabat Mater Dolorosa: imagining Mary’s grief at the cross,” in *Biblical Women*, 180-196 at 180-1.

70. “Mais surtout, considérez comme l’amour tire toutes les peines, tous les tourments, les travaux, les souffrances, les douleurs, les blessures, la passion, la croix

expression of their loving, lifelong relationship. Remarkably, for Francis, the motherly heart of Mary, once pierced, operates a “sovereign degree of union by suspension and ravishment” (672)⁷¹ reminiscent of the one shared when Jesus was an infant at her breast (674).

In chapters 13 and 14 of Book VII, Francis imaginatively chronicles the death of Mary herself, taking pains to remind Theotimus yet again that, “the sacred Virgin and her Son had but *one soul*, but *one heart*, but one life, so that this sacred Mother, living, lived not herself, but her Son lived in her!” (703).⁷² Theirs is a “more excellent union” (704) than any Francis has previously discussed. Hence, Mary,

who loved more than anyone else, was more than anyone else transfixed by the *blade* of pain: the pain of the Son was thus *a trenchant sword* that passed through the heart of the Mother, especially since this motherly heart was glued, joined and united to her Son as a union so perfect that nothing could wound one without grieving the other just as sharply. (705)⁷³

Loving this wound of love “more than any cure,” Francis states, Mary “desired continually to die of it” (705),⁷⁴ a mark of her most sacred charity.

et la mort même de notre Rédempteur dans le cœur de sa très sacrée Mère. Hélas, les mêmes clous qui crucifièrent le corps de ce divin Enfant crucifièrent aussi le cœur de la Mère, les mêmes épines qui percèrent son chef outrepercèrent l'âme de cette Mère toute douce; elle eut les mêmes misères de son Fils par commisération, les mêmes douleurs par condoléance, les mêmes passions par compassion; et en somme, *l'épée* de la mort qui transperça le corps de ce très aimé Fils outreperça de même le cœur de cette très amante Mère: dont elle pouvait bien dire qu'il lui était un *bouquet de myrrhe au milieu de ses mamelles*, c'est-à-dire en sa poitrine et au milieu de son cœur” (577). Note that the original French is more poetically resonant, as Francis pairs *misères* with *commisération*, *douleurs* with *condoléance*, and *passions* with *compassion*.

71. Book VII, chapter 3 is entitled, “Du souverain degré d'union, par la suspension et ravissement” (672).

72. “[C]ette sacrée Mère, vivant ne vivait pas elle, mais son Fils vivait en elle!” (703).

73. “Mais la douce Mère, qui aimait plus que tous, fut plus que tous outrepercée du *glaiue* de douleur: la douleur du Fils fut alors *une épée* tranchante qui passa au travers du cœur de la Mère, d'autant que ce cœur de mère était collé, joint et uni à son Fils d'une union si parfaite que rien ne pouvait blesser l'un qu'il ne navrât aussi vivement l'autre” (705).

74. Mary “aima sa blessure plus que toute guérison” and “désir[ait] continuellement d'en mourir” (705).

And, at the moment of her own death, Mary at last knows the suspension and ravishment of ultimate union:

[T]he Virgin Mother having kept, by a very vivid and continual memory, all of the the most beloved mysteries of the life and death of her Son, in her spirit,⁷⁵ [...] engaging also, for her part, in a perpetual movement of contemplation, at last the sacred fire of this divine love consumed her entirely, like a holocaust of sweetness; such that she died of it, her soul being utterly ravished and transported into the arms of dilection of her Son (704).⁷⁶

Like Mary the sister of Martha at the feet of Jesus, the Virgin Mother and Spouse of the Lord “*has chosen* the love of her Son” (708) and will have the *better part*; she is thus drawn to Jesus in heaven, thereby attaining the perfect union that is the ultimate goal in humankind’s ongoing relationship with God.^{77,78}

Conclusion

Given that St. Francis de Sales’ first drafts of material included in the *Traité de l’amour de Dieu* were the product of his writing short inspirational

75. While not a direct scriptural citation, the expression calls to mind Luke 2:19, “Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.”

76. “[L]a Vierge Mère ayant assemblé en son esprit, par une très vive et continuelle mémoire, tous les plus aimables mystères de la vie et mort de son Fils, [...] faisant aussi de son côté un perpétuel mouvement de contemplation, enfin le feu sacré de ce divin amour la consuma toute, comme un holocauste de suavité; de sorte qu’elle en mourut, son âme étant toute ravie et transportée entr les bras de la dilection de son Fils” (704). Note that while celebration of the Assumption of Mary dates to before the year 500, the question of whether Mary died before her Assumption remains open; in *Munificentissimus Deus*, Pope Pius XII cites various ancient liturgical texts indicating that Mary did die before her body was assumed into heaven, yet ultimately leaves the question open. “Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* defining the dogma of the Assumption,” accessed 14 November 2016. <http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html>

77. Langelaan links Mary’s contemplative life to this scene, summarizing as follows, “Mary led a purely contemplative life, which was none else than an affective union and unity with her son. This union and unity resulted in her enjoyment of his presence but also in her compassion with the sufferings of her Son, which caused in her the wound and final death of love.” Langelaan, “Mary: The Most Beloved and Loving Mother. The Mariology of Saint Francis de Sales,” (267).

78. One additional woman of the New Testament mentioned by Francis in the *Traité*

pieces for the Visitation community of Annecy, a congregation of women and girls who had embraced the religious life and whom Francis qualifies as “souls advanced in devotion” (*âmes avancées en la dévotion*, 347), it is perhaps not surprising that the saint known as “l’Evangile parlant”⁷⁹ should incorporate, in creative and fruitful ways, so many references to the women of Scripture in his treatise. Like Mary and Elizabeth, like Martha and her sister, readers of the *Traité de l’amour de Dieu* are called to intimate relationship with Jesus; by entering profoundly into the experiences of the women of the New Testament while simultaneously exploring the nuances of those experiences at a deeply theological level, Francis’ readers, both male and female, can learn to draw ever nearer to the divine object of holy love, seeking his presence prayerfully, rejoicing when it is attained, and living in hope of eternal, perfect union with him. It is that union, we can be sure, that Francis himself pursued without ceasing, constantly contemplating Scripture, breaking open the Word so as to open all human hearts to the joy of sacred love through an imaginative reading of familiar stories, stories that continue to speak to modern readers today.

has not been examined here: Herodias, wife of Herod, who is deemed responsible for causing her husband to entertain incompatible desires (373). In addition, Francis makes brief reference to the daughter of Jairus (whom he names *Telithe*, after Mark 5:41), as a figural representation of the good works of the just which, when the latter have sinned, fall into a state of dormition and yet can be revived when holy dilection returns (911).

79. André Ravier attributes this assessment of Francis to his contemporary St. Vincent de Paul. See Ravier, “Saint François de Sales et la Bible,” 617.