

THE ASCENT OF MARRIAGE AS VOCATION AND SACRAMENT.  
FRANCIS DE SALES'  
CHRISTIAN HUMANIST THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE  
A New and Old Vision between Two Competing Traditions  
on the Highest Vocation from the Apostolic Church to Erasmus

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## **Introduction**

A new worldview rocked the Early Modern Church, forging fundamental changes in the status and understanding of marriage and sexuality in Christian life. The combined influence of Trent confirming marriage a sacrament, Protestant teaching that celibacy was unnatural and against God's commandments (Gn 1:28; 9:1) and the Renaissance humanists, all played their part in that revolution. When the Council of Trent both formally granted marriage the dignity of a sacrament and at the same time declared celibate (*coelestis beatitudo*) religious life the highest, it articulated an underlying tension over the moral meaning of marriage that those controversies were forcing.<sup>1</sup> Francis de Sales (d. 1622) proclaims: "Everything in Marriage is Holy", raising marriage to a new esteem for its own sake as a vocation, which he avows requires more virtue than religious life.<sup>2</sup> De Sales is also one

<sup>1</sup> Council of Trent, sessions 23 and 24. Trent expanded upon the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Florence (1445) decrees that marriage was a sacrament.

<sup>2</sup> François de Sales, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, Edition Complète, 27 vols. (An-

of the earliest modern Christian commentators to break with the centuries of reading the Song of Songs allegorically as God's love for the soul, Israel or the love of wisdom.<sup>3</sup> He uses the sacred poem as a metaphor to argue that nuptial union is hallowed and noble in a way that validates him as an "exemplary witness of Christian humanism".<sup>4</sup> He believed that the sacramental character of marriage was not so much in the contractual vows, but as a vocation to live God's will daily with the "freedom of children".<sup>5</sup> As he explains in his *Introduction to the Devout Life (IDL)*, "there are some things that are without a doubt God's will, such as those that depend on God's commandments and the duties of our vocation".<sup>6</sup> The doctor of love deliberately, yet cautiously, repudiated the longstanding view of the western church that marriage is a refuge for the weak, who "burn with passion" (1 Cor 7). He allows sensuality a natural, even exemplary place in marriage as obedience to its vocation without shame. Chastity is not simply celibate abstinence that stoically rejects passion, but virtuous sexual desire and a duty when lived in the marriage vocation. The nuptial bed is noble, he writes in a chapter with that title of the *IDL*, if used with a detachment that leaves one free to serve God.<sup>7</sup> De Sales believed that instead of being a distraction from

necy: J. Niérat et al., 1892-1964), hereafter *OEA III*, p. 276. See Terence MCGOLDRICK, "Everything in Marriage is Holy". Francis de Sales, A Christian Humanist Theology of Marriage, in "*Salesianum*" 75 (2013) 761-780.

<sup>3</sup> The Song of Songs is the most important and influential book of Scripture for de Sales, which he cites by far more than any other book, usually following the traditional allegorical interpretation. He interprets the Song of Songs as human love only once, yet in the powerful context of the nobility of the nuptial bed in *OEA III*, p. 276. Anthony R. CERESKO, O.S.F.S., *The Interpretation of the Song of Songs in Francis de Sales. How the Saint Learned the Lessons of Love*, in ID., *St. Francis de Sales and The Bible* S.F. Publications, Bangalore, India 2005, pp. 152-181. Modern scholarship strongly sides with the more literal interpretation of human love, which is consistent with the Judaic commentaries for the text and ancient Near Eastern poetry. Gianni BARBIERO, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading*. Translated by Michael Tait, Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands 2011.

<sup>4</sup> BENEDICT XVI, General Audience, on St. Francis de Sales, March 2, 2011, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20110302\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110302_en.html).

<sup>5</sup> *Letter CCXXXIV* to Jane de Chantal, his Christian manifesto.

<sup>6</sup> *Opuscles* 5, p. 83. Christ loving service at Calvary is the basis and model of all vocations, *TAD* bk 3, V. See too *IDL IV*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *IDL III*, ch. 39.

a committed Christian life, sexuality fulfills the vocation of marriage as a good and holy gift of self to one another and to God in friendship, which is able to purify the egotistical passion of animal nature.<sup>8</sup> Like every virtue, he emphasizes, “Chastity is not a lazy virtue that consists in suppressing actions. Ah! No, it is a hardy, generous, active, continually at war against the enemy”.<sup>9</sup>

“The chaste heart”, he writes in the *IDL*, “is like the mother of pearl, which cannot receive a single drop of water that does not come from heaven, for it cannot receive any pleasure but those ordained to it from heaven, apart from that it is not permitted to dwell on voluptuous thoughts”.<sup>10</sup> This external-internal distinction enables de Sales to redeem sexual pleasure from those who would condemn everything from the flesh as inimical to the Spirit.<sup>11</sup> With sexuality able to be made holy as part of the vocation and sacrament of marriage, de Sales expanded upon the idea of conjugal sinless passion that Augustine only reluctantly conceded as possible before the fall (*concupiscentia nuptiarum*).<sup>12</sup> Marriage is more than a human good, it is a means of grace and mutual sanctification that bears fruit in the family and which is able to use conjugal passion virtuously in “nuptial friendship” which is the “veritable and certain mark of God’s benediction upon a marriage”.<sup>13</sup> As a vocation and sacrament, de Sales supposes that marriage is not for the weak or a secondary vocation, but a way to fully live Jesus in the busy circumstances of lay life tantamount to religious life. In an earlier article where I explain in greater detail Francis de Sales Christian humanist vision of marriage, I ended by stating that his esteem for

<sup>8</sup> T. MCGOLDRICK, “Everything in Marriage is Holy”, pp. 771-772.

<sup>9</sup> *Opuscles* 5, pp. 40-42.

<sup>10</sup> *IDL*, ch. 12, *De la Nécessité de la Chasteté*. Augustine and Erasmus use the same metaphor comparing it to a person who dwells on the sensual pleasure using the example of a disordered love of food.

<sup>11</sup> The interior exterior distinction is developed well on the subject of fasting in his sermon on Ash Wednesday (1622), *Sermons* 4, LIV.

<sup>12</sup> Ep. 6.5-7; in Elizabeth CLARK (ed.), *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 1996, pp. 99-105. In only one text of the entire 26-vol corpus of De Sales’ *OEA* is the term “conjugal chastity” found and the text is not clear if this refers to an Erasmian ideal of virginity in marriage or the ordered passions he speaks of in these passages, *Sermons* 4, LXX.

<sup>13</sup> *Letter* MDCXXV.

marriage as equal to celibate religious life was both new and old. I wish to now explain how this is so, beginning with the New Testament and tracing two competing interpretations found the Patristic tradition and then show the longstanding theological esteem for marriage through the Scholastics and up to Erasmus. This will then enable me to, in turn, explain how de Sales offers a new synthesis that respects both of these positions, and raises marriage to a new esteem as both vocation and sacrament of equal value to celibate religious life.

## **Two Traditions of Christian Marriage and Sexuality**

### *1 Corinthians 7, New Testament Ambiguities and the Salesian Compromise*

Particularly in the western Church, we find a conflict over opinions on which state of life is higher, celibacy or marriage, stretching back to Paul's possible reproach of Peter for traveling with his wife (1 Cor 9:5). The Gospels are ambiguous on the subject. The synoptics all recount Jesus saying that there will be no marriage in the kingdom of Heaven, but all will be like angels (Mk 12:25; Mt 22:30; Lk 20:34-36). Jesus institutes the sacrament of marriage, prohibits divorce, and yet is himself celibate and applauds those who choose to be eunuchs for the sake of Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 19:12). Over the centuries two traditions trace their origins to the New Testament texts; on the one hand are those who believe marriage is a lesser vocation and on the other hand are those who say instead that marriage is equal to, if not higher than, celibate life. I will now outline the main axes of these two traditions in order to place de Sales and the Christian humanists position in perspective.

The locus for the strongest New Testament case for celibacy is found in St. Paul's apparent preference in 1 Corinthians. He writes, "I wish that all were as I am" (7:6) and "to the unmarried and the widow I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (7:8-9). The Apostle also asserts that the unbelieving spouse is consecrated by marriage to a believer (7:10-16), and that the married have anxieties that prevent them from giving their full attention to following the Lord (7:32-

35). The consensus among modern exegetes, as Raymond Brown,<sup>14</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor<sup>15</sup> and Calvin J. Roetzel<sup>16</sup> discuss, is that Paul is referring to the nearness of eschatological crisis, in which case, beginning a family and entanglements of marriage make no sense. If the end of the world is near, why marry, unless you are burning with passion and must do so? Paul admits he is pastorally open to different needs and opinions, while “time has grown short” (7:29) and “the world is passing away” (7:31). Nonetheless, he clearly says marriage is no sin (7:36).

Conversely, the many passages in which Paul praises the virtues of marriage (Colossians, Ephesians and Corinthians) all attest to a more sanguine Pauline theology of marriage, especially as a model of Christ’s love for his Church. As Will Deming’s recent work on the Hellenistic background of 1 Cor 7 shows, Paul’s discussion on marriage in those pericopes are directed to a Corinthian Christian community controversy, inspired by the Cynic-Stoic debate over whether marriage is a distraction to contemplative life. The Stoics would say it is not, the Cynics would say “it is better a man not touch a woman” (which Paul cites in his letter to the Corinthians in order to refute it).<sup>17</sup> Deming argues that it is a mistake to interpret Paul’s entering that fray “as if they were the deliberations of a systematic theologian formulating a general definition of Christian marriage”.<sup>18</sup> Yet even today, the debate continues. Alistair May, for example, posits that although Paul does not believe marriage to be a sin, he thinks it is an obstacle to full commitment to the Lord and should be avoided.<sup>19</sup> Jerome Murphy-O’Connor counters

<sup>14</sup> Raymond E. BROWN, *An Introduction to The New Testament*, Doubleday-Anchor Bible Reference Library, New York 1997, pp. 518-520.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome MURPHY-O’CONNOR, O.P., *First Corinthians*, (New Testament Message. A Biblical-Theological Commentary), Wilfried HARRINGTON, O.P. and Donald SENIOR, C.P (Eds), Michael Glazier, Wilmington, Delaware 1980, pp. 70-76.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin J. ROETZEL, *Paul, The Man and The Myth*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1999, pp. 145-147.

<sup>17</sup> De Sales cites this verse as Paul’s own words in *Controverses* ch. 3, art. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Will DEMING, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy, The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7*, Society for New Testament Studies, Monograph Series, Ed. Margaret THRALL, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 217.

<sup>19</sup> Alistair S. MAY, *The Body for the Lord: Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5-7*, T&T Clark International, London 2004, ch. 9. Protestant scholars Dale B. Martin and David Fredrickson are also in this camp.

that Paul and his audience in Corinth both take it for granted that there is nothing morally wrong with marriage or sexual relations in marriage. Instead, Paul is conceding that celibacy is an ideal that may be suited for his personal charism, but it is not for everyone. This is why Paul tells the Corinthians that his statement should not be taken as a command, it should be seen instead as a concession to the realities of human nature. That same pragmatism returns when Paul opposes the Corinthian purists by refusing to agree to force Christians in mixed marriages to divorce (7:12-16).<sup>20</sup> In an interesting twist, Richard A. Horsley vies that Paul is reversing the Corinthian purists' idea that mixed marriages should be abandoned for the sake of holiness, when he contends instead that the believer in such marriages may sanctify the non-believing spouse.<sup>21</sup> In any case, as Joseph Fitzmyer summarizes, Paul regards both celibacy and marriage as a gift from God that involves self-control (*encrateia*).<sup>22</sup>

In later centuries, as I trace below, a Neo-platonic dualism will influence the text's interpretation that partially accounts for The Council of Trent granting celibate religious life the highest esteem. After an extensive review of the ancient literature and modern scholarship, Deming concludes that Paul's concession to marry is nothing more than pragmatism as the end of the world nears.

“It is not a matter of choosing a lower or higher standard of morality, but of forestalling important decisions in life on the basis of expediency. With the Church fathers [like Jerome], by contrast, the focus has shifted to a dualistic understanding of the world, cleaving the individual into body and soul, and demanding a choice between sexuality and spirituality”.<sup>23</sup>

Deming, with Montague<sup>24</sup> and Murphy-O'Connor all argue that it is the

<sup>20</sup> J. MURPHY-O'CONNOR, O.P., *First Corinthians*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>21</sup> Richard A. HORSLEY, *1 Corinthians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1998, pp. 96-100.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph A. FITZMYER, *First Corinthians* (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentary) Yale University Press 2008 p. 282. Fitzmyer discusses a broad selection of recent scholarship on the text.

<sup>23</sup> Will DEMING, *Paul on Marriage*, p. 224.

<sup>24</sup> George T. MONTAGUE, SM, *First Corinthians*, Catholic Commentary on Scripture, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2011.

excess of lust not sexual passion per se that Paul condemns. Edward Ellis shows that Paul's views were consistent with Jewish thinkers of the period, who did not believe that all sexual desire should be purged, indeed celibacy was rare in ancient Judaism, but they did denounce the overpowering and uncontrolled passion of lust.<sup>25</sup> All these modern authors concur that Paul believed that marriage rendered sexual desire safe and affirmed it, provided that it was governed by love and respect. Each spouse is told in 1 Cor 7:2-5 to both be attentive to the others needs and to give authority of one's body to the other in a way that does not insist or demand. It is important to note, George Montague says, that "Paul, following Jesus, is establishing a new, countercultural and revolutionary equality between husband and wife", when he says that both husband and wife should fulfill their duty to one another and not unilaterally abstain from sexual intimacy (1 Cor 7:4-5).<sup>26</sup> Modern scholarship seems more on the side of James Dunn who concludes it an "unfortunate assumption" to hold that Paul promoted the idea of marriage and sexual relationships as second best.<sup>27</sup>

De Sales has no knowledge of that modern historical-critical hermeneutic, and still, he is quite clearly convinced that the Apostle is not relegating marriage to the weaker disciples. The doctor of love cites 1 Cor 7 only 27 times in his 26-volume corpus.<sup>28</sup> The majority of these to say that one should remain obedient to their vocation in the trials of life, which is the theme of 1 Cor 7:17-24; "So brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God." Peacefully accepting the cross and daily duties of every vocation is the most important theme he draws from 1 Cor 7, where, as I will show, he is able to resolve the opposition between Spirit and flesh that have traduced the married state. None of these 27 texts are concerned

<sup>25</sup> Edward J. ELLIS, *Paul and Ancient Views of Sexual Desire: Paul's Sexual Ethics 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 7 and Romans 1*, Library of New Testament Studies, T&T Clark, London 2007, chapters 1 & 5.

<sup>26</sup> G.T. MONTAGUE, SM, *First Corinthians*, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> James D.G. DUNN, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK 1998, pp. 692-698. Scholarship on these texts is vast, I can only summarize major trends as they pertain to this study.

<sup>28</sup> *Controverses*, Ch 3, art 10 & 11; *Letters* CCCLXI; CCCXXXIII; MCCVII; CCXXX-IV; MCMXCII; *TAD* I, 4; II, 7; III, 8 & V, 7; *Sermons* 2, CLVII & LXXIX; *Sermons* 3, III & XXXIV; *Sermons* 4, LVIII; *Opuscles* 2, XII; *IDL*, III, 29 (twice); III, 38 (twice); III, 39 (four times); III; 40 (twice).

with Neo-Platonic dualism, nor does he appear aware of the eschatological crisis hermeneutic. In his earliest work, an apologetic against the Protestants, *The Controversies*, he defends celibacy, beginning with the examples of the celibate saints and their great accomplishments, to refute Luther's "absurd" position that it is impossible and against nature to respect Christ's counsels on celibacy. Yet he admits it "can only be obtained by Christ and in Christ".<sup>29</sup> There is no question that de Sales agreed with Trent's decree that religious celibate life is the higher state. He condemns Jovinian's position to the contrary in *The Controversies*.<sup>30</sup> For that matter, even if it were the case that his outlook mellowed with age, as was true for Chrysostom, for de Sales to say that marriage takes more virtue doesn't repudiate Trent, but adds a subtlety to the understanding that was characteristic of the Renaissance.<sup>31</sup> In effect he makes a subtle distinction and holds that both are highest in their own way, which is at the heart of our question, and which depends on his human psychology.

The Salesian synthesis on the question of higher vs. lower state comes in his treatise *On Virtue*, where he begins by pointing to the many examples of married persons of "eminent holiness". With the following argument he explains how married Christians' attention may be divided and at the same time may also be just as resolute as the celibate follower of Christ.

"The married person is able to gather all his love for God rendering perfectly to God the very love and acts of his marriage, if it be, at least, that his heart might be a little divided, distracted and altered by the passions and feelings necessary for the nuptial state, with a kind of impropriety. This is why, regarding the substance and essential perfection of celestial love, married persons can have all, and that includes more than the virgins and the perfect; but regarding exterior propriety, dignity, nobility and temperance the virgins always surpass them. This is what the Apostle means".<sup>32</sup>

He explains Christ's praise for those who choose to be eunuchs for the Kingdom along these same lines, noting that it "Does not mean eunuchs of

<sup>29</sup> *Controversies* art. X, p. 112, *Opuscles* 2, XII, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Ch. II, art. VII.

<sup>31</sup> All citations of Trent in the *Treatise* are from the 6<sup>th</sup> session on grace and justification, save one from the 14<sup>th</sup> session on contrition.

<sup>32</sup> *Opuscles* 5, pp. 40-42.

natural impotence, but by effort, by which their will applies itself to hold themselves in holy continence”.<sup>33</sup>

In his mind, true virginity consists in the purity of a devoted heart that loves one thing: God and all that God loves, as He loves it. This single-minded purity is not limited to cardinal pleasures, but applies to all worldly goods. This is particularly difficult with the “fire of concupiscence” which he concedes is “very dangerous” to manage, even in marriage.<sup>34</sup> “The virtue of chastity is especially necessary for married persons”, he writes, “because it doesn’t consist in absolute abstinence of carnal pleasures, but in being content amidst those pleasures”.<sup>35</sup> Moderation, he teaches elsewhere, is the “high point of virtue” and “almost impossible to attain”.<sup>36</sup> Francis will preach that Mary Magdalene is an example of the “arch-virginity”, because her ardent conversion constitutes a purer purity and devotion to our Lord “purified in the furnace of sacred love”.<sup>37</sup> The grand theme of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, which begins describing beauty as the harmony of God’s order manifest in creation, is that all human loves are ordered, healed and rendered beautiful by freely cooperating with divine love.<sup>38</sup>

The Pauline texts of 1 Corinthians discussed continue to foment debate on the moral value of marriage, yet there is a preponderance of scholars today who are unsatisfied with the stoic more Neo-Platonic version of Paul’s theology that would relegate sexual desire and marriage to fleshly weakness that drags one down from a celestial spiritual life. Four centuries ago Francis de Sales was able to respect the traditional highest esteem for celibacy and at the same time recognize the holiness of marriage by singling out an interior chastity that is inseparable from humility, obedience and love.<sup>39</sup> Marriage’s conjugal chastity is neither for the weak, nor does it distract from true discipleship, because it is essential to true discipleship in the vocation of marriage as a sacrament— one can love God with whole heart, mind and soul *by and in* loving one’s spouse and vocation, with the help of His grace. A good

<sup>33</sup> *TAD* I, 2.

<sup>34</sup> *IDL* III, ch. 22.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *OEA* XV, p. 114.

<sup>37</sup> *Sermons* 4, XLVIII, De Sales is assuming she was a prostitute, which was common in his day.

<sup>38</sup> *TAD* II, 9 & IX, 6 for example.

<sup>39</sup> *Sermons* 4, XLVI.

husband or wife is a blessing from God, he says, because “the yoke of the Savior, which is sweet and easy in itself, becomes more so when two carry each other together.”<sup>40</sup> Instead of being a distraction or a refuge, marriage is a sacrament and vocation inasmuch as “they sanctify one another in a true fear of the Lord.”<sup>41</sup>

A too literal interpretation of 1 Cor 7 would never be acceptable for Francis de Sales, because, in his opinion, anyone who searches the meaning of Scripture outside of the bosom of the Church espouses vanity in lieu of truth. He expounds in a letter to a detractor,

“It is certainly true that sacred Scripture clearly contains the doctrine necessary for your salvation... It is also true that conferring passages of one text with others and reducing all to an analogy of faith is a very good method of interpretation... Witness the errors of Lutherans and the books of Calvinists, who... irreconcilably continue to contest the meaning of the words of the institution of the Eucharist; and they boast on both sides to have carefully and faithfully examined the sense of these words in relation to other passages of Scripture, and the whole adjusted to the analogy of faith, they remain, nonetheless opposed in the understanding of words of such great importance”.<sup>42</sup>

However, if de Sales believes that the bosom of Church is the final authority on the meaning of 1 Cor 7 and the Western Church has been teaching for centuries that celibate life is the highest, how is he going to justify his apparently new idea that marriage is a sacrament and vocation on par with celibacy?

### *Highest Vocation is to Live Jesus!*

De Sales does not need an eschatological crisis to contextualize Paul’s ideas about marriage, and thus refute those who would relegate it to a lesser vocation for the half hearted. The central theme of the whole Gospel for him is the love of God, which does not consist in romantic sentimentality, but is to courageously Live Jesus!<sup>43</sup> Paul’s “not I but Christ lives in me,”

<sup>40</sup> *Letter* DCCCLXXXI.

<sup>41</sup> *OEA* III, p. 272.

<sup>42</sup> *Letter* MDXXXI.

<sup>43</sup> See for example *IDL* III, 23 and *Letter* DCCXXXVIII. He and Jane de Chantal often

is his great inspiration (Gal 2:20). To be fully human is to be living Jesus in heart, mind and soul. The human task in cooperation with grace is to “strip oneself” of all obstacles of selfish affections so that all may be freely loved in God.<sup>44</sup> The love of God, he says, orders all other loves, it “has no convicts nor slaves, but brings all things under its obedience with a force so delightful, that nothing is so strong as love nothing also is so sweet as its strength”.<sup>45</sup> To live Jesus is to follow his will within the circumstances of daily life. Whether a person be in a religious vocation or not, De Sales believed every life is lived between the two wills of God. That is, between the things that one could choose through discernment and those things that must be accepted because they cannot be changed. “For the will of God is manifest in two ways: by necessity and by charity”.<sup>46</sup> Salesian spirituality is flexible, according to the particular temperament, trials and circumstances of a person’s life, which are given specific graces, because God has called each by name. Obedience to vocation is not Kantian duty for duty’s sake but “all by love and nothing by force”.<sup>47</sup> It entails an equanimity, which enables duty to be joyful, trusting in God’s providence with “the true peace of the Children of God”.<sup>48</sup> By taking up the cross in daily life, whether by accepting the necessary or choosing the charitable with a humble and gentle heart, wherever one may be, every person’s particular call can be fulfilled.<sup>49</sup> If married person can keep focused on this kind of devotion to God admits its responsibilities, anxieties and sacrifices, as well as its pleasures and joys, de Sales believes rather than being a distraction it is able to reach the fullness of the human vocation to live Jesus!

That flexible devotion to the duties of one’s particular life and vocation,

ended their letters with Vive Jesus!

<sup>44</sup> *Entretiens*, IV.

<sup>45</sup> *TAD I*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> *Letter CCXXXIV*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Sermons* 4, L, p. 99, see too *Sermons* 4, LXI, p. 158, where he comments on *Ephesians* 5:1-2, Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

<sup>49</sup> An excellent synthesis is found in Wendy M. WRIGHT & Joseph F. POWER, *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal, Letters of Spiritual Direction*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, New York 1988, pp. 1-91. See too André RAVIER, S.J., *Ce Que Croyait François de Sales*, Labat, Paris 1976.

whether in acceptance or in action, also enables de Sales to rebut the currents of puritanical asceticism of the day. St. Simeon the Stylite, John the Baptist and the virgins who disfigured themselves to preserve their virginity, he says, all had very “extraordinary inspirations” with particular graces, but such rare examples of asceticism are not the ordinary Christian way.<sup>50</sup> God is found in the smallest works that one does with devotion in daily life, “great works lie not always in our way, but every moment we may do little ones with excellence, that is, with great love”.<sup>51</sup> For those seeking to be saints in the hectic life of the world, God is “present in all things”, including within the human mind and heart, where He may be encountered in countless little ways, within the duties and opportunities of daily life, especially in relationships and encounters with other persons, which makes that service a prayer.<sup>52</sup>

“Our works, therefore, as a little grain of mustard-seed, are in no sort comparable in greatness to the tree of glory which they produce, yet they have the vigor and virtue to produce it, because they proceed from the Holy Spirit, who by an admirable infusion of his grace into our hearts makes our works his, and yet withal leaves them our own, since we are members of a head of which he is the Spirit, and engrafted in a tree whereof he is the divine sap”.<sup>53</sup>

De Sales was convinced that the meaning of the whole Gospel is to live Jesus, with interior virginity or single-minded love of God that is modeled after Jesus’ humble and obedient love, in service defined by one’s vocation. This is the greater truth, the living truth of the whole Gospel, governing his reading of 1 Cor 7. This is the very same trusting abandon to God’s love that permitted him to resolve his crisis as a nineteen-year-old Paris student

<sup>50</sup> *TAD VIII*, 12. The model of resignation to one’s vocation was John the Baptist. “Was there ever a mortification like this, to be so close to your unique and sovereign Love, and, for love of Him, to remain without going to see, hear or listen to him”, *Letters DCXCVII* and *CCCLXVII*. It is arguable to say that De Sales would consider these extreme examples of asceticism superior, since as this essay explains, it is above all the interior attitude of the person and their charity that is the measure of merit. His attention to the love of one’s own body would argue against any violence to health or disfiguring for the sake of virtue or prayer.

<sup>51</sup> *TAD VII*, 6 also see *IDL III*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> *IDL II*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> *TAD XI*, 6.

in 1586. A certitude of peace that followed those terrible months of temptation to despair washed over him, as he prayed at the feet of the black virgin of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès: “Whatever it is to be, Lord, at least let me love you in this life if I am unable to love you in eternity”.<sup>54</sup> This profoundly transforming experience of faith in God’s love resulted in a conviction that is key to understanding the Salesian reading of the whole Gospel. To live Jesus in child like trust in God’s love and will, in whatever circumstances you may be, gives sacramental meaning to the demands of married life, more fundamental to Christian life than any particular text abstracted from the whole Gospel. In that context, conjugal chastity has a noble place in a way completely compatible with the optimism characteristic of Early Modern humanism.<sup>55</sup>

Each vocation is able to attain human spiritual heights, but in different respects. Either way, the essential is not the state of life, but the state of the person’s will. As he says in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the three evangelical counsels above all depend on humility and although they may be solemnly vowed in religious life,

“If they are going to actually cause perfection they must be observed, thus indeed making the difference between the state of perfection and perfection, since every bishop and religious person is in a state of perfection and nonetheless all are not in perfection, as one observes too often”.<sup>56</sup>

To Live Jesus is to live conformed to his will and person in the whole of one’s life, not so much as duty but in friendship with him. That fundamental and overriding truth of the Gospel was not vanquished in de Sales mind by a formidable tradition of asceticism inspired by 1 Cor 7 that I will trace below. The Early Modern Church was focused on what is known as the Catholic Reform. One of the great themes of all Francis de Sales writing and life as a bishop can be reduced to living a true Christianity in response to the scandal of hypocrisy that had fractured Christendom a generation earlier. In

<sup>54</sup> Cited from his student diary with one of the best-published analysis in André RAVIER, *Francis de Sales Sage & Saint*, translated by J. D. Bowler O.S.F.S., Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1988, p. 32.

<sup>55</sup> William MARCEAU, *L’optimisme dans l’œuvre de Saint François de Sales*, P. Lethielleux, Paris 1973.

<sup>56</sup> *IDL* III, ch. 9.

other words, the truest tradition of the Church, he repeatedly taught, is not in externals like celibacy, but in the interior heart and mind, living what we will see the Church Fathers mean by spiritual virginity – living Jesus.

What about the distractions that Paul warned were inseparable from married life? Every married person understands the anxieties of a family's needs, the worries that children bring and all the new ways a parent is exposed to suffering, if their children are harmed or disappointed. Accepting God's will does not mean a quietest *laissez-faire* family life.

Do you seek the higher things ...cultivate those lowly virtues which spring like flowers round the foot of the Cross, such as ministering to the poor and sick, family cares, and the duties arising therefrom, and practical diligence and activity; and amid all these things cultivate such spiritual thoughts.<sup>57</sup>

Parents' loving faith in God's Providence is at the same time active, generous, hardy, hopeful, trusting and humble. The pursuit of the family's needs can be excessive like every other love or desire. Those needs and worries are brought into perspective and balanced, Francis is saying, when unified in service to God as a vocation that orders family love and responsibilities as a way to live Jesus, and give glory to God in the large and small demands of that journey. Married life's responsibilities and anxieties become a way God is revealed, faith tested and our dependence on God learned, together with an ever-increasing appreciation for the blessings of children, spouse and the family's contribution to the common good.

Psychologically, de Sales believes, following Augustine, that the human soul has two parts, the intellectual or superior and the sensual or inferior.<sup>58</sup> The anxiety of every parent is a natural response of the inferior part of the soul, but faith and its resolutions that reside in the superior part of the soul can prevail, even if the person feels torn between the two.

"We experience daily in ourselves various contrary wills ... as when a girl be married to the contentment of her father and mother, yet when she takes their

<sup>57</sup> *IDL V*, ch. 35.

<sup>58</sup> He develops this idea with a famous analogy of the soul detached and withdrawn from life's disturbances dwelling in the Temple of Solomon's holy of holies, where there is a "supreme point of reason and spiritual faculty, that is not lead by the light of discourse or reason, but by a simple vision of understanding and simple sentiment of the will, by which the mind acquiesces and submits to the truth of the divine will". See *TAD I*, 12 and II, 3.

blessing she excites their tears, in such a way that though the superior will acquiesces in the departure, yet the inferior shows resistance”.<sup>59</sup>

In the midst of married life’s anxieties, which Pauline theology calls a distraction, de Sales envisions the superior part of the soul remaining fixed on its resolutions with faith, hope and love. In that sense, because God is found in all things, especially in doing his will as a true expression of love, instead of being a distraction, the service, responsibilities and even the anxieties all become a way to live Jesus in and through marriage and family life. Both marriage and holy orders are vocations and sacraments in this same way, above all by the inner resolutions and selfless abandon to service between the two wills of God. Just as Gregory the Great, who draws the spiritual lesson from the Song of Songs, that God is present in the absence or dryness of the interior life, de Sales believes that God is present in the “distractions” of married life.<sup>60</sup>

As avant-guard as it would be to say “everything in marriage is holy” in the post-Reformation Catholic Church, de Sales is not alone, if one looks closely at the Patristic tradition before him. The problem is that the Patristic tradition is not unanimous, it also reflects the two opposing positions about which life is higher; and the incompatibility between the flesh and spirit, heaven and earth, passion and purity that surrounds the New Testament interpretation. Lets now briefly look at both sides of the question of the highest state in some of the major Patristic sources, to contextualize the controversy and to show how de Sales is both traditional and original in this teaching.

<sup>59</sup> *TADI*, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Gregory the Great (c. 600) is cited in the *Introduction to the Devout Life’s* chapter on the nobility of the nuptial bed. Gregory was one of de Sales most often cited church fathers. His *Moralia* focuses on the interior life vs. the exterior circumstances of life in the world and is undoubtedly one of the most important patristic inspirations for de Sales spirituality. What are we to think when de Sales surmises that St. Peter was celibate because his heart was not divided? (*Sermons* 4, LX) Could he have been ignorant of Paul’s complaints about Peter traveling with his wife in 1 Cor 9:5? Juxtaposing these texts reveals that our author was comfortable with the same kind of metaphorical use of virginity that we find in the church fathers, like Gregory of Nyssa, to describe the interior chastity, poverty and obedience detached from the worldly idols that distract the soul from God. Peter therefore could be a celibate virgin metaphorically, while at the same time married literally.

### *The Christian Moderate Encratic Ascetics*

The dualist asceticism that Deming describes can be traced back in the Christian corpus to a Neo-Platonism that begins around the early third century. The ancients believed that the perfect, the heavenly, was found in the unchanging quint-essences of the stars and planets. If perfection means unchanging and permanent, then the fierce disturbances of a peaceful soul caused by passion is a violence pulling the soul down from the heavenly heights of tranquility and into the corruption of earthly change, illness, chaos and irrationality. For Origen (c. 220), the creation story of Genesis takes place in a spiritual realm pre-existing worldly creation. God created the material world for the punishment of fallen rational spirits and as a testing-ground for their conversion. Both Tertullian (c. 200) and Origen, held that Adam and Eve were asexual in the state of innocence and that a more truly spiritual existence closer to God is to be found in transcendence over bodily limits and turbulent concupiscence. Origen shared the belief that the body was a kind of prison of the soul with the Christian Gnostics Valentinus and Tatian, yet with an important nuance. For Origen, our sojourn in a body is an act of divine mercy, necessary for the gradual healing of the soul, a process of education so that it may come to open itself to the love of God. As Peter Brown shows, virginity for both Tertullian and Origen became the purest state, the untarnished and utterly free soul, the way to a spiritual existence of an intensely awakened sensual world of joy not dulled by the body.<sup>61</sup> Henri Crouzel reminds us that for Origen the flesh is impure because it is the ambiguous and dangerous characteristic of man's selfish passions, which is different than the choice of sin.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, Origen does in one place speak of procreation as something holy.<sup>63</sup> Origen attacked Marcion's insistence on celibacy, because marriage and procreation were gifts ordained by the providence of God.<sup>64</sup> Origen believed charity the

<sup>61</sup> Peter BROWN, *The Body and Society, Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York 1988 pp. 171-173.

<sup>62</sup> Henri CROUZEL, *Origen: The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian*, translated by A.S. Worrall, San Francisco, Harper & Row 1989, ch. 8.

<sup>63</sup> ORIGEN, *On Prayer*, in *Origen: an Exhortation to Martyrdom. Prayer and Selected Works*, Paulist Press, New York 1979, p. 83.

<sup>64</sup> ORIGEN, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* bk 14, ch. 16.

dominant virtue of marriage and chastity to be most importantly a moral attitude. Marriage's self-sacrificing demands of partner and children dictate a difficult way to perfection that required grace. Virginity is a charism more of heart than body, with its own self-gift to God, which in return is God's gift to the soul.<sup>65</sup>

David Hunter calls "moderate encratism," the early theology that rejects the gnostic belief that all Christians should embrace total celibacy and live a purely spiritual existence, and yet teaches that marriage is inferior to celibacy.<sup>66</sup> Tertullian, Cyprian (c. 250) and Origen elevated those who choose to be eunuchs for the kingdom of God over marriage. However, they reject the radical encratism of the dualist Manicheans and Gnostics like Tatian, who believe no man should touch a woman or marry, which was also condemned by Irenaeus (c. 200) and Clement (c. 200). Tertullian, Cyprian and Origen introduce moderate encratic thinking that will have a significant impact on Western ascetical theology and later influence Ambrose and Jerome in the following century. As Hunter explains, Tertullian praises marriage and intercourse as natural, blessed by God and the way to "go forth and multiply" as decreed by God in his earlier writings (*De Anima* for example). One sole marriage is permitted (not commanded) as a necessity to populate the world, Tertullian writes to his wife. Later in life, approaching his own conversion to ascetical Montanism, he condemns first remarriages by widows and then all marriage, decrying all intercourse as fornication. He cited Paul's letter to the Corinthians in his *Exhortation to Chastity* (208), to say Paul indicated God's preference for celibacy and to transgress a divine preference was to sin. Cyprian was heavily influenced by his fellow north African, Tertullian, and wrote his own treatise on the merits of virginity, which was widely read in the period. It was recommended by Jerome to the virgin Eustochium (384) and cited at length by Ambrose. Cyprian used Christ's indicating there will be no marriage in heaven, "because they are like angels and are children of God" (Lk 20:34-36) to support his position. To pass through the world pure and chaste makes one equal to the angels.

<sup>65</sup> Henri CROUZEL, *Origen*, p. 148.

<sup>66</sup> This view gained force especially in the Syrian Church and is found in period texts like the Gospel of Thomas and *The Hundredfold Reward*. David G. HUNTER, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity, The Jovinianist Controversy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 114-115.

Marriage (flesh), he argues in the encratite tradition, is for the Old Testament, virginity (Spirit) for the New Testament. The former age lived under the command of God in paradise to go forth and multiply, the new age calls for continence, to make oneself eunuchs for the kingdom of God. A higher place was reserved in heaven for the celibate, he believed, just below the martyrs and just above the married.<sup>67</sup> Athanasius (c. 360) is another example of the moderates, he rejected Tertullian's later extreme position on intercourse. He also considered marriage and sexuality to be good as part of God's creation and says that those freely yoked together to beget children are blessed.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Athanasius clearly believes that the higher state is the celibate monk who is more greatly blessed.<sup>69</sup>

During a time of the rise of monasticism, Jerome (c. 420) makes the argument that celibate life is higher, because it is better to follow the counsels of God (poverty, chastity and obedience) with the commandments, than to follow the commandments alone. Jerome taught, "Christ loves virgins more than others, because they willingly give what was not commanded them. And it indicates greater grace to offer what you are not bound to give, than to render what is exacted of you".<sup>70</sup> Yet he says it is not a sin to marry, but to make oneself a eunuch for the Kingdom of God is a mark of great faith and great virtue. Repeating Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 7, Jerome continues that freedom from the cares of a wife and the world allows one to focus on God alone.

The Roman Christian aristocracy were offended by Jerome's characterizing their lives as any less blessed by God. The poetry of Proba (c. 395) indicates a synthesis of Roman and Christian values (which justifies class distinctions) that John Curran and David Hunter argue uphold the sanctity of marriage, chastity, parenthood and family, "more typical of the average Christian at Rome than was the ascetic enthusiasm of Jerome".<sup>71</sup> Jerome scathingly calls Proba's poetry, praising the virtues of married life, the "chat-

<sup>67</sup> *Hab. Virg* 21 and 23 (CSEL 3, 202-203).

<sup>68</sup> Letter 48 to Amun.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas G. WEINANDY, *Athanasius A Theological Introduction*, Aldershot, Ashgate 2010.

<sup>70</sup> *Against Jovinianus* I, 12.

<sup>71</sup> D. G. HUNTER, *Marriage Celibacy and Heresy*, pp. 70-71. John R. CURRAN, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, pp. 284-293.

tering of an old hag".<sup>72</sup> His defense of virginity follows from 1 Cor 7, in a tradition that sees marriage as a way to avoid sin if one burns with passion. He makes no distinction between clerical celibacy and lay celibacy nor is there any consideration of different conditions and responsibilities incumbent upon these two very different states in life. The Roman clergy, who Jerome chided as lax, joined forces with the Roman nobility to expel him from the Eternal City after one of his protégés, a young virgin, died due to too much asceticism. Nevertheless he would remain an influential clerical voice for celibacy and virginity through the centuries with Tertullian, Gregory of Nazianzus, Origen and Cyprian. Elizabeth Clark has shown that this trend to elevate virginity was tied to a certain gender bias and ambivalent construct of "women" as temptress and weaker in late ancient Christianity.<sup>73</sup> There is considerable doubt that the laity observed these clerical requirements or for that matter that they agreed with a theology that considered desire and pleasure in marital union to be avoided or sinful.<sup>74</sup>

There is little doubt that Platonic dualistic Hellenism influenced the Early Church Fathers, but it would be too Harnackian to say it alone explains their asceticism. The radical character of the Gospel better explains early Christian asceticism.<sup>75</sup> The various dualist Greek philosophical schools that venerated celibacy were at odds with the civic ideal of ancient Rome as much as with Judaism. Augustine is a fine example of a Platonist that was not ascetic. Platonism influenced practically all of the Church Fathers. Robert Wilken shows that the spirit of early Christian thought was pri-

<sup>72</sup> Ep 53.7.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth A. CLARK, *Ideology, History and the Construction of "Woman" in Late Ancient Christianity*, in *Recent Studies in Early Christianity*, Everett FERGUSON ed., Garland Publishing Inc., New York & London 1999, pp. 1-30.

<sup>74</sup> Historians believe particularly during the Renaissance moral attitudes of marriage and sexuality were changing, but remained lax and private matters for most. See *Christian Marriage A Historical Study*, G.W. OLSEN (Ed), Crossroads, New York 2001. See too Merry WIESNER-HANKS, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World. Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Routledge, New York 2000, pp. 129-180.

<sup>75</sup> There are many studies on the history of celibacy and sexuality in Christianity that needn't be reproduced here. Two examples are: Carl OLSON, *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, New York, Oxford University Press 2007, and Roman CHOLIJ, *Clerical Celibacy in East and West*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Gracewing, Leominster Herefordshire 1990.

marily biblical and liturgical before it was Hellenist.<sup>76</sup> Christ is more than a philosopher, he personally reveals the divine in history. “For the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me” (Jn 5:36). On that authority, Christian asceticism preaches Christ crucified, a celibate Jesus, eunuchs for the kingdom of Heaven and the Pauline interpretations discussed above. As Anthony Meredith draws to our attention, Christian asceticism differs considerably from the Greek version in its views of prayer, demons, the body and its place in the Church.<sup>77</sup> The modern authors that continue to glean an ascetical teaching from Paul on marriage and sexuality are not simply guided by Platonic dualism, but instead by what we must admit is a possible interpretation of the Gospels and Pauline epistles.

The Orthodox Church offers a different interpretation of the patristic tradition. It considers the evangelical counsels equal to the precepts, and that the whole Gospel is addressed to each person and therefore it is a useless impersonal abstraction to call one state of life superior over the other.<sup>78</sup> As Olivier Clément explains, for the Orthodox Church “chastity does not necessarily mean continence; it signifies the integrity and wholeness of the spirit, of the heart-spirit assuming all the power of life, of Eros in the encounter with a person, which makes the body no longer an object but the poetry of a true tenderness”.<sup>79</sup> This theology sees marriage as a communion with Christ and his Church, and with the Trinity that makes its love more forgiving, lasting, and deeper, since it shares in the mystery of divine love. In 692 A.D., wary of the western church’s ascetical theology, the Council in Trullo affirmed the right of married men to become priests for the Eastern Orthodox Church.

For much of Christian history, especially in the west, the ideal has been a Neo-Platonic asexual spirituality, modeled on Christ’s own celibate life, that was at the same time curiously able to minimize the worthy married state

<sup>76</sup> Robert L. WILKEN, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2003, ch. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Anthony MEREDITH, S.J., “Asceticism-Christian and Greek”, in *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s., 27 (1976) 313-332.

<sup>78</sup> Paul EVDOKIMOV, *The Sacrament of Love, The Nuptial Mystery in Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1985, ch. 2.

<sup>79</sup> Olivier CLEMENT, Introduction to P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Sacrament of Love*.

of the apostles, martyrs and saints through the ages. Athanasius, Jerome, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine all acknowledge the goodness of marriage, but consider virginity and celibate religious life a higher vocation. Jerome calls the former silver and the latter gold.<sup>80</sup> This school of patristic thought relegated marriage as a lesser vocation and a compromise for the burning passions of a fallen nature. A dualism between flesh and Spirit, with support from New Testament authority such as Romans chapter 8 and Jesus' own words; "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" (Mk 14:38), fit well with stoic philosophical currents and gnostic asceticism of antiquity. Irenaeus, for his part, writes against gnostic dualism saying that it is the whole person, body and soul, that bears God's image and that Christ redeems the material fleshly body.<sup>81</sup> As Gasparro et al point out, the particular polemics of the Fathers, especially on marriage and sexuality, must be read in an overall perception of the incarnation that redeems humanity and gives a new dignity to the human condition.<sup>82</sup> As we have seen to this point of this study, for some of the Fathers the new dignity granted to all by humanity's union with the divine due to the incarnation and baptism, still falls short of the heights of the complete devotion belonging to those who sacrifice marital life and family to be disciples of Jesus Christ imitating him, the Blessed Virgin and some of his closest followers. The patristic sources that derogate marriage illustrate what Peter Brown and many others lamentably attribute to a theology written by celibate clerics and none others for centuries.<sup>83</sup> The Patristic tradition on marriage and celibacy is not unanimous. Other Church Fathers, make different arguments similar to Francis de Sales putting marriage on a par with celibacy, or even above it.

<sup>80</sup> *Against Jovinianus* I, 3.

<sup>81</sup> AH ch. 5. Matthew C. STEENBERG, *Irenaeus on creation: The cosmic Christ and the saga of redemption*. Supplements to *Vigiliae christianae*, Brill, Leiden 2008.

<sup>82</sup> Giulia SFAMENI GASPARRO, Cesare MAGAZZÙ, and Concetta ALOE SPADA, *The Human Couple in the Fathers*, Pauline Books and Media, Boston 1998.

<sup>83</sup> See Peter BROWN, *The Make of Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1978, pp. 61-75 (ch. 4: "East and West in the New Marital Morality").

## A Patristic Tradition for the Excellence of Marriage

In contrast to the moderate encratites, there does exist another equally ancient axis of teaching that gives marital life a more redeeming value for its own sake. The household codes of Paul's letter to the Colossians validate familial relationships as part of the Christian life, offering no preeminence to celibate life (Col 3:18-4:1). In Ephesians 5, which models the love of husband and wife as the analogy for Christ's love for his Church, marriage is viewed as a normal expression of Christian life. The Pastoral Epistles call "false teachers" those who forbid marriage and demand abstinence from certain foods.

"They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer" (1 Tim 4:1-5).

The ideal bishop described in the Pastoral Epistles is a man married to one woman, able to manage the Church as a well-governed household (1 Tim 3:4-4; Titus 1:7-8). In fact, some scholars have argued that the inclusion of the Pastoral Epistles in the Muratorian Canon of the New Testament at the end of the second century was an effort of Church leaders to combat an encratic ascetical interpretation of Paul, which was against marriage and for compulsory celibacy.<sup>84</sup>

Probably the earliest apologist to praise marriage and conjugal union was Bishop Theophilus of Antioch (c. 180), in response to Marcion.<sup>85</sup> At the beginning of the second century Justin Martyr and Athenagoras of Athens defended Christianity pointing to its high moral standards of fidelity in marriage that avoids all "promiscuous intercourse".<sup>86</sup> Lactantius (c. 311), the "Christian Cicero" and apologist, portrays the admirable institution of

<sup>84</sup> A group of scholars speculate that the author of the pastoral letters was targeting the Marcion's ascetic interpretation of Paul. See Mark HARDING, *What are they Saying about the Pastoral Epistles*, Paulist Press, Mahwah 2001, pp. 10-11.

<sup>85</sup> D. G. HUNTER, *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy*, p. 99.

<sup>86</sup> JUSTIN MARTYR, 1<sup>st</sup> *Dialogue*, ch 29. ATHENAGORAS, *A Plea for the Christians* ch. XXXII.

human sexuality, which permits, through the intermediary of pleasure, the reproduction of our species. God has given a violent sexual desire to man, he writes, so that he may master it with virtue and acquire heavenly merit.<sup>87</sup> Contrary to the stoics, he believes that the passions are good in themselves, because God has given them to man for this good purpose. As Michel Perrin explains, for Lactantius, the essential is not the intensity of the passions that render them good or bad but their intention, what Lactantius calls the “straight way”.<sup>88</sup> The passion of libido, Lactantius writes, when limited to the nuptial bed, is without sin, good and robust.<sup>89</sup> He declares that marriage is a wonderful creation of God, pure, and the begetting of children good. Besides these earliest lesser known sources there are several major patristic voices that advocate marriage in similar ways to Francis de Sales that I will now outline.

### *Clement of Alexandria*

At the end of the second century of the Christian era a kindred spirit of de Sales, Clement of Alexandria, commends the higher virtue of those disciplined by marriage and the responsibilities of a household, who are able to remain close to God, “despite the temptations of children, wives and domestics”.<sup>90</sup> He considers such exemplary men and women superior to celibates, who are free from those worries and only have to care for themselves. Yet on the other hand Clement thinks that the celibate is superior in regard to his own salvation, because the married man cannot dedicate himself to God’s service to the same extent, the married man has broader responsibilities and possibilities to reflect God’s providence.<sup>91</sup> Even though Clement believes the fall was due to some connection to immature sexual activity,<sup>92</sup> he sternly rebukes the gnostic encrateia, like Tatian, who believed if they

<sup>87</sup> LACTANTIUS, *Institutes*, bk 6, ch. 19.

<sup>88</sup> Michel J.-L. PERRIN, *L’homme Antique et Chrétien. L’Anthropologie de Lactance 250-325*, Beauchesne, Paris 1981, p. 180 & pp. 489-493.

<sup>89</sup> *On the Workmanship of God, or the Formation of Man*, ch. XII: “De utero, et conceptione atque sexibus”.

<sup>90</sup> *Stromata*, 7.2.

<sup>91</sup> *Stromata*, 2.23.139.5.

<sup>92</sup> *Stromata*, 3.17.103.1.

foreswear marriage, Christians could overcome the necessity of death.<sup>93</sup> He quips, “they set their hopes on their private parts”.<sup>94</sup> Sin and death, not sexuality, was the great affliction of the human race for Clement and the Christians of antiquity. His polemic against the *encrateia*, who renounced sex, obliged him to apply a stoic version of order to married intercourse. In true stoic fashion Clement believes “we should do nothing by desire”, because passion is contrary to reason.<sup>95</sup> Pagan moralists had avoided the marriage bed, and yet, Clement will assert sex is acceptable only for begetting children. He condemns the maximization of pleasures between married couples as “vulgar and plebian”.<sup>96</sup>

More importantly, as Peter Brown and John Behr show, Clement’s view of conjugal relations was a positive one overall without any impediment to a life fully dedicated to being a disciple of Christ.<sup>97</sup> For Clement the quiet courage and nobility of husband and wife serving Christ as heads of households “without distraction” was far more important than the details of the marriage bed. This especially when called to be martyrs despite the ties of their families, “the dearest relations of our life”<sup>98</sup> – something all too present in the face of the persecutions at the end of the second century. Clement argued that Paul affirmed the continuation between the old and new law, and states in Rom 7:12 that “the law is holy and the commandment holy, righteous and good”. If the law is holy, he concluded, then marriage is also holy. He turned to the Pastoral Epistles of Paul, which advise widows to remarry, the preference that deacons and bishops be married men and 1 Tim

<sup>93</sup> Tatian is identified as a gnostic and their leader by Irenaeus. In Tatian’s *On Perfection According to the Savior*, he regards marriage and all sexual union as sin and an obstacle to God. Sexual restraint (*encrateia*), they believed was the condition of Adam and Eve before the Fall and the way to return to that original innocence. See Arland J. HULTGREN, *The Earliest Christian Heretics. Readings from Their Opponents*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2008, ch. 14 for a summary.

<sup>94</sup> *Stromata*, 3.18.108.

<sup>95</sup> John BEHR, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*, Oxford (2000) discusses Clement’s tension holding these views on pleasure, that is both given by God and necessary for procreation and the stoic philosophy that allows no place for pleasure, pp. 145-149.

<sup>96</sup> *Stromata*, 2.20.1; 20.3; 2.13.59.

<sup>97</sup> P. BROWN, *The Body and Society*, pp. 130-139. John BEHR, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, pp. 176-180.

<sup>98</sup> *Stromata*, 7.11.64.

4:1-5, which warns of hypocritical sophists that will arise and ‘forbid food and marriage’. Clement believed the realities of human birth, sex, flesh and the material world were all redeemed by the Incarnation and blessed by God who declared them “very good”.<sup>99</sup> His fundamental defense of marriage was found in the goodness of creation – a creation redeemed by Christ. Marriage and procreation, Clement argues with Lactantius, against the encratic heretics, are our cooperation in the ongoing goodness of God’s creation.<sup>100</sup>

His ideal of the true hero of Christian virtue is a person, married or celibate, detached with purposefulness (*apathea*) from externalities, like the law, state of life, possessions or from worldly cares and focused on eternity and active discipleship. With an idea of the spiritual life very much like what we read in Francis de Sales’ the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Clement says,

“True manhood is shown not in the choice of a celibate life; on the contrary, the prize in the contest of men is won by him who has trained himself by the discharge of the duties of husband and father and by the supervision of a household, regardless of pleasure and pain –by him, I say, who in the midst of his solicitude for his family shows himself inseparable from the love of God and rises superior to every temptation which assails him through children and wife and servants and possessions”.<sup>101</sup>

Clement will go on to say the celibate remains “untried” in most respects and that “both celibacy and marriage have their own different forms of service and ministry to the Lord”.<sup>102</sup> Clement’s defense of marriage flows from a defense of the human condition that viewed the body not as a prison of a fallen soul, as the Christian Gnostics like Tatian believed, but as redeemed by Christ and divinized by faith. His task was not so much to rank marriage or celibacy, but to defend it against an ascetic gnostic Christian heresy and give it an equal dignity.<sup>103</sup> He is, for that matter, one of the few Fathers to argue for equality between men and women, rejecting the ideology of a

<sup>99</sup> *Stromata*, 3.17.103.

<sup>100</sup> *Stromata*, 3.6.45.

<sup>101</sup> *Stromata*, 7.12.70.

<sup>102</sup> *Stromata*, 3.12.79.

<sup>103</sup> For a good discussion see: D. G. HUNTER, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, pp. 101-129.

weaker sex.<sup>104</sup> Francis de Sales shared this view with Clement, and as Wendy Wright stresses, considered it his God given mission to be a pastor to women despite criticism from his contemporaries.<sup>105</sup> De Sales cites Clement in a total of seven places, but not on the subject of marriage.<sup>106</sup> He also cites Lactantius twelve times, but not the passages herein discussed.<sup>107</sup> His Christian humanist education certainly included extensive study of the Church Fathers, which makes it highly probable that he knew the tension among the Fathers on marriage. Although he was well acquainted with these authors, the doctor of love makes his own synthesis in response to the questions of his times – even if he does not cite these Patristic sources we are now excavating in that specific context.

### *Gregory of Nyssa*

At the end of the 4th century, Gregory of Nyssa's *De Virginitate* begins with a somber diatribe of Marriage's "grief mingled with joy" the passing of beauty, worries of parenthood and disillusionment of love.<sup>108</sup> He metaphorically uses marriage to describe those who are attached to worldly desires, which are more than pleasure, but vices of vainglory, greed, unchecked passion "the whole mob of moral diseases that invade men's homes" that mix the body and soul dragging it down from the delights of heavenly gaze.<sup>109</sup> Marriage is "the beginning and root of the desire for vain things", because it seeks fulfillment (*eros*) in companionship and worldly pleasures rather than in God and spiritual things that characterize the virgins.<sup>110</sup> Gregory was

<sup>104</sup> Donald KINDER, "Clement of Alexandria: Conflicting Views on Women", in *Recent Studies in Early Christianity*, Everett FERGUSON ed., Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London 1999, pp. 55-62.

<sup>105</sup> Wendy WRIGHT, "François de Sales: Gentleness and Civility", in *The Roots of the Modern Christian Tradition*, E. Rozanne ELDER (ed.), Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI 1984, pp. 124-144.

<sup>106</sup> De Sales quotes Clement rarely, chiefly in his sermons, CXLL and CXIX for example.

<sup>107</sup> *L'Estendart de la Sancte Croix*, ch. 10 & ch. 12.

<sup>108</sup> *De Virginitate*, ch. 3, in *Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 58, *Gregory of Nyssa*, translated by Virginia Woods Callahan, Catholic University Press, Baltimore, MD 1967, p. 14.

<sup>109</sup> *De Virginitate* chapters 4 & 5.

<sup>110</sup> *De Virginitate* ch. 6, p. 31.

probably married and lost his wife sometime before becoming a bishop.<sup>111</sup> His rhetorical diatribe attributes all vice to marriage and avows that it is impossible to pursue earthy marriage and serve God at the same time. Mark Hart shows that a closer reading reveals that Gregory believes the celibate vocation is for the weaker, who cannot live in the world without being seduced and that religious life is a remedy for concupiscence – not marriage!<sup>112</sup> The error of marriage, Gregory writes, is to seek immortality and fulfillment (*eros*) in earthly marriage that can only be found in God. Neither the state of celibacy nor marriage is the model, but an interior courage that does not flee death or over-indulge in pleasures, enjoying them as much as they satisfy our needs with peaceful temperance.<sup>113</sup> The celibate can fall into pride just as the married can fall into sins of the world and thus both must find virtue balanced by detachment. When Marriage is a courageous work (*leitourgia*) devoted to the common good and bringing children into the world, instead of hedonistic delusion, Gregory suggests it is more Christ-like than celibacy, because it bears the burdens of bodily existence and service to the common good. Gregory avoids saying one state is higher than the other, however if he does prefer marriage to celibacy, it is because it demands an excellence of virtue that can benefit the whole range of human life – community, household, family, sexuality and economy.<sup>114</sup> As Lucas Mateo Seco summarizes, essentially Gregory's high regard for the dignity of marriage is revealed in his idea that the union of husband and wife represents the union of God and the soul.<sup>115</sup> His commentary on the Song of Songs interprets the sacred poem as a spiritual marriage with God. His spirituality emphasizes this as a journey of divinization, never fully attained, because God is infinite.<sup>116</sup>

The only text of Gregory of Nyssa that de Sales cites approaching the

<sup>111</sup> *Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Classics of Western Spirituality) Malherbe ABRAHAM (Ed.), Paulist Press 1978, Preface p. xv.

<sup>112</sup> Mark D. HART, "Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa's Deeper Theology of Marriage", in *Theological Studies*, 51 (1990) 450-478.

<sup>113</sup> *De Virginitate* ch. 21.

<sup>114</sup> *De Virginitate* ch. 8 especially.

<sup>115</sup> Giulio MASPERO and Lucas F. MATEO SECO, *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, Brill, Leiden 2010 (eBook), pp. 489-492.

<sup>116</sup> *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Brian E. Daily S.J. and John T. Fitzgerald (Eds), Translation and Introduction Richard A. Norris Jr. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2012.

interior virginity seen above is in a sermon, where he notes Gregory's teaching that man was created from the mud of the earth to remind us that the root of all temptation is to escape the thought of death.<sup>117</sup> If marriage is a vocation and sacrament for de Sales, it seems there can be little doubt that it would include progress toward divinization as a cooperation with grace that, as de Sales says, requires more virtue than celibate life.

After Clement, the desert fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries had few prohibitions for married couples. Marital union apparently posed no problem for them. They regarded married life and sexuality a fact of nature since Genesis and counseled abstinence during days of fasting, which were on Saturday, Sunday, Wednesday and Friday and during the forty days of Lent. It is doubtful, however, that these ascetic prohibitions were really followed by more than a small number of pious laity of the times.<sup>118</sup>

### *John Chrysostom*

John Chrysostom (d. 407) is one of de Sales favorite patristic authors and is considered one of the "great apologists of Christian marriage".<sup>119</sup> His earliest writings defend virginity and emphasize the merits of celibacy,<sup>120</sup> but years as a pastor at Constantinople and Antioch, together with friendships with women like Olympias, a widow and deaconess, taught him an appreciation of married life.<sup>121</sup> He calls married love "the force that welds society together".<sup>122</sup> For Chrysostom marital unity shares in the mystery of Christ's union with his Church, resulting in a transforming spiritual conversion.

<sup>117</sup> *Sermons* 2, XXXIV.

<sup>118</sup> P. BROWN, *The Body and Society*, p. 256. A case in point, 300 prostitutes rioted in Palermo in the year 630 when the local Byzantine governor appointed the bishop inspector of brothels, in response the pope writes from Rome with a shocked rebuke for attempting such a thing. See P. BROWN, *Late Antiquity*, p. 68.

<sup>119</sup> St. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On Marriage and Family Life*, C. P. Roth and D. Anderson (translators), St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1986, p. 8.

<sup>120</sup> J.-P. MIGNÉ, *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) 47.277-316; PG 47.319-386 and PG 48.533-596.

<sup>121</sup> See discussion in John N.D. KELLY, *Golden Mouth. The Story of John Chrysostom Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1995, pp. 134-135.

<sup>122</sup> St. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, Homily 20 on *Ephesians* 5:22-33.

Their unity in Christ's own love extends to the household and promotes the spiritual growth of the entire family. He believed married people who truly lived the practical demands of that marital harmony could become "as holy as any monk".<sup>123</sup> Francis de Sales cites him when he says that husbands and wives should not speak of "mine" and "yours", not even of their bodies.<sup>124</sup> They should trust each other, generously give their time to each other, use gentle words and enjoy being home together, pray together and be generous with the poor together. De Sales cites Chrysostom again when he counsels chastity in marriage, which he says "doesn't mean to absolutely abstain from carnal pleasures, but to contain oneself amidst those pleasures".<sup>125</sup>

Chrysostom preaches that husbands are not only responsible for their own righteousness, but also, with God's help, for that of their children and wives. Wives too hold the same responsibilities to husband and children, because for Chrysostom the main theme is that marriage is meant to promote virtue modeled on Christ. His commentary on 1 Cor 7 argues for the positive value of marriage that fosters the virtue of chastity instead of being merely a remedy for sin. The primary good and purpose of marriage isn't so much procreation of children and the good of society for him, but the holiness that comes from a transforming union in Christian love and virtue that extends to the entire family in daily life. In his homily 12 on Colossians he explains that man and wife become one flesh in sexual intercourse, where she receives the seed nourishes and warms it, contributes something of her own self and gives back a child, who is a kind of bridge that cements the three as one flesh. He proposes a positive value of intercourse for its own sake, even if no child results, because it nourishes the couple's union. In his mind, the union of flesh and spirit is inseparable in the loving Christian couple that is committed to their vows and united to Christ. He tells his congregation there is no reason to blush about what is honorable. Chrysostom often railed against extravagant wedding feasts that revel in drunkenness, unseemly dance and comedy as an affront to the dignity of marriage and as callous to the suffering poor.

Another way to see the overriding transfiguration of the physical bond of

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> *De la propriété*, L2 158, 159; L3 184. De Sales cites this text of Chrysostom in the context of common property for religious life, *OEA* CLXVII.

<sup>125</sup> *IDL*, part III, ch. XII, On the Necessity of Chastity.

marriage to a spiritual one for John Chrysostom can be found in his opinion on divorce. When a spouse tries to force their partner to commit sin, or abuses the other with daily beatings and bickering, Chrysostom believes, it is better to separate or even break up the marriage “for righteousness sake”.<sup>126</sup> When the marriage morally endangers the spouse it goes against the very purpose of marriage. He believes the married person (usually the wife in his texts) has a right to escape violence and moral danger, citing Paul who says, “God has called you to peace”. He answers that the unbelieving partner is the one to blame for separation. But if at all possible, Chrysostom urges husbands and wives to work to heal their marriage. Marriage’s redeeming purity can only be effective if the marriage itself is freely chosen and lived by the couple, which leaves hope for the unbelieving partner. He doesn’t use the terminology of a special grace, which will come later to a theology of marriage, but its healing and sanctifying effects are the same. Marriage has an ability to be instrumental in the conversion of the pagan as long as the marriage endures. Chrysostom’s gloss allows for divorce in the case of fornication (as does Mt 19:9) and not paganism although it is a lesser sin,

“Because there is hope that the spouse who is perishing through his unbelief might be saved through marriage to a believer. In the former situation [fornication] however the marriage has already been dissolved: both partners are tainted while only one is really to blame”.<sup>127</sup>

At a time when baptism meant a lifelong commitment to discipleship and there was no sacrament of confession, the idea of “the unfaithful” spouse does not only mean the pagan. The Pauline privilege extends to mixed marriages when the apostle says the Christian wife’s faith sanctifies the unbelieving spouse and makes the marriage legitimate and its offspring. Unfaithful in Chrysostom’s time can also be used for the spouse who has betrayed his or her baptismal vows and thus becomes an obstacle to that righteous transforming union that marital love is meant to be. As W.H.C. Frend explains by the third century deadly sins (adultery, idolatry, apostasy and blasphemy) committed after baptism could only be forgiven by many years

<sup>126</sup> St. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, Homily 19 on 1 *Corinthians* 7.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

of penance.<sup>128</sup> This was a softening of Tertullian's (c. 200) position that such sins after baptism could only be forgiven by martyrdom.<sup>129</sup> Many waited until their deathbeds to be baptized because of its seriousness. Chrysostom's practical moral advice for married couples and his pastoral experience; all in all, give a positive view of sexuality and marriage that can lead to a holiness equal to monastic life. Marriage's sacrifices are in union with Christ as much as its union of persons is modeled on the Trinitarian union, the source of all holiness. Thus Chrysostom is an advocate of marriage as a vocation to the divinization of the whole family and sees the marital act beneficial to its particular version of Christian life.

### *Augustine of Hippo*

One cannot overestimate the influence of Augustine on this question, especially for our author. De Sales cites him twice as much as any other patristic author. Augustine, Jerome's contemporary, addressed the issue in 401 A.D. with two treatises *On the Good of Marriage* and *On Holy Virginity*, where he takes a middle position. Augustine praises the goodness of marriage and is critical of celibates who mock the fecund Old Testament patriarchs, who had many children. However, he sides with Jerome's interpretation of 1 Cor 7, that virginity is better, unfettered by the concerns of spouse, children and the world.

Augustine explains that married couples are to "descend with certain sadness" to the begetting of children, because its lust causes a loss of reason's dominance and is a lingering stain of Adam's fall.<sup>130</sup> The mark of original sin, the fallen state, is that rather than the higher powers (reason) ruling over the lower powers (passions), the lower powers rule the higher ones and throw the soul into turmoil. They were to feel a sexual shame for the fallen state, as Adam and Eve do when they see that they are naked, which is the cause of the constant "war against the law of my mind" that St. Paul calls the unruly passions of the flesh (Rm 7:22). Augustine's praise of marriage is

<sup>128</sup> W.H.C. FRENCH, *The Rise of Christianity*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA 1984, pp. 409-411.

<sup>129</sup> TERTULLIAN, *Apology* L. 16.

<sup>130</sup> *Sermon*, 51.15, 25.

one without unruly lust and strictly limited to serenely producing children. His teaching that original sin is passed on to the next generation through the lust of intercourse, tainted marriage and sexual intimacy for generations afterwards. Later in life, in his commentary on Genesis, Augustine expounds that Adam and Eve would have had sexual relations in Paradise untainted by lust, if not for the fall. Julian of Eclanum accused Augustine of a Manichean hatred of the body that God had made, faulting an overly ascetic view of human sexuality. “Was Marriage invented by the devil?” Julian cynically challenged. In his anti-Pelagian writings, Augustine could not agree with Pelagius, Julian and Lactantius, that lust, like other passions could be made right by moderation. He will say, “even if they [a man’s members] be restrained by temperance or continence, their use and control are not in any man’s power”.<sup>131</sup> As John Cavadini shows, Augustine’s pessimistic caution about lust and marriage are due to the complications of a fallen world, where sin, selfishness and sexual pleasure can be confused and corrupted by pride. The goal is to configure the pleasures of the flesh with love and humility. “The sacramentality of marriage in Augustine is entirely derivative of his ecclesiology” the primary place where the spousal healing love of Christ is encountered for Augustine is in the Church and marriage is where “they find Christ’s Church-forming love”.<sup>132</sup> Whether celibate or married, it is through union to Christ that these desires become purified and the whole of human life is redeemed.

In a recently discovered letter to bishop Atticus of Constantinople, later (421) Augustine reverted to the three goods of marriage; procreation, fidelity and sacramental permanent unity, and conceded that perhaps in marriage there was found a “concupiscence of conjugal purity” (*concupiscentia nuptiarum*) i.e. the desire for children, different from the selfish lust of the flesh (*concupiscentia carnis*). In this later anti-Pelagian letter, his position is nuanced to accede that perhaps there was such a sinless yearning in Paradise before the fall.<sup>133</sup> Augustine’s *De bono conjugali*, comes to see marriage as a necessary condition for the *societas amicalis* of the human race and “the first

<sup>131</sup> *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, bk 2, ch. 18.

<sup>132</sup> John C. CAVADINI, “The Sacramentality of Marriage in the Fathers”, in *Pro Ecclesia* 17 (2008) 4, 442-463.

<sup>133</sup> Ep. 6.5-7; in E. A. CLARK (ed.), *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, pp. 99-105.

natural bond of human society”.<sup>134</sup> Augustine’s position, forged in the controversy of ascetical heresies, seeks at the same time to praise the goodness of procreation and marriage and condemn the unruly lust that abrogates reason and the order of love. As Richard Sorabji summarizes, for Augustine lust was a bad thing due to its power over the will that could be put to good use in marriage. Pelagius, Julian, Jovinian (heretics) Ambrosiaster and Lactantius (Church fathers) believed that nuptial lust was a good thing that could be put to bad use.<sup>135</sup>

Augustine’s theology tying original sin to lust in marriage will dominate for centuries, overshadowing sexuality with shame that will fuel the ascetical theology of the moderate encratites until Thomas Aquinas. Gratian will codify the enduring medieval teaching taken from Augustine, stating that when couples have sexual relations solely for the satisfaction of their lust instead of procreation, they are not to be accounted as married, but as fornicators.<sup>136</sup> Of all the authors of antiquity that marked the Christian humanism of Francis de Sales, Augustine’s influence was clearly the largest. De Sales will come to a position soundly grounded in Augustine’s latter view that decries lust, but he will also see Marriage as a friendship, a grace and be able to find spiritual goodness in the marital act. In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, he lauds the tender caresses of spouses and contrasts their “chaste and just affection” with “unjust passion”, which is comparable to the two concupiscences of Augustine.<sup>137</sup> The fact that Augustine’s letter to bishop Atticus of Constantinople was probably unknown to him reveals how in tune he was with Augustine’s thought on the matter.

### *Ambrosiaster and Jovinian*

A third and lesser known contemporary of Jerome, Ambrosiaster (c. 380), who may have been a layman, regarded celibacy as fitting for the clergy for

<sup>134</sup> “Marriage” by D. G. HUNTER, in *Augustine Through The Ages. An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. FITZGERALD O.S.A., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1999, pp. 535-537.

<sup>135</sup> This comparison is discussed in Richard SORABJI, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Gifford Lectures), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, ch. 26.

<sup>136</sup> C. 32, q. 2, dpc. 1.

<sup>137</sup> *TAD*, ch. 8.

the same reasons the Levites sought liturgical purity. But he also defended the goodness of sexual reproduction, citing God's command of Genesis; "go forth and multiply", as a blessing. Ambrosiaster argues that as the apostle Paul says, the believing husband or wife sanctifies the unbelieving husband or wife, because God created marriage and the nuptial bed holy.<sup>138</sup> Jerome attacked that view with fury in *Against Jovinian*, causing an outrage against ascetic Christianity among the aristocratic Christian families of Rome at the time.<sup>139</sup> Jerome was characteristic of ascetic proponents when he responded that God's command to go forth and multiply came after the fall, at which point they were ashamed of their nakedness. Ambrosiaster countered that the penalty of the sin of Eden was not sexual desire but death.

Finally, another early Christian writer to speak of the merits of marriage was the controversial former monk Jovinian (d. 405). He argued that marriage and virginity were equally pleasing to God if the married person led a virtuous life. Jerome called him "the Epicurus of Christianity" and he was eventually condemned by two synods in Rome and Milan. David Hunter<sup>140</sup> shows Jovinian's widely known defense represented a significant resistance to ascetic Christian views on marriage that he traces back to the monks and bishops Epiphanius of Salamis<sup>141</sup> and Filastrius of Brescia<sup>142</sup> (380's). Both opposed Origen and any view that depreciates the created world and consequently fails to recognize the goodness of marriage. They denounce numerous gnostic heresies of the age that associate the devil with the body, as sexuality of radical encratitism. Epiphanius, like Lactantius, speaks of libido in positive terms, as part of God's benevolent created order. However both Epiphanius and Filastrius regard virginity as the higher vocation, unlike Clement, Chrysostom, Jovinian and Ambrosiaster who grant an equal, if not higher, dignity to marriage.

<sup>138</sup> *Patrologia Latina* v. 17, AMBROSIASTER, *In Epistolam B. Pauli Ad Corinthinos Primam*, VII, vers 14 & 15.

<sup>139</sup> D. G. HUNTER, *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, ch. 2.

<sup>140</sup> D. G. HUNTER, *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, ch. 4.

<sup>141</sup> *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Book 1 Sects 1-46*, Frank Williams (trans.), Brill, Leiden 1997, pp. 62-63 and 96-98.

<sup>142</sup> *Sancti Philastrii Episcopi Brixiani Liber De Haeresibus*, *Patrologia Latina* v. 12, LXXXIV.

## The Scholastics

A major shift in the Christian view of marriage begins with the scholastics who call marriage a sacrament. Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1140) is one of the earliest theologians to consider marriage a sacrament in the modern sense and its cardinal union a sign of the incarnation.<sup>143</sup> He argued in *On the Virginity of Mary* that Mary and Joseph were truly married even though Mary chose virginity for her entire life. Hugh distinguished two aspects of marital consent, one to marry and one to share intercourse. The first constituted marriage, but the second, granting of the marriage debt, was not necessary. The holiness of the marriage was proportionate to the degree that intercourse was absent.<sup>144</sup> He and Peter Lombard affirm the goodness of marriage in response to the medieval Cathar heresy, which detested marriage and sexual activity. Albert the Great (d. 1280) and Bonaventure (d. 1274), for their part, thought that marriage conferred grace both as a remedy to concupiscence and to those who “by the consent of love, are joined for the sake of raising children to worship God”.<sup>145</sup> But all of these scholastic authors saw marriage as the remedy for the weakness of the flesh and that sexual intercourse was considered, in the Augustinian tradition, to be a venial sin. Likewise they all believed that the lay state was second to the higher state of celibate religious life.

St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) introduces a significant change in perspective to the stoic idea of rebellious passions that so long influenced Christianity. He clearly opposes those who hold that sexual union in marriage is in any way sinful. Taking up the arguments of Jovinian, Clement, Lactantius, et al, Aquinas writes:

<sup>143</sup> *De Sacramentis*, I, I, VIII, 13. BOYD TAYLOR COOLMAN, *The Theology of Hugh of St. Victor: An Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK) 2013.

<sup>144</sup> ROBERT E. OBACH, *The Catholic Church on marital intercourse: from St. Paul to Pope John Paul II*, Lexington Books, Plymouth (UK) 2008, ch. 8.

<sup>145</sup> IAN C. LEVY “Marriage”, in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Supplement 1, Ed. by W. C. JORDAN, C. T. GALE, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York 2004, p. 552. ALBERT THE GREAT, *Commentarii in IV libros sententiarum*, Vivès, Paris 1894, vols. 29-30. *Doctoris seraphici s. Bonaventurae s.r.e. episc. card. Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi*, Ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, Quaracchi 1889, vol. 4.

“If we suppose that the corporeal nature was created good by God, the means that are destined to conserve and to which moreover incline its very being cannot be universally evil. For, the attraction that procreation of children bears is a natural inclination and this procreation is necessary to the conservation of the species. One therefore cannot say that the act of generation of a child is evil in any way, to such a degree that it cannot be accomplished in a just measure and thus become virtuous”.<sup>146</sup>

For the Angelic Doctor, pleasure is something positive that accompanies every truly good act, it is “an echo of divine beatitude”, the copious sign that the act has attained its perfection. He adopts Aristotle’s teleology of passions to appraise their value. Pleasure for its own sake, in sexuality would be lust, which he clearly condemns, as does every other Christian authority.<sup>147</sup> Every passion has a spiritual dimension in the human person, who is both a spiritual and a physical being as God’s image. The virtuous passions of husband and wife are inseparable from a spiritual dimension of human life, which is the education of children.<sup>148</sup> The passion to reproduce is a passion to share what a mature life has found to be the true good. Aquinas makes an original contribution to the Christian vision of the passions as integral to the virtuous life.<sup>149</sup> Sexual intercourse and its pleasure are not the self-pleasing lust of Augustine, but instead virtuous when fulfilled in its proper end. Ingeniously, Thomas introduces a paradigm shift, with perfection not being defined by stoic unchanging natures -- after the heavens, but in fulfillment of the desire in the true good. He faults the Stoics for failing to distinguish between the will and the passions. He reasons, against the moderate encratite Fathers, by pointing out that Adam and Eve would have human nature in its entirety in Paradise, which is to say they would

<sup>146</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 41, art. 3.

<sup>147</sup> John G. MILHAVEN, “Thomas Aquinas on Sexual Pleasure”, in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 5 (1977) 2, 157-181.

<sup>148</sup> John S. GRABOWSKI, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics*, Catholic University Press of America Press, Washington, D.C. 2003, pp. 65-71.

<sup>149</sup> Jean-Pierre TORRELL, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 2: *Spiritual Master*, R. ROYAL (trans.), Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 2003, p. 262. See too the fine study by Paul GONDREAU, *The Passions of Christ’s Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Aschendorff, Munster 2002, pp. 276-286, for a discussion of the passions as integral to the virtuous life in Aquinas and a survey of the literature.

have reproduced sexually, like all animals. And this, Aquinas writes, would have been with a greater pleasure than humans do after the fall, due to the “purity of nature and greater sensibility of their bodies” before the disorder of sin.<sup>150</sup> The original goodness of sexual passion has been marred since the fall, and may turn into lust. In the state of innocence, however, that passion is good like any other, when it desires what it should, when it should and as much as it should. In other words, before or after the fall, fulfillment of human sexuality is good and virtuous, when directed to its proper end -- reproduction (*fecunditas*), by right reason and without concupiscent lust (*inordinatae libidinis*).

In his commentary on Jesus at the wedding at Cana, in John’s Gospel, Aquinas says, citing Bede’s gloss: “If there were sin in a holy marriage bed and in a marriage carried out with due purity, the Lord would not have come to the marriage”.<sup>151</sup> Indeed the goodness of sex is so integral to our nature, that he asserts we shall retain it even in the resurrected state. In Paradise the glorified body will be complete with sexual members.<sup>152</sup>

“The diversity [of sex] is becoming to the perfection of [our human] species. ... Wherefore ... (human beings) shall rise again of different sex. And though there be difference of sex, there will be no shame in seeing one another, since there will be no lust to invite them to shameful deeds, which are the cause of shame”.<sup>153</sup>

St. Thomas’ luminous new esteem for the passionate fulfillment of marital sexuality distinguished good and sinless sexual union from lust. However, his vision does not speak of the second good use and purpose of the marital act -- the nourishment of the marital vocation, which will become an equally important dimension in Vatican II’s theology of marriage and which we will show is part of the Salesian view. Elisabeth Stopp shows that Aquinas was an important part of de Sales studies at Clermont College.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>150</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I q. 98, art. 2 ad 3.

<sup>151</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, ch. 2 lect. 1. See Matthew LEVERING (ed.), *On Marriage and Family Classic and Contemporary Texts*, Sheed and Ward, Lanham, Maryland 2005.

<sup>152</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, ch. 88.

<sup>153</sup> *Summa Theologiae Suppl.*, q. 81, a. 3 (this is pulled from IV Sent., d. 44, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 1).

<sup>154</sup> Elisabeth STOPP, *A Man to Heal Differences: Essays and Talks on St. Francis de Sales*,

And Paul Kristeller has made a career showing that Aquinas and the scholastics were more significant in the Renaissance than previously believed.<sup>155</sup> Even if he does not cite Aquinas to support his idea that the nuptial passion of marriage is just and without sin, the Angelic Doctor's theology was part of his formation.

Bonaventure (d. 1274) for his part believes, like Augustine, that Adam and Eve would have had children by sexual intercourse in Paradise before the fall. Their fall from grace gave marriage a new role as a medicine for "the disease" of lust. He considers it a sacrament with the benefits of fidelity, children and grace. Like his contemporary scholastics he sees marriage and the family as the foundational relationship of human society.<sup>156</sup> And yet, Aquinas and Bonaventure will share the common medieval view that considered religious life the higher state of life over the laity, because the laity are prevented from living a full life of contemplation due to the distractions of their worldly cares and possessions.<sup>157</sup> Georges Duby, the great medieval historian, judges that by and large the laity listened to these priestly reprimands, but not without exception.<sup>158</sup>

### *Erasmus of Rotterdam and the Renaissance Humanists*

On the eve of Trent at the center of the Reformation debate, Erasmus (d. 1536) is probably the most famous and influential Christian humanist proponent for the dignity of marriage commensurate with celibate life. He frequently wrote in praise of Christian marriage, to such an extent that the theologians of the University of Louvain accused him of leading an attack on monasticism in 1519. Friendship and spiritual union was the essence

St. Joseph University Press, Philadelphia, PA 1997, ch. 1.

<sup>155</sup> Paul O. KRISTELLER, "Renaissance Philosophy and the Medieval Tradition", in *Renaissance Concepts of Man and Other Essays*, Harper and Row, New York, NY 1972, pp. 110-155.

<sup>156</sup> Christopher M. CULLEN, *Bonaventure*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 176.

<sup>157</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, II, q. 186 art. 3 and Supl. q. 40 a. 2 ad. 3.

<sup>158</sup> Georges DUBY, *The Knight the Lady and the Priest, the making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, Trans. by B. Bray, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1983, pp. 27-29.

of true marriage for him rather than the usual legalist terms of canonical vows, consummation and an indissoluble contract.<sup>159</sup> Erasmus believed a marriage without *amicitia* would not constitute a sacrament and could thus be dissolved.<sup>160</sup> He considered marriage superior to friendship with its own pleasures and considered it a sacramental mystical union in terms no theologian before him had expressed so vigorously.<sup>161</sup> His rhetorical form of intimate dialogue deliberately sidesteps theological *disputatio* and highlights the natural goodness of sexuality that enhanced that marital friendship,

“What happiness there is in the union of husband and wife, than which none greater nor more lasting exists in all of nature! For while we are linked with our other friends by benevolence of mind, with a wife we are joined by the greatest affection physical union, the bond of the sacrament, and the common sharing of all fortunes but that needed to be bridled lest it be corrupted by lust”.<sup>162</sup>

Like his predecessors, for Erasmus marriage is for those who cannot suffer the intense pursuit of God in religious life of prayer and contemplation. He believes the ideal to be an almost stoic sexuality “sober, modest, chaste and as much as possible, most like virginity”.<sup>163</sup> And yet at the same time Erasmus writes; “I have no patience with those who say that sexual excitement is shameful and that venereal stimuli have their origin not in nature, but in sin”.<sup>164</sup> As a realist he has one wife in dialogue with another advise: “a wife must take every precaution to be pleasing to her husband in sexual relations, in order that married love may be rekindled and renewed and any annoyance or boredom driven out of mind”.<sup>165</sup> Erasmus still sees the marital act as lawful remedy for man’s weakness and may be to some extent

<sup>159</sup> Reinier LEUSHULS, “The Mimesis of Marriage: Dialogue and Intimacy in Erasmus’s Matrimonial Writings”, in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 57 (2004) 4, 1278-1307.

<sup>160</sup> Desiderius ERASMUS *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 69 John W. O’Malley (ed.) University of Toronto Press, 1999 (CWE) 69:281, 302, 334-335, 343, 365, 370; CWE 25:139.

<sup>161</sup> Reinier LEUSHULS, “The Mimesis of Marriage”, pp. 1278-1307.

<sup>162</sup> CWE 25:139.

<sup>163</sup> Alan W. REESE, “Learning Virginity: Erasmus’ Ideal of Christian Marriage”, in *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et renaissance*, 57 (1995) 551-567.

<sup>164</sup> *De conscribendis epistolis*, CWE 25:136-137. ASD 1-2, pp. 400-418.

<sup>165</sup> Desiderius ERASMUS, *The colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1965, pp. 114-126. ASD 1-3, pp. 301-313.

useful for rekindling married love, however he is not yet ready to say it is a means to strengthen the marriage bond or holy. He envisions virtuous marital intimacy as restraint to minimize wading into the dangers of lust. In his dialogue between a couple in love, Maria and Pamphilus, their discussion of sex and their conjugal life culminates speaking about the children they will have together and their aim to “see that at home we provide an example of life for them to imitate”.<sup>166</sup> As much as the sweet pleasures of marriage may have been carnal, Erasmus’ ideal that seeks virginity is his way to bow to the superior spiritual meaning of married life in mystical union and a Christian family.

While Trent was meeting, another humanist Rabelais, a Franciscan priest, will taunt in satire that celibate life is unhealthy, “The sage (Eccl 36:25-26) says, ‘Where there is no wife (meaning wife and mother in lawful marriage), a patient is a sorry plight.’ I’ve seen clear evidence of this in popes, legates, cardinals, bishops, abbots, priests and monks. Now there you’ll never get me”.<sup>167</sup> Renaissance literature’s classic authors, such as Edmund Spenser, John Dunne and John Milton also treated marriage and sexuality in a positive humanist light, representing the temper of the age.<sup>168</sup>

### *A Sacrament and a Vocation*

A new emphasis on a theology of cooperation with grace colored the post-reformation Catholic Church’s sacramental understanding of marriage. Like all sacraments, matrimony was a sign of efficacious grace as an *opus Dei et Christi (ex opere operato)*, but it also depends upon participation in the personal faith and gift of self by each spouse (*ex opera operantis*).

<sup>166</sup> Desiderius ERASMUS, “The Institution of Marriage”, *Erasmus on Women*, ed. Erika RUMMEL, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1996, p. 49.

<sup>167</sup> François RABELAIS, *Pantagruel*, bk 3, ch. 9. This work was condemned by the scholastics of the Sorbonne for its irreverence to authority, however King Francois I overrode that interdict.

<sup>168</sup> Renaissance Irish poet Edmund Spenser (d. 1599) and England’s John Dunne (d. 1631) also write sonnets redeeming the value of romance and sexuality in a loving marriage, Milton includes a lusty Adam and Eve in his epic *Paradise Lost* (1667). Robert V. YOUNG, “The Reformations of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” in Glenn W. OLSEN (ed.), *Christian Marriage A Historical Study*, Crossroads, New York 2001, pp. 269-296.

That two-dimensional sacramental theology wasn't new. Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Albert the Great all taught that both are required to receive the sacrament of marriage. To enter into marriage without believing in its grace and participating in its vocation, they concur, would put oneself in a violent state of fiction and forfeit its sacramental grace.<sup>169</sup> The debate between faith and works took a special place in the Early Modern Church's conception of marriage, because this sacrament's wellbeing depends upon the free participation of each spouse's fidelity to their vows throughout their lives together. De Sales emphasis on the internal participation in that Christ-like gift of self to one's vocation, spouse and God is an early consideration of this theology of cooperation with grace as he learned to apply it in his pastoral experience. As a sacrament, the love and faithfulness spouses share is, as Cardinal Walter Kasper explains, "not simply the sign and symbol of the love of God – they are the effective sign, the fulfilled symbol and the real epiphany of the love of God that has appeared in Jesus Christ."<sup>170</sup> All of these elements are in the Salesian theology of marriage. Francis writes "God opens the way to marriage"<sup>171</sup> because one of the more evident ways that grace operates in his theology is through friendship, which is an epiphany, sign and symbol of God's love and at the same time a sweet struggle of human work.<sup>172</sup> Marriage as a vocation includes a broader meaning of cooperative participation, which does not end with nuptial friendship and faith in the sacramental nature of marriage, but includes the family and serves the common good. He strongly believed that the Christian vocation was above of all in ordinary things, not in grandiose romantic ideals, which has particular meaning in domestic life.<sup>173</sup> He says to parents, "be gracious and humble of heart towards all, but especially toward your own. Do not impose yourself, be gentle and tolerant of one another".<sup>174</sup> De Sales vision of

<sup>169</sup> Michael G. LAWLER, "Faith, Contract, and Sacrament in Christian Marriage: A Theological Approach", in Michael G. LAWLER and William P. ROBERTS (eds), *Christian Marriage and Family, Contemporary Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 1996, pp. 38-58.

<sup>170</sup> Walter KASPER, *Theology of Christian Marriage*, New York: Crossroad, 1986 p. 35.

<sup>171</sup> *Letter CDXXI*.

<sup>172</sup> Terence A. MCGOLDRICK, *The Sweet and Gentle Struggle, Francis de Sales on the Necessity of Spiritual Friendship*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD 1996.

<sup>173</sup> *IDL III*, 27.

<sup>174</sup> *OEA XVII*, 44.

marriage as a sacrament, where one lives the love of God *in and through* the married life essentially resided in those interior attitudes that define every vocation, which was the most important lesson he drew from the whole Gospel.

## Conclusion

Placed in context, Francis de Sales views on marriage and sexuality are remarkably avant-garde. He lived in the age of the Catholic Reform, in the midst of competing visions of true Christian life. These were times fraught with militant rigorism that spilled over into ideas of spirituality, in the furor of changing worldviews. In the face of the too common hypocrisy of failed celibate religious, contrasted with the inspiring instances of married laity living exemplary Christian lives, he will begin to ask the great question of the age; what is true holiness, if grace cooperates with our efforts? His spirituality for those in the world applied especially to married life. Once the Council of Trent deemed marriage a sacrament, the Early Modern Catholic Church can hardly continue to be satisfied with granting it no more status than as a remedy for sinful desire – especially given the Protestant praise for marriage. As a son of the Council of Trent, de Sales considered marriage, like every sacrament, a means to sanctifying and healing the human soul by participation in divine love. His spiritual council for those in the world does not see worldly activities as distractions from true holiness. Lay life, including marital life, is able to live its own version of poverty, chastity and obedience. He was not relying on a literal interpretation of 1 Cor 7, the Council of Trent or its Catechism for his practical teaching on marriage as a vocation for the laity, but applying his own conviction to live Jesus as a pastor and doctor of theology, who had synthesized the whole Gospel. He boldly gives the chaste pleasure of the marital act a value in its own right, not as a remedy for weakness, but as holy and, as Vatican II and John Paul II will affirm centuries later, as salubrious nourishment of the family and marriage.<sup>175</sup> Both Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens and Pope Paul VI attribute the sections on the theology of marriage and family, in Vatican II's *Gaudium et*

<sup>175</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology Of The Body*, Pauline Books & Media, Boston 2006.

*Spes* (nn. 47-52) to Francis de Sales.<sup>176</sup> Not until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will John Paul II's theology of the body eventually give full value to marital intimacy.

As a Christian humanist, pastor and spiritual master, Francis de Sales sought true holiness around him, with a belief in the ability of grace to come to earth and touch all aspects of life. His humanist education extensively probed the Church Fathers, leading him to appreciate their ambiguity on the status of marriage and spurring him to thoughtfully weigh his own position on the question. His original vision of marriage as a place for the highest demands of Christian virtue and holiness is well represented in Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Lactantius, Chrysostom, and the major Scholastic authors we have briefly noted. His Christian humanism and his own personal experience of a God in crisis led him to find an optimistic goodness in human life and thus the nuptial bed, not seen since Ambrosiaster in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Essentially, his original contribution is to say that God is found in those so-called distractions of married life, especially in its demands of love, humility, and obedience to God's will as a vocation, which makes everything in marriage holy – including the marital act. The doctor of Love highlights a spiritual value to the entire marital life that was lost previously to a Christian asceticism that was overly concerned with lust and that could only find God apart from the world. Official affirmation of his both traditional and new teaching on marriage will come centuries later, with the test of time, when he will be named a doctor of the church by Pius IX in 1877. It is arguably in his theology of marriage that de Sales best fulfills his reputation as an original master of common sense flexibility with uncompromising spirituality for the laity. As a pastor has observed and is convinced that ordinary people may live Jesus in and through marriage, sexuality, family and community. Most importantly, the good fruits of this kind of cooperation with grace make marriage a vocation and sacrament equal to any other, where they “sanctify one another in the fear of the Lord,”<sup>177</sup> and are a blessing to their children and community.

<sup>176</sup> Joseph F. CHORPENNING, “Style Is Substance: Francis de Sales and Vatican II”, *ICSS Newsletter*, no. 30 (November 2013) pp. 1-5.

<sup>177</sup> *OEA* III, p. 272.