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Holy Indifference

Freeing the Heart for Pure Love

by Eunan McDonnell, SDB¹

The theme of *Pure Love* is essential to understanding a Salesian spirituality as lived within the Visitandine tradition. This article explores pure love through the lens of holy indifference which is essential for true spiritual freedom. It concludes with an examination of holy indifference as lived by Mary the paradigm of pure love.²

The virtue of indifference, as espoused by St Francis de Sales, is completely at odds with our modern understanding of indifference as being apathetic and uncaring.³ Indeed, St Francis teaches that “the

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2. The primary source for our study is the Annecy edition of the complete works of St Francis de Sales, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales, Evêque de Genève et Docteur de l'Eglise, Edition Complète*, d'après les autographes et les éditions originales [...], publiée par les soins des Religieuses de la Visitation, du 1^{er} Monastère d'Annecy, J. Niérat *et al.*, 1892–1964. References from this Annecy edition are abbreviated as follows: *OEA* (*Oeuvres Édition d'Annecy*) followed by the volume (Roman numerals) and page (Arabic numerals). Each reference to the *Treatise* in this primary source will be immediately followed by an equivalent translation taken from John K. Ryan's *Treatise on the Love of God*, (Rockford, IL: Tan book Publishers, 1975). This translation consists of two volumes and is abbreviated as *T1* (volume one) and *T2* (volume two) immediately followed by the relevant page number.

3. The term *la sainte indifférence* is translated by both John K. Ryan and Henry B. Mackey as “Holy indifference” whilst Vincent Kerns renders it as “Disinterested love.” The meaning of Holy indifference is conveyed through the following definitions: “In the ascetical sense, [holy indifference] is the habitual disposition of the will where

passions are part of our human nature and we become perfect not by ignoring or eradicating them but by bringing them under the dominion of the will and integrating them to our personality.”⁴ In a letter to St Jane Frances de Chantal, St Francis declares that when we enter the stage of holy indifference we do not, and need not, give up our human affections and feelings, but they are perfected: “Your strong affections will become sweet everyday through frequent exercise of indifference.”⁵ In his *Entretiens* to the Visitation Sisters he writes, self-renunciation is “the virtues of virtues,” the “cream of charity” and the “odour of humility.”⁶ Yet

to practice self-abandonment and to forsake ourselves is nothing else but to yield up and get rid of our own will that we may give it to God. For, as I have already said it, it would be of no benefit at all to renounce and forsake ourselves if it were not done in order to unite ourselves perfectly to the divine Goodness.⁷

It is against this backdrop that we need to consider indifference as a choice to orient our will towards the love of God. Hélène Michon points out that Salesian indifference does not imply an absence of will, but, on the contrary, an exclusivity in which the will is totally directed towards God in love.⁸

St Francis de Sales develops his theory of ‘holy indifference’ or

there is no preference from one thing to another until one comes to know the will of God.” Arnaldo N. Lanz, “Indifferenza”, in *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (Firenze: Città del Vaticano, 1948–1954), VI: 1832. Ernest Niermann considers indifference as “an aspect of the Christian attitude to the world” wherein our liberation by Christ and the promise of the *Parousia* inculcates an attitude of detachment from worldly things and yet, still involves us in the world. Ernest Niermann, “Indifference”, in *The Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (London: Burns and Oates, 1986), 699. It is our intention to explore holy indifference and its relationship to freedom, so necessary for *Pure love*. Those seeking a more detailed account on the theme of Salesian holy indifference can consult the following doctoral dissertations: Thomas Perumalil, ‘Holy Indifference’, *Indian Journal of Spirituality*, 3 (n.1, 1990) 3-35; 3 (n.2, 1990) 135-153; 3 (n.3, 1990) 247-276; 3 (n.4, 1990) 355-369. Joseph Kulathunkal, *Disinterested Love: The Theory of Love in the Thought of Saint Francis de Sales* (Fordham: Fordham University, 1991).

4. Perumalil, ‘Holy Indifference’, 27.

5. OEA XIV:81.

6. OEA VI:26.

7. OEA VI:22-23.

8. Hélène Michon, *François de Sales: Une Nouvelle Mystique* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2008), 225.

‘disinterested love’ in books eight and nine of the *Treatise*. The term *la sainte indifference* is a unique Salesian expression which has its roots in the wider Christian tradition. In the spirituality of the Early Fathers we find a concept called *apatheia* (indifference) which signifies impassivity under pleasure or pain.⁹ Indifference, understood in this sense, leads to the taming of one’s passions and aims at bringing about the dispassionate response of the soul which would guarantee full freedom from created things in the vision of God. The term gained a renewed significance with Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Von Balthasar commenting on Ignatian ‘indifference’ argues that

far from implying ‘lack of interest’, [it]means one’s active availability for God’s will. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius have a double rhythm. Firstly, they intend the overcoming of the sinful orientations of a person’s freedom. But this ‘negative’ indifference achieved in the first week of the exercises, in the sense of a freedom from disordered inclinations, is thought only to serve as a preparation for a ‘positive’ indifference understood as the active willingness to let God dispose of one as God sees fit. For Ignatius, indifference is the willingness in a person to choose God’s choice.¹⁰

For St Ignatius, “the affections operate on many different levels, from that of quite transient feelings to the level where they affect a person’s ways

9. The ideal of the philosophic life was to imitate God (who was thought to be impassible), his most noble faculty, the *nous*, is *apathēs* (dispassionate) by nature. The term *apatheia* (dispassion) belongs principally to the terminology of the Stoics. Their sage must free himself from the passions and remain calm in the face of the attractions and adversities of the world. The basis of *apatheia* is *enkrateia*, mastery over the body. On the other hand, however, Clement of Alexandria made a radical innovation with respect to Stoicism by linking *apatheia* closely to *gnosis* and *charity*. After Clement, Evagrius is the great doctor of *apatheia*: it was he who introduced the term and the concept was carried into monastic literature. He defined in a systematic way the connections between *apatheia*, charity, and *gnosis*. Cassian never used the word *apatheia*, but resorted to equivalent expressions such as *puritas mentis* and *tranquillitas mentis*. Tomas Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook*, trans. by Anthony P. Gythiel (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1986), 271-273.

10. Thomas Dalzell, *The Dramatic Encounter of Divine and Human Freedom in the Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (Berne: Peter Lang AG, 2000), 215.

of perceiving reality, making judgements, choosing and acting.”¹¹ The *Spiritual Exercises*, accordingly, are designed to bring about “a *conversion of affectivity*”, by allowing “the Spirit to enter into our affectivity, change it and act through it.”¹² The Jesuit retrieval of a spirituality of indifference had a significant impact on the young Francis de Sales who enjoyed a Jesuit education. A brief textual comparison between the writings of St Ignatius and St Francis can highlight this influence:

<p>We must make ourselves <i>indifferent</i> to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honour to dishonour, a long life to a short life. The same holds good for all other things. cf. <i>The Spiritual Exercises</i> ¹³</p>	<p><i>Indifference</i> must be practised in things that concern natural life, such as health, sickness, beauty, ugliness, weakness, and strength, in things that concern civil life, such as honours, rank, and wealth, in the various aspects of the spiritual life, such as dryness, consolation, relish, and aridity, in actions and in sufferings: in sum, in every event of every kind. cf. <i>Treatise on the Love of God</i> ¹⁴</p>
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This is not a recommendation of stoical indifference, but seeks to “free our hearts from all the harmful passions that prevent us from ascending to the full measure of love.”¹⁵ In short, “God having created the human person in his image desires that like in Him everything in us be ordained

11. Michael Ivens, *Understanding The Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2008), 2.

12. Ivens, *Understanding The Spiritual Exercises*, 2.

13. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, SJ (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1951), 23.

14. OEA V:122; T2: 107-108.

15. Anselm Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You: Wisdom from the Desert Fathers*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 47.

by love and for love.”¹⁶ This *archaeological* and *teleological* understanding of the human person, as originating from and destined towards love, has strong affinities with the spirituality of St Catherine of Genoa. For her, “the goal of the spiritual journey is defined by its beginning. We have been formed by love, in love and for love. The truest ‘port’ of the human heart is the Pure Love in which it was first created.”¹⁷ It follows that what characterizes *la sainte indifférence* is not only its relationship to love, but its relationship to *pure love*. As Perumalil notes, “love becomes pure when it is simple and single, that is, without any admixture of motivations, having only one intention or motivation.”¹⁸ We can note a development in this direction with the first letters of direction:

The perspectives are more restrained than they will be in the *Treatise*; the virtue of indifference is still conceived by him in direct reference with the acceptance of sufferings, while later he will present it to us as a more general and more positive attitude of soul, an attitude of exclusive love of God penetrating every pain and every joy.¹⁹

It follows that for St Francis de Sales *la sainte indifférence* is the highest stage of Christian perfection where a person “not only loves God above all things and in all things but loves only God in all things.”²⁰ As a consequence the person ceases to have his or her own desires, plans, and will but that of God. It is this state of ‘holy indifference’ that introduces us into the freedom of the children of God. Pocetto quite rightly points out that in the earlier teaching of St Francis de Sales he makes use of the term ‘spirit of freedom’ (*liberté d’esprit*) which later evolves into his teaching on ‘holy indifference.’ This earlier expression would translate the idea of the ‘indifferent heart’ as ‘a freer heart’ which renders it more palatable and comprehensible to our modern sensibilities. He argues that not only did the initial teaching of St Francis on “the spirit of freedom” develop into his doctrine on ‘holy indifference’ but this is substantiated by the manner in

16. OEA IV:40.

17. John Urdis, “Possessed by Pure Love: The Spirituality of Catherine of Genoa,” *Studies in Spirituality* 6 (1996): 131-144.

18. Perumalil, ‘Holy Indifference,’ 139.

19. Veillot as cited by Pierre Sérouet, in *De la Vie dévoté à la vie mystique* (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1958), 239.

20. OEA V:181.

which St Jane de Chantal also connects the ‘spirit of freedom’ with ‘holy indifference’ in her teaching. It is this earlier usage of the term ‘spirit of freedom’ that would find a greater resonance with the temper of our age.²¹

St Francis de Sales offers various parables in an effort to convey this concept of holy indifference which is difficult to conceptualize: the parable of the deaf musician at the palace of the king who continues to play music even though he does not enjoy it himself and the king is absent;²² the story of the queen about to embark with her husband no matter wherever he goes;²³ the fable of the physician’s daughter who is unconcerned about her own illness and pain, but fixes her attention on her father with filial love.²⁴ The heroes or heroines in these stories have no will or plan or desire of their own, but practise *pure love*.

Love, which expresses itself through the surrender of our will to God’s good pleasure, can be manifested in two ways: either by holy resignation or by holy indifference. Both of these responses demand conformity of our will to God’s good pleasure. *Résignation*, however, involves an effort and struggle²⁵ whereas *la sainte indifference* expresses a purer love of God that acquiesces willingly. Resignation is practised by way of effort and submission; the ‘indifferent’ or ‘freer’ heart, however, looks for God’s will no matter in what way it is expressed. The difference between these two responses is presented succinctly by St Francis de Sales, as follows:

Resignation prefers God’s will above all things, yet it does not cease to love many other things in addition to God’s will. *Indifference* goes beyond resignation, for it loves nothing except for love of God’s will

21. Alexander Pocetto, “Freedom to Love”, in *Human Encounter in the Salesian Tradition*, ed. Joseph F. Chorprenning (Rome: International Commission for Salesian Studies, 2007), 141.

22. *OEA V*:137-139.

23. *OEA V*:150-151.

24. *OEA V*:156-157.

25. When St Francis de Sales makes use of the term *résignation* it is not used in an equivalent manner to our usage of the term resignation. The strict etymological sense of the term is to *ré-signer* which means to add one’s signature at the end of a document. It is an idiom imbued with juridical implications, because in a legal context it is a specific reference to give one’s seal of approval wherein we waive our rights in favor of another person. St Francis de Sales, having obtained his doctorate in Law at Padua, would have been very *au fait* with this legal terminology.

so that nothing touches the indifferent heart in the presence of God's will.²⁶

It is clear from the above that *la sainte indifférence* is to be viewed as a progressive purification of our love for God. It sets us on a journey towards "le blanc de perfection,"²⁷ the target which we should aim for, which is *pure love*. Within *la sainte indifférence* itself there are various degrees of perfection. Perumalil outlines three different degrees of holy indifference: (1) the first degree is the union of our will with the good pleasure of God manifested through the various events that happen in our daily life. The direct object of our love is the events themselves as they are the expression of God's will; (2) in the second degree of holy indifference we have unity, not union, of our will with the will of God. Instead of loving or willing the events that are willed by God, we unite our will with the will of God who wills the events. The object of our love here is the will of God; (3) the third degree is the unity of our will with the very goodness of God. Here the object of love is the goodness of God.²⁸

Commenting on the difference between the first and second degree of holy indifference, St Francis de Sales writes:

Theotimus, as little children of our heavenly Father, we can walk with him in two ways. In the first way, we can walk with the steps of our own will, which we conform to his, holding always with the hand of our obedience the hand of his divine intention and following wherever it leads us [...] This is what God requires of us by his will as signified to us [...] But we can also walk with our Lord without having any will of our own. We simply let ourselves be carried by his divine good pleasure.²⁹

The highest degree of conformity of our will to God in *la sainte indifférence* is the unity of our will with the very goodness of God. St Francis expresses it poetically:

Just as a man on board a ship does not move by his own proper motion but lets himself be moved solely by the motion of the vessel in which he is. In

26. OEA V:119; T2:105.

27. OEA XII:21.

28. Perumalil, 'Holy Indifference', 147-148.

29. OEA V:152-153 ; T2:131-132.

like manner the heart that is embarked in the divine good pleasure should have no other will but that of permitting itself to be led by God's will. In such cases the heart no longer says, "Your will be done, not mine," for there is no will to renounce. It says these words, "Lord into your hands I commend my will," as though it did not have its will at its own disposal but only at that of divine providence.³⁰

Having passed through the various stages of purification, renunciation, abandonment and self-surrender, and death of the will, we arrive at the stage of *pure love* which is Salesian holy indifference.³¹ We are free from all plans desires, wishes and preferences that come from ourselves. We never ask for anything, but at the same time, there is an openness to receive everything that comes from God. "It is this state of holy indifference that St Francis means by the expression *ask for nothing, refuse nothing*."³² We can conclude, therefore, that the rigorous demands of *la sainte indifference* meet their zenith in the Salesian maxim: "Desire nothing, ask for nothing, refuse nothing."³³

Desire Nothing. Ask for Nothing. Refuse Nothing.

On the eve of his death, at Lyons in 1622, St Francis de Sales commends to his Visitation Sisters the following: "Do you ask me what I desire should

30. OEA V:150-151; T2:130.

31. To receive Jesus means we must remove anything that is an obstacle and this means never-ending efforts which demands "*absolute renouncement*." This Salesian term includes all those frequently used by Berulle: "Denial, despoiling, renouncing, spirit of death, love of the cross, servitude; moreover, the soul in this effort must "correspond to the divine impulse, draw it towards self, appropriate it, and actively join Christ acting in the soul and must honour its sacred mysteries, by the eloquence of her soul's works and services." Does such a stance not lead us back into moralism? According to Lajeunie, "This activism does not tend towards individual progress, as desirable in itself, it tends towards the glory of God, by the grace of God, out of pure love of God; moralism here becomes mysticism. With Berulle, as with Saint Francis de Sales, in a style and spirit individual to each one, the same metamorphosis is achieved, but we perceive that Salesian theocentrism which is, after all, less systematic, antedates Berulle." Étienne J. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales. The Man, the Thinker, His Influence*. 2 vols. trans. Rory O'Sullivan (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1987), 2:530.

32. Perumalil, 'Holy Indifference', 271.

33. For a detailed examination of this maxim, see "Ask for nothing, refuse nothing", in Eunán McDonnell, *God Desires You: St Francis de Sales on Living the Gospel* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2001), 83-88.

remain most deeply engraved upon your mind, so that you may put it in practice? [...] Desire nothing, refuse nothing. These words say everything, for they teach us the practice of perfect indifference.”³⁴ St Jane de Chantal, herself, writes, “ I never read the relevant chapters of the ninth book of divine Love without seeing clearly that he practised what he preached, as each occasion arose. “Ask for nothing, desire nothing, refuse nothing,” this excellent and little known saying of his, which he himself so faithfully practised to the very end of his life, could only have come from someone completely indifferent and dead to self.”³⁵

The Salesian practice of Salesian abandonment is allied to the gift of self to God, this detachment extends even to desires:³⁶

We must neither ask anything nor refuse anything, but leave ourselves in the arms of divine Providence, without busying ourselves with any desires, except to will what God wills of us.³⁷

The guiding principle of St Francis’s teaching is applied here to desires: in the state of union a person’s will is so completely transformed in God’s will that it excludes anything contrary to what God wills. Therefore any freely willed desire, or anything that is a sin or even only an imperfection, must be mortified because it is when we give free assent to such a desire that it becomes a departure from love.

The maxim has the advantage of presenting to us in summary form the essence of St Francis’s teaching on *la sainte indifference*:

1) The maxim demands a passivity before God, encouraging us to be led by God and preventing us from manipulating God’s will to our own

34. See The last Spiritual Conference, *OEA VI*:383-389.

35. *Saint Francis de Sales: A Testimony by Saint Chantal*, trans. Elizabeth Stopp (Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967), 167-168.

36. *OEA VI*:22. This maxim which emphasizes a nothingness that involves a radical renunciation of desires is not unlike the *nada* espoused by St John of the Cross. It is necessary to practice detachment if we are to learn how to turn our love wholly towards God, so that created things will be loved not for our own selfish ends but in him and for him. See John of the Cross, *The ascent of Mount Carmel* 1:13, in *Collected works*, rev. ed., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, revised ed. 1991), 150.

37. *OEA VI*:384; *SC*:400.

ends.³⁸ However, there is also an active passivity at work. It contains the biblical demand to remain awake and vigilant.³⁹

2) This “desire nothing, ask for nothing, refuse nothing” is not a permanent state, but a *stage* in seeking God’s will. It is the “balance that holds the scales at rest” where the will abstains from taking sides as it does not know God’s preference.⁴⁰

3) Having silenced our own desires and surrendered ourselves to God’s will, we receive the gift of holy indifference: a peace of mind and soul (at the supreme point of the spirit, because there can be outward and surface turmoil) that enables us to wait for God’s will to manifest itself.

4) Once God’s will becomes apparent the love that waits (holy indifference) is transformed into the love that moves us into action (zeal)⁴¹

It is important to maintain the Salesian balance between “desire nothing, ask for nothing” and “refuse nothing”. This latter aspect is of pivotal importance as it situates *la sainte indifference* in the context of providence. It promotes an attitude of childlike trust that when we surrender willingly into God’s arms, then, God will provide what is needed. It is also an acknowledgment of God’s grace at work, enabling us to surrender our will as an expression of love. It follows that the surrender entailed in *la sainte indifference* is the fruit of love. Viewed from outside this perspective of a mutual relationship, the demands appear excessive and intolerable, “but if it is seen in the context of a loving union, then, it is

38. “God’s pleasure is the supreme object of the indifferent soul. Wherever it sees it, it runs after it ‘in the odour of his perfume.’ Without consideration of anything else it always searches for the place where there is more of it. It is led on by God’s will as by a beloved chain, and wherever his will goes, the soul follows.” *OEA* V:121-122 ; T2:107.

39. “Jesus was always in a state of waiting and on alert to his Father’s will and as soon as it is made known to him promptly he accomplishes it, the waiting is transformed into consent.” *OEA* VI:26.

40. William Marceau, *Stoicism and St Francis de Sales* (Visakhapatnam: S.F.S Publications, 1980), 44. St Francis de Sales’s preferred term to express this *Indifference* as a general state of waiting is *attente*.

41. Indifference is described in the early meditations of the *Spiritual Exercises* by St Ignatius as a preliminary disposition to abandon. Indifference as a state of waiting has no longer any reason for its being once the will of God’s good pleasure is manifested. See *OEA* VI:23.

seen as a communion of hearts, a communion of wills, a oneness.⁴² Our surrender in love is a way in which we leave God free to lead us and allow ourselves to be led into a place of greater freedom by God.⁴³

Holy Indifference as Spiritual Freedom

The virtue of *la sainte indifference*, as epitomized in the maxim *desire nothing, ask for nothing, refuse nothing*, appears to compromise our freedom rather than setting us free. How do we reconcile the freedom of our will with the submission to God's will?⁴⁴ St Francis de Sales reconciles this apparent contradiction by declaring:

Just as death is not the end but a passage to a transformed life so too when the human will surrenders itself in God's hands and dies it enters into a new realm of existence; it begins to live in God. It is entirely "hidden with Jesus Christ in God" and henceforth it is no longer itself that lives but rather God's will lives in it.⁴⁵

The death of the will and the affections only have value if they are followed by a resurrection. St Francis, therefore, says that we cannot remain long in this state of passivity.

Hence, according to the advice of the holy Apostle, after we have put off the garments of the old Adam, we must put on the clothing of the new man, that is, of Jesus Christ. Having renounced all things, yes, even affection for virtue, so as to desire among them and all other

42. McDonnell, *God Desires You*, 88.

43. Loving surrender or abandon must be understood as active, the soul truly abandoning itself to God. "Our spiritual life is a task for two, the work of two wills, that of Our Lord and our own. But because God's will is infinitely involved, because its principal role is in our sanctification, its initiative enters profoundly in our direction. Our own will must bend to God's. This is the summit of perfection. St Francis de Sales distinguishes between the signified will to which obedience responds and the will of good pleasure which involves abandon." William Marceau 'Fenelon: Epigone of St Francis de Sales'. *Indian Journal of Spirituality*, 3 (1990): 379.

44. Marceau points to this opposition between will and love. "Since love is basically submission to the divine attraction and the will is generally conceived of as the affirmation of the self; Francis de Sales will unite these two aspirations in the one and same act, hence including himself in the Augustinian perspective according to which the will is in fact the desire for the good, that is, the love of God." Marceau, *Stoicism*, 51.

45. *OEA* V:149 ; T2:129.

things only what God's pleasure will grant, we must clothe ourselves anew with various affections, perhaps with the very ones we have renounced and given up.⁴⁶

This passage from the death of our will to new life is not undergone without a struggle.⁴⁷ When St Francis de Sales speaks of the 'death of the will' he does so 'avec une propriété toute particulière.' He states that "our will never dies" and so when he speaks of the death of the will he does so in the sense that death is only a stage, not an end. He comments that in the French language death is described as *trépas* which is suggestive of this idea of death as a passage or stage that takes us beyond this life.⁴⁸ Understood in this sense, the "death of our will, is an affirmation of the gift of freedom. It involves our freely choosing to follow Christ whose death was transformed into new life through surrendering to the Father's will."⁴⁹

However, far from restricting our freedom, *la sainte indifférence* introduces us to a new level of freedom as we participate in Christ's own freedom. It is true that the death of our will leads to a stripping but also to "clothing the *new man* with various affections agreeable to God".⁵⁰ As Špidlík instructs, "it is the restoration of the image of God after one

46. OEA V:161-162; T2:138. See J. S. Langelaan, 'Ecstasy of Holy Indifference'. *Review for Religious*, 37 (1978): 408.

47. The abandon, effected by holy indifference, does not suppress the struggle nor the repugnance that the soul may experience. Its goal is not to prevent us from feeling suffering. It resides in the superior part of the soul: desires contrary to the will of God can exist at the same time in the inferior part of the soul. "Abandon is one of those 'virtues' which reside in the higher region of our soul: the lower, generally speaking, has nothing to do with them. We must remain at peace, and paying no attention whatever to what that lower nature desires, we must embrace the divine will and unite ourselves to it whatever thus may entail." OEA VI:30.

48. OEA V:149.

49. André Brix, *Commentaire du Traité de l'Amour de Dieu*, Texte établi d'après l'enregistrement des conférences données au cours de plusieurs week-ends en 1980-1981 à Ellezelles (Belgique:1981), 354.

50. "Concerning the Complete Despoliation of a Soul united to God's will," see OEA V:160-163; T2:137-140. In a letter to St Jane Frances de Chantal, he writes "Blessed are they who are stripped for Our Lord will clothe them." OEA XVII:79.

has removed that which has darkened its beauty, the alien element, the passions.”⁵¹

The connection between *la sainte indifférence* and freedom is made explicit in a letter to St Jane Frances de Chantal: “It is necessary to acquire the spirit of holy liberty and indifference as much as possible”⁵² The liberty that we enjoy from *la sainte indifférence* is a ‘holy liberty.’ It is not just freedom *from* self-love, disordered desires and sin, but a freedom *for* intimate union with God. As Sachs expresses it:

This is what God wills; this is all God desires. It sums up the Law. In everything else God has truly made us free. Can we really believe that Christ has set us free *for freedom* (Gal 5:1), with no other hidden agenda, no new set of rules and regulations? God wishes us the real freedom to become lovers and so enter into the fullness of life. It is clear that our freedom is itself something which needs to be set free. In some manner, each of us suffers from the imprisoning effects of sin in the world. All of us are to some extent caught up in ourselves, unable to reach out freely to others.⁵³

For St Francis de Sales it is love alone that orients us towards true freedom. In his ascetical doctrine the focus is not on renunciation but on a strengthening of the will in love of God. *Pure Love* expressed in loving surrender is at the heart of *la sainte indifférence*. Such a response to God’s love can only be freely entered into out of love. It is a question of two loves: God and ours. Indeed, Brix goes so far as to say that “if we have properly understood Salesian indifference then it is also an attribute of God who allows us to be free. Before us, God is *indifferent* in the sense that although he wants us to do his will, he leaves us free to do our own.”⁵⁴ It is to safeguard our love that God leaves us free and does not intervene. For

51. Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 276.

52. OEA XIII:138.

53. John R. Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 33.

54. Brix, *Commentaire du Traité de L'Amour de Dieu*, 325.

God knows that although we can resist God with our freedom, we can also love God with our freedom.

As we progress in our loving surrender we move from *résignation* to la sainte indifference. In an earlier allusion to *résignation*, we noted how in the Salesian usage of the term it is transferred from the juridical field into the realm of spirituality. In so doing, “it emphasizes the covenantal nature of our relationship with God. *Résignation* is a free act of confidence in God, where we struggle, but hand ourselves over to God. It is an act of freedom, but still imperfect in love.”⁵⁵ It has not quite yet reached abandon which is the defining quality of *sainte indifference*, involving a more generous gift of self.⁵⁶ St Francis de Sales explains:

The indifferent heart is like a ball of wax in God’s hands, ready to receive all the impressions of his eternal good pleasure. It is a heart without choice, equally ready for all things and having no other object for its will except the will of God. It does not place its love in all things God wills but in the will of God who wills them.⁵⁷

When St Francis de Sales speaks of “a heart without choice”, he is not denying our freedom to choose. Rather, he is reminding us that an indifferent heart has already chosen the will of God. Every other ‘choice’ issues from this. It is therefore, not a heart that has no will, but on the

55. Brix, *Commentaire du Traité de L’Amour de Dieu*, 318-319.

56. “Indifference is ultimately contrasted, for Balthasar, with that resignation which characterizes non-Christian spirituality. We might briefly designate resignation as the total passivity which is not that active cooperation that makes for Christian indifference. In both the Greek philosophers and in Asian religions, Balthasar was confronted with an ideal of *apatheia*, which, at least superficially read, meant an absence of the passions. For him, true indifference is indeed a calmness, not one which is a matter of ‘spiritual aloofness,’ but rather one that has the character of being willing to be plunged into various human conditions if it be the will of God [...] The chief alternative to Christian indifference then is Stoic indifference (in whatever form). Stoic indifference does not let the deepest self be affected by the emotions, while Christian indifference allows the deepest self to be open to suffering if God wills it.” Raymond Gawronski, *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter between East and West* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 115-116.

57. OEA V:121; T2:106-107.

contrary, its will is *accrochée* to God. It is therefore the supreme expression of one's will and of freedom.⁵⁸

Given the predominance of passivity, however, that accompanies the images suggestive of indifference, is it not difficult to understand the role of freedom? St Francis makes it clear that holy indifference is neither a state of passivity nor a state of activity, yet both these elements are in it. It is a state of the soul in which the soul is always on the alert to the will of God, a state of waiting, which will be transformed into consent the moment it comes to know God's will. In the following quotation we can see how he grapples with different expressions in order to convey how our freedom is consonant with holy indifference. He writes:

It is very difficult to put into exact words this highest indifference of the human will, which is thus reduced to God's will and has perished in it. It seems to me that we must not say that it *acquiesces* in God's will, since acquiescence is an act of the soul declaring its assent. We must not say that it *accepts* or *receives*, because to accept and receive are actions that to a certain extent might be called "passive actions" by which we embrace and take what happens to us. Nor must we say that it *permits*, since permission is an act of the will, and hence a kind of inert willing. It does not actually will to do a thing, but still it wills to let it be done. Rather, it seems to me that the soul that is in this state of indifference and wills nothing but leaves it to God to will what is pleasing to him must be said to have *its will in a simple and general state of waiting*. To wait is neither to do nor to act, but only to remain subject to some event. If you will examine the matter, this waiting on the part of the soul is truly voluntary. Nevertheless it *is not an action but rather a simple disposition to receive whatever shall happen*. As soon as the events take place and are received, the waiting changes into consent or acquiescence. But before they occur, the soul is truly in a state of waiting, indifferent to all the divine will is pleased to ordain.⁵⁹

The text just cited is pivotal for understanding indifference and its relation to freedom. St Francis de Sales rejects the following verbs 'to acquiesce,' 'accept,' 'receive,' and 'permit' for they still imply a certain

58. Brix, *Commentaire du Traité de L'Amour de Dieu*, 323. Indifference arises spontaneously when we love; it is not reserved for an elite, but present to beginners.

59. OEA V:158-159; T2:136.

activity of the will. The freedom required in *sainte indifference* does not require an activity of the will, but a disposition of openness and receptivity which is nevertheless voluntary. This state of waiting is better described as an ‘active passivity’, for, considered from the aspect of love, even the passive element itself is active. This is because “every movement of holy indifference is predominated and permeated by love, pure love, which by its very nature is active and dynamic”.⁶⁰ This pure love which expresses itself in *sainte indifference* is a testimony both to the presence of God’s grace and to our free co-operation.

Freedom and Love of God

St Francis de Sales is quite emphatic about the fact that ‘nothing less than God can fill a soul capable of possessing God’.⁶¹ Nonetheless, though by nature our will is shaped to the good, this natural bias becomes a definite inclination to love God, as the supreme Good, only after God is perceived. What St Francis is especially concerned to highlight here is that ‘the degree of love felt, the force of our inclination to love God, is conditioned by the extent of our awareness of God, the clarity of our vision of him.’⁶² Such a vision in this life, however, is described as a ‘glimpse’ in contrast with the clear knowledge of God which awaits us in the beatific vision.⁶³ We are further hindered by the incapacity of our will, weakened by sin, to act upon this knowledge because when we have glimpsed God’s incomparable goodness, we do not necessarily respond in love.⁶⁴ St Francis declares, ‘here below on earth where we do not see that supreme goodness in its beauty, but *merely glimpse it* amid our darkness, we are indeed inclined and allured but still not necessitated to love it more than ourselves.’⁶⁵ Given these limitations of our *weak nature*, our love of God is frequently intermittent, that is, only activated when we feel like

60. Perumalil, ‘Holy Indifference’, 146.

61. *Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent*, OEA VIII:279.

62. Alex Baird, ‘St Francois de Sales and the Man’s Natural Knowledge of God in the *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*’. *The Downside Review* 92 (1974): 192.

63. In book ten, chapter ten of the *Treatise*, he describes this natural knowledge of God as a glimpse (*l’entreuve*) in contrast with the clear knowledge of God, the vision of him face to face, which awaits us in the beyond.

64. Baird, ‘St François de Sales and Man’s Natural Knowledge of God’, 189.

65. OEA V:202 ; T2:169.

it. In addition, ‘if we allow it to remain inactive, instead of loving God our hearts lean towards other things.’⁶⁶ Allowing ourselves to become absorbed in lesser ‘goods’ leads not only to a decline in our love of God, but to our progressive enslavement and loss of freedom. St Francis expresses the effects of divine love, in contrast, as follows:

They are made slaves to what they love.... Hence when divine love reigns in our hearts, like a king it brings into subjection all other loves possessed by the will, and consequently all its affections since they naturally follow love. Next, it tames sensual love and reduces it to obedience, and thus brings after it all sensual passions.⁶⁷

It is clear from this that there is a correlation between our growth in the love of God and our growth in freedom. In short, it is the love of God that sets us free to love. St Francis de Sales never gives up proclaiming that all freedom finds its perfection in the relationship which unites God with all his creatures: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and thy whole soul and thy whole mind. This is the greatest of the commandments, and the first.” Heaven above, Theotimus, how desperately the heart of Christ longs for us to love him!⁶⁸

In the light of this, one Salesian commentator argues that ‘it is quite possible to reflect on freedom, without speaking about love, but love cannot exist without freedom.’⁶⁹ Whilst agreeing with the sentiments expressed in the latter half of this statement, we would take issue with the first part. Within a Salesian understanding of freedom it is equally impossible to speak of freedom without love or love without freedom. It is precisely this aspect of freedom’s necessary relationship to love that undergirds the originality of a Salesian understanding of freedom. Once freedom is no longer at the service of love, set adrift from this mooring, it quickly degenerates into license, a counterfeit of freedom. It is love of God that safeguards and authenticates true freedom. However, just as there can

66. Matthew Kalathungal, “Declining Love, Sin and Guilt – A Psychological Approach” in *Enabling and Ennobling Love*, ed. Anthony Kolencherry (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1994), 40.

67. *OEA* V:309-10 ; T2:254.

68. *OEA* IV:112; T1:121.

69. Geneviève Pochat, *François de Sales et la Pauvreté* (Paris: Éditions S.O.S., 1988), 99.

be an inauthentic freedom, likewise an egotistical love can masquerade itself as true love, even in our love of God. In the *parable of the Deaf Musician*, he cautions us in this regard:

But little by little after [the young nightingales] are formed and trained in holy love, they imperceptibly bring about a change. In place of loving God in order to please God, they begin to love him for the pleasure they themselves take in the exercises of holy love. Instead of being in love with God, they fall in love with the love they have for him. They are attached to their own attachments. They do no longer take pleasure in God, but in the pleasure they have in his love ... Instead of loving this holy love because it tends to God who is the beloved, we love it because it proceeds from us who are the lovers. Who fails to see that in so doing it is no longer God whom we seek but that we return to ourselves? We love the love instead of loving the beloved.⁷⁰

Since our love for God is born from complacency, which is a movement of grace, we delight in the goodness of God, but for this love to become truly mature we need to progress to love 'the God of consolations rather than the consolations of God'.⁷¹ An affective love for God, which produces pleasant sensations due to his presence, still needs to be purified of self. It is not the delight in God, however, that is problematic for St Francis, but the movement which involves a *retour sur soi*, a reflexivity which seeks self rather than the other. He highlights this egotistical love through the metaphor of the image which is reflected in a mirror. He writes:

It is not easy, I admit, to look with pleasure at the beauty of a mirror for a long time without looking at oneself in it, yes, without taking pleasure in looking at oneself. Still, there is a difference between the pleasure a man takes in looking at himself in a mirror because it is a fine one and the complacency he takes in looking at a mirror simply because he sees himself in it. Undoubtedly, it is also hard to love God without loving to some extent the pleasure we take in his love. However, there is a great difference between the satisfaction we take in loving God because of his beauty and that we take in loving him because his love is pleasing to us. We must strive to seek in God only love of his beauty and not pleasure found in the beauty of his love. If a man prays to God and perceives that he is praying, he is not perfectly attentive to his prayer. He diverts his attention from God to whom he prays in order to think of the prayer by which he prays. Our very care not to have distractions often serves as a very great distraction. In spiritual actions simplicity is most recommend-

70. OEA V:138-9; T2:120.

71. OEA V:142; T2:123.

able. Do you wish to contemplate God? Then turn your gaze on him, and be attentive to that. If you reflect and turn your eyes down upon yourself to see how you look when you look at him, then it is not God that you behold; it is your own behaviour, it is yourself.⁷²

Complacency or delight in God's goodness, therefore, is a necessary stage in moving us towards a deeper love of God. As St Francis has already stated, 'there is a great difference between the satisfaction we take in loving God because of his beauty and that we take in loving him because his love is pleasing to us.' The difficulty envisaged here is not one of taking delight in God, but getting absorbed with this delight and turning back to the self. It is this self-consciousness that St Francis denounces as a product of the Ego and the antithesis of a truly contemplative spirit.⁷³ It represents a certain 'corruption' in the sense that this self-consciousness negates the union of those beings present to each other.⁷⁴ True contemplative love of God needs to go beyond a biological or egotistical love, which is taken up with affective experiences, to an authentic love in which we love God for himself. St Francis, of course, acknowledges that 'it is hard to love God without loving to some extent the pleasure we take in his love'. We can still infer from this, nevertheless, that, though it may be difficult, it is possible to love God without self-interest. Such a love St Francis denotes as 'pure love', a grasp of which is essential if we are to address the following question: If self-interest is involved, do we love God freely and purely or because of the benefit that accrues to us?

Pure Love of God

The purpose of the *Treatise on the Love of God* is quite clear. St Francis exclaims:

Love of God is love without a peer, because God's goodness is goodness without an equal ... Since God is the sole Lord, and his goodness is infinitely high

72. OEA V:140-1; T2:122.

73. See, OEA V :23-4 ; T2 :28.

74. This explains why contemplation for St Francis, in particular, and mystics in general, is never viewed as reflexive because it is a unitive presence in which the activity of the faculties are suspended. This is eminently true of the form of contemplation which is characteristic of the Visitandine spirit, 'the prayer of quiet.' See the *Treatise*, book six, chapter eleven.

above all goodness, he must be loved with a love that is lofty, excellent, and mighty above all comparison.⁷⁵

The central thesis of the *Treatise*, and indeed the *Introduction*, rests on this *pure love* of God which is a love that is free, pure and disinterested, it does not depend on feeling, but on the contrary, relies on interior and exterior actions which cannot be aroused through feelings of love. It is a love which seeks to love God without any admixture of self-interest.⁷⁶ There is a celebrated passage in the *Treatise* wherein the culmination of such *pure love* is manifested in an apparent willingness to even sacrifice one's own salvation if God's will deems it necessary. He writes, 'to imagine something impossible, if the soul knew that damnation would be a little more pleasing to God than salvation, it would forsake salvation and run after its own damnation.'⁷⁷ This problematic text needs to be viewed within its context as an extreme expression of one's love for God and readiness to do God's will. It also must not be taken at face value, for attention needs to be paid to the introductory phrase, 'to imagine something impossible.' Pure love does not entail the sacrifice of one's eternal beatitude for St Francis de Sales, because union with God and beatitude are the very reason for our creation. The legitimate desire of our nature for happiness has been instilled in our nature by the God who has created us. Pure love is, therefore, not sacrificial because it does not demand the sacrifice of one's happiness, for this desire comes from God and can only be realized in him. Taking this into account, Gilson's criticism, nevertheless, remains valid when he states:

Hence we may also perceive at the same time how far removed from St Bernard was even the genius of St Francis de Sales when he declared himself ready to love hell with the will of God even above heaven without it. Since this is precisely the starting-point of the whole Fénelonian mistake, in that inasmuch as a [wo]man is still capable of imagining, whether possible things or impossible, s/he has not yet arrived at pure love. For pure love imagines nothing, it possesses. St Francis de Sales is quite well aware that love is not to be divorced from the joy that it gives, but perhaps he never knew the joy of the

75. OEA V:187; T2:157.

76. 'St Bernard expressed himself quite clearly on this point: pure love of God is not a state in which man would cease to love himself, but a state in which henceforth he loves himself only for God's sake.' Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St Bernard* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 88.

77. OEA V:122; T2:107.

ecstatic in actual love of God for God's sake; and that is why he still reasons and argues when the time has gone by for anything but love.⁷⁸

Étienne Gilson alerts us to an important distinction between a Salesian and Bernadine understanding of 'pure love' in that, for St Bernard, pure love is essentially an ecstasy not a state.⁷⁹ Cistercian pure love is 'a mystical experience' and 'is neither an idea, nor an habitual disposition, but the brief and perpetually interrupted *excessus* of the soul of the mystic, when God unites it with Himself by exceptional graces.'⁸⁰ The 'pure love' of God lived in the midst of aridities, as experienced by St Jane Frances de Chantal, is the antithesis of a Cistercian understanding of *pure love*.⁸¹ From a Salesian perspective, however, it is such fidelity to God without feelings of love that qualifies it as 'pure love.' It is precisely this act of the will that loves without relying on feelings, which gives testimony to the authenticity of its love, and indeed, its freedom.

The Marian Paradigm of Pure Love

St Francis explains pure love as a love "with which God is loved for himself and by which the whole heart is given to him; the whole heart without any reservation."⁸² Such a testimony to pure love, which "exactly

78. Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St Bernard*, 146-7.

79. Gilson writes, 'pure love does not mean the same thing in the two doctrines (although Fénelon quotes liberally from St Bernard) perhaps it is permissible to say that the spiritual life of Fénelon, and even the tenderness of St Francis de Sales, would have appeared to St Bernard as nothing but permanent states of languor. That is the reason why, lacking the triumphant certainty that ecstasy alone can bring, the only means left to them to persuade themselves of the purity of their love lay is the acceptance of dryness. St Francis de Sales himself relies only on anguishes to make love *pure* and *clear*; this pure love seems more like that of the courtly poets or of the Astraea than that of St Bernard, for whom love is purified, not by dryness or languor, but by ardour.' Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St Bernard*, 243.

80. Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St Bernard*, 143-7.

81. In contrast to the spiritual dryness experienced by St Jane de Chantal, Cistercian pure love marked by ecstasy, emphasizes the 'affection experienced which is 'filled to the brim with 'sweetness and loveliness' because it fully enjoys the beauty granted by God. The intention of the will becomes 'pure and clean' because it is totally absorbed in the pure intention of the divine will and nothing of its own is left in it or mixed with it.' Hein Blommestijn, "Self-Transcendence in Bernard of Clairvaux", in *A Journey to Freedom*, ed. Franco Imoda (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 241.

82. OEA VII:397.

defines our relation to God, is to be found in Mary who is its living paradigm.⁸³ As one Salesian commentator observes:

It seems, then, by re-reading the marvelous Salesian pages on the motive of the Incarnation, that everything in the world must converge, as it did in the blessed hour of the Annunciation, to pierce better the mystery of being Jesus [...] everything in the universe is ordered to the realization of a heart capable of God, a heart capable of loving as God loves.⁸⁴

The destiny of all humanity to be in Christ, which is central to a Salesian theology of creation and incarnation, is supremely realized in the Virgin Mary, who is the first to participate in her Son's heart. Through 'living Jesus' she exemplifies our Christian calling as witnessed by the early Christians, who were all said to possess "one heart", that is, the heart of Christ:

The first Christians were said to have only one heart and one soul because of their perfect mutual dilection. If St Paul no longer lived himself but Jesus Christ lived in him because of that most close union of his heart with his Master's whereby his soul were as if dead in the heart it animated so as to live in the Saviour's heart which it loved. Then, O true God! How much truer is it that the Sacred Virgin and her Son had but one soul, but one heart and but one life.⁸⁵

Mary is presented as the prototype of this transforming union through *inhésion*⁸⁶ as she and her Son had only one soul and one heart.⁸⁷ Yet, this

83. Lajeunie, *St Francis de Sales* 2:240.

84. André Brix, *St François de Sales and The Canticle of Canticles* (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1989), 25-26.

85. *OEA* V:50-51.

86. The kernel of Salesian spirituality does not revolve around an imitation of Christ, but an "inhésion" in Christ, where we no longer live, but Christ lives in us. "Inhésion" depicts the flow of love in the Heart of Christ. This union produces a unity of hearts. By means of *inhésion*, "the soul is caught up, attached to, fixed to, bonded to the divine Majesty and finds it difficult to withdraw and move away." *OEA* V:16. "Such is the indissoluble bond of Christ's mystical body by which the Holy Spirit enraptures the Church." Lajeunie, *St Francis de Sales*, 2:392.

87. See *OEA* VII:443. A similar idea is to be found in the works of Bérulle who makes use of the term *adhésion* rather than *inhésion*. In the Salesian understanding of the spiritual life, "the essential point is a vital 'adhésion' to Christ, who makes us share in what he was and what he is; through this 'inhésion', a transmutation of life is

is the call of each of the baptized to become the body of Christ where “we draw God’s heart into our own.”⁸⁸ This participation in the divine life is made possible through the *mediative* and *transformative* role of the crucified heart of Jesus whose heart brings “a life more perfect and more pleasing to God, a life which will render [us] capable of uniting ourselves more clearly to divine goodness.”⁸⁹ We quite literally participate in the divine heart by means of the heart of Jesus because “love makes lovers equal.”⁹⁰ The devout heart takes complacency in the heart of Christ and therefore, is drawn into the divine life. This mystical union is described by Francis as the rhythmic action of two hearts beating as one:

“The spouse [Christ] pours his love and his soul into the bride’s heart and the bride in turn pours her soul into the spouse’s heart.”⁹¹

The prayer of Jesus that all may be one is given concrete expression in the Salesian ecclesial understanding that we must join ourselves with Mary, like the disciples, in order to receive the Holy Spirit, the source of unity.⁹² Mary is created to “attract and lead all people to her Son.”⁹³ In union with Jesus, she enters fully into the mystery of his death and resurrection.⁹⁴ She is at one with this movement of love that issues from the heart of God. Through her obedience in love, there is “no longer a

operated which caused St Paul to say: “It is not I who now live, but truly Christ lives in me.” Lajuenie, *St Francis de Sales*, 2:584.

88. OEA IV:260

89. OEA VI:89.

90. OEA IV:273.

91. OEA IV:345.

92. “If like the Apostles and disciples we begin with one heart and mind to pray to God with devotion together with Mary the mother of Jesus, we will receive the Holy Spirit... For no one can have Jesus Christ for a brother who will not have Mary for Mother; and he who will not be a brother of Jesus Christ, will no longer be a co-heir.” *First sermon on the feast of Pentecost 1593*, OEA VII:29.

93. OEA XXVI:266.

94. Love is “the active union of our will to God’s will for us in imitation of Jesus’ example. For Jesus that active union of wills took concrete shape and form by the exigencies of his life and ministry and culminated in his death. For each follower after him such an active union of wills will take concrete shape and form by the exigencies of each one’s own unique life, but will always be patterned in some way after the cross of Christ. The finest example of such imitation, for St Francis, is Mary.” Lewis S. Fiorelli, ‘Live Jesus! Key Aspects of Salesian Spirituality’. *Review for Religious*, 46 (July–Aug.1987): 492.

union but rather a unity of heart, soul and life between this Mother and this Son... If this Mother lived her Son's life, she also died her Son's death."⁹⁵ While it is true that Mary is privileged by God, she knows only too well our human struggles, as "she had part in all human miseries."⁹⁶

And yet, God's desire to free us from sin is supremely realized in Mary's redemption:

You are accustomed to hearing me say that, more than anyone, the Virgin Mary is the supreme creature of God and her Son; For, just as God has created her with more perfections than anyone else, so too, has she been redeemed more than anyone else. The reason for this is because not only has she been *redeemed from sin*, but furthermore, she has been *freed from the power and inclination to sin*. To buy back the freedom of a person, who ought to be a slave, before she can become one, is a gift even greater than being redeemed after one has become a slave.⁹⁷

Unlike Mary, who has been preserved not only from original sin, but also from the inclination to sin, our weakened human nature retains its inclination to sin. This does not separate us from Mary, but places before us what we are called to be through grace. It is true that Mary does not have to overcome the 'disordered affections' that obstruct our discernment of God's will. However, her lack of resistance to God's grace highlights the positive dimension of the 'indifferent heart' which chooses to do God's will out of love. Along with her we are called to embrace the positive aspect of indifference that allows for an inner freedom enabling us to grow in love by choosing God's will. Mary teaches us that

indifference consists in an attitude of equipoise... regarded positively it is an affective space within which the movements of the Spirit can be sensed and things seen in relation to the signs of God's will, an

95. OEA V:50.

96. OEA V:55

97. OEA VII:458.

affective silence making possible an unconditional listening... it is a positive desire for God and his will.⁹⁸

It requires a contemplative stance, it demands patience and receptivity. We are to allow things to happen in God's time and in God's way. It is an active passivity that is required of us - certainly we must wait, but we must be watchful and prepared. The contemplative stance required by "ask for nothing, refuse nothing", as lived supremely by Mary, is also connected with obedience. Obedience in the true sense of the word is about listening. Living this maxim fosters a listening attitude, a disposition of faith, an openness to receive. In no way can it be understood as a law, some external prescription that we are obliged to obey. In the legalist approach to God's will, we can feel safe as long as we are doing what authority tells us to do.

A deeper understanding of God's will means that if we are listening to the Spirit in the depths of our being, we will constantly be disturbed out of our comfortable security. This maxim is designed precisely to disturb us which accounts for Mary's disturbance when greeted by the Angel at the Annunciation. And yet, the obedience required by this maxim is the spirit of the Gospel which is a 'new law', a law of the heart. It is an inner law leading us to freedom, allowing ourselves to be drawn, ravished by God.⁹⁹ Here we truly enter into the mystery of call and response, our freedom and God's grace that draws us. It is the particular role of the Holy Spirit whose "inspirations" draw us to this. What God asks of us is a childlike simplicity that manifests itself in the ability to wait on God. Mary is a perpetual advent, "the morning star which brings us gracious news of the advent of the true Sun."¹⁰⁰ The virtue exhibited in such waiting is one of holy indifference. By this, as we have conclusively shown, St Francis does not mean apathy, rather, a single-mindedness where our only concern is to please God. Indifference is only made possible by love and "there is no one except the most holy Virgin our Lady who has perfectly attained to this degree of excellence in love for her dearly beloved."¹⁰¹ It is a complete trust in God and surrender to God's will that reveals both the freedom of

98. Ivens, *Understanding The Spiritual Exercises*, 31.

99. See OEA V: 169-170.

100. OEA IX:5.

101. OEA V:183.

the indifferent heart and the purity of her love. Thus, we see fulfilled in Mary the true destiny of “our heart which is the paradise of God.”¹⁰²

102. See the original draft of Book Five in the *Treatise on the Love of God* where St. Francis describes the human heart as the dwelling place and paradise of God.