

Mary in the life and thought of Francis de Sales Paths and contexts of Marian devotion

1. Experience, doctrine and situation of Marian devotion

The sense of the presence of the Mother of the Lord in the path of faith and holiness that Francis de Sales (1567-1622) personally travelled and illustrated with the awareness and dedication of the pastoral mission of spiritual guide of the faithful reveals itself from the first moment of an extraordinary quality, in terms of continuity, adherence and Christian insight. Jean-Pierre Camus (1584-1652), Bishop of Belley, left testimony of his admiration for the words of his great friend Francis de Sales on Mary: 'I myself heard him preach on the greatness of this Blessed Virgin, and I confirm that it was only to him alone, because of his great delicacy, to speak so worthily of the great Mother of God'.¹ And his nephew Charles Auguste de Sales reported in his uncle's biography that, feeling his death approaching, he said in confidence of his devotion to the Mother of God: 'I have prayed to her always, every day of my life'.²

The purpose of observing and understanding now the place reserved for the Mother of God in the writings, decisions and interventions of St Francis de Sales,³ preacher, pastor and founder, bishop of Geneva for two decades, leads one to perceive the vastness of the links of his spiritual vision of Mary with the many theological, ecclesial, anthropological and charismatic aspects. This singularity of breadth in spiritual experience actually corresponds to the lifestyle of St Francis de Sales, a man of exceptional human gifts and proverbial activity. The finesse of thought was united with the vast horizon of relationships cultivated by the bishop of Geneva in numerous, arduous and continuous pastoral commitments, where his decidedly open soul was expressed, typical of a great Christian personality, with amiable, well-known and harmonious traits.

The pastoral figure of Francis de Sales emerges particularly in the historical situation of confessional divisions, theological controversies, political tensions and continuous wars, proposing a Christian teaching marked by cordiality, justice, balance and realism. These values account for the success that Francis enjoyed among men and women of the most diverse conditions who found in the teachings of Francis de Sales the appropriate words for their lives.

The Marian theme in Francis de Sales thus now presents itself with the dual virtue of being both a reflection of his spiritual doctrine and equally a key to his faith experience. The two hermeneutical paths are good reasons to engage in the reading and interpretation of the Mariological texts of the bishop of Geneva, as demonstrated by the considerable bibliography on the subject.⁴ This work in particular seeks

¹ J.P. CAMUS, *L'esprit de S. François de Sales*, Société S. Jean l'Evangeliste, Paris 1904 (orig. 1639), p. 508. Bishop Camus devotes two chapters to François' Marian devotion (pp. 507-509).

² Charles Auguste de SALES, *Histoire du bien-heureux François de Sales évêque et prince de Genève, instituteur et fondateur de l'ordre des Religieuses de la Visitation Sainte Marie*, L. Vivés, Paris⁶ 1879.

³ The edition of the complete works of Saint Francis de Sales is *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales, évêque de Genève et docteur de l'Église*, 27 vols.: I to XII, J. Nierat, Annecy 1892-1902; XIII to XXI, E. Vitte, Paris 1904-1923; XXII to XXVII, Monastère de la Visitation, Annecy 1925-1964. For this edition we use the abbreviation *Œuvres* followed by the Roman number of the volume. For ease of reference for the Italian reader, we cite, where possible, the volumes *Complete works of Francis de Sales*, Città Nuova, Rome 2008-2015 (*The controversies*, vol. 1; *Introduction to the devout life*, vol. 3; *Treatise on the love of God*, vol. 4; *Spiritual tracts*, vol. 5; *Exhortations*, vols. 6/1 and 6/2; *Letters*, vol. 8; *Pamphlets. The Visitation*, vol. 10; *Pamphlets. Asceticism and Mysticism*, vol. 10b), using the abbreviation *Complete Works*. For the Italian edition of the letters we refer to L. ROLFO (cur.), *Tutte le lettere di San Francesco di Sales*, 3 vols., Paoline, Roma 1967, with the abbreviation *Tutte le lettere*.

⁴ I reproduce the bibliography on the Mariology of St Francis de Sales as an appendix to this contribution.

to respect and deepen the generative and contextual dimensions of Francis' Marian doctrine, with the aim of approaching the theological dynamism of his witness in terms of doctrinal relationality and spiritual progressiveness.

2. The Marian devotion of Francis de Sales

The bond of faith proper to the disciple of Christ with Mary of Nazareth, his mother, in Francis de Sales is first of all a concretely lived reality, which then becomes personal testimony, theological discourse and pastoral teaching. Francis' spiritual experience of the encounter with the mother of Jesus is a fact of authentic *devotion on the* basis of the personal involvement in his deepest soul that manifests itself in the strength of his convictions and the determined character of his decisions. It is therefore imperative to go back over the traces of Marian devotion practised by the Savoyard saintly doctor. However, it is not a question of writing a chronicle now to provide biographical references, as an introductory passage to the doctrinal exposition. Instead, the appropriate hermeneutical operation seeks the theological interpretation of the human story of faith that includes the characteristic moments of perception, reception, personalisation and expression of the salvation event given in the holy doctor's spiritual relationship with the Mother of God.

Charles Flachaire points in his study on Marian devotion in the 17th century to Francis de Sales' experience of union with Mary as the origin of his Mariological reflection.⁵ Louis Comte again points to the practical character of Francis de Sales' Mariology with an explicit reference to the path taken by the Bishop of Geneva himself.⁶ Comte also affirms the *exceptional degree of* Francis de Sales' Marian devotion,⁷ which corresponds to the solidity of his doctrine,⁸ but one should also affirm the reciprocal influence, to recognise that theological solidity has the support and impetus of lived experience. Valentín Viguera develops the same idea of the filial trust in the mother of the Lord practised by Francis, the foundation of the shared spiritual vivacity and the stimulus to holiness observed in his Marian texts.⁹ Hubert Pauels, with his valuable contributions on the thought and mission of Francis de Sales, particularly attentive to the genetic and evolutionary aspects of the teaching of the Genevan bishop, observes that every Salesian discourse on Mary is placed in the context of spiritual experience, with a marked Christological sense.¹⁰

Francis de Sales thus had a 'Marian life'.¹¹ The manifestations of Francis' Marian devotion are well

⁵ "La dévotion mariale du directeur de la Philotée est non seulement une consolation pour le coeur, mais aussi un aliment pour l'intelligence" (Ch. FLACHAIRE, *La dévotion à la Vierge dans la littérature catholique au commencement du XVII^e siècle*, Apostolat de la Presse, Paris 1957, p. 60).

⁶ "Découvrant au Peuple de Dieu le 'Mystère de Marie', François de Sales avait la droiture de reproduire ce mystère, de son mieux, dans sa propre vie" (L. COMTE, *Marie, mère et éducatrice selon S. François de Sales, Vatican II et Paul VI*, Lethielleux, Paris 1970, p. 34).

⁷ "François de Sales ne s'est pas contenté de 'prêcher' aux autres la dévotion mariale; durant toute sa vie, il l'a pratiquée lui-même à un degré exceptionnel" (COMTE, *Marie, mère et éducatrice*, p. 34).

⁸ Cf. COMTE, *Marie, mère et éducatrice*, p. 285.

⁹ "C'est peut-être le respect filial avec lequel il a toujours considéré les mystères de Marie qui ont fait de lui un mariologue. N'oublions pas que ses textes ont été cités par les papes qui ont proclamé les dogmes de l'Immaculé et celui de l'Assomption. Il n'a pas fait un traité de mariologie, mais il a écrit une mariologie, et surtout, il a fait une Eglise militante-vivante à l'ombre de Marie" (V. VIGUERA, *Essai sur une mariologie dans l'oeuvre de Saint François de Sales*, in "Ephemerides Mariologicae" 23 (1973) 251).

¹⁰ Pauels clearly establishes the devotional basis of Salesian thought on Mary: "Was er [Francis of Sales] über Maria zu sagen hat, bleibt ganz im Rahmen seiner Alltagsfrömmigkeit, die er in seiner Anleitung zu einem gottseligen Leben eindeutig charakterisiert"; and he specifies the Christological orientation of Francis' Marian piety: "Hieraus ersieht man deutlich das Bestreben von Franz von Sales, alles auf Christus in seiner Marienlehre auszurichten" (H. PAUELS, *Maria in der Spiritualität des hl. Franz von Sales*, in: H. PETRI (Hrsg.), *Christsein und marianische Spiritualität*, = Mariologische Studien 6, Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg 1984, pp. 205 and 222); a more systematic exposition of the Mariological thought of Francis of Sales in the whole of his teaching is given in H. PAUELS, *Gottes Leuchten auf einem Menschenantlitz. Das Leben und die Theologie des hl. Franz von Sales*, Wienand, Köln³ 1989, 120-124; the concise presentation in H. PAUELS, *Franz v. Sales*, in: R. BÄUMER - L. SCHEFFCZYK (Hrsg.), *Marienlexikon*, II, EOS, St. Ottilien 1989, pp. 516-517.

¹¹ "Marianisch war sein Leben" is the expression of PAUELS, *Gottes Leuchten auf einem Menschenantlitz*, p. 124; on the spiritual and Marian path of Francis de Sales again: COMTE, *Marie, mère et éducatrice*, 34-43; A. PEDRINI, *Francis de Sales and the devotion*

known and recurrent, even closely linked to the most salient moments of his life.¹²

2.1. The maternal roots of Marian devotion in the young Francis

From his earliest years and for the rest of his life, François received the testimony of faith and Marian devotion from his mother. François de Sionnaz invoked Mary's intercession for her first-born son even before his birth on the two occasions he performed the act of consecration.¹³ François, who will say in the *Philothea of the parents'* primary commitment to *imprint the fear of God in their children's hearts*,¹⁴ was aware of the importance of the religious sentiment cultivated by his mother, which he indirectly recalls when he proposes the examples of the holy mothers of Saint Augustine and Saint Bernard.¹⁵

François learned Marian prayers in the family, in the rhythms and forms of the popular piety of the people of his land who maintained their adherence to the Church of Rome,¹⁶ not without the difficulties arising from the pressure of Calvin's Reformation even in the Duchy of Savoy. In the religious education of Francis, the maternal tenderness and spiritual intelligence of François de Sionnaz prevailed, and this was to be the human growth ground of the Christian experience of cordial closeness and guidance of the mother of Jesus. François's loving expression of Marian devotion is grafted into the language of the maternal-filial relationship, with that naturalness that arises in François with the certainty that it is always God who *indulges the affections of mothers*.¹⁷

2.2. The influence of the Jesuits in Francis' years of study

As a student of the Jesuits at the college of Clermont in Paris in 1583, at the age of 15, the young Francis joined one of the Marian Congregations,¹⁸ the form of association of Marian devotees founded by the Jesuits for the students of the Roman College.¹⁹ Francis became its 'assistant' and then 'prefect' two years later. The congregants chose the Mother of God as their patron, protector and advocate, pronouncing a formula of oblation by which they declared themselves perpetual servants of Mary. The manuals of the Marian Congregations presented the mother of Jesus as a model of perfection and inculcated imitation, filial love and service. Étienne Binet (1569-1639) himself, a companion of Francis in Paris and later a member of the Company, composed a Marian text²⁰ that would form part of the Marian literature habitually offered to the congregants. Practices of piety were however varied in the private life of the congregants, conforming to the criterion of imposing little and leaving room for

to Mary Most Holy, in "Miles Immaculatae" 28 (1992) 226-250.

¹² I refer to the complete biographies of Saint Francis de Sales: H. WAACH, *Franz von Sales. Das Leben eines Heiligen*, Franz-Sales-Verlag, Eichstätt 1955; F. TROCHU, *Saint François de Sales évêque et prince de Genève, fondateur de la Visitation Sainte-Marie, docteur de l'Eglise (1567-1622)*, 2 vols., E. Vitte, Paris-Lyon 1955-1956; E.J. LAJEUNIE, *Saint François de Sales. L'Homme, la Pensée, l'Action*, I, Guy Victor, Paris 1966; G. PAPASOGLI, *Come piace a Dio. Francis de Sales and his 'great daughter'*, Città Nuova, Rome 1981; A. RAVIER, *Francis de Sales. Un dotto e un santo*, = Già e non ancora 151, Jaca Book, Milan 1986; E. ALBURQUERQUE, *Una espiritualidad del amor. San Francisco de Sales*, CCS, Madrid 2007; M. WIRTH, *San Francisco de Sales. Un progetto di formazione integrale*, = Studi e Strumenti 4, LAS, Roma 2021.

¹³ Cf. F. TROCHU, *La maman de S. François de Sales*, Apostolat des Editions, Paris 1963, p. 23. On the act of consecration of the son performed by François de Sionnaz during his pregnancy on pilgrimage to the Shroud, see also A. PEDRINI, *Francis de Sales and the Shroud*, in "Palestra del Clero" 65 (1986) 479-494.

¹⁴ Cf. *Introduction à la vie devote*, III, 38: Œuvres III, p. 271.

¹⁵ Cf. Œuvres III, pp. 270-271. Identical thoughts can be found in Antonio Possevino's letter to Canon Ivon Tarterio (cf. D LLORENTE, *Dos obras notables del P. Antonio Possevino*, Casa Martín, Valladolid 1941, pp. 95-96).

¹⁶ The young Francis joined the confraternity of the Rosary after his confirmation in 1577 (cf. RAVIER, *Francis de Sales*, p. 17).

¹⁷ Cf. Œuvres III, p. 271.

¹⁸ Cf. LAJEUNIE, *Saint François de Sales*, I, p. 138-139.

¹⁹ The 'Marian Congregations', associations of young students for a committed Christian life, were founded by the Belgian Jesuit Jean Leunis in 1563 at the Roman College and approved by Gregory XIII in 1584. Presented in R. PLUS, *Les congrégations mariales*, = Les tracts marials 7, Centre Marial Canadien, Nicolet 1950; E. VILLARET, *History of the Marian Congregations*, Stella matutina, Rome 1950; J. Wicki - R. DENDAL, *Le père Jean Leunis sj, fondateur des Congrégations mariales*, Rome, Inst. Hist. SI 1951; L. BRIEN, *Le p. Jean Leunis (1532-1584), pèlerin du Christ sur le pas d'Ignace*, in "Cahiers de spiritualité ignatienne" 15 (1991) 71-83.

²⁰ É. BINET (1569-1639), *Le chef d'oeuvre de Dieu, ou, les souveraines perfections de la Sainte Vierge sa Mère* (orig. 1634). Étienne Binet declared that his vocation was due to the example and words of Francis de Sales.

personal initiative.

The overcoming of the strong spiritual crisis that Francis de Sales went through between 1586 and 1587 also had a clear Marian component. In the church of *Saint-Etienne des Grès*²¹ in front of the small image of the *Vierge Noire de la Bonne Délivrance*²² the young Jesuit pupil made an act of consecration,²³ undoubtedly inspired by the readings of the *Libellus Sodalitatis* and *De vita et laudibus Deiparae Mariae Virginis* by the Belgian Jesuit François De Costere (1532-1619), written for the Marian Congregations. Francis de Sales vowed to pray the rosary²⁴ every day and made a vow of chastity, and it was then that the young Francis de Sales felt liberated from the torment of the uncertainty of his salvation. The path tried by Francis, with his strong commitment to discernment in a conception of grace that granted ample space to the role of the human will, indicates his clear harmony with the spiritual theological thinking of the Society of Jesus that Francis had also assimilated in the spiritual direction he sought from the very beginning of his entry into Clermont. Louis de la Rivière, Francis' biographer, states that from this moment of overcoming the religious crisis, his Marian devotion became more tender, strong and pure.²⁵

During the Paduan period, expressions of Francis' Marian devotion were confirmed and strengthened. As in Paris, Francis sought a spiritual guide in Padua, whom he found in Antonio Possevino (1533-1611), a Jesuit, who had arrived at the College of Padua after ten years of papal missions in Europe to counter the expansion of the Lutheran Reformation. Francis was able to learn from Fr. Possevino his knowledge of Calvinism, of which there is good evidence in his *Epistola ad Ivonem Tarterium, maioris Ecclesiae Trecensis in Gallia Decanum, qui postea a Calvinianis haereticis interfectus est*, written in 1576.²⁶ Antonio Possevino, a fervent Marian devotee, certainly urged Francis to enrol in the Marian Congregation of the Annunciation of the College of the Society of Jesus. He continued Francis in his intention to practise a fervent, shared and active Marian devotion.

In Padua, Francis became acquainted with the book that later accompanied him: *Il combattimento spirituale* by the Theatine Lorenzo Scupoli (1530-1610). Francis went on to recommend its reading.²⁷ Lorenzo Scupoli urged people to turn their thoughts to the Virgin Mother of Jesus:

"Just as he who approaches a great fire, cannot fail to receive its warmth, so and much more, every needy person who with humility and faith approaches the fire of charity, mercy and pity that always burns in the bosom of the Virgin Mary, will receive help, favours and graces from it, and the more often and with greater faith and confidence he approaches it".²⁸

The use of the metaphor of fire, the emphasis on charity and the tone of cordiality in the frequent invocation of Mary, present in Lorenzo Scupoli's speech, foreshadow the expressions of Marian piety that Francis will propose.

At the conclusion of his law studies in Padua, declared Doctor *in utroque iure* on 5 September 1591, Francis de Sales made the pilgrimage from Venice to Loreto by sea, where he renewed his vow of chastity.²⁹

²¹ The church of *Saint-Etienne des Grès* was habitually attended by Francis. The church of *Saint-Etienne des Grès* was destroyed at the time of the French Revolution.

²² On the significance of the devotional gesture V. VIGUERA, *Essai sur une mariologie dans l'oeuvre de Saint François de Sales*, in "Ephemerides Mariologicae" 23 (1973) 249. The Marian image is currently in Neuilly-sur-Seine, in the church of the *Sœurs de Saint Thomas de Villeneuve*.

²³ Cf. G. PAPASOGLI, *Come piace a Dio. Francis de Sales and his 'great daughter'*, Città Nuova, Rome 1981, pp. 87-89.

²⁴ The recitation of the rosary was an exercise faithfully maintained and lived with great devotion by Francis de Sales (cf. LAJEUNIE, *Saint François de Sales*, I, p. 205).

²⁵ Cf. L. DE LA RIVIÈRE, *La vie de l'Illustrissime et Reverendissime François de Sales où ses principales Actions, Vertus et Miracles*, Pierre Rigaud, Lyon 1625, p. 30.

²⁶ Text in D. LLORENTE, *Cultura de ingenios y Teología catequística. Dos obras notables del P. Antonio Possevino*, Casa Martín, Valladolid 1941, pp. 79-159.

²⁷ Francis de Sales in his letter of 24 July 1607 to Jeanne Frances de Chantal writes about Lorenzo Scupoli's book: 'Est mon cher livre, et que je porte en ma poche il y a bien dix huit ans, et que je ne relis jamais sans proffit. Tenés ferme a ce que je vous ay dit' (Œuvres XIII, p. 304).

²⁸ L. SCUPOLI, *Il combattimento spirituale*, Pirotta, Milan 1839, p. 152 (fragment of chapter XLIX 'D alcune considerazioni perché con fede e confidenza si ricorra a Maria Vergine')

²⁹ Notice in the biography of his nephew C.A. DE SALES, *Histoire du bienheureux François de Sales évêque et prince de Genève*,

2.3. Marian devotion in early pastoral work in Chablais

With his return to Savoy in 1592, Francis de Sales went through the troubled period of embarking on the priestly ministry overcoming his parent's unwillingness. While still a deacon, he founded the confraternity of Our Lady Immaculate, and his parents became its first members.

Francis de Sales was ordained a priest on 18 December 1593, and after two years of an almost completely fruitless mission in the Calvinist-dominated Chablais, he made a pilgrimage to the small destroyed Marian church on Mount Voiron, which he later had rebuilt, as well as the Marian shrine at Hermasse. Francis de Sales placed his pastoral mission under the protection of the Mother of God.

In the events of the election and episcopal ordination of Francis de Sales there was again the testimony of his Marian devotion. François de Sales was sent by his bishop, Claude de Granier (1578-1602), to Rome in 1599, and submitted himself to examination by Pope Clement VIII in the consistory of 22 March for his eventual episcopal appointment. Francis spent the vigil in an insistent prayer to the Blessed Virgin for her Son to silence him if he was not worthy of the episcopate.³⁰ A few days later Francis had an extraordinary experience of mystical contours on the feast of the Annunciation when he received communion from the Pope, with an intense perception of the mystery of the Incarnation, experienced by Mary, which Francis felt was closely linked to the experiences of the Eucharistic and pastoral presence. Francis narrated the episode with signs of his personal emotion:

"Mon âme fut consolée interieurement et Dieu me fit la grâce de me donner de grandes lumières sur le mystère de l'Incarnation, me faisant connaître d'une manière inexplicable comme le Verbe prit un corps, par la puissance du Père et par l'opération du Saint-Esprit, dans le chaste sein de Marie, le voulant bien lui-même pour habiter *parmi nous*, dès qu'il serait homme comme nous. Cet Homme-Dieu m'a aussi donné une connaissance élevée et savoureuse sur la Transsubstantiation, sur son entrée en mon âme et sur le ministère des Pasteurs de l'Église".³¹

On his return journey home, Francis de Sales again passed by the Marian shrine of Loreto, and asked his fellow travellers for time to pray to renew his vows to the Virgin Mary.

2.4. Episcopal ministry and the founding initiative

In 1602, Francis de Sales chose the feast day of the Immaculate Conception to be ordained bishop, the celebration of which he had prepared with a homily delivered on the feast of the Assumption. About a month after his episcopal ordination, Francis de Sales manifested to Juvenal Ancina, bishop of Saluzzo, his intention to link his pastoral mission to Marian devotion: "I received episcopal consecration on the day of the Conception of the Virgin Mary, our Lady, into whose hands I have entrusted my destiny."³²

In his pastoral ministry as a bishop, Francis de Sales chose Marian themes for his preaching and promoted Marian associations. With such solicitude one understands the Marian title of the 'Visitation' that Francis de Sales adopted for his foundation of consecrated women,³³ who also took the feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple (21 November) as the proper day for the renewal of vows, with the intention of *accompanying their own offering with that of the young Mary*.³⁴

The quick biographical and Marian insights of the Bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales, recalled here invite us to read his thoughts on the Mother of the Lord with the clear conviction that this is not mere doctrine, but is reflection matured in spiritual journey and pastoral ministry. There is no trace of formalism, nor of superficiality.

instituteur de l'Ordre des Religieuses de la Visitation Sainte Marie, I, L. Vivés, Paris⁶ 1879, p. 57.

³⁰ "La veille il pria la Vierge instamment 'que s'il devait être un méchant évêque, elle lui obtînt de son Fils adorable la grâce de demeurer muet' (Année Sainte de la Visitation, 93)" (LAJEUNIE, *Saint François de Sales*, I, 374).

³¹ *Œuvres* XXII, 110. The edition notes that the 'little note' was probably written by Francis shortly after 25 March.

³² Letter of 10 January 1603, in *Œuvres*, XII, p. 160. For a study of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in Francis I refer to A. PEDRINI, *L'Immacolata: mistero e devozione secondo Francesco di Sales*, in "Miles Immacolatae" 28 (1992) 35-43.

³³ Francis de Sales' esteem for the episode of the Visitation is very clear in his exhortations on the occasion of the feast (cf. *Œuvres* IX, 157-169, X, 61-77).

³⁴ Francis de Sales' exhortation on the Feast of the Presentation in 1617, after having established the custom of this date for the renewal of vows (cf. *Œuvres* IX, 129).

3. The centrality of God's love, accepted and offered by the Virgin Mother of the Lord

For the feast of 8 December 1608, at that time still called the 'Conception of the Blessed Virgin', Francis de Sales declared his intention to offer a 'thought full of love' about the Mother of the Lord in his homily:

"Vous voyez que je vay faire un discours tout d'amour, mais que je ne puis faire si le Saint Esprit, amour celeste, ne m'inspire, et que Celle qui par luy a receu plus d'amour que nulle creature ne m'en impetre la grace".³⁵

Francis immediately observes that this programme for preaching refers to the action of the Spirit and the intercession of Mary herself, two cues that relate his preference to the theological foundation of charity, on the one hand, and to the singularity of the mother of Jesus, on the other. In fact, the pneumatological cue belongs to the theological sensibility of the bishop of Geneva, who tended to mention the Spirit's function of guidance and impetus more than that of relief and comfort.³⁶ The spiritual perspective of charity in the discourses on the mother of Jesus is confirmed by Bishop Francis de Sales with the clarity necessary to identify the identity and mission of the young woman of Nazareth.

The 'play of love' between God and man, the primordial object of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, centres the attention of Francis de Sales, especially in the time of his spiritual maturity. The motif of the love of God is at the core of the thought of the bishop of Geneva, who composes the *Treatise on the Love of God* with an accurate spiritual investigation of the subjective dynamism of the believer's cordial relationship with God, perceived as an incomparable term of the most authentic and profound impulse of the human soul. If von Balthasar has advanced the accusation of anthropocentrism against the spiritual doctrine of Francis de Sales,³⁷ it must nevertheless be warned that the bishop of Geneva's privileged gaze towards the inner processes of the spiritual man also tends towards God. In the guidance and teachings of Francis de Sales, the love of God is the decisive reality in the Christian life and understanding of the Christian message.³⁸

André Ravier rightly observes that 'there is but one soul, in the eyes of Francis de Sales, who fully corresponded to this divine game: it is the Virgin Mary; therefore she could only die of love for her Son, because she lived by the life of her Son. She alone is the perfect shepherdess of the Song of *Songs*'.³⁹ The Marian discourse in Francis de Sales shows the various Trinitarian, Christological, anthropological and soteriological meanings of God's love, as well as their synthesis and convergence in God. The *Treatise on the Love of God* begins with a Marian prayer, of particularly enlightening value and placed in a place of clear importance:

"Most Holy Mother of God, vessel of incomparable election, Queen of supreme love, you are the most lovable, the most loving and the most beloved of all creatures. The love of the heavenly Father has been fulfilled in you from eternity, destining your chaste heart to the perfection of holy love, so that you might one day love his only-begotten Son with a unique motherly love, as unique is the fatherly love with which he loves him from eternity. Jesus, my Saviour, to whom better could I dedicate the words of your love than to the most loving heart of the Beloved of your soul? ".⁴⁰

³⁵ *Œuvres* VIII, p. 28.

³⁶ On the pneumatology of Francis de Sales C.F. KELLEY, *The Spirit of Love, based on the Teaching of St. Francis of Sales*, Harper, New York 1951, and A. PEDRINI, *La devozione di S. Francesco di Sales allo Spirito Santo nella vita e nelle opere*, in "Salesianum" 39 (1977) 255-292, in particular 280-285, and the entire survey in A. PEDRINI, *L'azione dello Spirito nell'anima secondo il pensiero di Francesco di Sales*, Gregorian University, Rome 1978.

³⁷ Von Balthasar stigmatises "a spiritual theology constructed according to an entirely anthropocentric point of view" (H.U. von BALTHASAR, *Gloria, V: Nello spazio della metafisica. L'epoca moderna*, Jaca Book, Milan 1975, p. 110).

³⁸ For a systematic presentation J. LEIDENMÜHLER, *Die Stellung der theologischen Tugend der Liebe im übernatürlichen Organismus der Seele nach der Lehre des hl. Franz von Sales*, Franz-Sales-Verlag, Eichstätt² 1963.

³⁹ A. RAVIER, *Francis de Sales. Un dotto e un santo*, = Già e non ancora 151, Jaca Book, Milan 1986, pp. 188-189.

⁴⁰ *Complete Works* 4, 81.

Francis de Sales, who frames the beginning of the Marian invocation between two titles already relating to love, *Reyne de la souveraine dilection* and *Bienaymee de votre [Jesus mon Sauveur] ame*, finds a tripartite formula to identify the singular figure of Mary of Nazareth: the mother of Jesus is the most lovable, the most loving and the most beloved of all creatures, *la plus aymable, la plus amante, la plus aymee*.⁴¹ Francis immediately illustrates and justifies this expression of Marian devotion by recalling the love of the Father for her, the love of Mary for her Son, and the love of the Son and the faithful for her. With this Marian passage, the holy bishop of Geneva introduces the reader of *Theodotion* to the mystery of God's love from the hand of the Mother of the Lord.⁴² The perspective of love for Francis of Sales first and foremost has the value and theological foundation of Mary's relationship with the Father, the Son and the Spirit,⁴³ given that Francis receives from the patristic tradition, as found in the homily on the Hypapapant of Hesychius of Jerusalem (+451), affirming that in Mary there is "all the fullness of the Trinity, for the Spirit came, the Father overshadowed, the Son dwelt carried in her bosom".⁴⁴

It should be noted that the aforementioned Marian title of the bishop of Geneva - *la plus aymable, la plus amante, la plus aymee* - is a reflection of the title of the Son, as reflected in the text of *Theodotion*:

Mary is 'the Mother of beautiful Love, that is, the most lovable as the most loving, and the most loving as the most beloved Mother of that one Son, who is also the most lovable, the most loving and the most beloved Son of that one Mother'.⁴⁵

Christ and Mary are *the most loving and lovable hearts that ever existed*.⁴⁶ Mary's union with Christ is the cornerstone of Francis de Sales' Marian teaching. The holy doctor illustrates the idea of Mary's union with Christ by using the image of the bee and honey: "The Word created Mary and was born of her, as the bee makes honey and honey makes the bee, so that there was never a bee without honey or honey without a bee".⁴⁷ The key message is the close link between the bee/Mary and honey/Jesus, to tell of their inseparable presentation and inseparability in the memory of the faithful devotees of the Mother of God.

The programme of union and sharing with Christ that corresponds to God's love is realised to perfection according to Francis de Sales in the holy Mother of the Lord. In the Bishop of Geneva's reflection, the drama of Christ's passion and cross is the emblematic and sublime moment of the mother's union with her Son in love at the extreme trial of suffering and death:

"Consider how love transfers all the pains, torments, labours, sufferings, wounds, passion, cross and death itself of our Redeemer into the heart of his holy Mother. Alas! The same nails that crucified the body of that divine Son also crucified the heart of the Mother, the same thorns that pierced her head pierced the soul of that sweetest Mother, she experienced the same sufferings of her Son out of pity, the same pains

⁴¹ "Tressainte Mere de Dieu, vaysseau d'incomparable election, Reyne de la souveraine dilection, vous estes *la plus aymable, la plus amante et la plus aymee* de toutes les creatures" (Œuvres IV, p. 1). J. LANGELAAN, *Mary, the most beloved and loving Mother. The Mariology of St. Francis de Sales*, in *Marianum*, 38 (1976) 257-287. Love is the fundamental reality of Mary and the spiritual life: "Mary was the most loving Mother both in an affective and effective way. Salesian mysticism is built on these two forms of love and has as its primary exemplars Jesus himself and the Blessed Mother" (LANGELAAN, *Mary, the most beloved and loving Mother*, 267).

⁴² The fifth chapter of Book X of *Theodotion* is also illustrative in saying of Mary in her relationship with God: "She who loves most, the most lovable and the most beloved of all the friends of the divine Bridegroom, who not only loves God above all things and in all things, but in all things loves God alone, so that she does not love many things, but only one thing, namely God" (*Complete Works* 4, 541).

⁴³ Francis comments on *Lk* 1:41 in his homily for Pentecost on 6 June 1593: 'Et ce n'est pas merveilles, car elle est Espouse du Saint Esprit, Fille du Pere eternel, Mere du Filz eternel' (Œuvres VII, p. 29).

⁴⁴ HESYCHIUS OF JERUSALEM, *Homily II on the Mother of God*, in: PG 93, 1462.

⁴⁵ *Complete Works* 4, 248. Francis de Sales proposes other Christological parallels for the mother of Jesus: Mary is the only Mother of the *only Son* (cf. *Complete Works* 4, 433), or he calls her *Capitainesse* and Christ *Capitaine* (cf. Œuvres IX, 348). These parallels could lead to a form of soteriological equating, a risk that the bishop of Geneva avoids with his insistent affirmation of the proper and singular role of Christ, the incarnate Word.

⁴⁶ Expression by Francis de Sales in Exhortation XLIII on the second Sunday after Epiphany, 17 January 1621 (cf. Œuvres X, 12).

⁴⁷ *Œuvres* X, 415.

out of sympathy, the same passions out of compassion'.⁴⁸

In the parallelism suggested by Francis de Sales, one senses that the physical pain of the Son, his body and head, is matched by the spiritual pain of the mother, her heart and soul, without having to think of any form of mitigation of the suffering in sharing. Francis de Sales' later reference in this fifth book of *Theotimon* to the sword foretold by Simeon in the temple (cf. *Lk* 2:35) confirms his thought of the mother's firm union with her Son. For the Feast of the Assumption in 1602, close to his episcopal ordination, Francis de Sales preaches: 'Je puis bien dire avec verité, o sainte Vierge, que votre ame fut transperceé dell'amour, de la douleur et des paroles de votre Filz'.⁴⁹

Francis de Sales writes again in *The Theotimon* that to the question *What do you seek, O Mother of life, on this mountain of Calvary, the place of death?* Mary would have answered: "I seek my Son, who is the life of my life [...] I do not seek pleasant things, but him alone; my heart in love makes me seek to be united with that lovable Son, my beloved Beloved, wherever he may be".⁵⁰ The closeness to the Cross of the Son represents the purpose of God's love and its most authentic image. Mary's closeness to her Son's Cross expresses the invincible faithfulness of love in the decisive hour of filial obedience.

The love of the Mother in the death of the Son, leads Francis de Sales to also recognise the love of the Son in the death of the Mother. In the last two chapters of the seventh book of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales develops in the most articulate form the understanding of Mary's union of love with her Son in the hour of death.⁵¹ The bishop of Geneva's thoughts on Mary's death are summed up in the idea that 'it is impossible to think that she died any other kind of death than that of love; the noblest death of all, and, consequently, due to the noblest life that ever existed among creatures'. Francis de Sales illustrates Mary's union with Christ at the end of his earthly life with two New Testament expressions: one Lucan in relation to the first community (cf. *Acts* 4:32) and the other Pauline on the inner presence of Christ (cf. *Gal* 2:20), and proposes a reflection on the union of love starting from the virginal motherhood and Mary's presence at the foot of her Son's cross, to affirm the fulfilment of the unification with the paradoxical formula *O mort amoureusement vitale, o amour vitalement mortel!*⁵² The death-life oxymoron is resolved with the common relation to love, manifested in the gift of self. For reflection on divine and virginal motherhood, the text of the *Treatise on the Love of God* is worth quoting:

"I say of the one Mother and the one Son because all other sons of men divide the gratitude for their birth between their father and mother; but in his case, since his human birth depended only on his Mother, who alone collaborated in what was required by the virtue of the Holy Spirit for the conception of that divine Son, to her alone was due and rendered all the love that comes from birth, so that that Son and that Mother were united by a union still more excellent in that it has a different name in love above all other names. For of all seraphim, who has the right to say to the Saviour: You are my true Son, I love you as my true Son? And to whom, of all creatures, was it ever said by the Saviour: You are my true Mother and I love you as my true Mother, you are my true Mother all mine, and I am your true Son all yours? If, then, an affectionate servant had the courage to say, and said it with truth, that he had no other life than that of his Lord, with how much strength and ardour must that Mother have exclaimed: I have no other life than the life of my Son, my life is all in his and his all in mine; for it was no longer union, but unity of heart, soul, and life between that Mother and that Son."⁵³

Divine and virginal motherhood returns in terms of a unique and mutual cordiality between Mother and Son to constitute a radical, total and definitive bond.

Mary's union of love with her Son leads to union with the Father, a reflection of Francis de Sales in a

⁴⁸ *Complete Works* 4, 312. Later in the *Theotimon* in the seventh book, Francis de Sales writes: "The sweet Mother, whom he loved more than anyone else, was pierced more than anyone else by the sword of sorrow: the Son's sorrow became a sharp sword that pierced the Mother's heart, because that Mother's heart adhered to, was joined and united to her Son with such perfect union, that nothing could wound the one without vitally striking the other" (*Complete Works* 4, 434).

⁴⁹ *Œuvres* VII, 446.

⁵⁰ *Complete Works* 4, 402.

⁵¹ On the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary in the Bishop of Geneva H. BARRÉ, *Le témoignage de saint François de Sales sur l'Assomption corporelle de Marie*, in: "Marianum" 13 (1951) 292-305.

⁵² *Œuvres* V, 52.

⁵³ *Complete Works* 4, 433.

fine interpretation of the Lucan episode of the Presentation in the Temple (cf. *Lc* 2,22): "Maintenant retournons à Notre Dame qui apporta son Fils au Temple pour l'offrir au Pere eternel, et par le moyen de cette offrande s'unir avec luy. Bienheureuses sont les ames qui scavent bien cette pratique de s'offrir à Dieu, et toutes leurs actions, en l'union de ce Sauveur!".⁵⁴ The Bishop of Geneva here naturally realises the passage from the Marian experience of God's love to the experience of the Christian, a passage from the concrete Marian story in the Gospel account to the general criterion of action for every moment of life: the faithful will be able to offer their lives to the Father, in union with the Saviour.

Mary's excellence in the love of God finds expression in her words in the canticle of the *Magnificat*, which Francis de Sales often recalls: "Above all, we find the most holy Virgin who, with an incomparable song, praises and magnifies the Divinity in a higher, holier and sweeter way than all other creatures put together could ever manage".⁵⁵ Francis de Sales also warns in the pages of his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, a discourse addressed to *Philothea* the soul that is living in the world, that Mary with her canticle shows the most sincere humility: "The Blessed Virgin says that God works wonders in her, and she does so only to humble herself and give glory to God; my soul magnifies the Lord, she says, because he has done great things in me".⁵⁶ And this is followed by the exhortation to *Philothea*: "Let us avoid saying words of humility, or let us say them with deep conviction, deeply responding to the words. Let us not lower our eyes without humbling our hearts; let us not play at being last if we do not mean to be last".⁵⁷ Humility is a direct reflection of love and its most credible sign.

For Francis de Sales, the presence of Mary at the foot of the cross "is the best in beauty and excellence that can be found in heaven and on earth".⁵⁸ Francis de Sales' doctrine on the love of God has the dynamism of aesthetic experience, as Hans Urs von Balthasar noted when commenting on the beginning of the *Treatise on the Love of God*:⁵⁹ "Beauty, not glory, is the guiding concept of this doctrine of love, which is also often very severe and ascetic".⁶⁰ In fact, a singular fact recounted by Francis de Sales in the *Theotimo* speaks of the perception of the beauty of the Mother of the Lord: the bishop of Geneva recalls his enthusiasm for the singing of a nun in Milan, where he had gone in 1613 to commemorate Saint Charles Borromeo, canonised a short time before - on 1 November 1610 - and comments in confidence:

"Thus Theodotion, among all the choirs of men and all the choirs of angels, is heard the dominant voice of the most holy Virgin, who, raised above all things, gives more praise to God than all other creatures; for this reason the heavenly King invites her in a very special way to sing".⁶¹

The application to Mary of the text of the *Song of Songs* (cf. *Ct* 7:6-7) has the fundamental motif of beauty, affirmed for Mount Carmel, for the Church, for Mary and for love.⁶² The Genevan bishop's recourse to the *Song of Songs* stems from a predilection for the Old Testament biblical text that began in the early days of his theological training in Paris with the lectures of the Benedictine Gilbert Genebrard (1537-1597),⁶³ and the Marian interpretation of numerous passages of the *Song of Songs* has the function of evoking union with the Son,⁶⁴ 'Heavenly King' who invites the Virgin to sing.

⁵⁴ *Œuvres* IX, 22.

⁵⁵ *Complete Works* 4, 332.

⁵⁶ *Complete Works* 3, 134. Also *Complete Works* 3, 138.

⁵⁷ *Complete Works* 3, 134.

⁵⁸ *Œuvres* IX, 29.

⁵⁹ St Francis de Sales opens the first chapter of the *Theotimo* with a reminder of beauty: 'Union established in distinction makes order; order produces expediency and proportion, and expediency, when realised in things whole and complete makes beauty' (*Treatise*, c. 1, in: *Complete Works*, 4, 100).

⁶⁰ BALTHASAR, *Gloria*, V, 112.

⁶¹ *Complete Works* 4, 332-333.

⁶² Exhortation XIX for the Feast of the Visitation in 1618 (cf. *Œuvres* IX, 160). The references to the *Song of Songs* in the writings of Saint Francis de Sales were examined in the doctoral research of G. CANNONE, *La presenza del Cantico dei Cantici nella mariologia di san Francesco di Sales*, Marianum, Roma 1985, and also illustrated in the more recent presentation of M. WIRTH, *Saint François de Sales et l'amour. Le Cantique des Cantiques dans le Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, in: J. M. GUEULLETTE (dir.), *Saint François de Sales. Parole publique et parole privée. Parole d'un évêque et d'un maître spirituel*, Cerf, Paris 2022, pp 67-86.

⁶³ G. GENEBRARD, *Canticum Canticorum Salomonis versibus et commentariis illustratum*, Parisiis, Aegidium Gorbini 1585.

⁶⁴ Cf. WIRTH, *Saint François de Sales et l'amour*, p. 80.

Again von Balthasar observes about God's love: 'What [Francis de Sales] really means is the mystery of the introduction of the loving and "indifferent" human will into the divine will.⁶⁵ It is the teaching of gratuitousness in the authentic and most perfect reality of love. It is the love of God accepted and offered. And in comparison with God's goodness, even Mary's own love is always inferior, *Deus semper maior*.

"The praises which the Mother of honour and love together with all creatures render to the Divinity, though excellent and marvellous, are infinitely inferior to the infinite merit of God's goodness and have no proportion to it; wherefore, though they greatly satisfy the sacred benevolence which the loving heart has for its Beloved, yet they do not satisfy it."⁶⁶

This thought is joined by Francis de Sales' appreciation for humility, which constitutes an immediate juxtaposition when he speaks of charity. In his exhortation for the feast of the Visitation in 1621, the holy bishop speaks of the union between charity and humility as the third union realised by Christ in his Mother's womb, after the union between divinity and humanity, and between motherhood and virginity.⁶⁷ The steadfastness and cohesion of the first two unions indicate what a close bond Francis de Sales felt between love and humility. With humility we are led to enter the discourse of the holy doctor on the concrete anthropological configuration of God's love in the experience of the mother of Jesus.

4. The human quality of God's love

For the holy bishop of Geneva, Mary is the human and luminous ideal of love: 'O Vierge, agréable entre les filles de Hiérusalem, des delices de laquelle l'enfer ne peut être réjoui, belle comme la lune et élue comme le soleil'.⁶⁸ For Francis de Sales, the love of God of the Mother of the Lord has its own characteristic and eminent profile, since it is "maternal love, the most caring, the most active, the most ardent of all, an untiring and insatiable love".⁶⁹ Francis de Sales repeatedly prefers the notes of sweetness, gentleness, tenderness, perfection, peace and serenity to speak of the charity of the Mother of God.

The Marian theme in St Francis de Sales shows his profound conviction on the authentic spiritual experience to be seen in the line of simplicity and recollection on the essentials, as a human exercise of virtues and search for belonging to God. The teachings of the bishop of Geneva depart from the fixation on exceptional phenomena such as raptures, ecstasies, visions and messages.⁷⁰

On the foundation of the consideration of God's love rises the Christian humanism of St Francis de Sales. The bishop of Geneva was inclined to an open appreciation of the human person, with his anthropological vision resolutely oriented towards transcendence.⁷¹ The placement of St Francis de Sales in 'devout humanism', proposed by Henri Bremond, is well known.⁷² Ludwig Königbauer concludes his study on St Francis de Sales with the statement that 'he [Francis de Sales] brought the humanism that preceded him to the perfect "Devout Humanism"'.⁷³ But even if one did not want to accept the formula of 'devout humanism' to identify the spiritual thought of Francis de Sales,⁷⁴ one would still have to recognise his conviction about the involvement of the person in the response to God's love, without

⁶⁵ BALTHASAR, *Gloria*, V, 112.

⁶⁶ *Complete Works* 4, 333.

⁶⁷ The bishop of Geneva begins his reflection with the words: 'I want to pause on three unions that were wonderful that God worked in Mary' (*Euvres* X, 61).

⁶⁸ *Euvres* XXII, 18.

⁶⁹ *Complete Works* 4, 245.

⁷⁰ Cf. RAVIER, *Francis de Sales*, pp. 180-182.

⁷¹ Expression of E. VILANOVA, *Historia de la Teología cristiana*, II: *Prerreforma, Reformas, Contrarreforma*, Herder, Barcelona 1989, pp. 750-754.

⁷² H. BREMOND, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France 1580-1660*, I: *L'humanisme dévot*, Blond et Gay, Paris 1929.

⁷³ L. KÖNIGBAUER, *L'umanesimo nella vita e nella dottrina di S. Francesco di Sales*, in: J. PICCA - J. STRUŠ (cur.), *Saint Francis de Sales and the Salesians of Don Bosco*, LAS, Rome 1986, p. 62.

⁷⁴ For the debate on the historiographical category of "devout humanism" see E. GOICHOT, *L'"Humanisme dévot" de l'abbé Bremond. Réflexions sur un lieu commun*, in *Revue d'Ascétique et Mystique* 45 (1969) 121-160, and again E. GOICHOT, *Encore l'"Humanisme dévot". A propos d'un livre récent*, in *Revue d'Ascétique et Mystique* 48 (1972) 315-321.

confusing it with the revival of Stoicism in the late 16th and early 17th century.⁷⁵ Francis de Sales practises such reliance on human possibilities in the Christian spiritual journey, without ever affirming them as autonomy of the subject and even less as boasting of the inflated individual, but on the basis of a sincere and open appreciation of the person, created and loved by God.

Francis de Sales applies to Mary an anthropological scheme that distinguishes a higher reason guided by the spirit and a lower reason guided by the senses,⁷⁶ that in the case of the Mother of the Lord not only were they not in conflict but "in that heavenly Mother all the affections were so well disposed and ordered that the divine love exercised its empire and dominion in her in a very peaceful manner, without being disturbed by the diversity of wills or appetites, nor by the conflict of the senses, because the repugnances of the natural appetite and the movements of the senses never reached the point of sin, not even venial sin".⁷⁷ In relation to the Mother of Jesus, Francis de Sales speaks of a coherent, harmonious and pacified humanity, without inner conflict, with the stability of self-mastery in all circumstances.

In the face of such an exemplary human profile, Francis de Sales did not fail to note and appreciate Mary's freedom, as *adhesion de sa volonté avec celle de Dieu*.⁷⁸ In concrete terms, Francis de Sales proposes a biblical path in his exhortations, which takes up the series of Marian texts from the infancy gospels of Matthew and Luke, up to the scene in the fourth gospel of Mary's presence at the foot of the Cross, all recalled under the common note of freedom: *Non par force mais de son plein gré*.⁷⁹ Full obedience, unreserved offering, dedication to God and neighbour are always affirmed as the result of a free and conscious decision of the Mother of the Lord. Francis de Sales observes that Mary's virginity and chastity, unlike that of the angels, are also the object of a choice: "The angels do not deserve praise because they are virgins and chaste, since they cannot be otherwise; whereas our holy Lady possesses a virginity worthy of being exalted, because she was chosen, elected and consecrated by vow; and although she was married to a man, it was not with prejudice to her virginity, because her husband was also a virgin and, like her, had vowed to be so forever".⁸⁰ Mary's free consent in the fulfilment of her maternal mission is a fundamental datum of the Marian teaching of the Bishop of Geneva, who constantly reminds the devout Christian of his responsibility.

Mary is the human and female figure that the bishop of Geneva proposes to the group of nuns of the Visitation with the allusion also to her feelings:

"Our Lady receives the news that she will conceive a Son by the Holy Spirit, and he will be our Lord and Saviour: what joy, what contentment for her in that holy hour of the Incarnation of the eternal Word! Shortly afterwards, St Joseph realises that she is pregnant, knowing full well that it is not by her own hand, oh God, what torment! In what bitterness he finds himself! And Our Lady, what sorrow and affliction does she not feel in her soul, seeing her dear husband on the point of leaving her, while her humility does not allow her to show even St Joseph the honour and grace with which God has filled her! Shortly after this storm, the Angel having manifested to Joseph the secret of that mystery, what consolation!"⁸¹

Francis de Sales continues his reflection by suggesting Mary's jubilation at the adoration of the Magi and her sorrow at Herod's persecution of the child. Similarly, the bishop of Geneva alludes to Mary's discerning, solicitous and respectful spirit in his commentary on the wedding episode at Cana of Galilee, and considers her words to her Son *They have no more wine* (Jn 2:3b):

"Undoubtedly a very excellent prayer, in which Our Lady speaks to Our Lord with the greatest respect

⁷⁵ Cf. L. ZANTA, *La renaissance du stoïcisme au XVI^e siècle*, = Bibliothèque littéraire de la Renaissance 5, Slatkine Reprints, Genève 1975.

⁷⁶ On the anthropological structure in Francis de Sales with his division of the soul into two levels, see L. MEZZADRI, *L'apogeo del rinnovamento della Chiesa*, in: C. BROVETTO - L. MEZZADRI - F. FERRARIO - P. RICCA, *Storia della spiritualità, V: La spiritualità cristiana nell'età moderna*, Borla, Roma 1987, pp. 145-146.

⁷⁷ *Complete Works* 4, 436-437.

⁷⁸ *Œuvres* IX, 232, on the Feast of the Presentation of Mary (21 November 1619).

⁷⁹ *Œuvres* IX, 352, fragment of the homily on the occasion of Sr. Bernarde-Marguerite Valery's reception and the profession of Sr. Marie-Etiennette Devillers (10 September 1620).

⁸⁰ *Œuvres* X, 51, on the Feast of the Annunciation (25 March 1621).

⁸¹ *Complete Works* 5, 478. The text is from the sermon of 4 January 1618 in the chapel of the Visitation in Annecy.

and kindness imaginable; in fact, she does not address her Son with confidence, nor with words of presumption, as many indiscreet and thoughtless people do, but with a profound humility, she presents Him with the need of those people, with the certainty that He will provide.⁸²

The bishop of Geneva engages here in a psychological and moral reading, not uncommon in his reflections, carried out, on the one hand, with a clear sense of the human depth of the spiritual experience of the mother of the Lord and then, on the other hand, with an immediate parenetic purpose for his readers and listeners, with a view to personalisation in new experiences.

In this regard, it is worth remembering that Francis de Sales discovers and is enthusiastic about human diversity: 'Just as we see that no two men are ever found perfectly equal as regards gifts of nature, so too no two are ever found perfectly equal as regards supernatural gifts'.⁸³ The attention to the singularity of the Mother of the Lord belongs in Francis de Sales to the appreciation of God's personal gift, which creates a rich human landscape worthy of observation.

With great naturalness, Francis de Sales evokes Mary's maternal human story: 'Sweet Jesus, what could your most holy Mother have dreamt of while she slept and her heart was awake? Did she not dream of seeing you still gathered in her womb, as you had been for nine months? Or clasped to her breasts as you gently pressed her virginal bosom?' concluding "Theodotion, who could ever imagine the immensity of such delights? How many conversations with the beloved Son, how many sweetnesses on every side!".⁸⁴ The moments of the mother-child relationship become the occasion to suggest first the spiritual experience of Mary, and then the devout admiration of the Christian. Francis de Sales thus evokes the filial human experience to stimulate meditation on the Marian texts of the gospels. Recalling the beloved disciple entrusted to the *sweet bosom of the Mother of the Saviour*, the Bishop of Geneva comments: 'Nothing is more desirable for the child than the bosom of his father and the bosom of his mother, whether he wakes or sleeps.'⁸⁵

Francis de Sales urges his readers' thoughts to similarly depict the cordial and familiar moments of Mary and Joseph with their son: "When the Saviour was still a child, the great Saint Joseph, his putative father, and the glorious Virgin, his mother, had borne him many times, especially in the passage from Judea into Egypt and from Egypt into Judea".⁸⁶ The initial dedicatory prayer of *Theodotion* goes on to mention St Joseph, also mentioning Mary's conjugal love, lived virginally. To Mary and Joseph, again singled out for the extraordinariness of their love, Francis de Sales offers his own long-planned work. The author of the *Theotimo* concludes the dedicatory prayer with the supplication of the gift of the Spirit, so that the author and readers of the *treatise* may come to the best experience of God's love.

Mary's divine maternity is in the eyes of Francis de Sales the divine gesture of human exaltation, attributing to the Mother of Jesus also a representative role for the whole of humanity, as he teaches in *Theotimo*: God 'elected the most holy Virgin Our Lady, through whom the Saviour of our souls would not only be a man, but a son of the human race'.⁸⁷ Humanity is called to recognise itself as involved in the story of Mary of Nazareth.

A moment not to be overlooked is the regard for the corporality of the virgin mother of Jesus. According to Francis de Sales, Mary is presented as a model of care, gratitude and wonder for the body:

"As for the Blessed Virgin, O God, with what devotion she must have loved her virginal body! Not only because it was a sweet, humble, pure body, obedient to holy love and totally impregnated with a thousand sacred fragrances, but also because it was the living source of that of the Saviour and belonged to him very closely, with a bond that has no comparison. That is why, when he granted his angelic body to the repose of sleep, he said: Come, rest, O tabernacle of the Covenant, Ark of holiness, throne of Divinity, refresh yourself a little from your weariness and recover your might with this sweet tranquillity."⁸⁸

⁸² *Œuvres* X, 9, in the homily of 17 January 1621, the second Sunday after Epiphany.

⁸³ *Complete Works* 4, 172.

⁸⁴ *Complete Works* 4, 247.

⁸⁵ *Complete Works* 4, 367.

⁸⁶ *Complete Works* 4, 431-432.

⁸⁷ *Complete Works* 4, 164.

⁸⁸ *Complete Works* 4, 246.

This Marian reference confirms the statement above: "The Christian must love his own body as a living image of that of the incarnate Saviour".⁸⁹ Francis de Sales, however, presents the assumption of Mary as an *abandonment* of the body,⁹⁰ a sign of a maturing stage in the development of the dogma of the bodily assumption, and a remnant of the dualist view of the person and the negative consideration of matter. However, in other places he speaks of the involvement of the body in the glorification of the Mother of the Lord.

Francis de Sales is a promoter of a harmonious and integral vision of the human, far removed from oppositions. For the bishop of Geneva, the affirmation of Mary's extraordinary gifts and blessings are not an impediment to recognising without a shadow of a doubt his full human condition, loved and redeemed, just as looking at the thoughts, emotions and feelings of the Mother of Christ does not obscure the conviction of God's action in his life.

5. Mary, the ideal of Christian devotion

Salesian devotion consists in the exercise of God's love, to live fully in union with Him. Mary, mother of Jesus, superior even to the angels,⁹¹ is for Francis de Sales the creature that best realises the ideal of devotion.

The spiritual life, the object of Francis de Sales' primary and expert attention, is assimilated neither to a higher knowledge nor to a more intense emotion, but is about union with the divine will,⁹² which the bishop of Geneva illustrates as conformity, possession or adherence to God's perfections.⁹³ The devotion where Francis de Sales sets his sights, combines the ordinariness in its proposition for the daily life of the Christian, and the extraordinariness of the level of holiness to be pursued.⁹⁴ With this paradoxical juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary, Salesian devotion likewise moves on the double track of the universality of the proposal and attention to concrete experience, dimensions also well recognisable in the pastoral ministry of the bishop of Geneva, committed to reaching the greatest number of faithful on the one hand, without neglecting individual guidance and direct and personal relationship on the other. Julien-Eymard d'Angers sums it up lucidly:

"Pasteur d'âmes avant tout, il entend sans doute instruire mais il veut principalement entraîner dans un vaste élan vers les cimes de la charité".⁹⁵

Through his preaching and writings, Francis de Sales seeks the spiritual progress of his faithful, lay and consecrated. It would be a grave mistake to confuse Salesian 'gentleness' with a teaching that is surrendered and soft, renunciatory and lacking in discipline; on the contrary, the doctrine of the bishop of Geneva is marked by the constant spiritual demand that aims at the fulfilment of charity. Julien-Eymard d'Angers observed this dynamic characteristic of Francis de Sales' spiritual doctrine.

Chapter Six *On Certain Special Favours Bestowed by Divine Providence for the Redemption of Man* in the second book of *Theodotion* contains Francis de Sales' reflection on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception,

⁸⁹ *Complete Works* 4, 246.

⁹⁰ Cf. *Complete Works* 4, 438.

⁹¹ Francis de Sales says of Gabriel the angel being "very inferior to Our Lady" (*Complete Works* 5, 483).

⁹² André Ravier explains that for Francis de Sales, 'to love God is to want to belong to God with a firm "résolution"; it is an essential and existential link to God, as the river belongs to the source, as the branch belongs to the tree' (A. RAVIER, *Francis de Sales. What he believed in*, = The Witnesses, Morcelliana, Brescia 2008, 22).

⁹³ "Complacency makes us possessors of God, drawing his perfections into us, and it also makes us possess God, because it unites us and makes us adhere to his perfections" (*Complete Works* 4, 309).

⁹⁴ SEE MEZZADRI's presentation of the spiritual doctrine of Francis de Sales, *L'apogeo del rinnovamento della Chiesa*, pp. 134-148.

⁹⁵ J.-E. D'ANGERS, *L'Humanisme chrétien au XVII^e siècle: st. François de Sales et Yves de Paris*, = Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Idées 31, Martinus Nijhoff, La Haye 1970, p. 27 (also the entire chapter *Les degrés de perfection d'après saint François de Sales*, 27-47).

which he fully embraces⁹⁶ and proposes to the devotion of the faithful.⁹⁷ Francis de Sales could learn from the Conventual Franciscan Filippo Gesualdi the theological explanation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which he taught in Padua in the 'Scuola Compuntiva', an association of prayer and penance founded by the Franciscan, where the young Francis also enrolled. The Bishop of Geneva understands Mary's gift of exemption from original sin in terms of God's closeness and experience of cordiality, which he explains with good theological commitment:

"That is why that holy Mother, all of her Son, was redeemed by him not only from damnation, but also from all danger of damnation, assuring her of grace and the perfection of grace, so that she might advance like a marvellous dawn that begins with a faint glow, and grows slowly in brightness until the fullness of day. Marvellous Redemption, the Redeemer's masterpiece and the first of all redemptions, through which the Son, with a truly filial heart, foreboding His own Mother with blessings of sweetness, preserves her not only from sin, as the Angels do, but also from every danger of sin and from all distractions and delays in the exercise of holy love. Therefore he proclaims that among all the reasonable creatures he has chosen, his Mother is his only dove, and his most perfect, his dearest Beloved, above all comparison and comparison'.⁹⁸

Francis de Sales' discourse aims to recognise the excellence of Mary's cordial closeness to God, with three considerations linked to her Immaculate Conception: the exclusion of any impediment to devotion as an *exercise of holy love*, the reality of the salvific intervention operated by the Son's love, and the progressiveness of divine experience, because the original condition of holiness does not exclude its expansion. The Salesian description of the spiritual life of the Mother of the Lord includes first of all the negation of any shadow of neglect, distraction or slowness, and then the affirmation of the fullness of dedication, and finally the recognition of constant progress.

In the text quoted, the bishop of Geneva suggests a spiritual comparison at the end, which he develops later with some observations worthy of special attention. Chapter six of *Theotimo* opened with an expression of praise for the variety of gifts of grace, and thus of differentiated personal spiritual paths. Francis de Sales speaks of other *exceptional creatures* called from their mother's womb, specifically John the Baptist and Jeremiah, who must nevertheless be said to be 'subject to tardiness and venial sins, which are contrary to the perfection of love, but not to love itself', unlike Mary 'Queen not only crowned with love, but of the perfection of love'.⁹⁹ The difference is even greater,' observes Francis de Sales, 'with other creatures who lose love for a *time* and always have imperfections'.¹⁰⁰ The Bishop of Geneva recalls that Mary, on the other hand, is perfect in every respect, and attributes to her, as an effect of the exemption from original sin, the gift of wisdom.¹⁰¹

In other places, however, Francis de Sales rejects comparisons with the Mother of God: 'When I make comparisons, I absolutely do not mean to speak in any way of the Blessed Virgin Mother, Our Lady. O God, I really do not, because she is the daughter of an incomparable love'.¹⁰² Beyond the apparent contradiction, the underlying idea is the same: the affirmation of an exceptional experience of charity.

One must recall here a particular moment of the holy Doctor's Mariological reflection, the one related to the Gospel account of the "Visitation" (*Lk* 1:39-45). Bishop Francis de Sales' predilection for the Lucan moment of the Visitation stems from his perception of the spiritual intensity of the Marian experience. With the mother of Chantal, the holy bishop confides and writes: 'My daughter, I am all taken up with the thought of this Visitation in which our Saviour, like a new wine, makes this loving affection in the womb of his holy Mother bubble up from all sides'.¹⁰³ Francis de Sales sensed in the mother of

⁹⁶ The thought and preaching of Francis de Sales on the Immaculate Conception are set out in A. PEDRINI, *L'Immacolata: mistero e devozione secondo Francesco di Sales*, in: "Miles Immacolatae" 28 (1992) 35-43.

⁹⁷ He writes to his mother Chantal that the feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin is "a feast of very special devotion for those who have devoted themselves and consecrated themselves to her service" (*All Letters* I, 1301).

⁹⁸ *Complete Works* 4, 170.

⁹⁹ *Complete Works* 4, 170.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *Complete Works* 4, 171.

¹⁰¹ In Exhortation XXVI for the Feast of the Presentation of Mary in 1619 (cf. *Œuvres* IX, 233-234).

¹⁰² *Complete Works* 4, 244. With some humour, the Bishop of Geneva writes that Mary 'is a dove so absolutely unique in love, that all others, compared with her, must be called crows rather than doves' (*Complete Works* 4, 542).

¹⁰³ *All Letters* II, 67.

Jesus the readiness for service, the purpose of witness, the expression of faith and the desire for blessing for the house of Zacharias.¹⁰⁴ Addressing the sisters of the Visitation directly, the holy Doctor exhorted:

"Do you not think, my dearest Sisters, that what moved our glorious Lady most to make that visit was her ardent charity and a profound humility that made her overcome the mountains of Judea with agility and readiness? Certainly, my dear Sisters, it was those two virtues that moved her and made her leave her little Nazareth, for charity is not idle, it boils in hearts where it reigns and dwells, and the most holy Virgin was filled with it, for she had Love par excellence in her bowels. She lived in continual acts of love, not only towards God to whom she was united by the most perfect devotion imaginable, but she also possessed to a very perfect degree the love of neighbour, which made her ardently desire the salvation of all and the sanctification of souls".¹⁰⁵

The Lucan scene of the Visitation encompasses, for Francis de Sales, the meaning of the relationship between the love of God and the love of neighbour, without confusing or separating them, with the one foundation for both being the presence of God. The Marian episode in the spiritual eyes of the holy bishop combines the diversity of manifestations, uniting the praise of God with the pursuit of good for one's neighbour. The intertwining of the love of God and neighbour is a clear conviction in the bishop of Geneva, which he expounds in an evocative Marian passage:

"The most holy Virgin, our glorious Lady, practised both these loves in her acceptance of her Son: she loved him and received him as her God; and she loved him and served him as her neighbour".¹⁰⁶

Jesus, neighbour to be cared for and God to be welcomed, brother and Lord was the Son of Mary in the reflection of Francis de Sales. Thus Mary's maternal love for her Son and for the disciple, felt in the Johannine scene of Mary's presence at the foot of the Cross, becomes in the preaching of the bishop of Geneva an exhortation to mutual love between devotees:

Mary "did not refuse, knowing well that in the person of St John she accepted all the children of the cross as her own, and would be their dear Mother. But in so doing, our divine Master taught us that, if we wish to share in his will and in the merits of his passion and death, it is necessary that we all love one another with that tender and strongly cordial love of the son towards the mother and of the mother towards the son, which in some way is greater than that of the father".¹⁰⁷

Francis de Sales derives the commandment of love from Jesus' words to his Mother and disciple at the final hour of his surrender to the Father.

On the devout contemplation of God's love, which Francis de Sales perceives as the recollection of the creature brought about by the Spirit, the Bishop of Geneva proposes the image of divine motherhood:

"Imagine yourself, the most holy Virgin Our Lady, when she had conceived the Son of God, her only love. The soul of that most holy Mother gathered, without doubt, totally, around that most beloved Son, and since that divine Friend was in her holy bowels, all the faculties of her soul withdrew into herself, like holy bees into the hive where their honey was; and in measure that the divine greatness was, as it were, contracted and clasped in her virginal womb, her soul magnified itself and proclaimed the praises of that infinite goodness, and her spirit exulted with joy in her womb (as St. John n that of his mother) around her God whom she felt. She did not project her thoughts nor her affections outside herself, for her treasure, her loves and her delights were to be found in her holy bowels".¹⁰⁸

Mary's maternal experience is related to the life of the Christian, and in particular to the moment of Eucharistic communion, and so Francis de Sales teaches that Mary's maternal joy¹⁰⁹ "can be experienced,

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Œuvres* IX, 159. Francis de Sales says again: 'Voilà les raysons, et plusieurs autres que je pourrois rapporter; mais je n'aurois jamais fait'. These thoughts are also set out in Exhortation XLVII for the Feast of the Visitation in 1621 (*Œuvres* X, 61-77).

¹⁰⁵ *Œuvres* IX, 159.

¹⁰⁶ *Œuvres* IX, 188.

¹⁰⁷ *Œuvres* IX, 276.

¹⁰⁸ *Complete Works* 4, 362.

¹⁰⁹ Of Mary's maternal joy, Francis de Sales writes later in the nonchapter of the sixth book of *Theotime*: "The Mother of God, our Lady and Mistress, when she was pregnant, did not see her own divine Son, but feeling him in her sacred bowels, true

by imitation, by those who, having taken communion, feel with the certainty of faith what neither flesh nor blood, but the heavenly Father has revealed to them, namely that their Saviour is present with a real presence in their body and soul, through that adorable Sacrament".¹¹⁰ Marian piety and Eucharistic piety are thus closely linked, in the similarity of love, presence and interiority of the two mysteries.

In the spiritual experience befitting the love of God, the creature, however, cannot claim to add any good to God. Francis de Sales explains how to live benevolence towards God: "It is a kind of benevolence towards God even when, noting that we cannot make him grow in himself, we desire to make him grow in us, that is, to make the complacency we have in his goodness ever greater."¹¹¹ This complaisance,' Francis de Sales further clarifies, 'is not sought for the pleasure the Christian feels, but because it strengthens his union with God. The Bishop of Geneva finds it appropriate at this point to recall Mary's canticle in Luke's gospel (*Lk* 1:46-55):

"In order to unite ourselves more closely with it [the good that resides in God] we would like to experience infinitely greater complacency, in imitation of the most holy Queen and Mother of love, whose holy soul magnified and exalted God unceasingly; and so that it might be known that this increase came about because of the complacency she had in the divine Goodness, she sang that her spirit exulted with joy in God her Saviour."¹¹²

Marian exultation has the sense of an authentic experience of God, free from all traces of self-seeking, and oriented to the glory and praise of God.

The Lucan episode of the parents searching for Jesus who had remained in the Temple (*Lk* 2:41-50) is quoted and interpreted by Francis de Sales in the sense of the exclusivity in the search for God to be practised in devotion: "The Mother of beautiful devotion and the Bridegroom of most holy love cannot stop among relatives and friends; but always in sorrow they go in search of the one object of their complacency. The desire to increase holy complacency takes away every other pleasure, in order to practise more intensely that to which divine benevolence invites him".¹¹³ It is certainly a singular reading of the family moment in the infancy gospel, but one of great spiritual efficacy, which always warns of the exemplary behaviour of the parents, signalled for their love not only by their titles - *Mere de belle dilection* for Mary and *Espoux de tressaint amour* for Joseph - but above all by their anguished search - *en douleur* - for their Son.

The holy doctor observes Mary's virtuous practice in the face of life's adversities: "The glorious Virgin, having partaken of all the miseries of the human race, except those which render immediately to sin, employed them very usefully for the exercise and growth of the holy virtues of fortitude, temperance, justice and prudence, poverty, humility, suffering and compassion: whereby they constituted no obstacle, but rather many occasions for heavenly love to fortify itself by continual exercise and progress."¹¹⁴ The Marian reference serves here for Francis de Sales to justify the existence of evil and suggest a kind of life that learns to profit from even negative and even dramatic situations. Every moment of life is suitable for growing in love.

6. Spiritual growth

Francis de Sales' discourses on prayer, will, sacrifice and union with God possess a tension, which we might call eschatological because of the topicality of the experience of the Spirit, the force of attraction towards the fullness of love and the orientation in the direction of the encounter with God.¹¹⁵ Devotion

God, what joy she felt!" (*Complete Works* 4, 368).

¹¹⁰ *Complete Works* 4, 362.

¹¹¹ *Complete Works* 4, 320.

¹¹² *Complete Works* 4, 320.

¹¹³ *Complete Works* 4, 322.

¹¹⁴ *Complete Works* 4, 437.

¹¹⁵ To indicate the theological dynamism of love, Francis de Sales proposes the example of the magnet in the *Theotimo* and concludes: 'Our heart is made for God, who continually entices it and does not cease to cast upon it the attractions of his heavenly love' (*Complete Works* 4, 437).

in St Francis de Sales 'expresses the progress of charity'.¹¹⁶ For the Bishop of Geneva, delay in love is inconceivable, because love activates its own dynamism, the key to authenticity. The Marian theme must also be considered in this light of the Bishop of Geneva's spiritual doctrine.

With a hyperbolic expression, Francis de Sales states in *The Theotimo* that in Mary's experience of love there was neither pause, nor sleep, nor rest.¹¹⁷ The bishop of Geneva applies to Mary the verse from Psalm 121 "She will not fall asleep, she will not get sleepy" (Ps 121:4) and proposes a Mariological interpretation of Lk 1:39: Mary "was not asleep, for at the call of the divine Word she rose promptly and departed. It was not necessary for her to make long examinations, for she had the grace of discernment. She went where God led her, and the King desired her beauty and chose her".¹¹⁸ The idea of the exclusion of any pause, distraction or disorientation in the spiritual journey of the Mother of the Lord is always present.

The Bishop of Geneva completes his affirmation of progressiveness without hesitation with the rejection of any idea of discouragement or surrender on the part of Mary at the moment of her Son's passion and death, and observes: 'Let us remember that Our Lady was standing beneath the cross. Those who think that she was so distraught with grief that she fainted are greatly mistaken; undoubtedly, this is not true; on the contrary, she remained steadfast and constant, even though her suffering was the greatest that any woman ever felt at the death of her son'.¹¹⁹ Not retrogression but a strengthening of love and union with the Son is accomplished at the moment of passion and death. Francis, who knew the popular exaggerations of the Mother's pain to introduce the insinuations of despair into Mary's soul, nevertheless maintains the datum of maternal suffering and denies its extension in the psychic terms of bewilderment and confusion.

In a metaphorical sense, the Bishop of Geneva preaches on the feast of the Assumption: *La Bienheureuse Vierge monte toujours*.¹²⁰ Mary is the excellent figure of spiritual growth:

"If it is true that the fire of asbestos cannot be extinguished, neither can it be increased; the sacred flames of the Virgin, on the other hand, since they can neither die, nor diminish, nor remain the same, have never ceased to grow immeasurably up to heaven, the place of their origin".¹²¹

With another image of nature, the rising of the day, Francis de Sales again illustrates Mary's spiritual progress:

"Just as we see the dawn of the day grow not in jerks or jolts, but with an accentuation of brightness and a gradual, almost imperceptible growth, so that we actually see it grow in splendour, but in such an equal manner that no interruption, separation or discontinuity can be discerned, so divine love grew at every moment in the virginal heart of our Lady, but with a gentle, serene and continuous increase, without agitation, nor shaking, nor any violence whatsoever.¹²²

Later, Francis de Sales proposes with good effectiveness the image of the course of rivers to understand the progress in the love of God by the virgin mother of the Lord:

"As one sees great rivers create whirlpools and sprays with great noise in steep places, where the rocks form shoals and rocks that hinder and impede the natural flow of the waters, while on the plain they flow and drain away gently, without effort; so divine love, finding in human souls many obstacles and resistances, and all of them in truth present different kinds, impels the will with different agitations and various efforts, in order to create a space for itself or at least to overcome those obstacles. But in the holy Virgin everything favoured and went along with the course of heavenly love: her progress and growth were immensely greater

¹¹⁶ J. STRUŠ, *La spiritualità di san Francesco di Sales*, in: J. PICCA - J. STRUŠ (cur.), *Saint Francis de Sales and the Salesians of Don Bosco*, LAS, Rome 1986, 65.

¹¹⁷ *Complete Works* 4, 245.

¹¹⁸ *Œuvres* IX, 391.

¹¹⁹ *Œuvres* IX, 276.

¹²⁰ *Œuvres* VIII, 105.

¹²¹ *Complete Works* 4, 248.

¹²² *Complete Works* 4, 435.

than in all other creatures; yet progress infinitely sweet, peaceful and tranquil.¹²³

With these speeches, Francis de Sales conveys his vision of the best and most desirable spiritual growth: continuous, determined, loving, gentle, serene, ardent and unstoppable, because that is what love is all about.

Spiritual progress requires the creature's free determination, as Francis de Sales observes in Mary: "If, therefore, there was any change in the most holy Virgin, it was only to strengthen that union and to grow, as far as possible, in every kind of virtue in order to stabilise the decision she had made to belong completely to God".¹²⁴ In the Mother of God, nothing hindered the growth of the love of God, neither sin, nor the possession of riches, nor pleasures, nor pride, nor self-love, for 'none of these obstacles found room in the heart of the glorious Virgin'.¹²⁵ The Bishop of Geneva always proposes the spiritual image of progress in holiness for Mary that

"every day she acquired an increase of virtue and perfection by taking them from her beloved Son, who could not grow in anything, because from the instant of his conception, he was as he always was and will be for eternity. All this made the holy Family, in which he was, always grow and progress in perfection, Our Lady drawing her own perfection from divine Goodness, and St Joseph receiving it, as we have already said, through Our Lady".¹²⁶

The last passage indicates the communicative aspect of Mary's spiritual journey in favour of St Joseph, with two ideas of clear relevance in the practice of spiritual accompaniment: on the one hand the participation in the progress of love, and on the other hand the intercessory role of the Mother of the Lord.

The bishop of Geneva teaches how spiritual dynamism ultimately corresponds to the action of the Spirit.¹²⁷ We have already recorded a typically pneumatological terminology in Francis de Sales whenever he speaks of the growth in Mary's spiritual life: fire, light, strength, heart, gentleness, wisdom, holiness. The Mother of the Lord is called by the bishop of Geneva *la fidelle Espouse du Saint Esprit*,¹²⁸ *e ruche mystique dans laquelle le Saint Esprit a pectri ce gasteau de miel avec le plus pur sang*.¹²⁹ Francis de Sales' interpretation of the Lucan account of the Visitation (cf. *Lk* 1:39-45) accepts the double Mariological and pneumatological component, recognising in the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth a singular experience of the Holy Spirit, of emblematic value for understanding the progress of love.¹³⁰ The *Magnificat* canticle also has for Francis de Sales the inspiration of the Spirit in the expression of humility, in the testimony of God's mercy and in the commitment to charity.¹³¹

In the *Prayer of Dedication* that opens the *Theotimo*, Francis de Sales invokes the intercession of the Mother of God to receive the gift of the Spirit and experience the spiritual revitalisation proper to the disciple of Christ:

"I beseech you [Mary] to enliven my soul, and that of all who read this writing, with your most powerful intercession with the Holy Spirit so that, from now on, we may sacrifice all our affections in holocaust to his divine Goodness, to live, die, and return to live forever in the flames of that heavenly fire that Our Lord your Son so desired to kindle in our hearts."¹³²

The Bishop of Geneva urges in his preaching "qui veut avoir le Saint Esprit, qu'il se joigne avec

¹²³ *Complete Works* 4, 248.

¹²⁴ *Œuvres* IX, 233.

¹²⁵ *Complete Works* 4, 438.

¹²⁶ *Complete Works* 5, 521.

¹²⁷ On the pneumatology of Francis de Sales, see the study by Arnaldo Pedrini who recalls firstly the life experience and secondly the doctrine taught by the bishop of Geneva: A. PEDRINI, *La devozione di S. Francesco di Sales allo Spirito Santo nella vita e nelle opere*, in "Salesianum" 39 (1977) 255-292.

¹²⁸ *Œuvres* IX, 160.

¹²⁹ *Œuvres* X, 415.

¹³⁰ Cf. *Œuvres* IX, 157-169; *Œuvres* X, 61-77.

¹³¹ *Œuvres* IX, 431.

¹³² *Complete Works* 4, 82.

Marie".¹³³ Mary intercedes so that the devout Christian also receives the gift of the Holy Spirit.¹³⁴ With these elements, it is not surprising that Francis de Sales proposes the figure of Mary to the sisters of the Visitation to invigorate their souls:

"When we consider the course of Our Lady's most holy life, I assure you that our hearts are filled with sweetness and gentleness; and if we look at the few examples she has left us, we are enraptured with admiration. If we wish to have sweetness in our behaviour and also to bring some of it into the hearts of our neighbour, we must go and get it in meditation on the life of our divine Lady. My dear Daughters, you must have her always before your eyes, to conform your life to hers and to adapt all your actions and affections to hers; for you are her Daughters, and you must follow and imitate her and use her examples as a mirror in which to look at yourselves without ceasing. Now, although the sweetness that you receive from the sight and consideration of Our Lady's life falls into a vase of clay, it is not for this reason that it will not be of a wonderful sweetness, for the balm put into an earthenware vase is just as sweet as that put into a crystal cruet.¹³⁵

In his letter to the Baroness of Chantal for the feast of the Nativity of Mary, Francis de Sales proposes the path of gentleness of heart, poverty of spirit and simplicity of life, summarised in the formula *Let us prepare a place for this holy Child*, and explains that the virgin mother of Jesus 'loves nothing but low places for humility, unadorned places for simplicity and vast places for charity; she willingly stays near the crib and at the foot of the Cross, and she does not give herself the thought of having to go to Egypt, far from all the comforts, as long as she has her dear Child with her'.¹³⁶

Mary's spiritual life with its characteristic progression possesses in the conception of Francis de Sales the note that we can rightly say is eschatological. In order to ascertain and to bear witness to this eschatological component, it is useful to recall the depiction of Mary's humility offered by the bishop of Geneva:

"Certainly, the humility of the Blessed Virgin in this life was very great, because she had a greater knowledge of God than any other. When she says that he 'looked upon the lowliness of his handmaid', it shows that she knew and confessed the infinite distance that exists between God and her. The humility with which she uttered the words 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord' was so extraordinary that it amazed the angels themselves. But the humility Our Lady has now in heaven is a thousand times greater than it was down here, because she has a knowledge of God that is a thousand times deeper than she had then. The knowledge of the divine Majesty, of His greatness and perfections, is the most excellent and most valid motive for humbling ourselves and lowering ourselves into our nothingness".¹³⁷

The composite look to the present and to fulfilment gives the path of Marian devotion an eschatological depth, which equally holds commitment and hope, the actuality of praxis and the awareness of orientation. The difference in the experience of humility in the two moments, historical and heavenly, is a function of the knowledge of God, according to Francis de Sales, an expression, if you like, of a certain Gnosticism, which must, however, be interpreted in the context of the practical Christianity of the Savoyard saint and the constant affirmation of the gift of grace.¹³⁸

Mary's intercession is a reason for hope, as the holy bishop confesses to the mother of Chantal on the Feast of the Assumption in 1612: "With the favour of this Mother, let us make great plans, because if we are a little tender in our love for her, she will not allow our hopes to be disappointed";¹³⁹ and to the same mother of Chantal the following year for the feast of the Immaculate Conception he confides: "The most holy Virgin, protector of our sacrifice, always lifts my heart with the hope she gives me of her favour".¹⁴⁰

¹³³ *Œuvres* VII, 30.

¹³⁴ *Œuvres* X, 72.

¹³⁵ *Œuvres* IX, 393-394.

¹³⁶ *All Letters* I, 695.

¹³⁷ *Œuvres* X, 141.

¹³⁸ Mezzadri rightly observes: 'Unlike many authors, Francis does not present a God-light, but a God-love' (MEZZADRI, *L'apogeo del rinnovamento*, 136).

¹³⁹ *All Letters* II, 212.

¹⁴⁰ *All Letters* II, 395.

The two motives, that of Mary's role in favour of the Church and the faithful, and that of progress in virtue, are reciprocally recalled in the recommendations of Francis de Sales, who wrote to a nun at the Visitation: 'We have been fortunate enough to be embarked under her protection and in her name, let us saintly accomplish our navigation in humble purity and simplicity, so that one day we may find ourselves in the harbour of salvation.'¹⁴¹

Mary is a support on the journey, in fact Francis de Sales writes to President Brulart's wife after advising her against a pilgrimage to Loreto because of the difficulty of the physical journey:

"Rather be ever more ardent in the devotion of that holy Lady, whose intercession is so powerful and so favourable for souls, that, for my part, I consider her as the most valid support we can have for progress in piety. Speak willingly of this subject, in order to learn more and more interesting details".¹⁴²

And the object of the intercession of the Mother of the Lord is naturally God's love: 'May the Blessed Virgin with her prayers make us live in this holy love! May it always be in our hearts and may our unity always give glory to divine love'.¹⁴³ The growth of the devotee always points to love.

7. Summary

Francis de Sales fully embraces the traditional teaching on the mother of Jesus in the themes of divine and virginal motherhood, original holiness, exclusion of sin, glorification and the role of salvation. The uniqueness of his teaching lies in the incorporation of Marian discourse into his spiritual doctrine, so that the evocation of Marian experience illuminates the life of the devotee, and devotion to God's love procures an evocative perception of Mary of Nazareth.

Francis de Sales was a Christian and a pastor who loved beauty, with an extraordinary aesthetic sensitivity, capable to an exceptional degree of wonderment for creation, for humanity and for God. The bishop of Geneva observes in the Mother of the Lord the excellent figure of spiritual harmony, which the holy doctor traces back to the experience of God's love, and becomes a strong centre of attraction for anyone who recognises and decides for this path of faith and charity. For Francis de Sales, Mary of Nazareth presents the power of humility and the beauty of love.

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¹⁴¹ *All Letters* III, 608.

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