

New Series

Volume 5

No. 1

May 2025

Pages 1-19



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Title: 'Imagine, Theotimus, the Holy Virgin, Our Lady': Mary, Embodied, in St Francis de Sales' *Treatise on the Love of God*

Abstract

St. Francis de Sales had a life-long devotion to Mary, and frequently referred to her role in salvation history in his many writings, both published and (in his time) unpublished, often in imaginative ways. In this article, we examine the saint's creative use of Mary's life and story in his monumental work, the *Treatise on the Love of God*, with particular reference to the ways in which Mary's embodied life experiences inform and inspire the devout life and spirituality of the saint. For Francis, Mary embodies the perfect love of God by the human soul. We move through Francis' imaginative rendering of her life chronologically, from her conception to her crowning in heaven.

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Treatise on the Love of God

From the time of his studies at the Jesuit College of Clermont at the University of Paris, St Francis de Sales was eminently aware of the great potential of the imagination in Christian spirituality.¹ St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, believed that God speaks to humankind as much through the imagination as through our rational faculties; this concept is at the heart of the practice of imaginative prayer that figures prominently in Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. Francis' readings about the medieval saints cemented his strong faith in the power of the imagination – that faculty of the mind that forms images or ideas of that which is not present to the senses – to enflame Christian hearts. In his *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis recounts St Bernard of Clairvaux's childhood 'mystical and *imaginary* vision'² of the gestation and birth of the Christ child as having remained powerfully with the saint throughout his lifetime, so filling Bernard's heart 'with comfort, jubilation and spiritual delights that it resonated in him all his life'³ – a clear testimony to the lasting impact of image and imagination upon the spiritual life. For Francis, imaginative vision allows us to see truths otherwise inaccessible to the human heart; imaginative prayer gives us new insights into our faith.

It is not surprising, then, that Francis would bring imaginative prayer to bear upon his appreciation of the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus.⁴ Scriptural references to Mary are, as Karl Rahner has noted, 'meagre.'⁵ But it is precisely this paucity of detail that has, over the centuries, spurred the imaginations of Christian authors and artists, starting with the earliest disciples, as Miri Rubin has observed: '[I]n the decades following the death of Jesus, ... [t]here was an understandable desire among Jesus' followers to discover the 'back story,' to flesh out the details, to understand the provenance of the God made Flesh'⁶ – a practice that would become so fundamental to much of Christian art and Marian theology. Francis was one of many in a line of great thinkers who, over the centuries, were committed to using imaginative prayer to further this discovery process; in so doing, as Joseph F. Chorprenning O.S.F.S., has noted, Francis' 'approach to the mysteries of the life of Christ and the Virgin in the Gospels

¹ Regarding Francis' training in imaginative prayer, see Wendy M. Wright, 'The Ignatian-Salesian Imagination and Familied Life,' in Joseph F. Chorprenning O.S.F.S. (ed.), *The Holy Family in Art and Devotion*, Philadelphia: St Joseph's University Press, 1998, 104-9, and Chorprenning, 'A Spiritual Pilgrimage to the Crèche with St Francis de Sales,' *Spiritual Life* 58.4, 2012, 202-12.

² In French, 'vision mystique et *imaginaire*' (emphasis mine). Saint François de Sales, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, ed. André Ravier, Paris: Pléiade, Editions Gallimard, 1969, III, xii, 517. All translations from the original French are my own, with page numbers referencing the Pléiade edition and following the indication of book and chapter. Unless otherwise indicated, the italics here are present in the Pléiade edition.

³ 'd'aise, de jubilation et de délices spirituelles, qu'il en eut toute sa vie des ressentiments extrêmes,' III, xii, 516-7.

⁴ For an extensive bibliography focused upon the Mariology of St Francis de Sales, see Antonion Escudero, 'Mary in the life and thought of Francis de Sales. Paths and contexts of Marian devotion,' paper given at the St Francis de Sales Conference, 18-20 November 2022. <https://francescodisales.unisal.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SFDS-2002-Parte-2-Aula-Escudero-ENG.pdf>. Accessed 7 August 2024, no page number. This list includes commentary as early as that of Jean-Pierre Camus (who focuses two chapters upon Francis' Marian devotion in his *L'Esprit de S. François de Sales*, 1639-41), and continues to the present day.

⁵ Karl Rahner, *Mary, Mother of the Lord*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1963, 16.

⁶ Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009, 3.



did not limit itself to what is explicitly stated in Scripture, but embraced what is plausible and reasonable to assume.⁷ Of course, much of Francis' Marian theology is not unique to him; a fundamental understanding of concepts like Mary's role in the Incarnation, her Assumption, and so on, had already been developed by saints and Fathers of the Church well before Francis' time, and Francis grounds himself firmly in that tradition. Yet I would contend that, employing his imagination, Francis came to formulate a unique vision of Mary herself, particularly the woman Mary *embodied*, that informs and lends compelling strength to his spirituality as it is developed throughout the *Treatise on the Love of God*.⁸

Hence, one might ask: How do Mary's very much embodied earthly and heavenly life experiences – as a chaste young woman, maternal caregiver, suffering witness at the cross, and beloved spouse and queen – inform and inspire the devout life and the spirituality of St Francis de Sales as laid out in the treatise? How does Mary herself embody – in the physical, even visceral sense of the word – the perfect love of God? How does Francis' imaginative rendering of Mary's lived experiences in the *Treatise* – experiences that suggest a clear sense of self as woman, deeply known – concretize, in embodied form, other fundamental theological concepts in this work?⁹

Scholars are quick to point to the centrality of Mary in Francis' devotional practice, from early childhood throughout his life; Francis' conversion experience before the statue of Notre-Dame de Bonne Délivrance in Paris cemented his loyalty to Our Lady.¹⁰ Subsequently, as Wendy Wright has noted, Francis' 'Marian doctrine, as his overarching spiritual vision, was remarkably integrated and theologically considered.'¹¹ Of course, Francis was careful always to situate his ideas about Mary 'in relation to Christological teachings,' for he knew that, 'for all her importance and the honor due her, it was from her Son that Mary received her true

⁷ Chorpenning, 'Pilgrimage with the Redeemer in the Womb: St Francis de Sales' 1610 Meditation on the Biblical Mystery of the Visitation,' in *In Nocte Consilium: Studies in Emblems in Honor of Pedro F. Campa*, Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner, 2011, 325.

⁸ Francis' writings about Mary are extensive. My goal is to understand Mary's role specifically in the treatise; I will reference other writings by Francis only in a very limited way. In general, however, references to the Virgin Mary in de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life* primarily concern intercessory prayer to Mary and the need to develop a prayer relationship with her. In her book *From Sacred Soul to Angelic Body: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Donna Spivey Ellington explores Francis' devotion to the Virgin Mary as evidenced by his many published sermons (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

⁹ As Rahner has stated, 'We must never view [Mary's] motherhood as a merely physical one, but see it as a free, personal act of her faith, within the context of social history' (*Mary, Mother of the Lord*, 56). Likewise, for Francis, Mary's motherhood is not merely physical, but he does embrace and celebrate its physicality in meaningful ways. Ellington suggests that, 'St. François de Sales offers his hearers a Virgin who is humble, quiet, passive, and submissive, obedient always to the will of God' (*Sacred Soul*, 142). The present essay does not contradict this estimation, but suggests that this quiet experience of womanhood embodied is nevertheless significant to the saint's theology.

¹⁰ Regarding Francis' devotion to Mary, see Wendy Wright, 'Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and the Conception of the Virgin Mary,' *Marian Studies* 55, 2004: 135-58. Wright studies at length the significance of Mary's conception without sin in Francis' spirituality. See also Escudero, 'Mary in the life and thought of Francis de Sales'.

¹¹ Wright, 'Conception,' 147.

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importance.¹² But, as is clear from the very first words of the *Treatise*, Francis relies upon Mary as the animating force behind his enterprise: ‘Most Holy Mother of God,’ Francis begins his dedicatory prayer, ‘vessel of incomparable election, Queen of sovereign dilection, you are the most lovable, the most loving and the most loved of all creatures.’¹³ Mary, whose love of God is superlative in every way, will be a model for Francis’ readers of what it means to love God perfectly.

St Francis de Sales’ *Treatise on the Love of God* is a twelve-book exploration of the spiritual life in its entirety. Combining theological principles (Books I-IV) and practical application of those principles (Books V-XII), the work was intended to help Christian believers strengthen their devotion to, and thereby advance in, the love of God. While references to Mary can be found in almost every book of the *Treatise*, Francis relies upon Mary as *exemplum* most frequently and most significantly in Books II and III, which deal respectively with the heavenly origin and birth of divine love, and with the progress and perfection of love (of which Mary is the consummate example), then, in the more practically oriented Books V and VI, which center upon prayer, and finally, in Book IX, which discusses the believer’s efforts to unite his will to God’s good pleasure. However, for the purposes of this study, we will explore Mary’s embodiment of this perfect love by moving through Francis’ imaginative rendering of her life chronologically, from her conception to her crowning in heaven.

From the Immaculate Conception to the Incarnation

For all that the Immaculate Conception refers to a state of grace and not a physical condition, mentions of Mary’s embodiment of that grace are not absent from *Treatise*. As Wright has explained, Francis spends considerable time discussing the conception of Mary, who was preserved from original sin, ‘as an example of God’s love that is expressed in particular and providential ways.’¹⁴ Francis vividly imagines the moment of Mary’s conception as threatened by (but ultimately saved from) a liquid ‘torrent of original sin’ that ‘unfurled its unhappy waves upon the conception of this holy woman.’¹⁵ But the Ark of the Covenant that is Mary, vessel destined to receive God’s Son, remains untouched by this pernicious emission of iniquity, ultimately to be adorned by her Son (here, Francis echoes Psalm 45) ‘in gilded dress.’¹⁶ Borrowing imagery from both Proverbs and the Song of Songs, Francis then evokes Mary’s beauty – she is ‘a beautiful dawn beginning to rise that continues to grow in brightness

¹² Wright, ‘Conception,’ 139.

¹³ ‘Très sainte Mère de Dieu, vaisseau d’incomparable élection, Reine de la souveraine dilection, vous êtes la plus aimable, la plus amante et la plus aimée de toutes les créatures,’ Dedicatory Prayer, 333.

¹⁴ Wright, ‘Conception,’ 148.

¹⁵ ‘torrent de l’iniquité originelle [qui] vint rouler ses ondes infortunées sur la conception de cette sacrée Dame,’ II, vi, 426.

¹⁶ ‘de robe d’or,’ II, vi, 426.

until midday,¹⁷ echoing the Dedicatory Prayer of the treatise, in which Francis refers to the parents of Jesus as ‘holy lilies of incomparable beauty.’¹⁸ Mary’s physical perfection is a tangible manifestation of her spiritual state of grace, one that shines ever brighter throughout her life, ‘[ascending] from love to love, perpetually advancing.’¹⁹ Her chastity extends not only to her body but to her heart and mind as well: ‘The virginity of her heart and of her body was more worthy and more honorable than that of the Angels; that is why her mind, neither *divided* nor shared, as St Paul said, was *entirely occupied thinking of divine things, as how she would please her God.*’²⁰

Immaculately conceived, Mary is thus the perfect vessel to bear the Messiah. Francis evokes God’s desire to communicate himself to his Creation, a desire that led God to ‘join himself to some created nature’²¹ in the Incarnation. For this purpose, God chose, from among all his creatures, humankind; thus humanity ‘was joined to the Person of God the Son,’²² who was thus both truly human and truly divine. In his chapter concerning God’s supernatural providence, Francis points to Mary (and to Mary’s very human body) as manifestly necessary to the generative process of the Incarnation:²³

Because God saw that he could use varied means to fashion the humanity of his Son while making him true man, as, for example, by creating it from nothing, not only as to the soul but also the body, or by forming the body from some pre-existing matter, as he did with Adam and Eve, or through the ordinary generativity of a man and a woman, or through the extraordinary generativity of a woman without a man, he considered that it would be done in this last way; and among all the women he might choose for this purpose, he elected the most holy Virgin Our Lady, through whose mediation the Savior of our souls would be not only man, but child of the human race.²⁴

¹⁷ ‘une belle aube qui, commençant à poindre, va continuellement croissant en clarté jusques au plein jour,’ II, vi, 427.

¹⁸ ‘Ils sacrés d’incomparable beauté,’ Dedicatory Prayer, 333.

¹⁹ ‘[montant] d’amour en amour par un perpétuel avancement,’ III, viii, 504.

²⁰ ‘La virginité de son cœur et de son corps fut plus digne et plus honorable que celle des Anges; c’est pourquoi son esprit, non *divisé* ni partagé, comme saint Paul a parlé, était *tout occupé à penser aux choses divines, comme elle plairait à son Dieu,*’ III, viii, 504.

²¹ ‘se joindre à quelque nature crééé,’ II, iv, 420.

²² ‘fut jointe à la Personne de Dieu le Fils,’ II, iv, 420.

²³ St Ambrose, whose imaginative reflections concerning Mary inspired Francis, wrote, ‘[F]lesh was born of flesh. Thus the Virgin had of her own what she gave, for the mother did not give something of another, but she contributed her own from her womb in an unusual manner, but in a usual function.’ Quoted in Rubin, *Mother of God*, 27.

²⁴ ‘Et parce que Dieu vit qu’il pouvait faire en plusieurs façons l’humanité de son Fils en le rendant vrai homme, comme, par exemple, la créant de rien, non seulement quant à l’âme mais aussi quant au corps, ou bien formant le corps de quelque matière précédente, comme il fit celui d’Adam et d’Ève, ou bien par voie de génération ordinaire d’homme et de femme, ou bien par voie de génération extraordinaire d’une femme sans homme, il délibéra que la chose se ferait en cette dernière façon; et entre toutes les femmes qu’il pouvait choisir à cette intention, il élut la très sainte Vierge Notre-Dame, par l’entremise de laquelle le Sauveur de nos âmes serait non seulement homme, mais enfant du genre humain,’ II, iv, 421.

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For Francis, the divine Son of God is consequently also a child of humankind due to his ‘true natural mother,’²⁵ Mary, the very ‘created nature’ Francis posited as both vital for and obedient to the divine will. Francis will later refer to the importance of Mary’s obedience to God’s will in the Incarnation as he labels her virginal body – ‘a gentle, humble, pure body, obedient to holy love and imbued with one thousand sacred sweet fragrances’ – as ‘the living source of [the body] of the Savior.’²⁶ Indeed, Francis continues, Mary loved and cared for her own physical body precisely because, having birthed the Savior, her body belonged utterly, irrevocably, and incomparably to him.²⁷

Mary’s Womb

However, it is in exploring Mary’s divine motherhood that Francis de Sales’ imagination truly takes flight. Having expressed her obedience to the divine will in the Annunciation,²⁸ Mary will spend nine months gestating, a period that Francis fleshes out in creative ways.²⁹ In Book VI, chapter 7 of the *Treatise*, Francis posits the pregnant Mother of God as an *exemplum* of the loving posture of the soul in divine contemplation. Explicitly inviting Theotimus to use his imagination, Francis paints a vivid portrait of an expectant Mary enjoying a grace-filled moment ruminating upon the divinity gestating within³⁰:

Imagine, Theotimus, the most holy Virgin, Our Lady, when she had conceived the Son of God, her one and only love. The soul of that beloved Mother was utterly centered

²⁵ ‘vraie mère naturelle,’ VII, xiii, 703.

²⁶ ‘un corps doux, humble, pur, obéissant au saint amour et qui était tout embaumé de mille sacrées suavités,’ ‘la source vivante de celui [*le corps*] du Sauveur,’ III, viii, 505.

²⁷ Mary thus serves as a model of healthy, positive embodiment for every Christian, male and female: ‘Of course, the Christian must love his body as a living image of that of the incarnate Savior, issuing from the same stem, and thus, belonging to him in parentage and consanguinity’ (‘Certes, le Chrétien doit aimer son corps comme une image vivante de celui du Sauveur incarné, comme issu de même tige avec icellui, et, par conséquent, lui appartenant en parentage et consanguinité,’ III, viii, 505).

²⁸ Interestingly, while Luke’s Gospel describes at length the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary and Mary’s Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, in the *Treatise*, Francis does not spend a great deal of time revisiting episodes no doubt well-known to his readership, preferring to give his attention over to the episodes Luke does not cover and to which Francis therefore devotes significant imaginative prayer. Once, however, speaking of Elizabeth’s powerful experience of Jesus’ presence in Mary’s womb, Francis tellingly notes that, at such moments, no imagination is required! (VI, x, 636)

²⁹ The theme of Jesus in his mother’s womb was central to the Mariology of Francis’ contemporary and friend Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629); see Vincent R. Vasey, ‘Mary in the Doctrine of Bérulle on the Mysteries of Christ,’ *Marian Studies* 36.11 (1985), 62-3. Much later, Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657) summarized Bérulle’s central teaching in his composition of the prayer, ‘O Jesus living in Mary,’ while St Louis de Montfort (1673-1716) would be greatly influenced and inspired by Olier’s (and, by extension, de Sales’ and Bérulle’s) spiritualities. See ‘The Interior Life of Mary According to Monsieur Olier,’ School of Mary, <https://schoolofmary.org/the-interior-life-of-mary-according-to-monsieur-olier/>, accessed 12 February 2025.

³⁰ Here and throughout most of the treatise, Mary is silent, her inner experience of motherhood taking precedence over her verbal acknowledgement of that experience. For more regarding the early modern shift toward the spiritual motherhood of Mary, see Ellington, *Sacred Soul*, chapters 4 and 5.

The Theotimus who is addressed here is ‘the human spirit as it desires to make progress in holy love (‘en la dilection sainte’).



around her beloved Child, and because this divine Friend was within her sacred womb, all the faculties of her soul were drawn into herself, like holy bees into their hive of honey; and in proportion as divine grandeur had, so to speak, contracted in size in her virginal belly, so her *soul* increased and magnified the praises of this infinite loving-kindness, and her *spirit* trembled with contentment in her body (as Saint John's did in that of his mother) around the *God* she sensed within. She cast neither her thoughts nor her affections outside of herself, since her treasure, her loves and her delights were within her sacred womb.³¹

Mary's pregnancy afforded her an opportunity to gather her own soul as a cocoon around her Child, and to embrace the immensity of divine grandeur paradoxically contracted and contained within her in a maternal gesture of sheer and perfect love. No intellectual faculty of Mary's intervenes in this stunning portrait; of its own accord, her soul, in contact with the divine, silently magnifies its praise of God's loving-kindness as her own spirit quivers perceptibly within her body. Mary's womb holds the treasure of the perfect love of God, incarnate.

Interestingly, Francis then extends this image of divine communion to those saints and devout believers who

hav[e] received the divine Sacrament which contains the dew of all celestial blessings. Their soul constricts and all of their faculties collect themselves, not only to adore this sovereign King newly present in all his awesome presence in their belly, but also for the incredible consolation and spiritual refreshment they receive, sensing through faith the divine seed of immortality within them.³²

Francis uses the word *entrailles*, which here best translates as 'belly,' but which also means 'womb.' Mary's womb-experience thus becomes conceivable (if difficult to attain) for all of the faithful who are open to knowing and being made fertile by the Lord, *divine seed*, as fully and intimately as his own mother was. Later, in her dreams (postpartum and beyond), Francis

³¹ 'Imaginez-vous, Théotime, la très sainte Vierge Notre-Dame lorsqu'elle eut conçu le Fils de Dieu, son unique amour. L'âme de cette Mère bien-aimée se ramassa toute, sans doute, autour de cet Enfant bien-aimé, et parce que ce divin Ami était emmi ses entrailles sacrées, toutes les facultés [*sic*] de son âme se retirèrent en elle-même, comme saintes avettes dedans la ruche en laquelle était leur miel; et à mesure que la divine grandeur s'était, par manière de dire, rétrécie et raccourcie dedans son ventre virginal, son *âme* agrandissait et magnifiait les louanges de cette infinie débonnairété, et son *esprit* tressaillait de contentement dedans son corps (comme Saint Jean dedans celui de sa mère) autour de son *Dieu* qu'elle sentait. Elle ne lançait point ni ses pensées ni ses affections hors d'elle-même, puisque son trésor, ses amours et ses délices étaient au milieu de ses entrailles sacrées,' VI, vii, 630.

³² 'ayant reçus le divin Sacrement qui contient la rosée de toutes bénédictions célestes, leur âme se resserre et toutes leurs facultés se recueillent, non seulement pour adorer ce Roi souverain nouvellement présent d'une présence admirable à leurs entrailles, mais pour l'incroyable consolation et rafraîchissement spirituel qu'ils reçoivent, de sentir par la foi ce germe divin de l'immortalité à l'intérieur,' VI, vii, 631. Elsewhere, Francis describes his own similar experience; see *Opuscles* XXII, qtd. in Edward J. Carney, O.S.F.S., 'Mary in the Life and Thought of St Francis de Sales,' *Salesian Living Heritage* 3.1, 1988, 18. Ellington notes that Francis' assertion 'is very medieval,' in part 'because of the way it draws together the Virgin and Jesus through their shared flesh' (Ellington, *Sacred Soul*, 239).

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recounts, Mary will have herself imagined returning to this state of pregnant bliss: 'Ah, sweet Jesus, what must your holy Mother have dreamt while she slept and her *heart* kept watch? Did she not dream of seeing you again folded into her womb, as you were for nine months?'³³ Pregnancy as the ultimate embodiment of intimate and loving presence of Mother to Son and Son to Mother could not be more clearly visualized than it is through the imagination of St Francis de Sales.

Mary, Mother of the Child Jesus

If Francis de Sales depicts the womb of Mary as a privileged locus of communion with the divine presence, his attention to Mary's maternal care for her Child affords Francis the opportunity to explore what it means to live in the will of God. Curiously, in his imaginative portrait of the Infant Jesus carried in his mother's arms, Francis inverts the paradigm one might expect, exploring the very *human Jesus'* acceptance of his own Mother's will for him as a model for the generic human soul's acceptance of God's will for her (*her* referring to *l'âme*, or the human soul). Francis begins Chapter 14 of Book VII with a vision of Mary's maternal care for her Son, at times carrying 'her dear little Jesus in her arms,'³⁴ at others, letting him 'walk on his own feet with her, holding him by the hand.'³⁵ Both experiences afford the mother of the Lord great contentment, Francis suggests; any weariness induced by the weight of the Child in her arms was no doubt mitigated by the fact that she carried '*the immaculate Lamb of God*,'³⁶ himself a source of solace even as a babe in arms. Yet, if she is not wearied, why does Mary simply hold her Child? Francis imaginatively suggests that 'it was not that she wouldn't have preferred to have him hanging from her neck on her breast, but she did so to train him to form his steps and walk himself.'³⁷ As a mother, Mary knew that her Child needed to experience some independence, that he might then *choose* to remain in her arms, just as God is content to carry the human soul in the arms of God's divine pleasure, her will entirely united to God's will, while at other times, Francis says, we choose to walk 'taking steps of our own volition'³⁸ while also *choosing* to conform our own will to God's. Once again, the maternal experience of Mary is one of loving union with the divine presence, and the divine will, albeit in a rather unexpected way.³⁹

³³ 'Hé, doux Jésus, qu'est-ce que devait songer votre très sainte Mère lorsqu'elle dormait et que son *cœur* veillait? Ne songeait-elle point de vous voir encore plié dans ses entrailles, comme vous fûtes neuf mois?' III, viii, 506.

³⁴ 'son cher petit Jésus entre ses bras,' IX, xiv, 797.

³⁵ 'marcher sur ses pieds avec elle, le tenant par la main,' IX, xiv, 798.

³⁶ '*l'Agneau de Dieu immaculé*,' IX, xiv, 797.

³⁷ 'ce n'était pas qu'elle n'eût mieux aimé de l'avoir pendant à son col sur sa poitrine, mais elle le faisait pour l'exercer à former ses pas et à cheminer lui-même,' IX, xiv, 797-98.

³⁸ 'des pas de notre propre vouloir,' IX, xiv, 798.

³⁹ Francis reminds his readers that Mary and Joseph both carried the Child Jesus many times (VII, xiii, 702), especially during the flight into Egypt.

It is in this context of maternal care that Francis integrates the image of Mary as nursing mother.⁴⁰ Continuing to muse upon the dream life of Mary, Francis writes: ‘Or [perhaps she dreamt of you] hanging from her bosom, gently squeezing the holy nipple of her virginal breast?’⁴¹ Francis’ portrait of one of Mary’s most intimate experiences of womanhood embraces physically explicit vocabulary related to the female body:

Once in her arms, I pay no attention to willing or not willing, leaving every care to my Mother except that of being on her breast, to suck at her holy nipple, holding fast to her very lovely neck so as to kiss her lovingly *with kisses of my mouth*. Know that, in the midst of the delights of these holy caresses which surpass all sweetness, I believe that my Mother is a tree of life, and I, in her, am her fruit, that I am her own heart in the midst of her breast, or her soul in the midst of her heart: [...] I never inquire where she wants to go, contenting myself with being always in her arms, joined to her amiable breasts, where I feed as if *among the lilies*. [...] Now go, dear little lovely Child, or rather, do not go, but remain faithfully affixed to the breast of your sweet Mother; go always in her and through her, or with her, and never be without her while you are a child. O how *blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed!*⁴²

In Francis’ imaginative rendering of this scene, the Child Jesus sucking in complete surrender at Mary’s breasts vividly captures the ideal posture of the human soul in its relationship with God, utterly at rest as she is nurtured at ‘the tree of life,’ responding to God’s invitation to relationship with kisses of love reminiscent of those described in the Song of Songs. Finally, in what sounds very much like a maternal doxology, Francis foregrounds the Child’s intimate

⁴⁰ ‘Not until the year 1200 in Western Europe was the image of a breastfeeding Mary comfortably represented,’ Rubin, *Mother of God*, 42. Ellington notes that, in the late medieval period, some preachers ‘glorified Mary’s milk as a sublime food from heaven’ (Ellington, *Sacred Soul*, 59). Francis is inspired by Bernard of Clairvaux, who explored at length the connection between the physical and the spiritual, with special attention to the figure of the nursing mother, connecting these teachings to the Song of Songs (Rubin, *Mother of God*, 150-1). Regarding the nursing mother in the *Treatise*, see Suzanne Toczyski, ‘“Blessed the Breasts at Which You Nursed”: Mother-Child Intimacy in St. Francis de Sales’ *Treatise on the Love of God*,’ *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 15.2, 2015, 191-213.

⁴¹ ‘Ou bien [ne songeait-elle point de vous voir encore] pendant à ses mamelles et pressant doucement le sacré chicheron de son tétin virginal?’, III, viii, 506. As Mgr Francis Vincent has noted, Francis’ language pertaining to nursing a child is one of remarkable candor (Mgr Francis Vincent, ‘Place de Saint François de Sales dans l’histoire mariale,’ *Maria: Etudes sur la sainte Vierge*, ed. Hubert du Manoir, S.J., Tome II, Paris: Beauchesne et ses fils, 1962, 994).

⁴² ‘Dès que je me trouve entre ses bras je n’ai aucune attention ni à vouloir ni à ne vouloir pas, laissant tout autre soin à ma Mère hormis celui d’être sur son sein, de sucer son sacré chicheron, et de me tenir bien attaché à son col très aimable pour la baiser amoureusement *des baisers de ma bouche*. Et afin que vous le sachiez, tandis que je suis parmi les délices de ces saintes caresses qui surpassent toute suavité, il m’est avis que ma Mère est un arbre de vie et que je suis en elle comme son fruit, que je suis son propre cœur au milieu de sa poitrine, ou son âme au milieu de son cœur: [...] je ne m’enquiers nullement où elle veut aller, me contentant que, comme que ce soit, je suis toujours entre ses bras, joignant ses amiables mamelles, où je me repais comme *entre les lys*. [...] Or allez donc, ô cher petit Enfant très aimable, ou plutôt, n’allez pas, mais demeurez ainsi saintement collé à la poitrine de votre douce Mère; allez toujours en elle et par elle, ou avec elle, et n’allez jamais sans elle tandis que vous êtes enfant. Ô que *bienheureux est le ventre qui vous a porté et les mamelles que vous avez sucées!* IX, xiv, 799.

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love relationship with his Mother Mary as a model for the love of the human soul for God. In Mary, through Mary, or with Mary, the Child exercises no will of his own as he rests upon the sweet breast of his mother, simply accepting the love that flows from Mary's breast to his lips.

Mary at the Foot of the Cross

As seen above, in his imaginative entry into Mary's dreams, Francis de Sales points to moments of mother/child intimacy – in the womb, at the breast – as useful depictions of the human soul's capacity for a deep and lasting relationship with God. But Francis also imagines Mary's dreams as extending beyond the idyllic intimacy of Jesus' childhood to the moment of his death on the cross: 'Perhaps she dreamt repeatedly,' he writes, 'that, as Our Lord had once slept so often on her breast, like a little lamb on his mother's soft side, so she slept in his pierced side, like a white *dove* safe *in the cleft of a rock*.'⁴³ As Mary is unable to touch her Son's body in his moment of agony, Francis envisions the Son welcoming his mother into his pierced side in a union of both spiritual ecstasy and also physical repose: 'there, her sleep was like ecstasy with regard to the spirit, whereas for the body it was a sweet and graceful relief and rest.'⁴⁴

Mary's rest in Christ's pierced side will, Francis notes, be well-deserved and necessary. For, if maternal love rejoices in the child born of her womb, that very love will be responsible for her own suffering as witness at the foot of the cross, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Simeon who foresaw (Lk. 2:35) that Mary herself would be pierced by a sword:

[C]onsider how love draws all pains, all torments, travaux, sufferings, griefs, the wounds, the passion, the cross and even the death of our Redeemer into his most holy Mother's heart. Alas, the same nails that crucified the body of this divine Child also crucified the heart of his Mother, the same thorns that pierced his head pierced through the soul of this utterly sweet Mother; she bore the same miseries as her Son through commiseration, the same dolorous experiences through condolence, the same passions through compassion; and, in short, *the sword* of death that pierced the body of this most beloved Son likewise pierced through the heart of this very loving Mother. She might thus have said that he was *a sachet of myrrh between her breasts*, that is to say, in her bosom and in the center of her heart.⁴⁵

⁴³ 'Peut-être songea-t-elle maintes fois que, comme Notre-Seigneur avait jadis souvent dormi sur sa poitrine, ainsi qu'un petit agnelet sur le flanc mollet de sa mère, de même aussi elle dormait dans son côté percé, comme une blanche *colombe dans le trou d'un rocher* assuré,' III, viii, 506.

⁴⁴ 'Si que son dormir était tout pareil à l'extase quant à l'opération de l'esprit, bien que quant au *corps* ce fût un doux et gracieux allègement et repos,' III, viii, 506.

⁴⁵ 'Mais surtout, considérez comme l'amour tire toutes les peines, tous les tourments, les travaux, les souffrances, les douleurs, les blessures, la passion, la croix et la mort même de notre Rédempteur dans le cœur de sa très sacrée Mère. Hélas, les mêmes clous qui crucifièrent le corps de ce divin Enfant crucifièrent aussi le cœur de la Mère, les mêmes épines qui percèrent son chef outrepercèrent l'âme de cette Mère toute douce; elle eut les mêmes misères de son Fils par commisération, les mêmes douleurs par condoléance, les mêmes



It is Mary's great love for her son that causes her to experience – physically, mentally, and spiritually – a *loving condolence* of suffering visually depicted by Francis as an act drawing all of the pain and torture of crucifixion and death into Mary's own compassionate heart.⁴⁶ Poignantly, as each physical torture of Christ's Passion is evoked in turn, Francis intensifies its effect upon Mary's being: the thorns that 'pierce' his head are said to 'pierce through' the sweet soul of Mary; the sword that passes through his side 'pierces through' the heart of his mother. Witnessing her Son's suffering causes excessive if not immediate effects upon Mary's person, due to her being (etymologically) one *with* him – through her *commiseration*, *condolence* and *compassion* – heart and soul. Francis later qualifies Mary's paradoxical experience of love at the foot of the cross in terms both spiritual and physical:

[S]he fainted neither of love nor of compassion beside the Cross of her Son, although she experienced there the most ardent and painful attack of love one can imagine; for, although the attack was extreme, it was nonetheless equally strong and sweet at the same time, powerful and tranquil, active and peace-filled, composed of a sharp but soft sensation of heat.⁴⁷

As Mary's love for her Son is the most perfect imaginable, so too is her loving condolence in his moment of greatest need, when, upon the cross, he experiences the Father's abandonment (Mt. 27:47); for Francis, the love Mary has to offer Jesus at that moment burns within her, both figuratively and tangibly, embodied in a superlative experience of ardent passion that unites her with her Son.

This 'sovereign degree' of oneness *with*, experienced by Mary at the foot of the cross, is invoked again by Francis in Book VII of the *Treatise*, which focuses upon the soul's union with God through prayer. As with contemplation, Mary's desire for loving union with her Son, not only as he dies but beyond death, is a model of the Christian soul's seeking (and finding) God in moments of spiritual communion. Francis again expertly weaves the story of the Sulamite's love for her Beloved in the Song of Songs into his imaginative depiction of Mary's love:

Ah, what do you seek, o Mother of life, on this Mount of Calvary, in this place of death?
I seek, she would have said, my Child who is life of my life. And why do you seek him?

passions par compassion; et en somme, *l'épée* de la mort qui transperça le corps de ce très aimé Fils outreperça de même le cœur de cette très amante Mère: dont elle pouvait bien dire qu'il lui était *un bouquet de myrrhe au milieu de ses mamelles*, c'est-à-dire en sa poitrine et au milieu de son cœur,' V, iv, 577.

⁴⁶ Ellington notes that in Francis' sermons, 'only spiritual and emotional pain was involved in Mary's suffering at the foot of the cross' (Ellington, *Sacred Soul*, 191). This quotation from the *Treatise*, however, suggests physical suffering also played a role.

⁴⁷ 'Non, elle ne pâma pas d'amour ni de compassion auprès de la Croix de son Fils, encore qu'elle eût alors le plus ardent et douloureux accès d'amour qu'on puisse imaginer; car, bien que l'accès fut extrême, si fut-il toutefois également fort et doux tout ensemble, puissant et tranquille, actif et paisible, composé d'une chaleur aigüe mais suave,' VII, xiv, 707.

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To be near him. But now he is caught in *the cords of death*. Ah, it is not pleasure that I seek, it is he himself; and my heart in love makes me seek always to be united to this lovely Child, my dear Beloved.⁴⁸

Following the dialogic model of Song 3, Francis gives voice to Mary's errant yearning as she seeks union with the Child of her womb – 'caught in *the cords of death*'⁴⁹ (Ps. 18) – not in an abstract way and not simply for her own pleasure, but with his very person, embodied. Francis refers to such a bond as 'inhesion or adhesion, because through it the soul is seized, fastened, bonded and affixed to divine Majesty, such that only with difficulty can she extricate herself and withdraw.'⁵⁰ Moreover, Jesus will remain with his mother beyond his own death in the form of a *sachet of myrrh between her breasts* (Song 1:13), which, for Francis, following Bernard of Clairvaux, was an ongoing experience of pain via what Bernard called the 'bouquet composed of all the sufferings of the Lord.'⁵¹ Mary's meditation upon Christ's sufferings will not end with his Crucifixion, or even with his Resurrection. Indeed, Francis suggests, Mary's long-suffering love, combined with his death, will be the direct cause of her own passing from life to death.

The Death of Mary

Interestingly, although, as we have seen, Francis de Sales was very invested in exploring Mary's sleep patterns and dreams, in the *Treatise* he does not directly borrow, at least lexically, from the Eastern tradition of the Dormition of Mary (extant and circulating since at least the third century),⁵² but rather devotes two entire chapters of Book VII of the *Treatise* to what he refers to only as her 'death': 'That the most holy Virgin, Mother of God, died of love for her Son' (chapter 13)⁵³ and 'That the glorious Virgin died of a love extremely sweet and tranquil' (chapter 14).⁵⁴ Indeed, these are the final chapters of Book VII, which progresses from the role of love in the human soul's union with God in prayer, to the various degrees of such union, finally ending in a series of chapters centered upon what it means to

⁴⁸ 'Hé, que cherchez-vous, ô Mère de la vie, en ce moment de Calvaire et en ce lieu de mort? Je cherche, eût-elle dit, mon Enfant qui est la vie de ma vie. Et pourquoi le cherchez-vous? Pour être auprès de lui. Mais maintenant il est parmi *les tristesses de la mort*. Hé, ce ne sont pas les allégresses que je cherche, c'est lui-même; et partout mon cœur amoureux me fait rechercher d'être unie à cet aimable Enfant, mon cher Bien-aimé,' VII, iii, 673.

⁴⁹ 'parmi *les tristesses de la mort*,' VII, iii, 673.

⁵⁰ 'inhésion ou adhésion, parce que par icelle l'âme demeure prise, attachée, collée et affigée à la divine Majesté, en sorte que malaisément peut-elle s'en déprendre et retirer,' VII, iii, 673.

⁵¹ Bernard de Clairvaux, Sermon 43, quoted in Blaise Arminjon, S.J., *The Cantata of Love: A Verse by Verse Reading of The Song of Songs*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983, 121. See also Francis' description of Francis of Assisi's imaginative experience of Mary at the cross (VI, xv, 657).

⁵² Myriad accounts of Mary's death were composed before 1000 AD; at least sixty survive (Rubin, *Mother of God*, 55). See also Stephen Shoemaker, *Earliest Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, Oxford: OUP, 2002.

⁵³ 'Que la très sacrée Vierge, Mère de Dieu, mourut d'amour pour son Fils,' VII, xiii, 702.

⁵⁴ 'Que la glorieuse Vierge mouru d'un amour extrêmement doux et tranquille,' VII, xiv, 705.

die not only in love but by love. Concluding this series, the two chapters focusing upon Mary's death thus represent the culmination of Francis' exploration of the spiritual communion of the soul with God; again, Francis' principal focus is the perfect union between mother and Son, a prefiguring of the eternal perfect union that is the hope of every human soul.

Clearly, given that two entire chapters are devoted to it, the death of Mary's physical body was a pivotal element of Francis' theology of the human soul's love of God. Interestingly, Francis first observes that, 'it is impossible to imagine that she [Mary] died of any other sort of death than that of love.'⁵⁵ Francis grounds his argument in Mary's revelations to two medieval saints: 'On the one hand, they say that Our Lady revealed to St Mechtilde that the illness of which she died was nothing other than an impetuous assault of divine love;⁵⁶ but St Bridget⁵⁷ and St John Damascene⁵⁸ testify that she died an extremely peaceful death: and both are true.'⁵⁹ Francis embraces the paradox; the idea that Mary's death could be at once 'an impetuous assault of love' but also 'peaceful' is attributable to the union Mary knew with and in her Son: 'the holy Virgin and her Son had but *one soul, one heart*, and one life, such that this holy Mother, living, lived not, but her Son lived in her!'⁶⁰ Indeed, theirs is a union in *truth*, Francis suggests through a cascading repetition of the word *vrai* in an exclamation reminiscent of the Song 6:9: '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.'⁶¹ Consequently, Francis continues, as Jesus' human birth depended upon Mary alone, her death must be recognized as intimately linked to the utterly human death of her Son: 'Now, if this Mother lived the life of her Son, she also died the death of her Son, for as in life, so in death.'⁶² As Christ left his physical, human body behind, so, Francis says, did Mary: 'although this holy soul loved her very holy, very pure and very lovely body exceedingly, she nonetheless abandoned it without

⁵⁵ 'il est impossible d'imaginer qu'elle [Mary] soit morte d'autre sorte de mort que de celle d'amour,' 703. André Ravier has observed that, '[O]nly [Mary] could "die of love for her Son" because she "lived the life of her Son."' André Ravier, *Francis de Sales, Sage and Saint*, Stella Niagara, NY: DeSales Resource Center, 2007, 211.

⁵⁶ See *Select Revelations of S. Mechtilde, Virgin*, anonymous translation of *Five Books of Her Spiritual Grace*, chapters XIV and XV,

<https://ia800203.us.archive.org/16/items/selectrevelation00mech/selectrevelation00mech.pdf>. Accessed 29 July 2024.

⁵⁷ *The Prophecies and Revelations of Saint Bridget (Birgitta) of Sweden*, Book 1, chapter 9, available online at: [https://www.saintsbooks.net/books/St.%20Bridget%20\(Birgitta\)%20of%20Sweden%20-%20Prophecies%20and%20Revelations.pdf](https://www.saintsbooks.net/books/St.%20Bridget%20(Birgitta)%20of%20Sweden%20-%20Prophecies%20and%20Revelations.pdf). Accessed 29 July 2024.

⁵⁸ 'Assumption of Our Lady: Homily by St. John Damascene,' available at:

<https://themarianroom.com/assumption-of-our-lady-homily-by-st-john-damascene/>. Accessed 29 July 2024.

⁵⁹ 'On dit d'un côté que Notre-Dame révéla à sainte Mathilde que la maladie de laquelle elle mourut ne fut autre chose qu'un assaut impétueux du divin amour; mais sainte Brigitte et saint Jean Damascène témoignent qu'elle mourut d'une mort extrêmement paisible: et l'un et l'autre est vrai,' VII, xiv, 705.

⁶⁰ 'la sacrée Vierge et son Fils n'avaient qu'une âme, qu'un cœur, et qu'une vie, en sorte que cette sacrée Mère, vivant ne vivait pas elle, mais son Fils vivait en elle!' VII, xiii, 703.

⁶¹ 'Vous êtes ma vraie Mère et je vous aime comme ma vraie Mère, vous être ma vraie Mère toute mienne et je suis votre vrai Fils tout vôtre,' VII, xiii, 704.

⁶² 'Or, si cette Mère vécut de la vie de son Fils, elle mourut aussi de la mort de son Fils: car quelle est la vie, telle est la mort,' VII, xiii, 704.

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any pain or resistance whatsoever.’⁶³

Inspired by Pliny’s *Natural History*, Francis embellishes upon the naturalist’s account of the death of the phoenix to assist his reader in imagining the final moments of Mary’s physical embodiment on earth. Of course, as Mary is unique among women, only a creature as distinctive as the phoenix⁶⁴ will suffice for this purpose:

The phoenix, they say, having grown old, gathers a quantity of aromatic wood upon a mountaintop, upon which, as on a bed of honor, he will end his days; for when the sun, in the noonday heat, casts its most ardent rays, this utterly unique bird, in order to contribute additional energy to the ardor of the sun, does not cease to beat his wings on his pyre until it catch fire, and, burning with it, he is consumed and dies among these fragrant flames.⁶⁵

It is the phoenix’s careful assemblage of fragments of flammable aromatic wood (‘cassia and sprigs of incense,’ according to Pliny) that most spoke to Francis’ imagination here, an endeavor that permits the creature’s active collaboration with the sun’s ardent rays to enact its own demise. Ultimately, the phoenix’s body burns, utterly consumed by the flames. Likewise, Francis states,

the Virgin Mother, having gathered in her mind all the most well-loved mysteries of the life and death of her Son through her very quick and perpetual memory, and always receiving directly the most ardent inspirations that her Son, *Sun of justice*, cast upon humankind in the height of his charity, and moreover also, making for her part a perpetual movement of contemplation, finally, the sacred fire of this divine love consumed her entirely, like a holocaust of sweetness; such that she died of it, her soul wholly ravished and transported into the arms of love of her Son. O death, amorously life-giving! O love, vitally death-giving!⁶⁶

Mary’s fragments are the collected memories of her Son’s life and death, set aflame by the

⁶³ ‘bien que cette sainte âme aimât extrêmement son très saint, très pur et très aimable corps, si le quitta-t-elle néanmoins sans peine ni résistance quelconque,’ VII, xiv, 709.

⁶⁴ ‘It is said that there is only one [phoenix] in existence, and that that one has not been seen very often.’ *The Natural History of Pliny*, Volume 2 (of 6), trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley, Book X, Chapter 2, Project Gutenberg, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/60230/pg60230-images.html#BOOK_X_CHAP_2. Accessed 31 July 2024.

⁶⁵ ‘Le phénix, comme on dit, étant fort vieilli, ramasse sur le haut d’une montagne une quantité de bois aromatiques, sur lesquels, comme sur son lit d’honneur, il va finir ses jours; car lorsque le soleil au fort de son midi jette ses rayons plus ardents, ce tout unique oiseau, pour contribuer à l’ardeur du soleil un surcroît d’action, ne cesse point de battre des ailes sur son bûcher jusques à ce qu’il lui ai fait prendre feu, et brûlant avec icelui il se consume et meurt entre ces flammes odorantes,’ VII, xiii, 704.

⁶⁶ ‘la Vierge Mère ayant assemblé en son esprit, par une très vive et continuelle mémoire, tous les plus aimables mystères de la vie et mort de son Fils, et recevant toujours à droit fil parmi cela les plus ardentes inspirations que son Fils, *Soleil de justice*, jetât sur les humains au plus fort du midi de sa charité, puis d’ailleurs faisant aussi de son côté un perpétuel mouvement de contemplation, enfin, le feu sacré de ce divin amour la consuma toute,

wings of love of the *Sun of Justice* (Mal. 3:20) and encouraged on in intensity by Mary's participation via contemplation of that love upon a veritable altar of sacrifice, until Mary's soul alone is transported into her Son's arms. If we follow the metaphor to completion, we can only imagine that Francis envisions Mary's body, like that of the phoenix, as consumed, this time by the flames of love as a 'holocaust of sweetness.'⁶⁷ Again, as in life, so in death: here, I borrow Mackey's translation of the final exclamation of this passage, which perhaps most aptly captures the paradox that so ignited Francis' imagination: 'O, death, amorously life-giving! O, love, vitally death-giving!'⁶⁸ Chapter 13 ends reminding the reader of Mary's painful presence at the cross, united with her Son and pierced through by the sword of his physical pain – 'the pain of her Son was then a trenchant *sword* that passed through the heart of the Mother,'⁶⁹ where it was her Son who became a 'perfect holocaust for all the sins of the world,'⁷⁰ himself consumed by flames of love out of love for all. All this to confirm the first assertion of the paradox: St Mechtild's revelation that Mary died of 'an impetuous assault of divine love.'⁷¹

To complete his account of Mary's death, Francis will turn, in Chapter 14, to the peaceful qualities of the passing of the mother of God from this earthly world to the heavenly realm, qualities directly related to the nature of the mother's love for her Son, usefully embodied by that quintessential organ of charity, the human heart. Most saints, Francis suggests, experience love for God in fits and starts, repeatedly, over time and with much effort, giving birth (*enfantât*, or birthing; the image is telling) to a blissful death;⁷² their hearts engender many obstacles before arriving at the perfect union which they seek. Mary's love, Francis then asserts, knew no such fits and starts: 'divine love grew at every moment in the virginal heart of our glorious Lady, but by gentle, peaceful, and continual growth, without agitation, or tremors, or any violence.'⁷³ Only a heart utterly and entirely open to divine love, free of obstacles, could be capable of perfect union on this earth, and therefore able to enjoy an entirely peaceful physical death.

Interestingly, Francis frames his understanding of the nature of such potential obstacles in terms implicitly linked to the body, as contrasted with the higher-order functioning of the mind:

comme un holocauste de suavité; de sorte qu'elle en mourut, son âme étant toute ravie et transportée entre les bras de la dilection de son Fils. Ô mort amoureusement vitale, ô amour vitalemment mortel! VII, xiii, 704.

⁶⁷ In his Sermon of 15 August 1602, however, Francis does account for the Assumption of Mary's body. Francis de Sales, ed. Lewis Fiorelli O.S.F.S, *On Our Lady*, Charlotte, North Carolina: TAN Books, 1985, 15. See also Vincent, *Histoire mariale*, 1001-2.

⁶⁸ *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. Rev. Henry Benedict Mackey, O.S.B., vol. II of the series 'Library of St. Francis de Sales', London: Burns & Oates; New York: Benziger Brothers, 1884, 321.

⁶⁹ 'la douleur du Fils fut alors *une épée* tranchante qui passa au travers du cœur de la Mère,' VII, xiii, 705.

⁷⁰ 'holocauste parfait pour tous les péchés du monde,' VII, xiii, 705.

⁷¹ 'un assaut impétueux du divin amour,' VII, xiv, 705.

⁷² VII, xiv, 706.

⁷³ 'le divin amour croissait à chaque moment dans le cœur virginal de notre glorieuse Dame, mais par des croissances douces, paisibles et continues, sans agitation, ni secousse, ni violence quelconque,' VII, xiv, 707.

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I am not saying, Theotimus, that in the very holy Virgin's soul, there were not two portions, and thus two appetites, one according to spirit and superior reason, the other according to the senses and inferior reason, such that she could sense the aversions and contradictions of one appetite to the other; for such travails were found even in Our Lord her Son.⁷⁴

Like every human being – even Jesus himself – Mary knew what it was to experience the world through her bodily senses as they relayed information to her ‘inferior reason,’⁷⁵ and thus could judge experiential knowledge against the higher faculties of the mind and intellect. But because she was conceived without sin, Mary, though a witness to ‘difficulties, oppositions and contradictions’⁷⁶ in the world around her, was never herself troubled by any untoward affections, and thus no form of ‘natural appetite or act of the senses ever ended in sin, not even venial sin.’⁷⁷ On the contrary, Francis says, Mary was able to harness her experiential knowledge of others’ ‘thorns’ to increase her own ‘flowers’ or heavenly virtues. Having chosen love, like Martha’s sister Mary, the mother of the Lord only watched it flourish and grow; she never allowed it to wane, but only to advance, that her union with her Son might also grow in perfection.

Francis completes his second chapter concerning the death of Mary through one final imaginative comparison. Just as, Francis says, iron can be prevented from being attracted to a loadstone by certain physical qualities or substances, so five qualities of the human condition can keep the heart from God (sin, riches, sensual pleasure, pride or vanity, and self-love). Mary’s heart knew no such obstacles. Her heart, ‘made for God’⁷⁸ as every human heart is, allowed Mary to unite herself to her Son ‘in an incomparable union, through gentle, peaceful, effortless ecstasies,’⁷⁹ drawn to him as inexorably as iron to a magnet. Consequently, Francis notes, echoing Song 1:3, ‘[T]he death of this Virgin was gentler than one can imagine, her Son drawing her sweetly to himself through *the fragrance of his perfumes*, and she flowing most amiably toward their sacred scent into the bosom of goodness of her Son.’⁸⁰ Notice that even Francis, creative chronicler of Mary’s sweet and

⁷⁴ ‘Je ne dis pas, Théotime, qu’en l’âme de la très sainte Vierge il n’y eût deux portions, et par conséquent deux appétits, l’un selon l’esprit et la raison supérieure, l’autre selon les sens et la raison inférieure, en sorte qu’elle pouvait sentir des répugnances et contrariétés de l’un à l’autre appétit; car ce travail se trouva même en Notre-Seigneur son Fils,’ VII, xiv, 707.

⁷⁵ Francis uses Aquinas’ terminology. *Summa Theologiae*, First Part, Qn 79, Art. 9, Obj. 4. <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1079.htm#article9>. Accessed 31 July 2024.

⁷⁶ ‘difficultés, oppositions, et contradictions,’ VII, xiv, 707.

⁷⁷ ‘appétit naturel ni les mouvements des sens n’arrivaient jamais jusques au péché, non pas même au péché véniel,’ VII, xiv, 707.

⁷⁸ ‘fait pour Dieu,’ VII, xiv, 708.

⁷⁹ ‘d’une union incomparable, par des extases douces, paisibles et sans effort,’ VII, xiv, 709.

⁸⁰ ‘Si que la mort de cette Vierge fut plus douce qu’on ne se peut imaginer, son Fils l’attirant suavement à l’odeur de ses parfums, et elle s’écoulant très amiablement après la senteur sacrée d’iceux dedans le sein de la bonté de son Fils,’ VII, xiv, 709.

peaceful death, cannot begin to *imagine* this final moment. As noted earlier, Mary can leave her body behind without a thought as she delights in the fullness of Christ's love, intimately nestled in the bosom of her Son's goodness, as he once nestled in her lap and sucked at her breast.

Francis concludes his chapter about Mary's peaceful death by observing that, 'At the Cross, love had given this divine Spouse [Mary] the supreme pains of death; it was certainly reasonable that in the end, death gave her the sovereign delights of love.'⁸¹ Death provided Mary with boundless pleasures – those self-same delights of which the woman Mary, having known the intimacy of carrying her child in the womb, at her breast and in her arms, and of being carried in his pierced side, might well have dreamt throughout her life, as Francis had noted many chapters before:

[I]f ever she dreamt, as Joseph did of old, of her future grandeur, when in heaven she would be *clothed with the sun, crowned with stars, the moon at her feet*, that is, surrounded by her Son's glory, crowned with that of the Saints, the universe below her; or if, like Jacob, she saw the progress and the fruits of Redemption effected by her Son for the sake of Angels and men, Theotimus, who could ever imagine the immensity of such great delights? Such conversations with her dear Child, such sweetness on all sides!⁸²

Having known perfect, embodied union with her Son throughout her lifetime – as source of his humanity, she found union in and with his human person – in death Mary passes beyond the tangible embodiment of her relationship with Jesus as maternal caregiver and suffering witness to his pain, one that allows her to exercise and enjoy fully her status as divine Spouse and Queen of Heaven in sweet colloquies with him for all eternity.

Mary as Divine Spouse and Queen of Heaven

Readers of St Francis de Sales have long noted his consistent and extensive utilization of imagery associated with the Beloved and his Spouse in the Song of Songs as an essential paradigm for the relationship between God and the human soul.⁸³ And, as we have seen, Francis frequently paraphrases the Song to describe Mary's multi-faceted relationship with

⁸¹ 'L'amour avait donné près de la Croix à cette divine Epouse les suprêmes douleurs de la mort; certes, il était raisonnable qu'enfin la mort lui donnât les souveraines délices de l'amour,' VII, xiv, 709.

⁸² 'Mais si jamais elle songea, comme l'ancien Joseph, à sa grandeur future, quand au ciel elle serait *revêtue du soleil, couronnée d'étoiles, et la lune à ses pieds*, c'est-à-dire tout environnée de la gloire de son Fils, couronnée de celle des Saints, et l'univers sous elle; ou que, comme Jacob, elle vit le progrès et les fruits de la Rédemption faite par son Fils en faveur des Anges et des hommes, Théotime, qui pourrait jamais s'imaginer l'immensité de si grandes délices? Que de colloques avec son cher Enfant, que de suavités de toutes parts!' III, viii, 506.

⁸³ See Suzanne C. Toczyski, "'Qu'il me baise d'un baiser de sa bouche": La Sulamite dans le *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* de Saint François de Sales,' *Œuvres & critiques* XLV: 1, 2020, 117-29.

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her Son, for Mary is the perfect embodiment of all the soul can aspire to in her relationship with God. In incorporating these paraphrases, Francis freely adapts references to intimacy to suit his purposes (the 'kisses' of Song 1:2 become maternal kisses; Mary's womb is the 'garden' of Song 5:1). Quoting Book X of the *Treatise*, Blaise Arminjon affirms that, 'Saint Francis de Sales perceived that the words of the Song [6:9] apply fully to the Virgin Mary only, to her of whom Max Thurian said that her Son led her "from the state of mother to that of bride."' ⁸⁴

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that, among the many titles Francis applies to Mary in the *Treatise*, that of Spouse plays a small yet significant role in his theology of the perfect love of God. Indeed, Francis states categorically: 'no mortal creature ... ever loved the celestial Spouse with this unique and perfectly pure love except the Virgin who was both his Spouse and Mother at once'. ⁸⁵ Mary is, Francis asserts, quoting Song 6:9, 'the utterly *unique dove*, the entirely *perfect Spouse*' ⁸⁶ – not, as noted above, in any carnal sense, for Francis clearly states that Mary's virginity was 'more worthy and more honorable than that of angels'. ⁸⁷ Yet, even when Mary is imagined as the consummate maternal presence, seeking her Son in death, and, in her own voice, echoing the Spouse of Song 3 – 'I seek, she would have said, my Child who is the life of my life ...' – Francis weaves in references to the intimacy of lover and Beloved, as Mary continues: 'Everywhere my loving heart makes me seek to be united to this lovable Child, my Beloved. In short,' Francis concludes, 'the soul's hope in this union is simply to be with her Lover.' ⁸⁸ Although such references are relatively few in number in the *Treatise*, through his imaginative evocation of Mary as Spouse, Francis de Sales allows Mary's embodiment as woman to be exemplary in all its fullness. ⁸⁹

If Mary is the '*perfect Spouse*,' she finds her ultimate station at the right hand of her son, enthroned as Queen of Heaven, an honor prepared, Francis states, from her very conception: 'like a special garden that was to carry the fruit of life, [Mary] was made to flourish in every kind of perfection, her Son of eternal love having dressed his Mother *in gilded dress*, ... that she might be Queen at his right hand, that is, the first of all the elect, who would

⁸⁴ Arminjon, *Cantata*, 294.

⁸⁵ 'il n'y eut, comme je pense, jamais créature mortelle qui aimât l'Époux céleste de ce seul amour si parfaitement pur, sinon la Vierge qui fut son Épouse et Mère tout ensemble,' X, vi, 826. Rubin notes that 'Such contradictions within the person of Mary date back at least to the Council of Ephesus' (*Mother of God*, 47), citing Ambrose as having introduced the notion of Mary as Spouse (28). Arminjon quotes Augustine regarding 1 John: 'The bed of the Bridegroom was the womb of the Virgin. For in this virginal womb, they united together, the Bridegroom and the Bride, the Bridegroom Word and the Bride flesh' (135).

⁸⁶ 'la tout *unique colombe*, la toute *parfaite* Épouse,' III, viii, 504.

⁸⁷ 'plus digne et plus honorable que celle des anges,' III, viii, 504.

⁸⁸ "'Je cherche, eût-elle dit, mon Enfant qui est la vie de ma vie ... [P]artout mon cœur amoureux me fait rechercher d'être unie à cet aimable Enfant, mon cher Bien-aimé.'" En somme, la prétention de l'âme en cette union, n'est autre que d'être avec son Amant,' VII, 3, 673.

⁸⁹ Here Francis follows in the late medieval tradition described by Ellington: 'Allegorical use of the Song of Songs often led preachers to speak of Christ as Mary's lover or spouse in the Incarnation (Ellington, *Sacred Soul*, 63). In the early modern period, St Lawrence of Brindisi and St Robert Bellarmine likewise discuss Mary's 'marriage' with the divine (Ellington, *Sacred Soul*, 159-161).

enjoy the *delights at the divine right hand*.⁹⁰ Moreover, resplendently robed, Mary is crowned not only with love, Francis says, but also ‘with her own Son who is the sovereign object of love, since *children are the crown* of their fathers and mothers.’⁹¹ Christ himself, on earth Mary’s human Son, becomes in heaven the diadem she wears, a sign of their ongoing union and intimacy.

As both Queen and Mother, in heaven and on earth, Mary is able to give voice to her profound and perfect love, as every Christian soul is called to do: Mary ‘praises and magnifies the Divinity more highly, more sacredly and more deliciously than all other creatures together could ever do.’⁹² Ultimately, the Christian soul is called to express its desire for union with the divine by ‘imitating the very holy Queen and *Mother of love*, whose sacred soul perpetually magnified and exalted God.’⁹³ Queen though she may be, Mary remains the human embodiment of the soul’s ongoing desire to praise God for all eternity.

Conclusion

If, as Antonio Escudero has noted, in the writings of St Francis de Sales, ‘[W]e 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,’⁹⁴ clearly it is perfect love, as unequivocally embodied by Mary, that Francis establishes as the consummate model for all human love of God in the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Mary, whose own humanity afforded the Son of God the human component of his identity, allowing Christ to become human in order to save all of humanity, loved her Son and Beloved more perfectly than any other, as virgin and mother, spouse and queen. Offering an excellent example of the Ignatian imagination at work, Francis demonstrates that, in her every embodiment of perfect love, Mary herself revealed her Son to the world; in Mary, Francis finds an inestimable vessel brimming over with love, a love never static but always and forever ‘perpetually enflamed with the holy love she received from her Son,’⁹⁵ a love that never ceases to ‘increase as it ascends to Heaven, its place of origin.’⁹⁶

Engaging profoundly with the woman Mary’s experience ‘in the body’ – her embodied experience of womanhood – Francis has, unlike any theologian before him, grappled

⁹⁰ ‘comme un jardin d’élite qui devait porter le fruit de vie, [Mary] fut rendue florissante en toutes sortes de perfections, ce Fils de l’amour éternel ayant ainsi paré sa Mère *de robe d’or* [...] afin qu’elle fût *la Reine de sa dextre*, c’est-à-dire la première de tous les élus, qui jouirait *des délices de la dextre* divine,’ II, vi, 426. Ellington explores references to Mary as ‘an “enclosed garden of delights”’ (*Sacred Soul*, 61-5).

⁹¹ ‘de son Fils propre qui est le souverain objet de l’amour, puisque les *enfants sont la couronne* de leurs pères et mères,’ II, vi, 427.

⁹² ‘loue et magnifie la Divinité, plus hautement, plus saintement et plus délicieusement que tout le reste des créatures ensemble ne saurait jamais faire,’ V, xi, 597.

⁹³ ‘à l’imitation de la très sainte Reine et *Mère d’amour*, de laquelle *l’âme* sacrée magnifiait et agrandissait perpétuellement Dieu,’ V, vi, 585.

⁹⁴ Escudero, ‘Mary,’ no page number, see Section 3.

⁹⁵ ‘perpétuellement enflammé du saint amour qu’elle a reçu de son Fils,’ III, viii, 507.

⁹⁶ ‘prendre des accroissements incroyables jusques au Ciel, lieu de leur origine,’ III, viii, 507.

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profoundly with what it means for Mary to love God by exploring her physical and spiritual experience of the divine. It is this depth of understanding which we foreground in this study of his *Treatise on the Love of God*. Moreover, while Ellington has aptly noted a shift toward ‘the primacy of the soul and spiritual life over the body’⁹⁷ in Post-Tridentine Europe, as we have demonstrated here, Mary’s embodied (physical) experiences as a woman are essential to Francis’ spirituality and theology of the love of God, providing not only examples of the perfect love of God, but also entry into complex theological topics such as God’s good pleasure.

‘If there is only one mother of Christ according to the flesh, all are begetting Christ according to the faith,’ St Ambrose wrote.⁹⁸ The medieval theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart asked, ‘What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace?’⁹⁹ St Francis de Sales’ ultimate desire is to give flesh to the perfection of love himself, as Mary did, to embody that love, that he might one day enjoy perfect union with Christ – and with the Blessed Mother – in Heaven:

[W]hat will it be like when our spirits, gloriously illumined by the blessed light, will see this eternal birth from which the Son proceeds, ‘God from God, light from light, true God from true God,’ divinely and eternally! Then shall our spirit be joined through incomprehensible delight to this delicious object and, by our undeviating attention, will remain eternally united to him!¹⁰⁰

If to proclaim the love of Christ is to embody the love of Christ, then one might well judge that Francis’ wish has been eternally granted, thanks to his imaginative proclamation of the embodied love of Mary, mother, spouse and queen, throughout his own masterpiece, the *Treatise on the Love of God*.

⁹⁷ Ellington, *Sacred Soul*, 186.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Arminjon, *Cantata*, 207.

⁹⁹ ‘Sermon 88,’ in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed., Maurice O’C. Walshe, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009, 429. The concept dates back to Origen: ‘and when you have been made worthy of the shadow, His body from which the shadow is born will in a manner of speaking come to you’ (Rubin, *Mother of God*, 15).

¹⁰⁰ ‘que sera-ce quand nos esprits glorieusement illuminés de la clarté bienheureuse, verront cette éternelle naissance par laquelle le Fils procède, “Dieu de Dieu, lumière de lumière, vrai Dieu d’un vrai Dieu,” divinement et éternellement! Alors donc, notre esprit se joindra par une complaisance incompréhensible à cet objet si délicieux, et par une invariable attention lui demeurera éternellement uni,’ III, xii, 517.