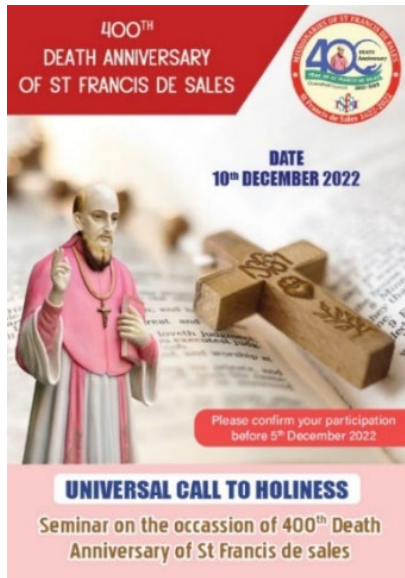




From Canticle to Treatise and Back: St. Francis de Sales on The Love of God

by

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10 December 2022

As a contribution to this international seminar for the jubilee year of the fourth centenary of the death of St. Francis de Sales, this paper addresses the Doctor of the Church's *Treatise on the Love of God*. No single paper can do justice to this twelve-part masterpiece! Therefore, we shall narrow the focus to consider the *Treatise* in light of the biblical *Canticle of Canticles*, and the little known "exposition" that St. Francis de Sales wrote about that long before he developed the *Treatise*.

Scholars around the world have pointed to the close connection between the biblical *Canticle* and the Salesian *Treatise*. James Langelaan, OSFS notes that in his preaching about the *Canticle*, "St. Francis tells his audience, 'The spouse places the first elements of the knowledge of God in the knowledge of self,'" whereas in the *Treatise*, "he argues the other way around" to say that "we arrive at the knowledge of ourselves as the image and likeness of the One and Triune God."¹ André Ravier, SJ claims that in the *Treatise*, St. Francis de Sales does not seek to explain the mysteries of God or of man, but exposes the reader to the light of the Bible (especially the *Canticle of Canticles*) and shows how the love of God is in accord with, even rooted in, familiar human experiences of love.² And André Brix, OSFS "truly wonders whether the *Treatise*, itself, was originally envisioned as a 'commentary' on the *Canticle of Canticles*."³

What this paper proposes is a somewhat different connection. Its twofold suggestion is (1) that the two Salesian works, when seen together, disclose a distinctly narrative approach to the Love of God and (2) that this approach taken by St. Francis de Sales creates a legacy in which we in the Salesian tradition answer our call to holiness.

To support these claims, the first part of the paper will consider these two portrayals of the Love of God, the one told by the sacred author in the biblical *Canticle of Canticles*, and the one told by St. Francis de Sales in the *Treatise on the Love of God*. About each of them, we will first summarize

the way the "story" of the Love of God is told, for although they are very different in form, the two works tell a similar tale in terms of how that love operates. Then we will look at our patron saint's experience with each story, in terms of what influenced him and how he approached them in his own writing. Lastly, we will briefly review the reception of the saint's writings about the Love of God, in terms of their contribution to Salesian spirituality.

Then, in the second part of the paper, we will suggest how these two tales of the Love of God help us to understand the universal call to holiness in its specifically Salesian conception. The dual love story that so influenced the life and work of St. Francis de Sales flows from a "real mysticism" that informs his writings and opens to us the way of carrying on our patron saint's legacy of living the Love of God.

Part One - ON THE LOVE OF GOD

The *Canticle of Canticles*

(1) Literature

This short book is a collection of love poems, not unlike others in the Ancient Near East, in which a young Sulamite maiden and a shepherd communicate out loud, but not necessarily in direct address to each other, about their mutual attraction. Its title is the Hebrew way of expressing a superlative; in literal English, it is the "songest song."



The book pertains to that portion of the Old Testament known as "Wisdom" literature or "Writings." The texts in this section pertain neither to the Law nor to the Prophets. More importantly, the distinguishing feature of these writings is that they communicate inspired wisdom not from the "top down" (as in God handing the Law to Moses, or delivering a message to the Prophets) but from the "bottom up" – that is, they begin from human experience to lead to an understanding of God.

In its form, the *Canticle of Canticles* does not offer practical guidance (like the Book of Proverbs), nor does it disclose a speculative inquiry (as in the Book of Job). Instead, the entire book is thoroughly "lyrical" – written in poetic verse, it is very much a "song" about love.

In its literal sense, the *Canticle* speaks of human love, with poems disclosing the thoughts, affections, and actions of a young woman and man, along with comments from others (the "daughters") who know them. In an allegorical sense, despite never mentioning God, the book has been interpreted to reflect aspects of a divine relationship, as in the covenant between God

and Israel, or the relation between Christ and the Church, or the relation between God and the individual soul.⁴

This story begins from a natural human desire, expressed in the opening verses by the female protagonist: "Let him kiss me (she says) with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine, better than the fragrance of your perfumes" (1:2-3).

It then proceeds dramatically through a series of poems that express how the lovers yearn to find each other and the obstacles they encounter when trying to find each other across distances. Drawn to each other, their desire to be together inspires them to run toward each other.

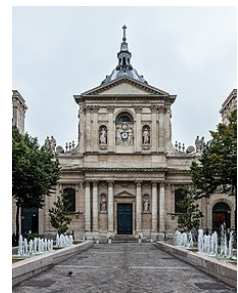
They follow this impulse, this inner call to seek and find, based on the beauty that they sense in each other. Throughout the poetic interchanges, we find descriptions of each of the lovers that reveal their mutual attractiveness and impel their movement toward union. They adopt a traditional poetic form – the *wasf* – which describes physical attributes in terms of the natural world. For example, he says of her: "How beautiful you are, my friend, how beautiful you are! Your eyes are (like) doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead" (4:1; cf. 5:10–16; 6:5b–7; 7:1–7). That image may not appeal to our sensibilities, but back in the day it was apparently a nice thing to say!

Eventually, and ideally, the two embrace. Listen to their words, which still resonant in the Salesian tradition. Early on, the woman expresses the intention to "take hold (of him) and never let go" (3:4), a verse that echoes today as the motto ("*tenui nec dimittam*") of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. In the end, the tale concludes with a description of the incomparably powerful hold that love has on them: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death" (8:6), an image familiar to us from our profession of vows.

(2) *Influences in the life of Francis de Sales*

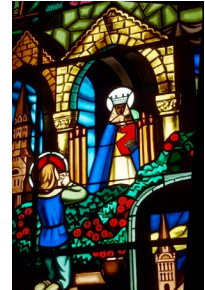
These familiar verses and images play such a strong part in our tradition precisely because of the profound and formative influence this *Canticle* had on our patron saint.⁵ This biblical poetry provides for St. Francis de Sales a "universe of meaning" that has subsequently been transmitted through our tradition.⁶

That influence came primarily from lessons taught to our patron while he was a student in Paris. There he learned about the *Canticle* from Gilbert Générard, a Benedictine whose lectures were both academically rigorous and spiritually rich. Générard introduced Francis to the spiritual sense of the *Canticle*, as symbolizing the relationship between God and human beings, individually or collectively. As Ravier notes, "This was a revelation for Francis. From that time, he was no longer able to conceive of the spiritual life except as a love story, the most beautiful of love stories."⁷



This love story would prove decisive in the critical life event that Francis would soon experience in that same city.

Well-documented by his many biographers, the "crisis" (of anxiety or despair) or "temptation" our patron saint experienced reveals the profound contrast between the understanding of the *Cantic* given him by Générard and the theological arguments concerning predestination proposed in lectures he heard at the Sorbonne. Perplexed by the tragic possibility that he was predestined to eternal damnation, Francis was mired in grief. Yet, when the dramatic combat raging within him does come to an end — through an evidently "mystical" experience before the statue of the Black Virgin, *Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance* — the love story of his life assumes a new and enduring sense. Francis emerges from this trial with real resolve: he has taken hold, never again to let go. His first wound of love having been healed, Francis learns from this experience that with God true happiness does not consist in the knowledge of the object loved but in the possession of it.



This is the conclusion to which Francis leads in writing his own “Mystical Exposition of the Cantic of Canticles.” That short work was written quite early compared to other works in the saint’s corpus.⁸ In it, he adopts the poetic text to explore, through a spiritual interpretation, “by how many degrees a soul, being in mental prayer, can climb to the highest consideration of God, and with which remedies the soul can be aided against many obstacles.” Like the biblical poetry, progress in prayer ends with a human-divine embrace, when “the soul, having surmounted all the obstacles, has no more need of remedies, but dwells absorbed in and united with God by a perfect devotion.”⁹

DISCOURSE #1 1st Obstacle: Recollection of Sensible Pleasures (in the past) Remedy: Desires and Petitions (asking) for Spiritual Goods 1st Degree: Consideration of God in Corporeal Things	DISCOURSE #3 3rd Obstacle: Human Praises Remedy: To Be Attentive to the Praises of God (to delight in what is divine) 3rd Degree: The Soul Considers God in Itself	DISCOURSE #5 5th Obstacle: Human Respects Remedy: Solitude 5th Degree: The Consideration of God in Himself, as God
DISCOURSE #2 2nd Obstacle: Imaginative Distractions (fantasies & sensible visions) Remedy: Attention to Inspiration 2nd Degree: Consideration of God in Spiritual Things, Outside of Himself	DISCOURSE #4 4th Obstacle: (fatigue of) Bodily Travail (and the sensible part) Remedy: Spiritual Conferences and Conversations 4th Degree: Meditation on God not in Himself, But in Humanity	DISCOURSE #6 The soul, having surmounted all the obstacles, has no more need of remedies, but dwells absorbed in and united with God by a perfect devotion.

The exposition is brief, but in it the story of the biblical *Canticle* and the story of prayer in a Salesian perspective are united. Each is narrated as a mystical conversation, corresponding to the attraction ("draw me") and movement ("we will follow") inspired by the Holy Spirit, and carried on in that secret colloquy which is so characteristic of true friends deeply in love with each other.

(3) Reception of the Salesian text

For reasons not explicitly given or otherwise known, St. Francis de Sales never published his "mystical exposition." Unlike his other works, this one came to light only after his death.

Perhaps he thought the writing was too personal, relaying an experience of prayer that was primarily his own. Perhaps he thought that his interpretation was not within the scholarly mainstream – as suggested by his calling it a "declaration" or "exposition" – and that it was far too early in his ecclesiastical writing career to be venturing into mystical realms of thought.

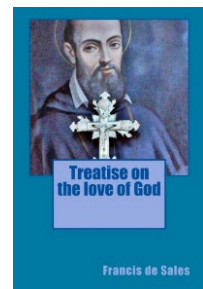
Nevertheless, the saint's interpretation of the *Canticles* is fully in keeping with tradition, as is evident from the approbation of Doctors in Theology on the faculty of Paris which is appended to the published text.¹⁰ And despite the tendency of modern historical biblical criticism "to ignore or disparage the traditional or 'allegorical' interpretation of previous centuries," that mode of spiritual interpretation, into which our patron saint's writing can be located, is nowadays making a comeback!¹¹

Still, the "Mystical Exposition" remains lesser known in the Salesian tradition – that is, until we encounter its subject as the foundation to Francis's profound interpretation of the Love of God in his master work.

The Treatise on the Love of God

(1) Literature

The "treatise" is just that – a systematic treatment of various aspects related to the love of God, specifically "the history of the birth, progress, decay, operations, properties, advantages and excellences of divine love."¹² Unlike the biblical poetry, this lengthy work is decidedly analytical, presenting "an immense mass of instruction, dogmatic and moral, on the science of the love of God."¹³



Nevertheless its purpose remains didactic, intended as a spiritual guide for those seeking holiness to be able to advance in their design. Based not merely on academic learning but on the saint's "attention to the service of souls,"¹⁴ this work discloses, according to Ravier, "how the doctrine of (Francis de Sales) is nothing but the explication of the spirituality of the Bible."¹⁵ Akin to the

spirituality of the *Canticle of Canticles*, we might say that the *Treatise* proceeds by narrating a story about the love of God like that poetic tale of the Sulamite and her shepherd.

As with the desired “kiss” with which the *Canticle* opened, so the *Treatise* begins with a consideration of the affinity of lovers (human and divine). With a focus on the universal anthropology of love, Francis writes about how love rules through a natural inclination (book 1), how love responds to being generated by divine Providence (book 2), how love leads us onward toward perfection in heaven (book 3), and how love runs the risk of decay and ruin on account of sin (book 4).

With more human psychology than biblical poetry, Francis’s description of this phenomenon of the Love of God highlights its dynamism and movement from attraction to affection to action. In this movement, love first desires – attracted to the good that God is through complacency and benevolence (book 5). Love then feels – continually cultivating an affection for God through meditation and contemplation (book 6) and at times experiencing union through ecstasy and rapture (book 7). Ultimately, love does – in acts of conformity to God’s “signified will” (book 8) and submission to God’s “Good Pleasure” (book 9).

And, as with the concluding embrace of the young lovers in the *Canticle*, devout love leads ultimately toward union with God. It is a love that puts God above all things (book 10), that unites the virtues (book 11), and that lives on in this life by making continual progress in the “school of love” modeled for us on Mount Calvary (book 12).

the AFFINITY of Love	the MOVEMENT of Love	the UNION of Love
love rules	love desires ... (attraction)	love puts God above all
I - natural inclination (Anthropology)	V - complacency & benevolence	X – covenant commandment
love responds	love prays ... (affection)	love unites the virtues
II – generation (Providence)	VI - meditation & contemplation	XI – authority of charity
love leads onward	VII – ecstasy & rapture	love means living this life
III – progress & perfection (heaven)	love wills ... (action)	XII – counsels for progress
love runs a risk	VIII – love of conformity (Signified Will)	
IV – decay & ruin (sin)	IX – love of submission (Good Pleasure)	

(2) Influences in the life of St. Francis de Sales

This story of the Love of God that Francis de Sales tells in the *Treatise* is influenced by several experiences in his life.¹⁶

Ravier tells of Francis's relationship with a humble village woman (Pernette Boutey), whom he considered writing about in his original idea for a book on the "Life of Holy Charity." It was this inspiration that would lead, eventually, to the book we know as the *Treatise*.¹⁷



Francis, himself, admits to the great influence on his work exercised by St. Jane de Chantal and the first Visitation community. Of them, he poignantly acknowledges in the Preface to the *Treatise* that

as their purity and piety of spirit have oftentimes given me great consolation, so have I striven to return them the like by a frequent distribution of the holy word ... and I owe a good part of that which now I communicate to you to this blessed Society because she who is the mother of them and rules them, knowing that I was writing upon this subject, and yet that scarcely was I able to accomplish it without God's very special assistance, and their continual urging, took a constant care to pray and get prayers for this end ...¹⁸

And our patron's own learning about and personal experience of the Love of God inform all his writings. In composing the *Treatise*, he admits: "I have touched on a number of theological questions, proposing simply, not so much what I anciently learnt in disputations, as what attention to the service of souls, and my twenty-four years spent in holy preaching have made me think most conducive to the glory of the Gospel and of the Church."¹⁹



Based on this autobiographical influence, it should not come as a surprise to see a close connection between his earlier "Mystical Exposition of the Canticle of Canticles" and his treatment of the Love of God in the *Treatise*.

On the one hand, the thought of both concerns the same subject. Acknowledging the literal interpretation of the biblical book, Francis writes in his preface to the "Mystical Exposition" that the poems there can also be interpreted spiritually to speak of supernatural love. For him that sacred story "represents the holy and chaste loves of their marriage that are produced by mental prayer, which is nothing else than the consideration of God and of divine things."²⁰ That consideration becomes the foundation to all that the *Treatise* will expound.

On the other hand, the dynamism at work in the *Canticle* and the *Treatise* operates through a similar sensibility, even a corresponding language. The desire of love expressed poetically by the Sulamite and her shepherd becomes in the *Treatise* a thought more systematically expressed by

a spiritual master. Yet in both, what inspires the saint is a lyrical longing for love. As Brix claims, "In the Cantic of Canticles, he has so assimilated this song of love that his entire expression is penetrated by it; he has become, in his turn, the true 'chanter of the Love of God'. But he wishes that we, possessed in turn by this love, also would sing, and this is the motive for the Treatise."²¹

(3) Reception of the Salesian text

That song has been sung ever since the Salesian masterpiece was published, though not always well. One English translator spells out two "considerable difficulties" in the reception of the *Treatise*, one not long after the book appeared, the other ongoing.

The first is a celebrated public controversy between Bossuet and Fenelon concerning the matter of Quietism. Because each of these well-known authors invoked the *Treatise*, however mistaken their reading of it was, this public spat tended to lessen the authority of, and regard for, the saint's chief work.²²

The second, and ongoing, challenge arises from the density of the *Treatise's* ascetical theology. As the same translator points out, this "is not a book, like other spiritual books, treating only a section or single element of the devout life, but it is one by which and on which the whole spiritual life can be formed." The saintly author of the *Treatise* provides a thorough science of loving God, a veritable philosophy of life for those advanced in holiness, and a deep psychological dive into the motives for serving God – all in a work that is part manual and part prayer-book.²³

Nevertheless, the Church has repeatedly expressed her approbation of this spiritual masterpiece. All the popes who have written major documents about St. Francis de Sales have made reference to it, with accolades for its saintly inspiration, its literary fascination, and its holy exploration.

Pope Pius IX	Pope Pius XI	Pope Paul VI	Pope John Paul II	Pope Benedict XVI
				
1877 - <i>Dives in Misericordia Deus</i> apostolic letter proclaiming SFDS a "Doctor of the Church"	1923 - <i>Rerum omnia perturbationem</i> encyclical on the 3 rd centenary of SFDS death	1967 - <i>Sabaudiae Gemma</i> apostolic letter on the 4 th centenary of SFDS birth	2002 - Letter on the 4 th centenary of SFDS episcopal ordination	2011 - General Audience

In the jubilee that preceded this year's, Pius XI wrote that "The Treatise on the Love of God ... is a much more important and significant book than any of the others he published" and he said that in it the saint "gave the impression that what he wrote flowed no less from this heart and the depths of his being than from his intellect."²⁴ Most recently, Benedict XVI spoke of it with true admiration, noting how "In an intensely flourishing season of mysticism The Treatise on the Love of God was a true and proper summa and at the same time a fascinating literary work."²⁵

Part Two - on the SALESIAN CALL TO HOLINESS

Both the *Treatise*, and the *Cantic* on which it is based, speak to the universal call to holiness that we celebrate during this jubilee year by providing a distinctively Salesian way in which we can understand and live the Love of God.

(1) The "Story of Stories"

For our patron saint, the Love of God remains a veritable song – something heard and sung. It is heard in the lyrics of the *Cantic of Canticles*, whose poetry St. Francis de Sales read and "exposed" in light of his experience with prayer. It is sung in the operatic *Treatise* by which St. Francis dramatizes the relationship between God and the devout soul.



In his life and in his writings, Francis de Sales so appropriated the biblical song of love that, as Luigi Groppi claims, he possessed its language, its content, and its phrases in such a way that he used them as we do the words of our mother tongue."²⁶ In turn, he provides to us a lived intelligence of Sacred Scripture, the entirety of which Pope Francis recently described as a "Story of stories" – a meta-narrative that tells "the great love story between God and humanity."²⁷ The plot of that sacred story moves in parallel ways in the *Cantic* and the *Treatise*.

The great love story begins with a deep understanding of *who we are*, as created by God. Whether expressed as a sought-after "kiss" or a natural "inclination," the point of departure is found in what our patron saint understands about being human, namely, that in himself, as in every human person, there dwells a central impulse which aspires to union with God. This universal desire, already created within us, disposes us toward the happiness for which we long and initiates our movement toward the One who is our ultimate good.²⁸

What carries along and sustains that dynamic movement is nothing less than a *spiritual seduction*. It happens in the *Cantic* when the lovers imagine and describe each other's beauty, their mutual attraction thereby impelling each toward the other. We learn of it in the *Treatise* when love is considered in terms of complacency and benevolence, inspired through meditation and contemplation, and called forth in acts of virtue by which we love God and neighbor. As Jacques Hennequin notes, this dynamism of spiritual seduction, in the Salesian perspective, does not simply have a captivating sense; rather, it gives structure to how divine love functions, "in the sense that the movement of man toward God responds to the movement of God toward man."²⁹

That movement leads, ultimately, to its forever *fulfillment*. In the *Cantic*, this happens when the bond of love that is "strong as death" becomes the "seal" upon the hearts of the maiden and her shepherd. In the *Treatise*, it begins to occur when we come to the realization that our

fulfillment as human beings lies in "belonging to God" in such a way that we love God above all things, that we prefer God to every other love, and that we wish to be God's whatever the cost.³⁰

(2) "Real Mysticism"

The similarity between these two works suggests that, from *Cantic* to *Treatise*, St. Francis de Sales understands the seductive Love of God in a mystical way. Our response to that love comes in answering the call to holiness.

However, as Ravier notes, the Salesian sense of "mysticism" is not limited to the common understanding of that term. Rather than denoting the opposite of asceticism, Salesian mysticism lifts us beyond the here and now of spiritual disciplines and religious exercises to embrace the love of God in the whole of our spiritual lives, as a complete participation in the mystery of God.³¹

In this respect, the wisdom of Salesian spirituality remains comparable to the Old Testament "Writings" in which the story of the *Cantic of Canticles* is included.³² In terms of understanding sacred love, our tradition begins with what is profoundly human – what is "real" – and from there proceeds to the God who reveals and fulfills all that human beings are to be. Put simply, we who have been created by the Love of God have also been created for the Love of God.



This may explain why for Francis the human heart plays such a central role in the spiritual life.³³ Cultivating affections in the heart serves as the key to his teaching on mental prayer; similarly, persuading the heart lies at the core of his method for preaching.³⁴ And, as Ravier rightly claims, the whole of the *Treatise on the Love of God* is contained in Francis's emphasis on "sentiment" over reasoning in the high point of the soul.³⁵ There, in particular, we experience the Love of God that appeals to us precisely as human beings and calls us to respond with lives of holiness.

(3) Living legacy of holy love

This universal call to holiness brings us back to the foundations of that Salesian spirituality we have inherited.

In his paradigmatic worldview, St. Francis de Sales envisions the summit of holiness as an *inter-connection of hearts*, where the divine and the human embrace. As Wendy Wright describes it,

For the Savoyard bishop all human hearts were created to beat in rhythm with their Creator's dynamic, creative and generative heart. Because human hearts are created by God who is goodness and love itself they too are essentially good and always retain their original orientation to love. Yet as they are wounded by sin human hearts are, as it were, arrhythmic and must be restored to their intended pulse by "living Jesus." They do this through the mediation of the one heart that

is both fully human and fully divine. The heart of Jesus thus must be exchanged for human hearts. It is this interiorized process that is most characteristic of Salesian spirituality which is grounded in his reading of Scripture.³⁶

That interiorizing process is the song that the biblical story of stories sings. It is the song a young and perplexed Francis heard. It is the song whose lyrics the older and wiser Francis writes. And now it is the song that the saint desires for us to sing.

That song plays out in our hearts as we learn to love God and neighbor. In Francis's mystical approach, these loves are inseparable. Preaching about the first verses of the biblical love story, he says:

it is indeed necessary to kiss Our Lord *with the kiss of the mouth* during this mortal life, which is made in meditation and contemplation, where the soul replenishes itself with good thoughts and holy considerations that it may be converted afterward to the utility of the neighbor. ... Do you wish to know if you have prayed well and if you have kissed Our Lord with the *kiss of the mouth*? Look to see whether you have a breast full of sweet and charitable affections towards your neighbor and whether your heart is disposed to provide for him in all his necessities and to support him lovingly in all sorts of occasions.³⁷

By holding together love of God and love of neighbor – by linking the heart, drawn by affective love of God's mysteries, and the soul, in which effective love chooses to conform and submit to God's will – Francis's approach to love goes beyond the spiritual mysticism of his time. Then, as sometimes also now, holiness was conceived as a complete renunciation of life in the world or was thought to be reserved for a contemplative elite.³⁸ Instead, our patron adopts a "real" mysticism that presents love in human terms, thereby offering offers us a practical way to live this call to holiness.



By living that dual commandment through prayer and virtue, we enter into the song that is the Love of God. In this our call to holiness is sounded, a call which, in our Salesian legacy, concerns the totality of a life of devotion.

Holiness is not a spiritual dimension added onto the rest of life. It is not a matter of the disciplines we keep or the exercises we do. It is not just one aspect among many in this world. Our holiness *is* our life.

The call to holiness, in this Salesian sense, is our response to the song of redeeming love that God sings through the voice of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It is our song of the Love of God that we live in prayer and in practice.

In this jubilee year, let us enter into this song – the song poetically sung by the Sulamite and her shepherd in the *Cantic of Canticles*, the song whose lyrics are set forth by our patron saint in the *Treatise on the Love of God*, the song that brings us back, once again, to the legacy of Salesian Spirituality that is now ours to carry on.

+ May God Be Blessed +

NOTES:

¹ James S. Langelan, *The Philosophy and Theology of Love According to St. Francis de Sales*, Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 67 (Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), pp. 76-77.

² André Ravier, S.J., *Initiation à la lecture du Traité de l'Amour de Dieu de Saint François de Sales* (Paris: Ateliers Henry Labat, 1986), pp. 6-7.

³ André Brix, OSFS (ed.), *St. Francis de Sales and the Cantic of Canticles*, trans. Thomas Dailey, OSFS (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1989), p. 13.

⁴ See Anthony R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S., "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs in St. Francis de Sales: How a Saint Learned 'The Lessons of Love'," *Salesianum* 66 (2004): 36-42, for a survey of modern variations on the spiritual interpretation of the Song.

⁵ See Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S., "A Song of Prayer: Reading the Cantic of Canticles with St. Francis de Sales," *Studia Mystica* 15/4 (1992): 72-76.

⁶ Ceresko, "Lessons of Love," 32-33: "the Song's celebration of love helped Francis to uncover love's manifold dimensions. The words, images, and expressions of the work provided a means of probing and analyzing his own and others' experience. He created a "universe of meaning" out of the Song's language in order to attract and motivate his reader or listener to pursue the path he pointed out: to love God and neighbor as the highest and noblest achievement possible to human creatures."

⁷ André Ravier, S.J., *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint*, trans. Joseph D. Bowler, O.S.F.S. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 31.

⁸ The editors of the *Oeuvres* of St. Francis de Sales (tome XXI, page 10) suggest that the Mystical Exposition be dated 1602-1604 (i.e., after his work in the Chablais, but earlier than the writing of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* in 1608). The editors claim that an earlier dating, prior to the redaction of *The Defense of the Standard of the Holy Cross* in 1598, would be too early "given the authority with which he writes." To the contrary, I would argue that the earlier period associated with the end of his studies (1590-1592) is more likely because of his personal experience of the "story" narrated in the work and because his desire not to publish this work suggests a time before he has gained ecclesiastical authority.

⁹ *St. Francis de Sales and the Cantic of Canticles*, pp. 119, 142.

¹⁰ *St. Francis de Sales and the Cantic of Canticles*, p. 146

¹¹ Ceresko, "Lessons of Love," 37.

¹² "Preface" to the *Treatise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), p. 41. NOTE: Quotations from the *Treatise* are taken from this CCEL online edition, with page numbers referring to the PDF version, downloadable at <https://ccel.org/ccel/d/desales/love/cache/love.pdf>

¹³ "Translator's Introduction" to the *Treatise*, p. 19.

¹⁴ "Preface" to the *Treatise*, p. 44.

¹⁵ Ravier, *Initiation à la lecture du Traité*, 8.

¹⁶ J.-M. Courcoux, "S. François de Sales et le Traité de l'amour de Dieu," *Oratoriana* 6/21 (1936): 52-68, insists that the master lines of doctrine in the *Treatise* are founded on the saint's experience as "converter, director, theologian and mystic," thereby situating this work in the same realm as his Letters and Spiritual Conferences, where "the Christian life is summed up in the life of charity." See also Ceresko, "Lessons of Love," 46-47.

¹⁷ Ravier, *Sage and Saint*, 154-154. According to the privately published notes of Fr. John Conmy, O.S.F.S., the idea for the *Treatise* developed over several years. "On February 11, 1607, St. Francis de Sales wrote to St. Jane de Chantal that whatever free time he could find, be it only a quarter of an hour, he was devoting to the writing of the life of a saint about whom he would speak often: the life of St. Charity. ... On February 15, 1609, he wrote to Archbishop Pierre de Villars that he was thinking of publishing two booklets dealing with the two tablets of the Law: one, consequently, would deal with the love of God, and the other with the love of the neighbor. ... In June of 1610, the Visitation was founded. St. Francis de Sales' contacts with the first Visitandines gave him a clear insight into the kind of book that was needed: not a few practical counsels, but a thorough treatment of the spiritual life, from the most lofty states of the soul to the most humble, from speculative considerations to practical advice."

¹⁸ "Preface" to the *Treatise*, p. 47.

¹⁹ "Preface" to the *Treatise*, p. 44.

²⁰ *St. Francis de Sales and the Canticle of Canticles*, p. 115.

²¹ *St. Francis de Sales and the Canticle of Canticles*, p. 14.

²² See the "Translator's Introduction" to the *Treatise*, pp. 7-18.

²³ See the "Translator's Introduction" to the *Treatise*, pp. 18-22.

²⁴ Pius XI, *Rerum omnium perturbationem*, encyclical on the third centenary of the death of St. Francis de Sales, 26 January 1923.

²⁵ Benedict XVI, general audience, 2 March 2011.

²⁶ Luigi Groppi, "Formazione teologica di S. Francesco di Sales," estratto dall'tesi di laurea, *La formazione di San Francesco di Sales al suo magistero ecclesiastico* (Roma: n.p., 1951), 87.

²⁷ Pope Francis, "Life Becomes History," *Message for the 54th World Communications Day*, published on the Memorial of St. Francis de Sales, 24 January 2020.

²⁸ Jacques Hennequin, "Séduction de l'homme, séduction de Dieu selon saint François de Sales," in R. Marchal et Fr. Moureau (eds.), *Littérature et séduction, Mélanges en l'honneur de Laurent Versini* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997), p. 168: "Desire does not have that pejorative connotation that a mere consideration of its perversions could give to it. It is, for Francis de Sales, the motor of the will tending toward the good."

²⁹ J. Hennequin, "Séduction de l'homme, séduction de Dieu," 170.

³⁰ Ravier, *Initiation à la lecture du Traité*, 85.

³¹ Ravier, *Initiation à la lecture du Traité*, 64.

³² Cf. Yair Mazor, "The Song of Songs or the Story of Stories? 'The Song of Songs': Between Genre and Unity," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 4/1 (1990): 1-29. who argues that the singular narrative layer of a "love story" underlies and unifies the succession of poems.

³³ Cf. Wendy Wright, "'That Is What It Is Made For': Image of the Heart in the Spirituality of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal," in A. Callahan (ed.), *Spiritualities of the Heart* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 143-158.

³⁴ Cf. Thomas Dailey, "'Preaching as Praying: Complementary Methods for Sacred Eloquence in the Teaching of St. Francis de Sales,'" *New Theology Review* 31/1 (October 2018): 11-17.

³⁵ Ravier, *Initiation à la lecture du Traité*, 22, with reference to book I, chapter 12. See also Alexander T. Pocetto, "Cultivating the Memory of the Heart: The Sense of the Word 'Sentiment' in the Writings of Francis de Sales (1567-1622)," a paper presented at the 2014 Salesian Scholars Seminary in Stella Niagara, NY.

³⁶ Wendy Wright, "'He Opened His Side': Francis de Sales and the Exchange of Divine and Human Hearts," in J.J. Markey and J.A. Higgins (eds.), *Mysticism and Contemporary Life, Essays in Honor of Bernard McGinn* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2019), p. 190.

³⁷ Francis de Sales, "On the First Verses of the Canticle of Canticles," Sermon XLII, *Oeuvres* IX: 462-475.

³⁸ Ravier, *Sage & Saint*, 178.