When the New Testament talks about the law, it frequently contrasts the law of the Old Covenant with the obligations of the New Covenant, always suggesting, of course, that Jesus has ushered in a new understanding of the law. Indeed he has, but in this evening’s first reading we see a noteworthy shift in this theme. The letter to the Hebrews wishes to emphasize that the obligations of the New Covenant are fully realized only in the accomplishment of the will of God. The will of God is the true law. But more, it is not simply saying we must do the will of God in place of the many restrictive requirements of the law found in the Old Testament; rather it suggests that Jesus is the ultimate personification of the will of God in his self-gift for us on the cross. He is the will of God made flesh—a new law made flesh. It is his sacrifice that has replaced the old, creaky strictures which absorbed the attention of many of Jesus’ contemporaries. In other words, this letter describes the will of God as both a person and an ongoing event in which we are made holy—consecrated in other words; turned over to the Father; placed on a Spirit guided trajectory, if you will, to the Father. It is saying that the will of God is a vocation, and it was the vocation Jesus lived. Unfortunately, this is not how we often think about the will of God.

I feel the average Catholic seeks the will of God as if it could be described as the monthly bill from the credit card company. Pay this amount by this date or face finance charges. In fact we sometimes hope that God’s will would be just that expressive and clear when we
reach critical decision points. “What should I do now?” “Where should I go?” “What should I DO?” These questions occupy our thoughts and demand attention. These questions are not entirely inappropriate but must always be asked in the context of vocation. For FRANCIS DE SALES, our vocation is the will of God and the will of God is only clearly articulated within the vocation.

DeSales held both civil and canon law degrees, and he understood the function of law and its obligations. For DeSales a discussion of God’s will always presupposes that the individual understands that the will of God is found in the Decalogue and the Commandments of the Church, within the evangelical counsels and in inspiration. But all laws are obeyed and take on their significance in the context of our God-given vocation. In a 1604 letter to Madame Brulart, one of his Philotheas, DeSales writes:

We must love what God loves. Now, He loves our vocation; so let us also love it, and not occupy ourselves with thinking on that of others. Let us do our duty; each one’s cross is not too much for him. Mingle sweetly the office of Martha with that of Magdalen; do diligently the service of your vocation, and often recollect yourself, and put yourself in spirit at the feet of the Lord, and say, “My Lord, whether I run or stay, I am all Yours and You mine: You are my first souse; and whatever I do is for love of You, both this and that”…¹

And what exactly is this vocation? Well for DeSales it is more than simply our state in life but also the particular work we are given: student, priest, teacher or administrator, lawyer or doctor, soldier or spouse, parent or clerk, and so on. This much is true, but even more

importantly the vocation of the will of God is the vocation of charity—the devotion of which he writes so eloquently. Clearly this is what Jesus came into the world to do—not just to love but to be God’s love for us—his love made flesh for us. Thus the imagery of the family offered in Mark’s Gospel is useful in rounding out our new appreciation of the will of God as vocation.

We hear Jesus declaring that his family is composed of all of us “who do the will of God”—that is, per DeSales, those who live a life of charity, busy loving and if we may say so, to be passionate about it. It’s the family we build in Eucharist. Here the vocation of Jesus to love and the will of God are clearly one. We don’t separate them out, one from the other. They are woven seamlessly, one into the other, as we are in each other. It is as if we are becoming one body. We all belong to families. I know that as a member of a family myself as a child I had to ask the rules. “Can I do this, Mom?” “Can I do that, Dad?” However, as I matured I never had to ask, “What does the law of the family, or the will of the family or any of its members demand of me in this or that situation?” Rather I have only asked, “What is it that love demands?”

This, then, is the vocation of the will of God—to do what love demands. No law or constitution or statute or even commandment is higher than this imperative. It is this Eucharistic love that makes us brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, whose only obligation is found in the sacrifice modeled in the Eucharist. It seems to me that in an age where litigation serves greed and the quest for power more often than truth, it is refreshing to note a way to convert our understanding of law as life-giving and as capable of reflecting the enfleshed goodness of God.