On Holy Thursday of 2003, Pope John Paul II issued his latest, and possibly his last, encyclical letter – *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Desirous of rekindling an “amazement” at this sacramental gift and mystery, the Holy Father writes to the Church in an unusually personal vein and offers his own testimony of faith regarding this blessed sacrament: “Here is the Church’s treasure, the heart of the world, the pledge of the fulfillment for which each man and woman, even unconsciously, yearns.”

The following year, on the feast of Corpus Christi, the pope announced the extraordinary celebration of a “Year of the Eucharist” to begin in October 2004, at the International Eucharistic Congress in Guadalajara (Mexico), and to conclude with the eleventh ordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2005, the theme of which will be “The
Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church.” As he proclaimed in his homily for the feast, “The Church lives from the Eucharist and knows that this truth does not only express a daily experience of faith, but encloses in a synthetic manner the nucleus of the mystery that she herself is.”

From encyclical to celebration to synod – each of these ecclesial moments, while reaffirming theological teaching regarding the Eucharist, also signals a renewed emphasis on the reality of an “encounter” with the Lord Jesus in and through the sacrament. As Cardinal Schotte notes in the preface to the lineamenta for the synod, “Today, the Church is undeniably experiencing a certain ‘Eucharistic need’ based not on an incertitude regarding the presentation of doctrine . . . but on a Eucharistic practice which calls for a renewed attitude of love that is expressed in acts of faith in the One who is present for those continuing to search for him in our world.”

Though not mentioned by name in these documents, Francis de Sales (1567-1622) would certainly share the theological appreciation that informs the Church’s recent effort at renewing appreciation for the Eucharist. For him, the sacraments are “the channels through which God comes down to us” and, thus, the means by which our souls are elevated to God. Chief among these is the celebration of the Eucharist, which remains “the sun of all spiritual exercises . . . center of the Christian religion, heart of devotion, and soul of piety, the ineffable mystery that comprises within itself the deepest depths of divine charity, the mystery in which God really gives himself and gloriously communicates his graces and favors to us.”

Francis de Sales has left us a variety of writings on the Eucharist; taken together, they reveal a pervasive influence on his theological thought and his pastoral work. These include eleven sermons, in whole or in part, on the subject, three chapters in his Introduction to the
Devout Life, three other short treatises, a personal note, and even a poem in honor of the Blessed Sacrament! In an unpublished thesis, Jean-Luc Leroux also mentions some of the “lost” writings of the saint, including a series of sermons for the people of Thonon and additional tracts on the Eucharist that would have formed part of his collection of pamphlets that were later collected under the title of Controversies.

A complete exposition of Francis’ treatment of the Eucharist, which would properly account for the numerous references to it in his other writings, lies far beyond the scope of this paper. Our goal is simply to explore how this mystery of our faith, as understood by the saint, provides us with a privileged moment in the spiritual life. Exploring his thought on the Eucharist through the lens of theopoetics, we will focus primarily on how Salesian spirituality inclines us toward “encountering” God in the Eucharist, thereby fulfilling the “need” of the Church in the twenty-first century.

SALESIAN THEOPOETICS

As a method of interpretation, theopoetics seeks to articulate the spiritual meaning that comes to us in, by, and through a symbolic experience. It affirms the transcendent significance of inspired texts or religious objects, and attempts to recognize that which God manifests to us in our encounter with the sacred symbol. As a principal proponent of this method, Stanley Romaine Hopper, suggests, “What . . . theopoiesis does is to effect disclosure [of Being] through the crucial nexus of event, thereby making the crux of knowing, both morally and aesthetically, radically decisive in time.”
As a form of religious thinking, theopoetics asserts the primacy of “invention” and “imaginative construction.” It is particularly appropriate for considering the experience of ritual and worship. In particular, the celebration of the Mass unfolds the divine drama of salvation, whose beauty comes to be fully appreciated in the reception of Holy Communion. There our encounter with the Eucharist discloses to us the real presence of the divine and makes known to us the way of holiness.

As a bishop of the Counter-Reformation, Francis de Sales worked tirelessly to promote a true appreciation of the Church’s doctrines on the Eucharist. While the vast majority of his teaching focuses on this dogmatic dimension, the real power of his words derives from the imaginative perception he brought to bear upon this sacrament. As Leroux concludes from his study of the interpenetration of three languages (rational, symbolic, and affective) in the saint’s writings, “What is the Eucharist, then, if not the sacrament which reveals to us each day the entire Mystery of Christ who, by his Incarnation, is at the juncture of these two movements of love which he reconciles in his humanity and which he regenerates by his Redemption. And by the bread and wine that we receive in his Body and in his Blood, he renders us participants freely, that is by love, in his life by incorporating us to Himself.”

Founded on his own experience with the Eucharist, Francis’ teaching elaborates upon how God is really present in this sacrament through a poetic reading of the Gospel narrative. In so doing, he elucidates for us the decisive theological encounter that takes place when we share in this Holy Communion with the totality of our mind and heart and soul.
Eucharist as Path to Perfection

A Salesian theopoetics of the Eucharist derives from the experience Francis himself had with this sacrament. According to one of his biographers, Francis was greatly affected by a meditation on the liturgical mystery of Corpus Christi in 1595.

His whole being was suddenly invaded by such power of spiritual sweetness that his bodily strength gave way beneath it and he fell prostrate to the ground and was forced to cry out, ‘Hold back, O Lord, the torrents of Thy grace; depart from me, for I am unable to bear the strength of Thy sweetness and am fain to cast myself to the ground.’ He found his soul filled with consolation and celebrated Mass with intense devotion. Later that day he preached on the Blessed Sacrament with such divine charity that his whole face seemed to be transformed to the congregation.15

Years after this, in 1599, the saint himself notes the supernatural favor that he received during a Roman liturgy. “Having received the holy Eucharist from the hand of the Sovereign Pontiff on the day of the Annunciation, my soul was interiorly consoled. God provided me the grace of giving me great lights on the mystery of the Incarnation, making me understand in an inexplicable way how the Word took flesh, by the power of the Father and the operation of the Holy Spirit, in the chaste womb of Mary, thereby wishing himself to dwell among us, since he would be human like us.”16 Later, in letters written to Jane de Chantal, he admits of experiencing “a special consolation on feast days knowing that we are both receiving communion together.”17
The dramatic power that Francis experienced in his meditation on, and by his reception of, the Eucharist was also evident in the celebrations of the sacrament at which he presided. As Jane de Chantal would testify,

it was easy to see how deep was his reverence in the presence of God. His eyes were modestly cast down; his face full of recollection, and so calm and sweet that those who looked at him attentively were touched and thrilled with devotion. Especially at the moment of Consecration and Communion the peaceful radiance of his countenance filled every heart with emotion. Indeed this Divine Sacrament was his true life and strength and in this action he appeared like a man wholly absorbed in God.\(^{18}\)

Thus, from his student days in Paris through his years of pastoral ministry,\(^ {19}\) Francis regarded the Eucharist as the great means of attaining perfection.\(^ {20}\) No doubt, this is why he encouraged more frequent reception than had been the practice at the time.\(^ {21}\)

**Eucharist as Divine Manifestation**

The spiritual sweetness, interior consolation, and peaceful radiance that Francis experienced in celebrating the Eucharist and in receiving Holy Communion flow from and point to a realization of God’s self-disclosure in the sacrament. While he treats the doctrine of the real presence extensively,\(^ {22}\) it is his spiritual and affective interpretation of events in the Gospels that give evidence of a more theopoetic understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist.
The good news of salvation begins with the kenosis of the Word of God become flesh, an act of self-abandonment mirrored in the Eucharist. According to Francis, in one of his letters to Angélique Arnaud, in both mysteries we find Jesus “who, in order to unite himself to us, abandoned and gently abased himself, even to rendering himself food and nourishment for us who are the nutriment and food of worms.”

Conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God dwells first in the womb of his virgin mother. Commenting on the Mary’s Magnificat, Francis exclaims: “In proportion as God’s grandeur was as it were restricted and constrained within her virginal womb, so did her soul further increase and magnify the praises of that infinite mercy. Her spirit leaped with joy . . . in the presence of her God whom she felt within her.” For Francis, there, as also in the Eucharist, the Son of God produces His salutary effects. “In imitation of her this same contentment may be attained by those who have received Holy Communion and with sure faith feel that which ‘neither flesh nor blood’ but the heavenly Father has revealed to them. They know that their Savior in body and soul is present with a most real presence in their body and their soul in this most adorable sacrament.”

Pregnant with this holy child, Mary visits Elizabeth, who rejoices at her arrival. Francis encourages the same response from the religious order that bears the name of this sacred mystery:

Oh, my very dear Sisters, how you should be overwhelmed with joy when you are visited by this Divine Savior in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, and by the interior graces which you receive daily from His Divine Majesty through the many inspirations and words which He speaks to your hearts. . . . Ah!
What thanksgiving you owe to this Lord for so many favors! With what careful attention you should listen to Him, and how faithfully and promptly you should do His divine will! 

Beginning his public ministry, Jesus effects the first “sign” of redemption at Cana. Analogously, Francis preaches that the Eucharist also serves as a salvific sign. “He performed the first miracle at a banquet, and the last, the Eucharist, at another banquet. He changed water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, and at the Last Supper, which was as the wedding feast of his Sacred Spouse, He transformed bread into His Flesh and wine into His Blood.” These festive miracles, at Cana and in the Eucharist, retain their power as signs in as much as they are not fully perceived by our sense knowledge.

In brief, in His first miracle He changed water into wine; and in the last one which He performed before His death He instituted the Eucharist, the Sacrament of His true presence. We believe this truth and this mystery which, along with the Incarnation, is the greatest and most hidden of all. Because faith teaches it, we believe that Jesus Christ is in this Most Holy Sacrament, body and soul. . . . This truth may contradict our senses, which perceive nothing of its reality. Yet we believe it – and even believe it with greater delight the more our senses fail us here.

The ultimate sign of salvation is the tree of love on Mt. Calvary. In his Defense of the Standard of the Cross, Francis claims that the crucifixion and the Eucharist both speak of Jesus’ passion, “for the Eucharist represents it principally on account of the total identity of the one
who is offered there and of him who was offered on the cross, who is none other than Jesus
Christ.”

The Passion reaches its new and eternal climax in the Resurrection of Jesus. In his notes
for a sermon on the Real Presence, Francis writes about the dimension of imperceptibility that
the Eucharist shares with this mystery.

Christ as man is really present, not everywhere, but in his
sacrament, in heaven, and where it pleases him. First of all, he is
really present in the eucharist but in a spiritual manner. Thus [on
Easter Sunday] he will come out of the sepulchre really but in an
invisible manner, whereas the angel, on the contrary, will be
visibly dressed in white. Marvelous exchange! One will see a
spirit; one will not be able to see a body. In the same way, on
[Easter] Monday, you will see Christ the pilgrim making a journey
without being recognized.”

From this the saintly preacher concludes, “The body of Christ is thus in the Eucharist, and not
only his body, but also his blood, his living and vivifying soul and his divinity.”

Finally, Jesus’ Ascension to heaven also alludes to his Eucharistic presence. In an
outline for a sermon on the feast of the Ascension, Francis quotes Chrysostom to the effect that
“Elias left his cloak to his disciple; the Son of God, rising to Heaven, left us his flesh. But,
whereas Elias was stripped, Christ leaves us his flesh without quitting it himself.” Then he adds,
“But in the end there is more. Far from contradicting the Eucharist, the Ascension serves to
support it. See, in effect, I pray you, this body, no longer carnal, but spiritual, which penetrates
the heavens.”
Reading the biblical narratives as God’s manifestation to us in Jesus, Francis interprets the Gospel not through a critical explanation of historical events, but with a poetic appreciation of a trans-historical truth – that Jesus is truly alive and really present to us, in order that we might be united to him. In turn, we experience this truth when we receive Holy Communion.

Eucharist as Sacred Experience

The gospel narrative of communion with God – revealed to us and effected for us by the redemptive acts of Jesus – suggests that the real presence of the divine disclosed in the Eucharist has a particular purpose. As Francis instructs the Sisters of the Visitation, “Each sacrament has its own effect, even though all of them have but one aim and purpose, which is to unite us to God.” What we come to know decisively in this sacrament is what God has done for us, what we should do as a result, and what is promised to us.

In the Eucharist we come to know and to perceive the reality of being nourished, spiritually but no less really. Francis writes to Jane about this on more than one occasion. In one letter he builds on the image of what food does to/for our bodies.

People who have a good digestion feel their whole body strengthened as the food distributes itself evenly to every part of them. In the same way, my daughter, people who have a good spiritual digestion feel that Jesus Christ who is their food penetrates to every part of their soul and of their body and communicates himself to them. They have Jesus Christ in their head, breast, eyes, hands, tongue, ears and feet. But what does our
Saviour do in them? He straightens everything out, purifying, mortifying, quickening all things. He loves in our heart, understands in our head, inspires our actions within us, he sees in our eyes, he speaks with our tongue, and so with all the rest: he does everything in us, and then we live, not we ourselves, but Jesus Christ lives in us. O when will that be my dear daughter? When, O God?"34

In another, he expresses a corresponding religious fervor and ardent longing. “Ah! I tell you, O Savior of our heart, since [in eternity] we will always be at your table to eat not only your bread, but you yourself who are our living and essential bread, make it so that all our days we would have a good and perfect digestion for this most perfect food, and that we would live perpetually embalmed by your sacred sweetness, goodness and love.”35

Similarly, his preaching sounds the note of one moved to affection by this reality. “O savory Bread, anyone who eats You worthily shall live forever and can never die the eternal death. What an incomparably delightful taste this Bread has for souls who eat It worthily! How wonderful to be nourished on the Bread come down from Heaven, the Bread of angels! It is even more wonderful by the love with which It is given to us by Him who is at once both Gift and Giver.”36

Finally, for Francis what we can apprehend in receiving Holy Communion is the anticipation of so much more. Our reception of the sacramental bread and wine is significant not simply because of the fraternal communion that comes from sharing a meal. Rather, as William Marceau concludes, in the phenomenon of celebrating this sacrament, “(t)he Eucharist becomes then an act of union, a gesture of love and participation in the mystery of life itself.”37

Granted
to us sacramentally, our beatitude is found now in this sacred nutrition, and eternally in the
visionary presence of God, as Francis explains in his Treatise on the Love of God.

Such is infinite happiness . . . and it has not only been promised to
us but we have a pledge of it in the most holy sacrament of the
Eucharist, the perpetual feast of divine grace. In it we receive our
Savior’s blood in his flesh and his flesh in his blood, for his blood
is dispensed to us by his flesh, his substance by his substance. It is
given into our own bodily mouths so that we may know that he
will give us his own divine essence in an eternal feast of glory.

Here on earth, it is true, this boon is granted to us really but in a
hidden way, under sacramental species and appearances, whereas
in heaven, God will give himself openly and “we shall see him
face to face, as he is.”

Thus, through the sacramental feast, we come to know, in a non-discursive way, that
communion of life and love that God has disclosed to us in Jesus, made possible for us in the
incarnational and paschal mysteries, and promised to us for all eternity.

**Eucharist as Holistic Encounter**

On the divine Giver’s side, the Eucharist provides grace-filled nourishment. On our side,
according to Francis, we must bring to it the totality of our minds and hearts and souls. To make
this encounter a holistic one, and thereby draw the greatest benefit from the Eucharist, he
suggests re-focusing our intention and attention, and practicing condescension.
For de Sales, directing one’s intention is what gives our human actions a distinctively spiritual character. Beyond the bodily experience of being nourished, the Eucharist feeds the soul, for it is there, in the depths of who we are, that we encounter God really present to us and in us. Therefore, to partake of Holy Communion most fittingly, we must first purify our intention. Explaining this to the Visitation Sisters, he says: “Now, the intention is pure when we receive the Sacraments or do anything else, whatever that may be, in order to unite ourselves to God and to become more pleasing to Him, without any mixture of self-interest.” For Francis, this intentionality remains paramount. “Our aim should be always to unite ourselves more closely to the Lord. Apart from this, we should neither ask for nor desire anything, neither for ourselves nor for others, since that is the purpose for which the Sacraments are instituted.”

This unitive purpose comes to be realized in a privileged way in and through the Eucharist, which both contains and confers the sacred mystery of our faith. As such, our minds must be especially attentive to appreciate this encounter, as Francis again counsels the Sisters. “Indeed, we have to approach the Sacraments with great attention, just as much because of their sublime action as of what each Sacrament requires from us.” To understand and appreciate the action of God in the Eucharist, our reception of it cannot be routine or perfunctory; instead, it requires the conscious consideration of all that the sacrament entails. As Francis explains to “Philothea” in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*,

> Your great intention in receiving Communion should be to advance, strengthen, and comfort yourself in the love of God. . . .

> No, you cannot consider our Savior in an action more full of love or more tender than this. In it he abases himself, if we may so express it, and changes himself into food, so that he may penetrate
our souls and unite himself most intimately to the heart and body of the faithful.\(^{42}\)

The gaze of our mind’s eye upon the sublime truth of the Eucharist should lead, then, to the opening of our own hearts to the Love that comes to us. This is why Francis exhorts his Visitation Sisters that “when we go to Communion we should have a heart filled with fervent love.” It is also why he believes that “the most important preparation we should make for the reception of the Sacraments is the total abandonment of ourselves to God’s will, submitting without any reserve our will and all our affections to God’s dominion.”\(^{43}\) In this way, we will be able to “receive through love that which Love alone caused to be given to [us].”\(^{44}\)

And when we receive this divine Love with the whole of our being – in mind and heart and soul – our encounter can become a privileged means of communicating, affectively and effectively, with God. On the one hand, this encounter should generate an affective response on our part. In the words of one of Francis’ sermons, “Certainly we ought to make a thousand adorations each day to this divine Sacrament in thanksgiving for the love with which God dwells among us.”\(^{45}\) And that love is decidedly personal. As Francis explains in his instructions on how to receive Communion, “After you have received him, excite your heart to do homage to the King of salvation. Converse with him concerning your inmost concerns. Reflect that he is within you and has come there for your happiness.”\(^{46}\)

On the other hand, Francis notes that our encounter with the Lord in the Eucharist should produce a salvific effect in us, “for this heavenly bread does not receive life from the one who eats it, but gives it to him absolutely, and changes it in him.”\(^{47}\) In turn, our encounter with the intimate gift of life given to us in the Eucharist also fortifies us for the love of others, as Francis points out in a Lenten sermon.
To what extent did the greatness of God lower itself for each one of us, and to what extent does He wish to exalt us? To unite us so perfectly with Himself as to make us one same thing with Him. Our Lord did this to teach us that as we are all loved with one same love by which He embraces us all in his Most Holy Sacrament, so He wishes us all to love one another with that same love, a love which tends toward union, but a union greater and more perfect than can be conceived.  

With humble condescension to the love of God in us through the Eucharist, we should then practice in a greater way the complementary virtue of gentleness. This, for Francis, is the true effect of the Eucharist, which he explains to the Visitation Sisters. “If by means of Holy Communion you become very gentle (since it is the virtue proper to this Sacrament, which is all gentleness, all honey, and all sweetness), you will draw the fruit which is particular to it, and thus you will make progress.” In this way, the Eucharist becomes expansive, as it leads us to virtuous relations with others in the “assembly of love” that is the Church, and to just engagement with the lives of all whom we encounter in the world.

**The Eucharist as the Church’s Encounter**

Clearly the Eucharist holds a preeminent place in the life and legacy of St. Francis de Sales. Blessed with inspiration in his prayerful consideration and liturgical celebration of this sacrament, Francis renders for us not only a thorough, rational explanation of its doctrine, but a
moving, poetic appreciation of its mystery. In this light, Salesian spirituality offers the Church a means for Eucharistic renewal.

Salesian spirituality sees in the Eucharist a manifestation of the divine presence. As real in this bread and wine as was his birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus’ presence discloses to us the love to which we are called and by which we are fulfilled. We encounter this salvific love through our acts of faith.

Salesian spirituality recognizes in this sacrament a sacred event. Experienced as nourishment, for our lives now by grace and for all eternity in glory, Holy Communion makes possible the transformation and conformation of our lives to that of Christ’s, he who is and remains the bread come down from heaven, the bread of angels, the bread of life by which we shall never die. We encounter this life-giving bread through our attitude of love.

Salesian spirituality encourages a holistic reception of the Eucharist. The mind’s consideration of the saving presence within leads to heartfelt affections of contentment and thanksgiving. Moved by this wondrous Love of Him who is both Giver and Gift, we effect a continuing encounter with Love through the practice of the virtues of humility and gentleness that are integral to the sacrament and central to the Salesian tradition.

In sum, a Salesian theopoetics of the Eucharist undeniably responds to the “Eucharistic need” that the Church is presently experiencing and provides us with a mode of fully encountering the source and summit of our lives.
NOTES

1. John Paul II, Ecclesia de Eucharistia (On the Eucharist in Its Relationship to the Church), 17 April 2003, no. 59.
8. Leroux, L’Eucharistie dans la théologie salésienne, 19-20. On the genesis and publication of these pamphlets, see Alexander Pocetto, “Ecclesial Dimensions of Salesian Thought” <www4.desales.edu/SCFC/Studies/ATP-ecclesio.htm>, who notes that the ill-chosen title of “Controversies” originated with the publisher, whereas the saint refers to them as “meditations” on the Church.
9. The index to the Oeuvres lists some 33 references to the Eucharist, 14 of which concern the “real presence,” and an additional 73 references to Holy Communion.
17. OEA 12:360. On this aspect of their relationship, see the paper prepared by Alexander Pocetto for this volume.
19. Henry Benedict Mackey (ed. and tr.), Library of St. Francis de Sales, I – Letters to Persons in the World, 5th and rev. ed. (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, n.d.), 204-05: “Experience has made me realize in my twenty-five years of serving souls the all-powerful virtue of this Divine Sacrament, to strengthen hearts in good, exempt them from evil, console them, and in a word make them God-like in this world if it be frequented with faith, purity and devotion.”
20. Letter to Présidente Brûlart: “Je pense que la Communion est le grand moyen d’atteindre la perfection; mais il faut la recevoir avec le désir et le soin d’ôter du coeur tout ce qui déplait à Celui que nous voulons y loger” (cited in Wagner, “L’Élévation de l’Âme à Dieu,” 188-89).
Letter to Celse-Bénigne de Chantal: “Tenez bon à la fréquente communion et croyez-moi, vous ne sauriez faire chose que vous affermisse tant en la vertu” (cited in Wagner, “L’Élévation de l’Âme à Dieu,” 193). See also Introduction to the Devout Life, 114 (Pt. 2, ch. 20): “Our Savior has instituted the most august sacrament of the Eucharist, which contains his flesh and blood in their reality, so that whoever eats of it shall live forever. Therefore whoever turns to it frequently and devoutly so effectively builds up his soul’s health that it is almost impossible for him to be poisoned by evil affection of any kind.”


OEA 18:400.


OEA 2:216.

Sermons for Advent and Christmas, 107.

OEA 8:24.

The Spiritual Conferences, 2.


Sermons for Advent and Christmas, 56.


Treatise on the Love of God, 191-92 (bk. 6, ch. 11).

The Spiritual Conferences, pp. 2, 6.

“truly this belief in the most holy Sacrament, which contains in truth, reality and substance the true and natural Body of Our Lord, is truly the abridgement of our faith” (OEA 1:338).

The Spiritual Conferences, 3.

Introduction to the Devout Life, 118 (bk. 2, ch. 21).

The Spiritual Conferences, 3.

Introduction to the Devout Life, 118 (bk. 2, ch. 21).

Sermons for Advent and Christmas, 107.

Introduction to the Devout Life, 118 (bk. 2, ch. 21). Cf. OEA 26:192. In his paper prepared for this volume, Pocetto notes that these thoughts are “reminiscent of the practice of swearing or taking an oath of fealty to one’s feudal Lord.”

OEA 7:183-84.


The Spiritual Conferences, 6-7.

In his paper prepared for this volume, Pocetto argues “It is precisely this word [assembly] that the saint purposely chooses to make us understand better the unique character of the Church. The Christian Church is made up of people ‘assembled by the Word of God,’ called into existence by love and maintained in existence by love, which is the true ‘cement that holds together the living stones of the Church’ (OEA 1:49).”