PLAYFUL PRAYER:
Imagination and the Task of Theology
in Salesian Perspective

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Ecce, homo!
(John 19:5)

Behold, the wood of the cross,
on which hung the Savior of the world!
(Liturgy for Good Friday)

Voilà ce Coeur qui a tant aimé les hommes!
(apparition to St. Margaret Mary Alocoque)

Three languages. Three references. Three truths. Whether for biblical exegesis, dogmatic reflection, or liturgical devotion, these and other propositions like them have been able to reach the minds and hearts of Christian believers because of their revelatory power. And that power is intimately connected with a uniquely human faculty —the imagination—which gives to the work of theology both its vision and its vitality.

INTRODUCTION: THE AESTHETICS OF THEOLOGY

In recent years, an appreciation for the creative and artful dimension of human knowing has begun to flourish in the world of theology. Within this domain the magisterial works of Amos Wilder, David Tracy, Gordon Kaufman and others, have singled out the role of the imagination as fundamental to the theological task. Specifically, these methodological considerations have generated a newfound interest in the central role that imagination plays in biblical interpretation. Focusing on the literary form or shape of the Sacred Scriptures, this turn toward an "aesthetic
"theology" underscores the work of the imagination as it both issues from and contributes to the revelatory power of the Word to disclose meaningful truths for the lives of modern believers.¹

Yet this concern for the functioning of the imagination in the world of theology is not entirely new. More than three centuries ago, St. Francis de Sales wrote the ascetical and mystical works which have distinguished him in the history of theological literature. From the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, whose popular piety is reflected through imaginative examples, to the *Treatise on the Love of God*, whose systematic reflection is developed from the starting point of "beauty," the corpus of Salesian writings contains so many images (33,000 by one scholar's count!) that Francis can be considered the literary champion of the imagination among all French authors of his time.²

Nevertheless, in our contemporary age Francis' apparent enthrallment with the play of images has not been universally well received. Some feel that his extensive use of what are by now unfamiliar comparisons makes his devotional guidance in the *Introduction* more obscure and therefore less amenable to today's spiritual initiates.³ Others critique Francis' comparative use of biblical references in the *Treatise* with the claim that his is merely a personal accommodation of the text, one which is outmoded and inconsistent with the tenets of modern biblical scholarship.⁴

Given this historical contrast, it would seem beneficial to re-consider the relationship between imagination and theology. In light of the current theological interest in the imagination, and with an eye toward its use in the spiritual writings of St. Francis de Sales, this essay proposes that the true task of theology is a matter of "playful prayer": *based on the creative power of the imagination, the play of theology becomes an enabling method, the goal of which is realized in prayer.* In order to explicate this thesis, we will consider the philosophical theories upon which the work of the imagination is founded, the theological implications which devolve from the use of the imagination, and the spiritual dimensions which are actualized in the poetic imagination of St. Francis de Sales, especially as this is revealed in his exposition on the Canticle of Canticles. In this way it will be suggested that theology, in a Salesian perspective, begins with and culminates in a mystical imagination.
THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

Philosophical speculation on the nature of the imagination has most often focused on the contribution it makes to the human ability to know something. Immanuel Kant, for instance, conceives of the imagination as that faculty of the mind which forms an epistemological bridge between sensible data and conceptual understanding: "Through the former, objects are given to us; through the latter, they are thought." Yet Kant's critique of the role of the imagination in reasoning about things causes it to fall short of any theological usefulness; the "descriptive" nature of the imagination, according to this philosopher, is not applicable when dealing with transcendental realities such as "God" and "world."

A theory of the imagination that bears more directly upon the work of theology is the one propounded by Paul Ricoeur. Situated within his broader project of developing a poetics of human willing, Ricoeur's treatment of the imagination pertains to his analysis of hermeneutics, particularly as this concerns the functioning of symbols, metaphors, and fictional narratives. As contributing to the power of these literary phenomena, the role of the imagination takes center stage by virtue of its creative function. And it is this character that give value to the imagination as a theological tool, in as much as it contributes to the revelation of a new world to which we are invited to belong.

To clarify his understanding of the term, Ricoeur considers the imagination in terms of its psychological power ("Imagination in Discourse and Action," pp. 4-6). By this he means that the human ability to imagine something functions, first of all, in a "reproductive" fashion; here the use of the imagination entails "the arbitrary evocation of things which are absent but which exist elsewhere," such as when we reminisce about a favorite place in times past. This function can be seen at work in paintings or drawings "whose function is to 'take the place of' the things they represent." In this first sense, then, the imagination enables us to experience some "other" thing, which is recalled and reproduced either as mental picture or concrete figure. Beyond that, the imagination can also function in a "synthetic" manner; in this sense, it is used to "bring to mind not absent things but nonexistent things," such as when we picture to ourselves a purple dinosaur. This usage stretches the mind to engender figurative thoughts which pertain to the realm of the unreal. In these latter cases, the imagination exerts its synthesizing function by combining known
experiences in a way that is yet unknown, as happens both in dreams or delusions, in inventions or illusions.

From an existentialist viewpoint, however, a reduction of the meaning of imagination to psychological prowess can be severely limited and limiting in terms of human transformation. As Ricoeur notes, the reproductive imagination is often relegated to the realm of perception, where an image becomes "merely the trace, in the sense of a lesser presence" of that which is or was a real object. The synthetic imagination, on the other hand, may by its very fascination broach the confines of consciousness, where "the image is confused with the real, taken for the real." Because of these limitations, a psychological approach fails to do justice to the full power of the imagination. This is why Ricoeur promotes instead the notion of a "productive" or "creative" imagination.

The creative imagination functions by way of a picture-making ability, a "seeing-as" which can carry us beyond the everyday world of ordinary description. This "figurability" should not be confused with the practice of evoking what is absent in the mind or what is unreal in our world. Rather, it relates to the capacity of the imagination to open up for us a new world of possibility. This overture, as Ricoeur explains, follows from the ability of the human mind to grasp together otherwise disparate realities.

Imaging or imagining …is the concrete milieu in which and through which we see similarities. To imagine, then, is not to have a mental picture of something but to display relations in a depicting mode. Whether this depiction concerns unsaid or unheard similarities or refers to qualities, structures, localizations, situations, attitudes, or feelings, each time the new intended connection is grasped as what the icon describes or depicts ("The Metaphorical Process," p.148).

This iconic aspect of the imagination —its ability to "see" and depict new ways of relating to others and to the world —is the underlying, creative force at work in the writing and reading of fictional narratives. Because these do not reproduce an already given reality, truly good stories are capable of mesmerizing us by taking us to another world, one whose literary construction is unshackled from the restraints of ordinary or scientific language. As Ricoeur explains,
Fiction addresses itself to deeply rooted potentialities of reality to the extent that they are absent from the actualities with which we deal in everyday life under the mode of empirical control and manipulation. ... It is in fiction that the 'absence' proper to the power of suspending what we call 'reality' in ordinary language concretely coalesces and fuses with the positive insight into the potentialities of our being in the world which our everyday transactions with manipulatable objects tend to conceal ("The Metaphorical Process," pp. 152-153).

In other words, meaningful literature builds on the productive power exercised by the imagination. This uniquely human faculty yields new cognitive insights; it stirs up novel images of a world to be; it generates a newfound feeling or mood in and through which we come to situate ourselves in the world. In this respect, the full power of the imagination resides in its ability to carry us beyond the ordinary and everyday realm of the actual by envisioning and promoting a "passion for the possible." 7

It is this productive power to intimate a new reality by way of discovery and creation that gives to the imagination its ultimate purpose and value. Rather than re-presenting a picture of what was, the imagination fulfills a heuristic purpose by enabling us to construct a "world" that could be. For Ricoeur, this creative potential parallels the work of a model, the construction of which serves the purpose of explanation and understanding.

To the extent that models are not models of... i.e., still pictures of a previously given reality, but models for..., i.e., heuristic fictions for redescribing reality, the work of the model becomes in turn a model for construing in a meaningful way the concept of the productive reference of all fictions, including the so-called poetic fictions ("The Function of Fiction," p. 141).

Admittedly, this poetic or fictional world often stands at odds with, or in variance to, the world to which we are ordinarily accustomed. Yet, this "imaginative" portrayal exists as much more than mere fascination or fantasy. Instead, it offers to all who are willing to consider it a new world, one in which we come to "see" how we are capable of living and acting.

Ultimately, this productive or creative work of the imagination reflects the poetic talent for depicting something novel. For the philosopher, however, this is not merely a literary skill;
rather, it corresponds to an existential concern, namely, the expression of our ability to live in ever new and changing ways. Referring to what he calls the "paradox of iconic augmentation," Ricoeur explains this aesthetic dimension of human existence:

The more imagination deviates from that which is called reality in ordinary language and vision, the more it approaches the heart of the reality which is no longer the world of manipulable objects, but the world into which we have been thrown by birth and within which we try to orient ourselves by projecting our innermost possibilities upon it, in order that we dwell there, in the strongest sense of that word ("The Function of Fiction," p. 79).

And for the theologian, the central task is to enable us to dwell more fully in this world —the created and now redeemed universe where God and humans meet.

THE THEOLOGICAL PLAY OF IMAGINATION

The phenomenological foundations offered by Kant and Ricoeur, as well as the theological elaborations suggested by Kaufman and others, have recently been examined in detail by David Bryant. This author brings together various philosophical elements in a comprehensive definition of the theological imagination as

the corporate and personal power of taking things in terms of meaningful forms, forms which are embedded in and mediated to us through the history shaping us (tradition), which disclose, shape, and are shaped by living experience and which give rise to, guide, and are reformed by reflective thought (p. 126).

This definition, which highlights the significant contribution of historical tradition and the formative power of experiential thought, opens theology to a new field of play, one in which the imagination will come to bear directly upon biblical interpretation and faith apprehension.

Following upon the notion of metaphoricity elaborated by Ricoeur, Bryant explains that the imagination can be characterized in terms of a "taking as" (more than "seeing as"). which occurs in four inter-related modalities (pp. 100-103). First, imagination demonstrates a synthetic capability, in that it harbors the activity of seeing the similar in what is otherwise dissimilar. This visionary activity of the imagination, however, is not merely that of a figurative perception; it
also, and necessarily, exhibits a linguistic aspect in as much as the meaningfulness of images is communicated in and through semantic structures. When this linguistic articulation creates a new situation of being-in-the-world, the imagination reveals its elaborative character; providing a heuristic model for life, the creative imagination thereby "operates in a realm of multiple networks and interconnections and of radical visions that enable profound and far-reaching breakthroughs in insight." Ultimately, this insightfulness reflects the disclosive power of the imagination —being open to reality in ever new and changing ways, the imagination mediates something of the world to us, in order that we, in turn, might take an active role therein.

This four-fold imaginative mediation, when applied in the work of theology, makes for an aesthetic enterprise. Synthesizing timeless truth and contemporary contexts, theology elaborates upon the situation of humans in the world in order to promote new dimensions of knowing and living, particularly as these are disclosed for us by way of divine Revelation. Theology thus takes on an artful aspect in as much as it must constantly develop new forms of speech-about-God which will resonate in the consciousness of believers today. Yet the sense of artfulness intended here need not be confined to the common idea of pleasurable enjoyment lacking any cognitive value. Rather, in keeping with Gadamer's dictum that "Art is knowledge and the experience of a work of art is a sharing in this knowledge" (Bryant, p. 106), the aesthetic awareness for which theology strives can and must become an experience of greater self- and world-understanding.

To share in this understanding, theology engages in a form of play. As Bryant explains, "the central feature of play, in Gadamer's understanding, is its ability to absorb into itself those who play ...(which) means, in the first place, that the essence of play is located not in the consciousness of the players but in the movement of play itself" (p. 106). This emphasis on the enactment of the play means that the task at hand for the theologian concerns first and foremost an actual relationship between God and humans, and not the second-order elaborations of doctrinal propositions. In other words, because play "does not move toward a goal outside of itself but exists for the sake of the playing itself" (p. 107), the primary aim of theology is the development of one's experiential relationship with the God about whom all theology speaks; only on a second-order level does theology become a corpus of systematic formulations. 9

Moreover, the play of theology also takes shape as art. Here, as in the domain of the performing and fine arts, the aim of theology is a showing forth of possibilities for others,
specifically the possibility (and the means) of engaging in a divine-human interaction. In other words, by way of the playful imagination, theology illumines a new world of understanding, one in which a new mode of living becomes possible. In Gadamer’s explanation of this aesthetic aim, "The world of the work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. By means of it everyone recognizes that that is how things are" (Bryant, p. 108). And the recognition that the theological art provides is one which places as central to human existence the conversion of mind and heart according to the divine will.

This personal and social transformation is made possible when humans enter into a true dialogue with God. In Gadamer's philosophical terms,

When one enters into dialogue with another person and then is carried along further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person, holding itself back or exposing itself, that is determinative. Rather, the law of the subject matter is at issue in the dialogue and elicits statement and counter-statement and in the end plays them into each other. Hence, when a dialogue has succeeded, one is subsequently fulfilled by it, as we say (Bryant, p. 110).

For the theologian, this fulfillment takes place most clearly when he/she enters into conversation with the Word of God, for the Bible remains the primary and normative locus for all theological dialogue.

To pursue this transforming dialogue, the theologian brings his/her own self to bear upon the world which is imaginatively constructed in the biblical text. In this way, he/she pursues that "fusion of horizons" by which revelation occurs, for "the Bible becomes revelatory when the proposed world in front of the biblical texts leads one to take the world in which one lives and acts concretely as appropriately redescribed by this proposed world, that is, when the biblical texts engage and lead the imagination" (Bryant, p. 143). For this reason, an imaginative interaction with Sacred Scripture imbues theology with its life-giving force — in the reflective space of dialogue with the Word of God are to be discovered those forms of knowing and living which give shape to theology. In terms reminiscent of Ricoeur's "paradox of iconic augmentation," Bryant explains the imaginative construal of faith offered to us in the Bible as that which transpires when these various forms of discourse disclose a possible world in which God is the ultimate reality and when this disclosure becomes the occasion
for taking such a world as the one in which our most authentic possibilities are realized, not just through our own efforts but through the empowering presence of the ultimate mystery" (p. 166).

By being attuned to this divine mystery as it is portrayed in Sacred Scripture, the theologian enters into play, and the imaginative enterprise which is the task of theology thereby begins. To demonstrate how this playful task can be fulfilled, let us now consider the theological method of St. Francis de Sales.

**The Theological Imagination in St. Francis de Sales**

As mentioned above in the introduction, St. Francis de Sales stands out among religious authors of the 17th century due to the remarkable style of his writings. The theological imagination evident in his many works devolves, in great part, from his personal formation in the cultural milieu of that time, and it pervades his many instructions, counsels, and spiritual teachings. Francis' understanding of theology thus admits of a decidedly imaginative character. This aesthetic emphasis can be seen quite clearly in his interpretive exposition on the Canticle of Canticles, a lesser known but no less revealing work, which demonstrates in an exemplary fashion the mystique of theology in the Salesian perspective.

Situated in the age between Renaissance and Classicism, St. Francis de Sales produced his corpus of religious works between 1595 and 1622, a period of time most often designated as that of baroque literature. Influenced by the beauty of his Savoyard culture, at once both French and Italian in spirit and in expression, his writings take on an "imaginative" flair. As Lemaire points out, Francis' poetic style incorporates "not only one word images, but also extended metaphors and allegories, personifications, comparisons so characteristic of (him), symbols and parables." Yet this usage bespeaks far more than affectatiuous ornamentation; rather, "his innumerable images are often personal, because they are delicate and harmonious and because they reflect his thought, his heart and his entire being" (*Etude des images litteraires*, pp. 15-16 and 129).

Amid this cultural scene, the theological formation which Francis received also contributes to the flowering of his imagination. In contrast to the artistic caution of the Reformation, with its penchant for eliminating ecclesiastical sounds and colors as not reflecting the sinful nature of human beings, Francis experiences a different intellectual milieu, especially during his years of
schooling in Paris. There, under the tutelage of Gilbert Génébrard, his imagination is developed and enriched through a tutorial study of the Canticle of Canticles. Ebulent with symbolic meaning, this biblical book becomes for the impressionable young theologian a vivid mode of divine revelation, one to which he will ardently cling for the remainder of his life. This encounter with the biblical imagination at work in the poetic canticle will thoroughly transform Francis; as Andre Ravier rightly notes, "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." So, too, his many writings will overflow with this newfound narrative conception.

The impact which this cultural heritage and theological experience had on his later writings has led contemporary scholars to claim that Francis actually thought in images. As R.L. Wagner explains,

That means that for him a notion is never pure but that it results from the subtle and often unforeseeable interpenetration of two related concepts. In this interplay what in itself was concrete and dense, becomes light; on the other hand, by these contacts abstractions gain substance; they take root in a nourishing soil.

And the soil which Francis most often tills is that of the Canticle of Canticles, whose references number it among the greatest of the sources of his writings and whose content gives substance to the play of the imagination in Salesian thought. For Francis, the ultimate task of theology will blossom in this garden of biblical love poetry.

Before examining directly his interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles, we might consider how Francis expounds upon the use of the imagination both in his own practice and in his spiritual counsel. The former concerns, primarily, the work of preaching, the sacred eloquence of which becomes a notable and noteworthy characteristic of the saint. Filled with illustrations and comparisons drawn from Sacred Scripture, natural history, and the whole range of human action, Francis’ sermons demonstrate the power of his own imagination and the value of its use. Why the use of the imagination affords such benefit is because it has "an inestimable efficacy to enlighten the mind and move the will." To clarify and to promote—these epistemological and existential aspects indicate that the use of the imagination is, for Francis, much more than simple ornamentation, for it reaches to the very core of what theology seeks to accomplish.
This productive sense of the imagination also comes to light in Francis' counsel to others, particularly as this concerns the life of prayer. There, the imagination is regarded as essential, for it enables the lively and attentive realization of God's presence with which meditative prayer begins. As Francis explains in the Introduction to the Devout Life,

> Although faith assures of his presence, yet because we do not seek him with our eyes we often forget about him and behave as if God were far distant from us. We really know that he is present in all things, but because we do not reflect on that fact we act as if we did not know it. This is why before praying we must always arouse our souls to explicit thought and consideration of God's presence (part II, chapter 2).

This imaginative arousal has for its goal not merely fascination but attention, not simply wondering but focusing. For this reason, Francis writes in one of his letters of spiritual direction about the need for simplicity and sobriety in the use of this faculty:

> ... if your imagination is very vivid and you spend a lot of time this way, you undoubtedly needed this correction [to not use your imagination or your understanding in prayer]; but if you use your imagination briefly and simply, only as a means of helping your mind be attentive and bringing it back to the subject of your meditation, I don't think that there's as yet any need to give up all use of it. You must neither linger over your images, nor totally disregard them. Neither should you imagine in too much detail, for instance, wondering about the color of our Lady's hair, the shape of her face, and details of that sort; but simply and in a general way, imagine her longing for her Son, or the like, and only briefly (p. 145).

By no means, however, does this suggested brevity imply that the sensibility of the imagination is a superfluous perception or that its understanding is a supereminent abstraction. To the contrary, Francis maintains that this faculty is, for the majority of believers, necessary in one's prayer life:

> So the good (Carmelite) Mother (prioress) says that there is no need to employ the imagination in order to envision the sacred humanity of the Savior. Not, perhaps, for those who are already far advanced along the mountain of perfection. But for those of us who are still in the valleys, although desirous of mounting, I think it expedient to employ all our faculties, including the
imagination. Nonetheless, I have already stressed in another letter that this imagining must be very simple and, like a humble seamstress, thread affections and resolutions onto our spirits (Letters of Spiritual Direction, p. 69).

Thus, one factor which unites the life and thought of St. Francis de Sales is his emphasis on the power of the imagination to produce an openness toward, and engender a response to, the presence of God as it is manifested in human life. Locating this spiritual faculty not simply in the mind but in the heart, Francis has been able to formulate a holistic vision regarding the Christian life. As the editors of his letters point out,

At the root of his perception, and at the deepest point of wisdom of Salesian spirituality, is the assumption, which derives in part from the Christian humanist tradition, that the spiritual life is not primarily about understanding, nor solely a matter of enthusiasm. It is a dynamic, integrative process that is brought about through the engagement of the whole person. The heart in Salesian thought is the seat both of intellect and of will. There the affective as well as cognitive capacities of the person are seen to dwell. All Salesian praxis then proceeds from this conceptual point of view (Letters of Spiritual Direction, pp. 57-58).

So, too, the work of theology in the Salesian perspective ultimately leads back to the imaginative heart, united with God, as its point of arrival.

That Salesian theology is an imaginative venture follows from the necessary inclusion of faith in the process of reflection. As Francis explains in the Treatise on the Love of God, discursive reasoning encompasses three different degrees as it takes place according to the senses, the human sciences, or faith (book I, chapter 12). Applying this schema to the work of theology, one passes beyond the realm of conceptual thinking based on given experience, to a world in which we seek not simply to know but to be united to and joined with the infinite goodness of God. In this respect, true theology surpasses methods of thought and study and enters into the more "imaginative" realm of meditation and contemplation (Treatise, book VI, chapter 2).

For this reason, Francis speaks of theology and prayer in the same vein. Granted, the saint acknowledges the "speculative" dimension to theology understood as the rational exposition of Christian doctrine (cf. Treatise, book I, chapter 12). Yet, in the Salesian perspective, then, theology is not limited to the academic application of methodological principles by which one
becomes learned in the ways of God. Rather, because the ultimate goal of a theologian is the same as that of any believer—to be united with God—theology is, by nature and nurture, a mystical enterprise. It evaluates not simply the divine aspect of goodness but the goodness found ultimately and uniquely in the divine. It considers God not merely as involved in things human but as meritorious in and of himself. It seeks not only to know the beloved God but to possess him in love (Treatise, book VI, chapter 1). This is why, ultimately, Francis can claim that "love is the abridgment of all theology" (Treatise, book VIII, chapter 1).

This mystical love toward which theology tends, and the imaginative road along which it trods, are ardently displayed in the Canticle of Canticles and admirably exemplified in the Salesian interpretation of this biblical book. Unlike a "commentary" properly speaking, Francis' "Mystical Exposition" offers little or no critical analysis of the verses in terms of their historical background or lexical significance. Rather, it takes shape as a theological exposé which encodes the transcendent meaning of this love story in the language of the text itself. In this way, the playful dialogue of theology and the creative power of the imagination work together to bring about a spiritual intelligence that both enlightens and enlivens.

The Salesian reading of the Canticle of Canticles proceeds within a complex "genre" of patristic and medieval interpretations which see in this biblical poetry a witness to the union between God and the individual person. Yet, based on his personal experiences, Francis clarifies the imaginative presentation of this sublime mystery in his own way, by elaborating upon the manner of this relationship. As the biblical story perpetuates the relationship between shepherd and shepherdess by means of the lyrics of love poetry, so Francis maintains that an individual's relationship with God is furthered through a similar language—in this case, the language of prayer. Hence, for Francis the Canticle of Canticles "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" (St. Francis de Sales and the Canticle of Canticles, p. 119).

Because this "marriage" involves the abstract, mysterious component of the divine, the language of the Canticle may seem to be foreign to such an interpretation. Speaking literally, the Canticle makes no use of specifically theological terms. Instead of any references to devotion, rapture, ecstasy, and the like, one finds in the Canticle only words speaking of sleeps, dreams, languors, inebriations, and other similar sensibilities. Nor does one find there any explicit
reference to God or to divine characteristics; all that is described are properties of the human person (eyes, hair, teeth, lips, necks), and these are portrayed in quite imaginative detail.

Yet Francis perceives in the emotive potential of these terms a depiction of love. He intuits in what appears to be merely human the pervasive, engaging presence of divine love. In his understanding, therefore, the language of the Canticle does not refer only to an interpersonal human experience; it also embodies those characteristics of one's relationship to God. Quite naturally this relationship paints the Salesian picture of a life of prayer, which is nothing more than a conversation between lovers. As human love entails a correspondence between two persons, so the Salesian interpretation of the Canticle speaks of a prayerful correspondence between the inspiration of the divine, "drawing" the devout person, and the resultant movement of the human heart, which "follows" or "runs" after such a lover (cf. Cant 1:4).

But as the communication between lovers is unique to them, so the life of prayer is a mystical experience; both involve the language of a secret colloquy which only the lovers themselves understand. It is this special experience, fraught with emotion, which the text of the Canticle imaginatively encodes. To interpret this experience, then, is to use one's own imagination to comprehend this mystical colloquy and give expression to it in understandable terms. This, ultimately, is the sense and purpose of the Salesian interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles in the "Mystical Exposition." There Francis expounds upon the biblical poetry to "demonstrate to us 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."

To the critical mindset of contemporary exegesis, this theological interpretation is certainly imaginative. Yet Francis' experiential hermeneutic need not be totally denigrated, for it serves the "playful" purpose of theology by communicating the lyrical longing and living of the divine-human relationship evident in the biblical love story and sought after by religious believers. Following upon the biblical enactment of this relationship, the Salesian interpretation explains how a personal transformation can take place through the dialogue of prayer. Synthesizing the poetic elements of the biblical narrative, the Salesian interpretation elaborates upon this mystical relationship and discloses the possibility for a newfound being-in-the-world which is conveyed by the biblical language.
Of necessity, this "playful" interpretation builds on the productive imagination of the saint. Formulated in terms of his own passion for the possible, itself the fruit of his own spiritual experiences, the Salesian interpretation constructs a theological model by which the life of prayer can be explained and understood. Seeing the biblical story as literary fiction and inspired revelation, Francis proffers the insight that in the portrayal of this divine-human relationship lies the development of the spiritual life. In this way, his own imagination couples with that of the biblical poet to augment the iconic figures of the Canticle's lovers. Projecting the imaginative world of shepherd and shepherdess, he orients us to the love of God by disclosing the possibilities of prayer (with its obstacles, remedies, and degrees) by which we can dwell there. In so doing, his interpretation attunes us to our relationship with God, which, ultimately, is the purpose of all theology.

**CONCLUSION: THE "MYSTIQUE" OF SALESIAN THEOLOGY**

At issue in this essay has been the role of the imagination in the task of theology, particularly as this connection is exemplified in the writings of St. Francis de Sales. The predominance of "images" in his works, understandable given his cultural background, seems in the modern era to be a drawback for more critically-minded readers. We have suggested, however, that the imaginative play which is at the heart of his personal experience and his spiritual instruction represents not just a fanciful literary style but a deeply-rooted understanding of the aesthetic dimension that is essential to the activity of doing theology.

The Salesian writings, especially the "Mystical Exposition on the Canticle of Canticles," abound with imaginative terms and expressions. This, we concede, is due to the fact that Francis is a mystic, one whose understanding of God issues forth in words that reveal his very soul. Yet Francis is also a pre-eminent theologian, one exalted as Doctor of the Church because of his ability to communicate the truth of God to others.

That truth, about which theology has the task of speaking, is intended not only to clarify one's understanding but also to move one's will. To do this, theology can and should benefit from the productive power of the imagination, that human faculty by means of which we are able to inhabit the world revealed to us by God. Because of the playful prayer which is both practiced and taught by St. Francis de Sales, we, too, can now dwell there.
NOTES


3. The Salesian Spirit: A Layperson’s Call to Holiness. St. Francis de Sales' Introduction to the Devout Life, adapted and presented by Y. Stephan, translated by J.D. Bowler and L.S. Fiorelli (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1990) p. __: “In his language and style are found expressions and words different from ours, and they can discourage the uninitiated or hurried reader. ... Further, his comparisons and images, which are so suggestive and expressive, rely heavily on a knowledge of his time and, presented as such, run the risk of concealing from today's readers the profound truth that they are meant to convey.” Cf. the criticisms noted by B. Long in her review of this book in Salesian Living Heritage (Spring 1990), pp. 43-44.

4. Cf. A. Lumia, Aux sources de Traité de l’amour de Dieu (Rome: Université Gregorienne, 1960), who claims that the references to Scripture in the Treatise are "but debris material taken haphazardly" (p. 558), whose use does a disservice to the divine word (pp. 569-570) and whose interpretation is overridden by his own personal experience (p. 591).


7. For a more thorough explanation of this notion as it is summarily applied to Ricoeur's philosophical enterprise, see K.J. Vanhoozer, Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1-16.


10. On the creative, "paschal" imagination at work in the gospels, see S. Schneiders, The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), pp. 102-108. On the imaginative role of the reader, cf. M.J. Thompson, "Praying with Scripture," Weavings 5,3 (1990), pp. 36-41: "the purpose here is ... to allow the stories to become alive for us by entering into them with all the knowledge, experience, and imagination we possess" (p. 39).
11. Cf. The "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" of the Second Vatican Council: "For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired really are the Word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology" (#24).


19. See my analysis of this experiential hermeneutic in "A Song of Prayer: Reading the Canticle of Canticles with St. Francis de Sales," forthcoming in Studia Mystica, and from which the remainder of this essay has been adapted.