Among the many developments spawned by the progressive teaching of the Second Vatican Council has been the tremendous growth in critical biblical scholarship. However, along with this advance a somewhat invidious corollary has arisen, namely the practical denigration of all previous methodologies.

Specifically, the present boom in critical exegesis has highlighted several inadequacies in the hermeneutical heritage of patristic, medieval and renaissance times. Primary among these is a lack of attention to, or concern for, properly "historical" considerations. In her recent work, E. Ann Matter generalizes such criticism in this way:

> the perception, in the eyes of modern biblical scholarship, (is) that medieval exegesis is "wrong." Medieval Bible scholars worked from poor texts, with little or no knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, and, what is especially problematic for many, they simply assumed allegory as the best interpretive tool, and the best way to expose the nature of the text.  

For this reason, works of biblical interpretation which derive from this period tend to be devalued as mere exercises in spiritual imagination.

Emblematic of this clash of interpretive approaches is the work of St. Francis de Sales, specifically with regard to his interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles. Dismissed by critics as an ingenuous, though inexact, theological construct, his understanding of the sacred text nevertheless constitutes a significant part of his devotional legacy. For this reason, we seek to demonstrate how the interpretation given by St. Francis de Sales reflects a legitimate exercise in
biblical theology by witnessing to an experiential mode of hermeneutics consistent with the patristic and medieval traditions. Such an interpretation, we suggest, incorporates a valid appropriation of the text in a manner beneficial to contemporary theology.

The Question of Biblical Interpretation

The decree by which St. Francis de Sales was elevated to the position of "Doctor of the Church" attributes much to his interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles:

It should not be overlooked that in these lucubrations, and especially in (his) interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles, many Scriptural puzzles involving moral and analogical meanings are solved, difficulties are explained, and obscure passages are bathed in new light. From this we may conclude that through his abundant heavenly grace, God enlightened this holy man's mind so that he might understand the Scriptures and make them accessible to the learned and the unlearned alike.³

Actually, the fact that Francis has written at length about this particular work of the Bible should not be astonishing; such a stance "is quite consistent with both his own spirituality, wherein the union of divine and human love is both lived and taught, and with the contents of this sacred writing, which provides, in poetic form, a perpetual witness to this mystery of love."⁴

Though references to the Canticle pervade his various writings, the sacred text is given prominence in two of Francis' works. The first, pertaining to his opuscules on asceticism and mysticism, was written between 1602 and 1604, though it did not appear in print until after his death in 1622. Entitled a "Mystical Exposition of the Canticle of Canticles," this series of discourses interprets the Canticle as a narrative of one's progress in prayer.⁵

The second focus on the Canticle appears in his famed Treatise on the Love of God (OEA, tomes IV-V), first published in 1616. Though not limited to a direct exposition of the biblical text, this spiritual masterpiece was conceived by its author as an original commentary on the Canticle.⁶ Replete with allusions to, and images drawn from, the Canticle, the Treatise exemplifies Francis' familiarity with, and preference for, this sacred text.

The many references to the Canticle in this latter work have been analyzed by Antanas Liuima.⁷ In this study, Francis' attraction to the Bible is evaluated positively in terms of his spirit
and purpose. According to Liuima, Francis possesses perfectly the spirit of the Scripture, a spirit which in turn permeates the Treatise. Moreover, Francis' full knowledge of the inspired meaning of the biblical texts is intended to be the basis of the doctrines he propounds.

Nonetheless, Liuima readily objects to Francis' use of the Bible in his writing. He claims that the saint subjectively accommodates Scripture in support of his own thoughts; as such, this a-critical use of the inspired Word, often taken out of context, gives no solid basis to the Salesian doctrines. Employed merely as a literary device to support and dress his own ideas, the Scriptural references are not valid commentary "but debris material taken haphazardly." Consequently, Liuima seems to suggest that Francis de Sales cannot seriously be considered an exegete, scholar, or theologian in terms of things biblical.

It is just such criticism, unfounded in our opinion, which suggests the present study. By situating the Salesian interpretation in its broader historical perspective, the particularity of the saint’s reading of the Canticle of Canticles can be better appreciated. We thereby hope to show that the theology expounded by Francis de Sales, especially in his "Mystical Exposition," can qualify him as a biblical scholar in his own right and can inspire a renaissance of his biblical spirituality today.

**The Salesian Commentary in Historical Perspective**

The present rupture between the historical-critical perspective and the ways of the past reflects the extension of a post-Renaissance philosophical shift. Bastioned by the Protestant Reformers, this turn of events is marked by a total emphasis on the literal level of meaning in the Bible, often to the exclusion of other, seemingly contrived, senses. In its contemporary manifestation, "the triumph" of such historical criticism "is to have given back the Song to lovers, those who are most identical with the original speakers." Hence, most commentators today speak of the Canticle only in terms of its literal, historical meaning — the celebration of human love.
Yet contemporary scholars are beginning to admit the inherent value of the traditional interpretations of the Canticle. As Roland Murphy rightly argues, "one may not simply dismiss past exegetical traditions as 'precritical' and invalidated by the superiority of the historical-critical approach." Instead, an awareness of the history of exegesis re-affirms the patristic and medieval tradition, which "has always affirmed that the ultimate scope of Christian exegesis is to read Scripture 'in the Spirit,' meaning to obtain its 'spiritual intelligence'." And this spiritual intelligence offers us a fundamental insight — that the Canticle also reflects the relationship between God and people.

In patristic times the mode of biblical interpretation devolves from the particularity of the sacred writings: "the biblical text contains ...a dimension of interiority which the profane writings do not have; it possesses a 'spiritual sense,' owing to the presence of the Spirit in the reading." As such, commenting on the Scriptures, for the Fathers, is a properly theological exercise. More than a simply historical investigation, patristic interpretation reflects, and even demands, a subjectifying input on the part of the reader.

An exemplary interpretation of the Canticle in this patristic vein can be found in the commentary of Origen. In his quest to make the biblical love story relevant and profitable to its readers, Origen prefers to contemplate the spiritual, rather than analyze the material, sense of the text. What enables him to attain this goal, and that which distinguishes this mode of interpretation from contemporary exegesis, is a dual operation: "the semantic process of allegorizing interpretation on the one hand, and the enunciative functioning of the reading on the other." Through the act of interpreting, these elements merge.

Passing to medieval times, the enunciative functioning of the text looms even larger on the interpretive horizon. The reading's inherited sense of divine mystery gives impetus to the spiritual interpretation of the text according to various "senses" beyond the literal or historical meaning. The first of these spiritual senses is the "allegorical." Often misrepresented as an imaginative construction of meaning, this sense is necessarily bound to the literal, as it discloses the significance of the historical events. The "tropological" then proceeds from the truth of the literal and allegorical interpretations. Concerned with one's personal relationship to God, this sense
elucidates the significance of the text for one's interior growth and exhorts a corresponding *comportment* in exterior behavior. Finally, the "anagogical" serves to fulfill and complete the tropological and allegorical aspects. Focusing on things ultimate, this sense suggests a *future* perspective which, in turn, becomes a present anticipation of the final revelation of all things.

This multi-layered approach to biblical interpretation is portrayed clearly in the sermons of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Like others of his time, Bernard perceives all four senses in the Canticle and adopts them in an interpretation which attempts not only to explain the words of the text but to move the hearts of his listeners (cf. Sermon XVI:1). As such, he does not limit his reading to historical concerns but "ranges far and wide across the relationship of the individual person to God. In short, he is a mystic, and he writes for those who would use the Song for the purpose of knowing and loving God."18

It is within this complex of patristic and medieval interpretations that the Salesian commentary on the Canticle is to be situated. Comprehending that spiritual intelligence inherent in the text, Francis follows the traditional interpretation which sees in this biblical poetry a witness to the union between God and the individual person (*OEA* IV:50-51). Yet Francis clarifies 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,19 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" (*OEA* XXVI:11).

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 terms drawn from mystical theology. Instead of any references to devotion, rapture, ecstasy, and the like, we find in the Canticle only words speaking of sleeps, dreams, languors, inebriations, and other similar sensibilities. Nor do we find 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 (OEA XXVI:13-14).

Yet Francis perceives in the emotive potential of these terms a depiction of love. In doing so, he gives force to the hermeneutical principle of Augustine, namely that he understands the Bible "who realizes that the fulfillment and end of all Divine Scripture is the love of that which is the object of our beatitude, namely God, and the love of that which is capable of enjoying the former with us, namely our neighbor."²⁰ By intuiting in what appears to be merely human the pervasive, engaging presence of divine love, Francis also wholeheartedly concurs with Bernard's attentiveness to the meaning of the text:

in this marriage-song it is not the words which are to be pondered, but the affections behind them... And love speaks everywhere; if anyone desires to grasp these writings, let him love. It is vain for anyone who does not love to listen to this song of love, or to read it, for a cold heart cannot catch fire from its eloquence (Sermon LXXI:1).

For Francis, 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 (cf. OEA IV:305). It is this special experience, fraught with emotion, which the text of the Canticle poetically encodes. To interpret this experience, then, is 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" (OEA XXVI:14).

This demonstration benefits from the medieval notion of the four senses of Scripture. While Francis respects an attention to the literal sense as the foundation of any other possible senses, he nevertheless distinguishes between a literal sense that is metaphorical and the mystical or spiritual sense. In his thought the metaphorical sense, which is distinct from allegory, "must be presumed to be the literal sense in such books, or parts of books, as (the) Canticle of Canticles." The mystical sense, on the other hand, "contains a practical lesson for the spiritual life and is implied, not directly, but remotely, in the literal sense."\[21\]

Accordingly, Francis reads the Canticle in light of the four medieval senses. The literal sense is clearly "the love of the chaste shepherd and a modest shepherdess" (OEA IV:51). Speaking allegorically, the shepherd and shepherdess represent Christ and the Church (OEA IV:3). In its a tropological bearing, the text reflects "the Savior's love and that of the devout soul" (OEA IV:50; cf. IV:187-198); in this regard Francis makes special reference to the love between Jesus and his Mother (OEA IV:106-107; V:183). Finally, the anagogical sense reveals "the perfect union of the soul with God …in heaven" (OEA IV:188).

This traditional explanation situates Francis' writings among those of a similar interpretive "genre"\[22\] and enables his defense against the accusations which arise from modern critical scholarship. As history demonstrates, his metaphorical understanding of the biblical love story is a reading consistent with that of other Fathers and Doctors of the Church. Since these remain the "hereditary exponents of Sacred Scripture,"\[23\] such a reading could hardly be a mistaken deviation from the inspired sense, especially as his interpretation strives to remain consistent throughout his exposition (OEA XXVI:14).

Moreover, the language he employs in his interpretation does not strip the biblical story of its context and original sense, but issues from "a pious and judicious use of the mystic(al) sense" by which Francis clearly and attractively presents the truth of faith encoded in the text. Such an exposition stands strong as an orthodox and valuable reading of the text, in line with the thought of Cardinal Newman, who acknowledges that,
In all ages of the Church, her teachers have shown a disinclination to confine themselves to the mere literal interpretation of Scripture. Her most subtle and powerful method of proof, whether in ancient or modern times, is the mystical sense…

Thus situated in its proper historical context, the Salesian interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles issues from the saint's subjectification of the biblical text. Admittedly, he reads the Canticle with his own experience in mind. But to do otherwise is hermeneutically impossible! As Ignace de la Potterie points out, the patristic and medieval mode of interpretation highlights this stance:

because the 'sense' goes further than the object (and) stands beyond reality, it therefore implies a pre-comprehension, a taking of a position on the part of the subject, a choice, a personal co-involvement. All this pertains to interpretation.

This mode of reading, then, is far from being a disservice to the divine word. On the contrary, it actually brings the sacred text to life. By means of this sort of interpretation, the biblical text does not remain merely the expression of a linguistic past but becomes an invitation to, and method for, one's personal appropriation of the sacred truth.

For this reason the Salesian interpretation is proffered in the form of a "Mystical Exposition." Unlike a "commentary" properly speaking, Francis' work 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. As such, Francis' writing is more mystical than literal, more an interpretation than an allegorization, for it maintains "an essential reference to the transcendent" which is characteristic of medieval thought. Such a reference, as we shall now see, devolves from Francis' experience of the Canticle in his own life.

The Salesian Experience of the Canticle of Canticles

As an heir to the patristic and medieval traditions, Francis de Sales is educated at a time when the Reformation shift in biblical interpretation is flourishing. As a result, his encounter with
the Canticle of Canticles, and his subsequent writings about this biblical text, come to be influenced by the specificity of his intellectual milieu and by the depth of his own mystical experiences.

Sent to Paris to study the humanities, Francis there begins his individualized pursuit of a theological education. In 1584, at the age of seventeen, Francis initiates a long-revered relationship with Gilbert Génébrard, a Benedictine who served as Regius Professor of Theology and Hebrew at the Royal College of the University of Paris (cf. OEA V:227). It is with Génébrard that Francis begins his love affair with the Canticle.

According to André Ravier, Génébrard's lectures on the Canticle "were lessons of a rigorous scholarship, but which gave to the Cantique a boldly mystical interpretation: the 'loves of the Sulamite and of her shepherd' were presented as symbolic of the relationship between God and the human heart, between Christ and the Church." In line with his interpretation, Génébrard published in 1585 his own translation of the Canticle. This work sought to refute the paraphrastic translation of Theodore Beza, whom Génébrard felt was blind to the literal meaning and scope of the text and was therefore far removed from the goal of the sacred author. Even more than his linguistic objections, Génébrard questions the ability of this "profane" writer to give proper expression to something so thoroughly sacred, mystical, and spiritual.

It is through Génébrard that Francis is introduced to the allegorical and tropological senses of the Canticle. 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." Yet such a love- and life-story was not without its critical moments for Francis. In fact, his newfound understanding of the Canticle contributed directly to the mystical experience he was soon to undergo.

Well-documented by his many biographers, this event — be it a "crisis" (of anxiety or despair) or a "temptation" — reveals the contrasts between the understanding of the Canticle given him by Génébrard and the theological arguments concerning predestination proposed in lectures heard at the Sorbonne. Perplexed by the tragic possibility that he was predestined to eternal damnation, Francis is 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, "La Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance"—the love story of his life assumes a new and enduring sense. Francis emerges from this trial with mystical resolve: he has taken hold, never again to let go ("tenui nec dimittam"—Cant 3:4). 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 (OEA XXII:10).

Having thus arrived at a plateau in the spiritual life, Francis then begins to refine his own spirituality. As a student in Padua, he formulates for himself a rule of life designed to maintain his mystical yearning in the midst of his many academic endeavors (OEA XXII:21-44). Not surprisingly, we find in these "spiritual exercises" several allusions to the Canticle and its significance in his life.

In his exercise of "spiritual repose," Francis recognizes the soul's need for solitude, wherein one is at rest "between the chaste arms of its heavenly Bridegroom" (OEA XXII:28). Beyond this individual mysticism, however, Francis concerns himself more with interpersonal relations. The values he considers in this regard are those he reads in the Canticle, namely, beauty and welcoming. The beauty of God, he will suggest, is found in the flower of human nature—hence, the exhortation "never (to) despise meeting a person" (OEA XXII:37). These and other such admonitions demonstrate that Francis' personal mysticism is, from the very beginning, directed toward a life of virtue.32

This two-fold experience of the Canticle in Paris and Padua will form the basis for Francis' later exposition of the biblical text. However, another Parisian experience contributes further to his interpretive horizon, namely, an encounter with the spiritual circle of Madame Acarie. As "a capital moment in the formation of Francis as a spiritual master," his interaction with the Acarie circle will directly influence his spiritual theology.33

In the intimacy of this group, Francis experiences first-hand the dominant spiritual current of abstract mysticism. In its Rhineland tendency, espoused at the turn of the seventeenth century by the members of the Acarie circle, one "felt very much attracted by the 'ultra-contemplative life'
of direct union with the Divine Essence, even beyond the humanity of Christ." Yet Francis does not appropriate this current for himself. Fearful of its dangerous excesses and deviations, he "plainly took the position —right from the start —in favor of Teresan mysticism, in which the solid, evangelical virtues were much preferable to visions, revelations, and ecstasies."³⁴

These contrasting forms of mysticism may explain the fact that Francis' "Mystical Exposition," which was written at or about this time, remained for him a secret undertaking, later unknown even to his closest friend, confidant, and collaborator, St. Jane de Chantal.³⁵ Nevertheless, as we shall see, the experiences recalled here will contribute to the movement of prayer which Francis reads in the Canticle. Foregoing a detailed analysis of each of the obstacles, remedies and degrees of prayer which Francis elaborates upon in the "Mystical Exposition," we wish only to demonstrate how the experience of the shepherdess in the Canticle parallels that of his own life. This synopsis, in turn, will illuminate our contention that Francis' mode of interpretation is not an artificial by-product of his rich imagination but instead the theological explication of his experiential reading of the biblical text.

The first such experience for Francis is his perception of, and accession to, a priestly vocation. As the shepherd girl aspires to union with the shepherd, so for Francis the recognition of the divine goodness generated in him the desire to be united with God. This initial fervor of love inspires him to pursue, though in secret, a theological education and an ecclesiastical career. Through his contact with Génébrard, Francis begins to comprehend that such a relationship with God is, indeed, a love story —not unlike the narrative of the biblical shepherd and shepherdess. And this lyrical story becomes the narrative of his own life and prayer.

Early in his spiritual life, Francis comes upon a road block in the relationship that mirrors the seemingly futile advances of the biblical shepherdess. She, in her desire, languishes due to the absence of her sought-after beloved (Cant 1:7). She sees him, though only occasionally and then with not more than partial clarity (Cant 2:8,9). She knows of him, but her detailed descriptions reveal an as yet unfulfilled longing actually to be and remain with him: "On my bed at night I sought him whom my heart loves; I sought him but did not find him" (Cant 3:1).
So, too, Francis suffers from the apparent absence of his beloved God. His Parisian "crisis," so formative in one so young, yields a conviction (*tenui nec dimittam*) more of heart than of mind. The God whom he seeks so ardently, yet knows so futilely, is the one to whom he dedicates and consecrates his entire life. Like the shepherd girl, Francis passes from intellectual wonder to a soul-filled admiration of God's "beauty," from an emotional fervor to an affective devotion to what is ultimately "good." In his longing for the beloved, he, like her, is ecstatic.36

But in the midst of her journey of love, the biblical shepherdess suffers much travail; her search for her beloved is exhausting. Only through many restless fits and turns (Cant 5:5-6), and with the help of the "daughters of Jerusalem" (Cant 6:1), does she eventually discover the resting place of her beloved, the garden in the night where she wishes to be one with him, at rest in his arms forever: "My beloved has come down to his garden … My beloved belongs to me, and I to him" (Cant 6:2-3).

So for Francis, the numerous duties and obligations of the pastoral life impinge upon his personal quest to repose quietly in the presence of his God. And yet, Francis realizes that union with God is found not in some mysterious dream of ecstatic rapture but in and through the tilling of the garden of everyday life. Ever cognizant of his Padua experience, Francis adheres to the belief that an affective union with God must also be a living union of effective love.

Ultimately, the shepherd girl finds her beloved and remains united with him, sealed with a bond of love that is stronger even than death (Cant 8:6-7). So, too, in the final analysis, Francis de Sales achieves this apex of union. The saintly quality of his life reflects that highest degree of devotion whereby one "dwells absorbed in and united with God" (*OEA* XXVI:37). Yet, as befits his mystical bent, such a union is not the solely personal rapture of the Rhineland mystics whom he encountered in the Acarie circle. Rather, as the love saga of shepherd and shepherdess concludes with the lovers tending to their paradisiacal garden, so the union of the devout person with God blossoms forth in a life of ecstatic virtue — in Salesian terms, the ecstasy of action, whereby one conforms to the manifestations of the divine will, and the ecstasy of holy indifference, whereby one submits to God's good pleasure.37
This final scene of the Canticle of Canticles, this ultimate union of one's heart with God manifest in a life of virtue, becomes for Francis his vision for the future. It is to be embodied, as his legacy, in the charism of the Visitation of Holy Mary. As Wendy Wright points out, this unusual congregation had no specific work as its charism except the living out of this vision of the transformed heart through prayer... Their vocation was not at all ascetic in the physical sense. Rather, theirs was to be a life of the surrender of the heart, a slow and unobtrusive metamorphosis into the loving capacity of the creator.

The transformation intended for the Visitation is the same progression encoded in the biblical text of the Canticle of Canticles and experienced in the life of Francis de Sales. It is, likewise, the scope of the Salesian biblical theology as well as its summit.

**A Salesian Biblical Theology**

Throughout his exposition of the biblical text, Francis speaks of prayer, which has as its object God. So, too, does theology. Yet for Francis, 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—theory 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 (OEA IV:303).

Concerning biblical theology in particular, Francis offers no explicit elucidation of its methodology. Nevertheless, he is quick to assert that, besides the respect and love which rightfully must be accorded to Scripture (cf. OEA IV:150, 197, 199; VIII:384), the interpreter of the sacred text must follow consistent rules of interpretation. And this consistency demands not only the application of hermeneutical principles to the text but also the appropriation of the interpreted word in one's life.
As we have seen, the principles of biblical science employed by this holy doctor in his interpretation of the Canticle are those of patristic and medieval times, a past tradition whose exegesis, according to Maurice Gilbert, "has been, more often than ours (in the present), ecclesiastical, theological, spiritual, and pastoral." His perception of the metaphorical and mystical senses of the text reveals a spiritual intelligence of the Scripture. And this mode of understanding, formulated and furthered by his life experiences, is consonant with modern hermeneutical theory, which clearly makes provision for the surplus meaning of a text.

But in the view of contemporary critics, Francis' mystical interpretation seems lacking in exegetical scholarship. Yet any "scientific" analysis of Scripture which purports to correct the wandering imaginations of spiritual interpreters risks the failure of substituting epistemological exactitude for the "sense" of the biblical text. Instead, a fuller strategy of biblical interpretation recognizes that among the sciences of the spirit, there is a new category, that of the "hermeneutical sciences," which puts into practice the notion of "sense." In this category belongs exegesis, which has as its specific task to interpret, to comprehend the Sacred Scripture, to say what is its sense.

The appropriation of this "sense" Francis has certainly accomplished in his own life. In fact, according to Luigi Groppi, "He had so assimilated the Sacred Bible that 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." It is this maternal language and paternal direction which Francis incorporates in his "Mystical Exposition."

The interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles according to Francis de Sales, therefore, is not a flight of fanciful commentary but the work of a devout biblical theologian. Based on his education in the ways of Christian humanism, and affected especially by his tutelage under Génébrard and his spiritual refinement in Padua, Francis understands that in himself, as in every human person, there dwells a central impulse which aspires to union with God. This capacity for, and expression of, reciprocal love —of which the Canticle is a narrative—is cultivated through a sensitizing of the heart in prayer. As Wendy Wright explains:
Prayer, gentle and humble, is the place of most intimate contact with the divine. It is the place where the person lays his or her head against the heart of God and listens to the rhythm of the life pulsing there. Salesian practice in prayer, no matter what "methods" it employs, is directed toward enabling this listening to occur. Through it, heart speaks to heart.46

Such a dialogue of hearts, as in the poetic dialogues of the Canticle, is spoken in the Parisian experiences which Francis underwent. Both his spiritual "crisis" and his interaction with the Acarie circle enable Francis to participate in that mystical reality which is embodied in the biblical love story.

This lived intelligence Francis incorporates in his "Mystical Exposition" and in the Treatise on the Love of God. In these works his interpretation of Scripture reveals a biblical theology founded on the hermeneutic of experience which pervades the patristic and medieval tradition. As Anne-Marie Pelletier concludes:

This hermeneutic is founded on the preliminary of a spiritual experience which, even before the reading of the text, has brought to proof that of which the text speaks. It is this experience, finally, which regulates the sense read and understood. And, thus, it is that which explains how one same text, read from the point of differing experiences, could induce totally disparate interpretations.47

Ultimately it is this spiritual experience, more so than any critical analysis, which suffuses the Salesian exposition of the Canticle of Canticles. Yet this fact, in and of itself, should not denigrate an interpretive tradition, for through his writings Francis de Sales has, indeed, communicated the lyrical longing and living of this biblical love story.

NOTES

[1.] This paper was originally presented in the Salesian Studies section of the Fifteenth International Conference on Patristic, Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies, held at Villanova University (PA) in September of 1990.


[5.] *Oeuvres de St. François de Sales*, Édition complète, 27 tomes (Annecy: Religieuses de la Visitation, 1893-1963), XXVI:10-19. According to the editors of this tome, the dating is justified by the style of the writing (earlier than the *Introduction to the Devout Life* in 1608) and by its authority (later than *The Defense of the Standard of the Holy Cross* in 1598). [N.B. Hereafter, quotations drawn from this edition of Francis' writings (*OEA*) will be cited in the body of the text.]

[6.] This is the thesis of J.S. Langelaan, "Saint Francis de Sales' Use of Scripture in the *Treatise on the Love of God*" (published in Dutch).


[8.] Liuima, 558.

[9.] Matter, 5: "One of the theological imperatives of the Reformation was the firm establishment of a tradition of literal biblical study which had grown out of the late medieval schools and contrasted sharply to prior monastic practice. Reformation schools insisted that the Bible speaks plainly, on the literal level." For further explanation of the shifting interpretation of the Canticle, see A.-M. Pelletier, *Lecture au Cantique des Cantiques. De l'énigme de sens aux figures de lecteur* (AnBib, 121) (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989), 58-104.


[13.] La Potterie, 212. This same author notes that the spiritual depth of Scripture was often admired by the Fathers of the Church: Augustin exclaims, "Mira profunditas eloquiorum tuorum, mira profunditas, Deus meus, mira profunditas!" (*Confessions*, XII:14,17); Gregory adds that the commentator must "elevate himself from history to mystery" (*In Ezech* 1:6,3).
[14.] Pelletier, 286: "This exegesis, such as it has been practiced throughout the patristic epoch, in no way obstructs the role of the reader or commentator. Rather, it must be defined by this very intervention, exercised and assumed consciously. The difficulty which we have in conceiving this holds to the idea that we make of ourselves a subjectivity which could only be subjectivism, meaning personal sentiment. When the readers of the fourth or fifth century read the Scriptures, they do so as its subjects, but subjects whose individuality is not in conflict or rivalry with the regulative collectivity of the reading which is the Church, simultaneously defined as a social, institutional and mystical reality."

[15.] Pelletier, 217.


[18.] R.E. Murphy, "Patristic and Medieval Exegesis — Help or Hindrance?" *CBQ* 43 (1981), 514.


[20.] *De Doctrina Christiana*, I:35 (cited in Iserling, #261).

[21.] Iserling, #17 and #255.

[22.] Matter's thesis is "that medieval biblical commentary in general should be understood as a broad genre because the treatises display a clear consciousness of belonging to a type, a method, a mode of literature. To medieval scholars, the Bible represented an untouchable category of literal expression, set apart from other texts: it was the map of divine reality and therefore that through which this reality was revealed to human consciousness" (p.7).

[23.] Iserling, #29.

[24.] Quoted in Iserling, #264.

[25.] Liuima, 591.

[26.] La Potterie, 222.
[27.] Liiuma, 569-570.


[30.] Ravier, 31. We note here an allusion to the title of the Canticle of Canticles, which in Hebrew is a superlative form of comparison.

[31.] This citation, which Francis adopts as a motto, appears in his class notes of March 1586 (*OEA* XXII:10).

[32.] A. Brix, *François de Sales commente le Cantique des Cantiques* (Crippone, France: n.p., 1985), 16: "never in the writings of our saint has the spiritual life been a strictly personal affair, a cutting off of life with other men. Quite to the contrary, it is in his intimate life with God that he found true conduct in relation to other men."

[33.] Ravier, 110. On the extent of Acarie's influence, Ravier adds: "Indeed, we can affirm, without risk of exaggeration, that the *Treatise on the Love of God* would not be the perfect 'grammar of the spiritual life' that it is, if Francis had not lived several months —and almost daily—in the intimacy of the Acarie circle."

[34.] Ravier, 112.

[35.] In a letter to M. Noël Brûlart, Jane acknowledges: "In an age-old trunk, which was labeled 'Vielles quittances,' we have found an explication of the Canticle of Canticles in the form of (a) meditation. I think that these are some of the first pieces of work which had been mislaid, for I do not remember his having spoken to me about them" (*OEA* XXVI:xv).


[37.] On these ecstasies of action and indifference, see Langelaan, *Man in Love with God*, 290-313.

[38.] In the "Spiritual Directory for the Sisters of the Visitation," Francis writes the following as an inscription at the head of the book of vows: "We have no bond but the bond of love (dilection), 'which is the bond of perfection' (Col 3:14); because 'love (dilection) is strong as death and the zeal' of love 'firm as the netherworld' (Cant 8:6)" (*OEA* XXV:135).


[41.] As Murphy notes: "the separation, not merely the distinction however defined, between a material or historical sense and a spiritual sense is ill-advised" ("Patristic and Medieval Exegesis," 515). Elsewhere, Murphy emphasizes the same conclusion: "any text comes to have more meaning than the literal sense given to it by the author(s)… This is an inevitable hermeneutical process; as time passes, new horizons emerge" ("Critical Biblical Scholarship," 67).

[42.] Cf. M. Panthalany, "St. Francis de Sales' Use of the Old Testament," *Spirituality of St. Francis de Sales: Its Sources and Influences* (Studies in Salesian Spirituality, 4; ed. A. Kolencherry) (Bangalore, India: S.F.S. Publications, 1985), 28: "it is to be affirmed that Francis was not an OT-scholar in the modern sense of the term… His study of the OT was pastorally oriented. His exposition of the OT, therefore, cannot be categorized a scholarly exposition in the modern sense; it is more a pastoral exposition."

[43.] La Potterie, 221.


[45.] Cf. Y. Mazor, "The Song of Songs or the Story of Stories? 'The Song of Songs': Between Genre and Unity," *SJOT* (1, 1990), 1-29, who argues that the singular narrative layer of a "love story" underlies and unifies the succession of poems.

[46.] Wright, 149.

[47.] Pelletier, 280.