ABSTRACT: St Francis de Sales has been credited with adapting monastic spirituality to the context of everyday life so as to make holiness possible for everyone. In this article, we shall examine this spiritual innovation as viewed through the lens of the Introduction to the Devout Life. In particular, we shall explore how the Salesian invitation to return to the heart (reditus ad cor), whose roots are in the monastic tradition, offers us a spiritual itinerary that is an asceticism of love.

St Francis de Sales (1567-1622), commonly known as one of the artisans of ‘Christian humanism’, was born at a time of the full flowering of Renaissance humanism. In this respect, he does not stand outside, but enters into the current of Renaissance Humanism that was ubiquitous during his own lifetime. He himself acknowledged the contribution of religious authors who had preceded him. His genius, therefore, did not lie in promoting an original...
way to Christian perfection, but in his ability to synthesize and make accessible what fifteen centuries of religious literature had handed down. Having imbibed the Renaissance culture through his Jesuit education, he promotes an optimistic spirituality that celebrates the inherent goodness of human nature. Streebing remarks:

He was clever enough to see during the Renaissance in France as in Italy and Spain the thing to be emphasized was the human person. He had to capitalize on that main preoccupation of the Renaissance. Consequently, anthropocentric considerations were the order of the day. Any successful effort in the direction of holiness of life would have to be initiated with these considerations. 3

In this, St Francis shows himself a man well adapted to his times. 4 Prior to this, with the Copernican revolution, many Catholic thinkers retreated behind the bulwark of tradition. St Francis, on the other hand, “embraces this renaissance starting point for the theological enterprise: he begins with the human person, with a ‘turn within’; anticipatory of the great movement in Post-Kantian transcendental thought. In his version of the ‘turn-within’ as starting point, St Francis appropriated the category of the Greek maxim, ‘know thyself,’ grounding that imperative biblically as did Erasmus.” 5 Given the threat of external anarchy with the wars of religion and the advent of Christian Socratism through Renaissance literature, it is understandable that St Francis de Sales should also share in this turn-within of seventeenth century French religious thought. 6 The hallmark of his spirituality, then, is a devotion which

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3 Streebing, Detout Humanism, 56.
4 Contemporary with St Francis are a group of independent thinkers (libertines érudits) e.g., Le Vayer, Gabriel Nauyé, La Mothe and Pierre Gassendi who had been influenced by Erasmus, Charron and Montaigne. Erasmus declared that ‘know thyself’ was accomplished through self-transcendence, by going out of oneself in love; For LeVayer, self-knowledge of God is achieved through reflection on his works, the human person being God’s greatest work. For a detailed analysis of these thinkers in relation to St Francis de Sales, see René Bady, L’Homme et son “Institution”: de Montaigne à Bérulle:1580–1625 (Paris : Société d’Édition, Les Belles Lettres, 1964); Alexander T. Pocetto, Saint François de Sales et les libertins érudits (Ph.D. dissertation, Laval University, 1970), 68-113.
7 One key term in the spirituality of seventeenth century France is the word intérieur. A spirituality of the interior postulates that God is to be sought within, not outside, in the deepest recesses of the human heart. There is an obvious influence from, and affiliation with, the Augustinian method of introversion, which implies that the further the soul advances into the exterior world the more it is distanced from God, and conversely, the more the
begins not with the external but internal conversion that leads to service of one’s neighbor, as expressed in his best seller, *Introduction to the Devout Life.*

**The Introduction to the Devout Life**

First published in 1609, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* was received with public acclaim and was already in its third edition by the time the *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616) was published. In many ways the *Introduction* can be considered as a preface to the *Treatise*. Its purpose was to extend the pursuit of perfection far beyond the monastic context, so that holiness could be lived by everyone “leading an ordinary life to all outward appearances”. St Francis de Sales sought to lead Christians to a full and fervent interior life through a life of true devotion which is the true love of God that has reached such a degree of perfection that “it not only makes us do good, but, also to do this carefully, frequently, and promptly”. This life of devotion is possible for any person in any vocation or profession, but it is exercised in different ways by “the gentleman, the worker, the servant, the prince, the widow, the young girl, and the married woman”. It must be


8 The first edition of *The Introduction to the Devout Life* grew out of the memoranda on the spiritual life which he had written for individuals, especially Louise de Chastel, the 20-year-old wife of Claude de Charmois, ambassador of the Duke of Savoy to the Republic of Bern and a distant relative of Francis. Before she departed for Chambéry, Francis wrote out for her a set of instructions to guide her in the life of the Spirit, and he entrusted her to the care of the rector of the Jesuit college in Chambéry. After reading these instructions, the rector immediately wrote to St Francis encouraging him to publish them. They were the seedlings that were to blossom into the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

9 Although *The Introduction to the Devout Life* was first written between the years 1607–1608, St Francis continued to revise it until the definitive edition appeared in 1619. Already in February 1609, St Francis had written to Madame de Chantal: “Bring me all the letters and articles I have sent you, if you have them still. In case the *Introduction* has to be reprinted, these will be a great help, as I shall find there many things for this purpose.” OEA XIV:131.

10 Chatillon writes: “The *Introduction* was intended to provide spiritual guidance for those who were leading “an ordinary life to all outward appearances”. It reflected the Erasmian humanism that focused upon finding the love of God and Christ in daily activities. St Francis de Sales tried to counter what he considered the pessimistic theology of Calvinism, with its emphasis on human sinfulness and predestination, and emphasized in Molinistic fashion the freedom of the human will and the natural desire for God that was harmonized with divine grace. His Christian optimism was based upon his understanding of the doctrines of creation and redemption.” J. Chatillon, “Devotio”, in *DSp* 3:702-716.

11 Viviane Mellinghoff-Bourgerie concludes that “St Francis de Sales brought the cloister ideal into secular life and not the inverse.” V. Mellinghoff-Bourgerie, “François de Sales au XVIIème Siècle entre rayonnement spirituel et autorité canonisée.” *Transversalités* 91(2004):157.

12 OEA III:15; ID:40.
13 OEA III:19; ID:43.
adapted to the strength, responsibilities and duties of each person. It should come as no surprise, then, that St Francis should be described as deserving “credit for removing Christian spirituality from the monastic framework in which it had been confined for many centuries.”

Salesian Asceticism: Freedom from Sin, disordered desires and self-love

Although St Francis de Sales highlights the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, at the same time, he does acknowledge the potentiality for sin, a failure to love God and others. He acknowledges this paradox concerning our being similar to, but not identical with, God, when he preaches: “Since we are created in the image of God we receive all that is good from him; but since we are created from nothing, there always remains some imperfection in us.” If the dignity and growth of our spiritual life consists in loving God and others, the converse is also true; we diminish through sin when we fail to love God and others.

For St Francis, as human beings we have a twofold tendency to go out of ourselves: either a sensual ecstasy that brings us down towards the beast or a transcendent ecstasy that enables us to respond to the good for the sake of the other. In brief, we are drawn out of ourselves toward charity or egoism. This struggle within the human person cannot be reduced to a simple dualistic interpretation of a struggle between the spirit and the flesh. Rather it is to be understood, in the Pauline sense, as a conflict of two loves, sacred love and self-love.

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14 By his death in 1622, at least forty editions of the Introduction to a Devout Life had appeared, and it had been translated into the major European languages. Protestants read it too, often in an edition purged of peculiarly Catholic features such as Eucharistic piety.


16 The human person cannot be adequately described by referring only to the ‘Imago Dei’. Both the Church documents (Gs 13, EV 1/1360 ff.) and Biblical exegesis underline another characteristic which we can define as limit, sin and vulnerability. This characteristic is expressed in Bernadine theology as our ‘unlikeness to God.’ In short, our transformation consists in a “progressive elimination of our unlikeness to God, enabling us to know God in the measure in which God re-makes us in His likeness.” E. Gilson, The Mystical Theology of St Bernard (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 93

17 Sermon for Palm Sunday 20th March 1622, OEA X:345.

18 “Although, by virtue of our freedom we have sinned, we were not given our freedom for that,” see Augustine, De Libero Arbitrio, II, 1,3 as cited by Solignac, “Liberté chez les pères de l’église”, DSp 9:813.


20 Sensual in this context must not be understood as a negation of the erotic, for it does not include, for example, physical expressions of love proper to marriage. It is to be understood more in terms of lust where we use the other for self-gratification rather than offering oneself as a gift. See Pope Benedict XIV’s Encyclical: Deus Caritas Est, n.9-11.
The reality of sin in our lives admits of unfreedom and implies the notion of a struggle or effort to achieve freedom. St Francis writes, in the Introduction, “the work of purging the soul neither can nor should end except with life itself.”

In the classical language of spirituality such an acknowledgment necessitates the need for ascesis. Asceticism is the struggle to overcome the deep divisions within our nature, the reordering of our desires, so that our lives can be brought into harmony with the demands of our Christian faith. “In its most general sense, asceticism can be said to represent all those elements of the spiritual life that involve an organized campaign against the sinful aspects of self, and against exterior temptation, as well as positive efforts directed toward the perfection of our own spiritual activities.”

The spiritual outlook of St Francis de Sales is situated within such an ascetical tradition that emphasizes the need of human effort in achieving freedom, so as to create an openness and receptivity to God’s grace. Wright encapsulates the Salesian understanding of asceticism when she notes, “At their root all of these practices seek to open the heart so that the whole person, in thought, intent and deed will become utterly responsive to the most subtle fluctuations of the divine breath.”

The original meaning of asceticism is tied up with exercising so as to obtain a skill. Although in everyday language it has become synonymous with renunciation, asceticism in the monastic tradition meant something positive, exercising in order to acquire a religious behaviour. Such an understanding is reflected in the writings of St Francis de Sales who addresses one of his correspondents in the following manner: “Little by little train your will to follow God’s will, wherever it may lead you; see that your will is strongly roused when your conscience says: God wants this. Gradually the resistance you feel so strongly will become weaker and soon disappear altogether.”

The purpose of such

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22 Asceticism as a discipline is not exclusive to Christianity. The Stoics, the Epicureans, and Socrates taught sophisticated and coherent methods in what Epictetus called “the art of living”. All these methods involved self-denial and the re-ordering of our value systems in order to achieve inner peace, a serene acceptance of what could not be changed. P. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault, ed. A. Davidson and trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 68. However, as Robinson notes “these theological underpinnings are important because what we are concerned with here is asceticism undertaken as response to the grace of Christ, and not as an exercise in self-realization.” J. Robinson, Spiritual Combat Revisited (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 246.
26 One of the reasons for the success of the Introduction to the Devout Life lies in the fact that it found a receptive audience in the dévots, pious laymen and laywomen who believed that the wars were a sign of God’s wrath, and so, they reformed their dress and behaviour on narrow ascetic lines, adopted rigorous programmes of meditation and prayer, and sought to imitate Christ by humble service to the sick and poor. “Make yourself a servant of the poor”, he wrote in the Introduction, advising his devout readers to tend the ill with their own hands, to feed them and even wash their soiled linens.” OEA III:190; ID: 165-166. The prototype for this piety of active mercy was St
exercise is to cultivate an attitude of *apatheia* or indifference that will lead to a condition of inner peace. However, this peace only emerges out of the struggle to overcome all that which would hold us back from God. This struggle, in Salesian language, is perceived as a ‘spiritual combat.’ He writes in the *Introduction*, “We must not be disturbed at our imperfections, since for us perfection consists in fighting against them.” 27 Commenting on the use of this terminology of ‘spiritual combat,’ Marceau remarks that,

The spiritual combat is not a decorative metaphor used as the title of a book. It is a proper expression for the pathetic signification he has experienced […] In order to find peace, holy tranquillity, he must descend below the surface agitations to the sanctified regions of the soul. 28

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**The ‘Spiritual Combat’**

The influence of *Il Combattimento Spirituale*29 (*The Spiritual Combat*) by Lorenzo Scupoli, on the life and writings of St Francis de Sales cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it has been reported that St Francis had intended to publish his own translation from Italian to French, only to discover that someone else had already done so. Subsequently, he withdrew his own version. 30 A further testimony of the esteem that St Francis de Sales held for *The Spiritual Combat* is manifested in the multiple letters in which he advises his correspondents to profit from this treatise. 31 In a letter to Jane Frances de Chantal he writes, “My dearest daughter, read chapter twenty-eight of *The Spiritual Combat* which is precious to me and which I’ve carried around in my pocket for the last eighteen years. Each time I re-read it, I discover something new.” 32

Catherine of Genoa who established ‘oratories of Divine Love’ in 1497. This, in turn was taken up by the Theatines who did not withdraw from the world but sought to renew the Church through individual penance and sanctification and by giving oneself to others through charitable activity. See C. P. Atwood, *Always Reforming: Christianity since 1300* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), 144.

27 OEA III:27; ID:48. See also, “It is enough that we have a right desire to fight valiantly together with perfect confidence that the Spirit of God will assist us with his help when occasion to use it presents itself.” OEA IV:253; T1:231; “God does not will to keep us from being attacked by temptations, but wills that by resistance our charity may be practiced more fully, that by combat we may gain victory” OEA IV:223 ; T1:207-208.


29 A son of his times, Lorenzo Scupoli (1530–1610) was caught up in the Counter-Reform milieu – that had already begun with *devotio moderna*, Catherine of Bologna, Ignatius of Loyola, Luis de Granada – that sought to renew the catholic ascetical tradition. For a detailed study and analysis of *The Spiritual Combat* by Lorenzo Scupoli, see, J. Robinson, *Spiritual Combat Revisited* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003).

30 Bishop André de Sauzéa, remarks on the “heroic humility” of St Francis de Sales in withdrawing his own edition of *The Spiritual Combat* and allowing Bishop André’s to be published instead. OEA I, xliv, n.2


32 Letter CDVI, *OEA* XIII:304. In the following year, 24 January 1608 he writes another letter to Jane de Chantal where he declares that he has been carrying around *The Spiritual Combat* in his pocket for 15 years. Letter CDXXX,
This admission on his part of ‘re-reading’ the *Spiritual Combat*, coupled with the fact that he has been carrying it around in his pocket for eighteen years, indicates not only his esteem for it, but also how its on-going assimilation is contributing to the fermentation of his own thought processes. In a conversation with St Francis, Jean Pierre Camus, Bishop of Belley and intimate friend of the saint, recalls:

One day I asked François who his Spiritual Director was? His answer was to take the *Spiritual Combat* from his pocket and say: “You see my Director in this book, which, from my earliest youth, has, with the help of God, taught me and been my master in spiritual matters and in the interior life. When I was a student in Padua, a Theatine father instructed me and gave me advice from it, and following its directions all has been well with me.”

It is beyond dispute that the *Spiritual Combat* exerts an important and formative influence on the on-going development of St Francis de Sales’s thinking. Having established this relationship, it is fitting to ask, what is the nature of this relationship?

The rapport between Salesian spirituality and Scupoli’s *Spiritual Combat* is intimate. In Scupoli’s *Treatise*, we find a methodical plan for the struggle with the interior life, in order to arrive at a pure love of God, in imitation of Christ. The call to perfection does not consist in exterior works, but in the interior. A perusal of the table of Contents of the *Spiritual Combat* reveals themes held dear by St Francis de Sales: the distrust of self and corresponding trust in God; a correct use of the understanding and a training of the will; the warfare between the inferior and superior will; on the regulation of the senses and resisting temptations; the acquisition of virtue and growing in prayer; and finally, the entire renunciation of our own will and absolute resignation to the divine good pleasure.

A similar process and methodology is quite clearly employed in the *Introduction*. St Francis de Sales begins with the need for purification from sin, the necessity of prayer and meditation, growing in the practice of the virtues, helps against temptations and exercises in renewing...
one’s devotion. In short, the spiritual combat in the Introduction relies on ascetical practices that seek to free from (sin, self-love, disordered desires) apparent goods. It also seeks to strengthen our will through promoting the virtues so as to arrive at, and grow in, freedom for love. Among the virtues proposed by St Francis special prominence is given to humility, gentleness and simplicity which lead towards the pre-eminent virtue of holy indifference.

The movement in The Spiritual Combat and the Introduction is basically the same: a movement from uprooting the vices to planting the virtues whilst growing in a life of prayer. It is our contention that the influence of Scupoli’s Treatise is one of osmosis rather than appropriation. This is evidenced from the outset where St Francis advises Philothea on the path of devotion and Scupoli calls his reader to perfection:

Would you attain in Christ the height of perfection, and by a nearer and nearer approach to your God become one spirit with him?“37

You wish to live a life of devotion, dearest Philothea, because you are a Christian and know that it is a virtue most pleasing to God’s Majesty”.38

A comparison of the Salesian text with that of Scupoli’s, as illustrated above, reveals important nuances. The substitution of the word perfection with devotion is not a matter of mere semantics, but is of full import.39 The word ‘devotion’ indicates a spirituality which is not preoccupied with perfecting the self, but of growing in love of God and neighbour. In the Introduction, St Francis de Sales distinguishes between true and false devotion:

I hold that devotion does not consist in the sweetness, delight, consolation, and sensible tenderness of heart that move us to tears and sighs and bring us a certain pleasant, delightful satisfaction when we perform various spiritual exercises […] True devotion consists in a constant, resolute, prompt, and active will to do whatever we know is pleasing to God.40

38 “Vous aspirez à la dévotion, très chère Philothée, parce qu’étant Chrétienne, vous savez que c’est une vertu extrêmement agréable à la divine Majesté.” OEA III:13; ID:39.
39 Margaret Lavin writes, ‘unfortunately, when influential early Christian writers began to reflect philosophically on the human person before God, the emphasis on the relational and social aspects of being created in the image of a relational and loving God was lost. Christian life became a private affair between an individual and God. Christianity turned in upon itself and emphasized “spiritual perfection” rather than “spiritual freedom”. The pursuit of Individual, non-relational holiness became the dominant concern in the life of believers.” M. Lavin, Theology for Ministry (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), 18. It is our contention that the spirituality of the Introduction, which promotes ‘devotion’ rather than ‘perfection’, is cognizant of this relational and social aspect which explains why St Francis encourages ‘spiritual friendships’ and emphasizes the role of the heart as we shall later see.
40 OEA III:318-320; I:257-258.
Despite these nuances, it remains that the ascetical nature of both these works is self-evident and that they have more in common than what separates them.

The Language of Combat

The language of combat (Eph. 6:10-18) may appear somewhat alien to our modern sensibilities, but within the purview of the literature of classical spirituality it is a key concept. It is the language of asceticism which recognizes that in the struggle to gain our freedom we have to contribute our efforts. The purpose of this struggle or combat is self-mastery which is ordered to the gift of self. Within the ascetical tradition, Cassian and Augustine both refer to this struggle as combat, St Bernard speaks of the need to combat self-love and St Thomas comments on the struggle to arrive at perfection.

Both Scuopli and St Francis de Sales recognize the pivotal role of the will in this combat. A comparison of texts may be helpful at this juncture:

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42 Placed midway between the ‘divine will’ and the ‘will of the senses’, the reasonable will ‘does not like to give itself completely to either, and this daily struggle begins to strengthen it and teaches us the limits of flesh and spirit more accurately”. Robinson, The Spiritual Combat Revisited, 86. For Scupoli, the method of choice to achieve mystical union with God lay in the transformation of the will. In the very first sentence of the opening chapter of Il Combattimento spirituale, Scuopli defined Christian perfection as a process of “drawing near to your God, [to] become of one same spirit with Him” (cf. 1Cor.6:17). From that point through the fourteenth chapter, he filled out his description of the process of transforming the human will and fusing it with the divine. He wanted readers systematically to entangle themselves from the desires of their own will through “renunciation” and an opposite “resignation to his divine pleasure.” In chapter ten, he began specific discussion of use of the will, reiterating time and again over the next few chapters that the goal was to recreate it “conformed in everything to divine pleasure.” Hudon, Theatine Spirituality, 56-57.
Although in this combat we may be said to have within us two wills, the one of the reason, which is thence called rational and superior, the other of the senses, thence called sensual and inferior, and commonly described by the words appetite, flesh, sense, and passion... and herein does our spiritual conflict principally consist. The reasonable will being placed, as it were, midway between the divine will, which is above it - and the inferior will, or will of the senses, which is beneath it, is continually assaulted by both; each seeking in turn to attract and subdue, and bring it into obedience. (emphasis mine)

The Spiritual Combat

As to the delight that may follow a temptation, it must be noted that there are two parts in the soul, the inferior and the superior. The inferior part does not always follow the superior part but acts apart by itself. Hence it often happens that the inferior part experiences the pleasure in the temptation without actually giving consent and does so even against the will of the superior part. This is the warfare the apostle describes when he says that “the flesh lusts against the spirit,” and that there is a law of the members and a law of the spirit. (emphasis mine)

Introduction to the Devout Life

In this struggle or combat between la volonté supérieure and la volonté inférieure we must not conclude that we have two wills, but rather that the will is divided in itself. As St Francis writes:

In ourselves we daily experience various contradictory wills [...] However, from this we must not infer that a man has two souls or two natures, as the Manicheans thought. “No”, says St Augustine...But the will enticed by different baits and moved by different reasons, seems to be divided within itself while it is pulled in two ways, until it makes a choice in keeping with its liberty and chooses the one or the other.

For St Francis de Sales, “the proper work of the will is in the ordering of our love; for the will dictates the consent or the refusal we give to love.” Lavelle continues, “the will regulates the course of love and must be vigilant to keep its flame alive and prevent it from being diverted to objects which may allure but can never satisfy it. Such objects are worthy of being loved only in the light of the Infinite Love which sustains the will itself and in which, once found, it reaches fulfilment.”

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43 TSC:26.
44 OEA III:296; ID:240.
45 OEA IV:64-65; T1:83.
To choose wisely, however, the will needs to be assisted by reason as it “meditates upon various points, the consideration of which may give it strength and restore its breath to resist the enemy.” If our will is subject to error, due to the fact that it can follow its own desires rather than the divine pleasure, so too, our understanding needs to be shielded against ignorance and curiosity.

To combat the ignorance of the understanding, Scupoli relies on prayer and “a true deep consideration of all things”; to combat idle curiosity he recommends humility, restraining the intellect and “submitting one’s opinion to that of others.” Scupoli has already asserted that in the spiritual combat we need to rely on the weapons of ‘self-distrust’ and ‘trust in God’, to these he has now added the third weapon of ‘spiritual exercises.’ It should be obvious now that our two authors recommend ascetical practices in order to enlighten the intellect and regulate and control the will so that we may learn to desire what God wants for us. As Robinson accurately surmises:

It is easy to make too sharp a distinction between understanding and willing and forget that it is the same person who does the thinking and desiring. Yet there is a difference, as we have seen, between the attitude taken up by the intellect as it tries to understand something and the will, which wants either to possess the object for itself or to distance itself from it. Once we are aware of whatever it is our experience presents us with, we almost automatically adopt an attitude of love or of hatred toward it.

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**Asceticism of the heart**

Asceticism is, at one and the same time, the love of God seeking to liberate us and our response to work with God’s liberating activity. St Francis writes:

Our heart is made for God, and he constantly entices it and never ceases to cast before it the allurements of his heavenly love. Yet five things impede the operation of his holy attraction: (1) sin, which removes us from God; (2) affection for riches; (3) sensual pleasures; (4) pride and vanity; (5) self-love, together with

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47 TSC:36.
48 For a more detailed examination of these ascetical exercises that are used to train the intellect in overcoming ignorance and idle curiosity, see exercises 7-10 in The Spiritual Combat, 15-20.
49 TSC:14-15.
50 Robinson, The Spiritual Combat Revisited, 98.
the multitude of disordered passions it brings forth, which are like a heavy load weighing it down.\textsuperscript{51}

The main purpose of ascetical exercises, therefore, is to free the heart to respond in love. This echoes the thinking of Scuopli, when he writes, “Thy heart was created by God for this end alone, to be loved and possessed by him... the first thing, then, which you have to do, is so fix and establish the intention of your heart, that the exterior may flow from the interior.”\textsuperscript{52}

Both St Francis de Sales and Scuopli recognise that to “fix the intention of your heart” is to train it in responding to the will of God or God’s divine pleasure. It follows that there will be a struggle between self-will and God’s will. This combat, however, is not to be perceived, in a dualistic manner as a fight between body and soul. It is this ‘graced combat’ that struggles against concupiscence, not the body, from which is born disordered movements that are rooted in self-love.\textsuperscript{53} Asceticism from a Salesian perspective, therefore, is necessary to clear a pathway to the heart, uprooting sin, self-love and disordered desires.\textsuperscript{54} The aim of ascetical practices is to set us free from disordered passions and destructive attachments so that we may enjoy purity of heart. It is this re-engagement with our heart that re-unites us with our truest and deepest origins which is love.\textsuperscript{55} In short, “God having created the human person in his image desires that like in Him everything in us be ordained by love and for love.”\textsuperscript{56}

In his letters to Philothea in his \textit{Introduction to the Devout Life}, he had already written that “wherever we are, we find God present,” but we do not think of it; so we must “challenge our souls to an attentive consideration of his presence. God is not only present in the place where you are, Philothea,” but “most especially in your heart, like the heart of your heart; your soul is the temple of God.”\textsuperscript{57} In this temple, “make spiritual aspirations to God by short, ardent movements

\textsuperscript{51} OEA V:56; T2:54.
\textsuperscript{53} See, OEA IX:16-17.
\textsuperscript{54} For an in-depth study of the effect of sin, self-love and disordered desires in Salesian spirituality, see E. Mc Donnell, \textit{The Concept of Freedom in the Writings of St Francis de Sales} (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 181-210.
\textsuperscript{55} This \textit{reditus ad cor} (return to the heart) has its roots in the monastic tradition. As Jean Marie Howe proclaims, “The journey home is a journey of the heart. Monastic life is a finger pointing within, indicating the path that leads to the deepest centre, to the true self: the path of \textit{reditus ad cor}. When we return to the heart, we return to ourselves; we claim the interior landscape of the heart as our own. Monastic life is essentially a process of awakening the dormant heart, liberating the life within us, and following its lead.” Jean-Marie Howe, \textit{Secret of the Heart: Spiritual Being}, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 35.
\textsuperscript{56} OEA IV:40. This movement towards our heart wherein we discover our true vocation has strong affinities with the spirituality of St Catherine of Genoa. For her, “the goal of the spiritual journey is defined by its beginning. We have been formed by love, in love and for love. The truest ‘port’ of the human heart is the Pure Love in which it was first created. See J. Urdis, “Possessed by Pure Love: The Spirituality of Catherine of Genoa”, \textit{Studies in Spirituality} 6 (1996): 131-144.
\textsuperscript{57} OEA III: 74-75; ID: 85.
of your heart, Philothea”. The monastic withdrawal from the world is now replaced with an invitation to Philothea to withdraw into her heart in the midst of her busyness. He writes, “our tasks are seldom so important as to keep us from withdrawing our hearts from them from time to time in order to retire into this divine solitude.” Nevertheless, this movement inwards, is to be followed by a movement outwards, in synchronization with the heart’s breathing in and breathing out. He advises: “We retire into God before we aspire to him, and we aspire to him so that we may retire into him. Hence aspirations to be with God and spiritual retirement support one another and both proceed and are born from good thoughts.” St Francis concludes that “since the great work of devotion consists in such use of spiritual recollection and prayers of aspiration... without this exercise we cannot properly lead the contemplative life, and we can but poorly lead the active life.”

Salesian asceticism faces us with a paradox: on the one hand we must work on ourselves, but on the other hand, we must recognize that we cannot make ourselves better through our own effort, God alone can transform us.

There is no clock no matter how good it may be, that doesn’t need resetting and rewinding twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. In addition, at least once a year it must be taken apart to remove the dirt clogging it, straighten out bent parts, and repair those worn out. In like manner, every morning and evening a person who really takes care of his heart must rewind it for God’s service by means of exercise.

From a Salesian perspective, grace precedes our response but requires our consent. This is the manner in which we “co-work” with God’s grace, because “we receive the grace of God in vain, when we receive it at our heart’s door but not into our heart’s consent.” Furthermore, this consent needs to be carried through in our actions because “to have consent within your heart without putting it into effect is like planting a vine with no intention that it bear fruit”.

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58 See OEA III:94; ID:98.
59 OEA III:93 ; ID: 97. The Second Part of the Introduction, ch. 12 is devoted to this theme of retiring or withdrawing into the heart, so as to commune with the Lord.
60 OEA III:94 ; ID:98.
61 OEA III:100 ; ID:103
63 OEA IV:122; TI:129.
64 OEA III :111; ID :111.
**Salesian Asceticism: Freedom for love**

Our exploration of the Salesian asceticism of the heart brings us inexorably deeper into the mystery of freedom and grace. St Francis states succinctly:

> Freedom is the life of our heart [and] the greatest gift we can give to God [...] Even God, who has bestowed on us this gift, never wishes to violate it. In inviting us to respond in freedom, God desires that we do so willingly and freely [...] Although God is all powerful, he has never constrained anyone to serve him.\(^\text{65}\)

This emphasis on our free consent to love brings us to the threshold of the mystical life because it presupposes God’s prevenient grace already at work within us. In Salesian terminology this is the role of inspirations.\(^\text{66}\) Although it is generally accepted that the *Introduction* is an ascetical work and the *Treatise* is of a more mystical genre, this clear-cut distinction between asceticism and mysticism is not countenanced by St Francis de Sales. Although St Francis does acknowledge the difference between asceticism and mysticism, he brings them together by assigning a pivotal role to love. The struggle or combat involved in ascetical exercises is perceived as an act of love. Brix observes that,

> It may seem surprising not to see more emphasis on sacrifice, suffering, the gift of self, renouncement. However, all of them are implicitly contained in love: for the only thing that God asks of us is our heart, in other words our freedom, the free gift of self. We can only offer such a gift if we are fully conscious of it and ardently desire it.\(^\text{67}\)

It is love that transforms asceticism so that it is difficult to define when asceticism gives way to mysticism because it too is oriented to union with God through love. As Lajeunie rightly surmises:

> Salesian spirituality has been defined as “a synthesis of asceticism and mysticism”; this is apparently true, but looking more deeply into it, one can easily see it is really pure mysticism, since from the very first steps of the soul towards faith, our doctor discovers the decisive role of inspiration and

\(^{65}\) *OEA* IX :335.


inspiration is a mystical factor. Again, the ascension of the soul continues through inspiration felt in the heart: asceticism is therefore integrated in mysticism: And this is a characteristic of the spirit and the method of our saint.\textsuperscript{68}

It is free will that gives to love its precious value, and right love gives will its freedom. It is this positive vision of freedom that characterizes a Salesian understanding of freedom. It is positive because the origin and purpose of freedom is to love. This is the core value embedded in the depths of the human heart. Indeed, it is the reason for the existence of our heart, even for the existence of desire within us. Hence, the aim of ascetical exercises within Salesian spirituality is to return to the heart and live its vocation which is love.

An asceticism of love confronts us with the truth that since our hearts are wounded or tarnished by original sin they “are ‘arrhythmic’; they breathe and beat to a rhythm of their own.”\textsuperscript{69} The reditus ad cor, therefore, is not simply a “matter of ‘returning to the heart’ but of ‘recreating the heart,’ and only Christ can reassure us this new genesis, this new beginning, this new heart.”\textsuperscript{70} To embrace its vocation of love, the human heart, as Wright points out, needs

some intermediary heart that can bridge the human and divine realms, one heart that is both model and mediator that can transform human heart and allow them to become what they were created to be. The heart is the crucified heart of Christ, the one who invites all to come and learn from Him for he is gentle and lowly of heart.\textsuperscript{71}

The spirituality of the \textit{Introduction}, accordingly, is aimed at our transformation into Christ. Our assimilation into Christ leads to our divinization, aptly encapsulated in the Salesian dictum “live Jesus”.\textsuperscript{72} Grace as divinization must always be perceived as the person’s free participation in God’s freely given life.\textsuperscript{73} It is not a superadded quality, but the fulfilment of our created nature which we must have if we are to be fully human.\textsuperscript{74} St Francis recapitulates,
To sum up, the pleasure we take in anything is a precursor that places in the lover’s heart the qualities of the thing that pleases. Hence holy complacence transforms us into God, whom we love, and the greater the complacence, the more perfect the transformation. Thus having great love, the saints are very quickly and perfectly transformed, since love transports and translates the manners and dispositions of one heart into another.\textsuperscript{75}

The idea of transformation into Christ, therefore, while being uniquely personal\textsuperscript{76} is also radically communitarian. St Francis highlights this communitarian dimension for since each person is made in the image and likeness of God, “together we represent one same portrait which is God.”\textsuperscript{77} Here, we enter into what Lajeunie describes as Salesian “cosmic Christocentrism”.\textsuperscript{78} The summit of creation, therefore, is the communion of all persons in love with one another and with God.

\section*{Conclusion}

In sum, the essence of an ‘asceticism of love’ as underscored in the \textit{Introduction to the Devout Life} is the understanding that we do not come to God bypassing the things and persons that God has created, but, rather, we enjoy communion with God in, through, and with them. True love of another is not a hindrance to our love of God. We do not have two hearts, one to love God and one to love our neighbour. We learn to love both God and others at the same time. The two loves, divine and human, are intimately intertwined. It is as if our hearts undergo an expansion in the very process of loving itself. In the material world when we give we have less, in the spiritual world, another law operates: it is in giving that we receive; it is in loving that our capacity for love grows.

This accounts for the centrality of the ‘heart’ in the \textit{Introduction} which seeks to incarnate in our world the double commandment of love of God and neighbour through ‘spiritual friendships’.\textsuperscript{79} Both love of God and neighbour, as witnessed in spiritual friendships, demands a constant \textit{asceticism of love}, as we seek to transcend ourselves in going out in love to others and God. Such a

\textsuperscript{75} OEA V:61; T2:58-59.

\textsuperscript{76} In the \textit{Treatise}, book two, chapter seven, St Francis indicates that as a personal intimate relationship with God, grace is unique. Each person receives a personal individual grace. Grace has such a unique quality that no two persons are alike.

\textsuperscript{77} OEA X:270

\textsuperscript{78} See Lajeunie, \textit{St Francis de Sales}, 2:159.

“relational spirituality, a spirituality of communion, [is] incomprehensible if not rooted in the communal life of the Church.”

Our communion with the body of Christ, wherein we ‘live Jesus’, prolongs the mystery of the incarnation. An asceticism of love re-enacts the dying and rising of our Lord, for “love not only builds up the union, it destroys whatever is incompatible with it … in order to unite, love also divides; it divides us from ourselves so that we can give ourselves as a gift.” Such an understanding of love cannot be reduced to sentimentality but is more akin to the martyrdom of love as experienced by St Jane Frances de Chantal.

If human nature is to reflect the dynamism of God’s being which is self-diffusive goodness, then, an ‘asceticism of love’ is not oriented towards self-perfection but towards a constant movement of self-transcendence, a going out of oneself in love. Commenting on this ecstatic nature of love, Louis Lavelle writes: ‘Whoever complains of not being able to love remains on the surface of self and allows the spectacle of the world either to distract or imprison us in the cavern of self; thus we will know nothing of the infinity of love, save a few impulses immediately checked by self-love.’ In this drama between self-love and ecstatic love, freedom is of the essence. In short, our free choices either enable us to progress on the path of love through self-transcendence or stunt our growth in love, by regressing into self-love.

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83 Lavelle, Quatre Saints, 194.