AL CUORE DELLA SPIRITUALITÀ
DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES

601 Studiorum summaria

609 Studia

JOSEPH BOENZI, Presentation

JOSEPH BOENZI, Francesco di Sales e l'Introduzione alla vita devota

EUGENIO ALBURQUERQUE FRUTOS, El influjo de los escritores espirituales españoles del siglo XVI en la Introducción a la vida devota de san Francisco de Sales

EUNAN MC DONNEL, Understanding the spirituality of the Introduction to the Devout Life as an asceticism of love

EUGENIO ALBURQUERQUE FRUTOS, El influjo de los escritores espirituales españoles del siglo XVI en la Introducción a la vida devota de san Francisco de Sales

VALENTIN VIGUERA, Elementi caratterizzanti della direzione spirituale di san Francesco di Sales

ANNE-MARIE BAUD, Des «philothées» à la Philothée ou saint François de Sales et ses «philothées»

TERENCE MCGOLDRICK, “Everything in Marriage is Holy”. Francis de Sales, a Christian Humanist Theology of Marriage

Recensiones

787 Opera accepta

793 Index totius voluminis LXXV (2013)
“EVERYTHING IN MARRIAGE IS HOLY”.
FRANCIS DE SALES,
A CHRISTIAN HUMANIST THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

Terence McGoldrick
University of Providence (Rhode Island)

Salesianum 75 (2013) 761-780

The Roman Catechism and Trent grant marriage an unprecedented official dignity as a sacrament, and yet the Tridentine Church holds that the highest state of life is indisputably (anathema sit) the religious state, which Luther counters is an unnatural and impossible life contrary to the command of God. The Christian humanists of the Catholic Reform, give a new appreciation to the lay state and this includes marriage in a special way. Francis de Sales is a leading architect of this movement, which does not repudiate Trent’s decree that the celibate life of the monk, nun and priest is highest, but he will say marriage requires more virtue than celibate life and make marriage a vocation instead of a refuge for the weak. This paper looks at de Sales teaching on marriage in the entire corpus of his 26 volume works and shows that his positive treatment of marriage and sexuality is both new and old. It traces two opposing views on marriage and celibate life in the tradition and identifies sources of the Salesian position, in order to demonstrate that de Sales’ theology of marriage is a new positive emphasis that is also well represented in the church Fathers. Three influences are explained that contextualize the Salesian position; the Protestant positive treatment of marriage, Christian humanism, and Trent’s new declaration of marriage as a sacrament.
Francis de Sales, the Christian Humanist: “I am a man, no more no less”

The hymn of Humanism: how beauteous mankind is! spanned several centuries with various nuances. The rich literature of antiquity that upheld a honum honestum that did not seem to need Christ or faith for a dignified life, posed a threat to the Christian world view. Since Medieval times, Christianity was occupied with a dialogue with the great authors of the pagan world, and Christian humanism is the response of the early modern period. As the hallmark of the age, Jesuit spirituality, expresses it: ‘the glory of God can be found in all things’. The strain Henri Brémond credits to Francis de Sales issued from the Renaissance and was shaped by the Catholic Reform. The famous Christian authors of the age all affirmed a distinctively Christian character to the study of the Classics and the Bible for both Catholics and Protestants. Humanity is beautiful, the Christian Humanist, like Francis de Sales believes, because it is endowed with so many noble qualities as the image of God, and because, with all creation, it participates in the Creator’s “immense goodness”. Love ascends to God through the beauty and goodness of created things. Redemption, and not sin, is the central doctrine of Christianity for Francis and the Christian Humanism of this age. It was the Catholic response to the age’s discovery of the classics of antiquity, as much as to Protestant abasement of all human efforts and innate goodness. Yet, this fundamental optimism about the human person is balanced

---

3 François De Dainville, La naissance de l’humanisme moderne, Paris, Beauchesne 1940.
4 Œuvres de saint François de Sales, évêque de Genève et docteur de l’Église, Edition complète d’après les autographes et les éditions originales, 26 Volumes, J. Niérat, et al., Annecy, Åbry 1892-1964, XXII, pp. 35-37. Already in the 6th Century St. Gregory the Great used the same arguments implicitly (Moralia 49, 74), which became explicit in the 9th Century with Alcuin’s De animae ratione, and were elaborated throughout the Middle Ages in the libraries of the flourishing monasteries. For a list of a good number of the many studies on Humanism and its trends see Jean Daniérou, “Humanisme et spiritualité”, in Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, VII, cols. 956-1033.
5 Calvin cries that without God man is “stupidity, misery, vanity, wickedness... rotten, a worm, garbage stinking of iniquity”. Œuvres complètes de Calvin, Joannis Calvini opera quae
by humanity’s need for grace and its proclivity to become less rather than more. Wounded and weakened by original sin, we may freely cooperate with grace in our own small way to attain the perfection Providence has always meant for us. Francis de Sales best expresses this central and overriding theme of his age when he writes in grief after the loss of a friend, “I am a man, no more no less”.6 This is not an apology; he means there is nothing to be embarrassed about in human weakness, that while granting it is reasonable to be displeased, he counsels patience and gentleness and trust in God’s mercy rather than anger and agitated self recriminations.

Don’t torment yourself. One must hate our faults, but with a tranquil and quiet hatred, not a despising and troubled hate, and yes, we must have patience to see those faults and take profit from the holy humbling of ourselves.7

You are no more than a man, but you are also nothing less! There is no reason to be surprised by your faults. “Begin anew to cultivate the lacking grace, with a very deep trust in His Mercy, and with a bold, brave heart”.8 As feeble as the human role in cooperation might be, like birds without feet that can only lift their wings and be lifted by grace, all human virtue and effort is made glorious by God’s love. “The divine sweetness renders all things profitable to us, takes all to our advantage, and turns all our endeavors, though ever so lowly and feeble, to our gain”.9 Rejoice! The glory of God is revealed in the fulfillment, the splendor, of the human person in a life lived in and for God’s love. This kind of Christian humanism was able to find a glory both in human achievement and in the humility of the human condition, when united to a vision of humanity redeemed by the incarnation. A human goodness that depends on God’s love and at the same time depends on human effort and cooperation with that grace in resolutions, in listening to divine inspirations in the whispers of the heart and in the situations of

---

6 “Je suis tant homme que rien plus”, L CDXVIII. My interpretation-translation.
7 L DXII.
8 ID III, 9.
9 T III, 2.
life. This was Francis’ way to interpret Trent’s teaching on grace. It is the
overriding theme of his most theological systematic work, *The Treatise on the
Love of God*. This theology gives human effort a place, a fundamental goodness,
elevates it, even with its weakness, that is at the same time wholly dependent on God’s grace that generously is given to it.

De Sales will argue that the spiritual life adds a new essence, measure
and motivation to pagan virtue. The Christian humanist would say to the
pagan philosopher, ‘your virtue is not virtuous enough without Christ’. As
de Sales explains in a chapter of his *Treaté*, on how natural virtues of the
philosophers do not compare with Christian virtue animated by charity.
“Love is the soul and life of all the virtues… patience is not patient enough,
nor faith faithful enough, nor hope confidant enough, nor mildness sweet
enough, unless love animate and quicken them.” With Augustine he argues
that whatever good pagan reason and natural virtue was able to achieve is
a reflection of divine goodness and praiseworthy, but falls short of the
heights that God’s love and grace make attainable to those who follow
Christ. De Sales sees the culmination of meaning for humanity through the
lens of the incarnation and expands on the belief that God is Love to say,
“Man is the perfection of the universe; the spirit is the perfection of man;
love, that of the spirit; and charity, that of love. Wherefore the love of God
is the end, the perfection and the excellence of the universe.” For him, like
the church Fathers, humanity found its resplendence in the love of God
and the obedience of that love in service as taught by Christ – the model
and perfection of human life. A love united to the cross and motivated by
gratitude of the paschal mystery, gives a new richer meaning to the humanist
philosophy and moral excellence of antiquity. This is the fundamental
difference Christian humanism has to criticize the humanism of antiquity.

O free will of my heart, how good a thing were it for thee to be bound and
extended upon the cross of thy divine Savior! How desirable a thing it is to die to
thyself, to burn forever a holocaust to the Lord! Theotimus, our free will is never
so free as when it is a slave to the will of God, nor ever so much a slave as when it
serves our own will. It never has so much life as when it dies to itself, nor ever so
much death, as when it lives to itself.

---

10 *TXI*, 4.
11 *TX*, 1.
12 *TVII*, 10.
Our author’s Christian humanism was best known in his popular spiritual writings for the laity, which began as letters. It has often been pointed out that the counsels of Francis de Sales, “the father of the French Church,” were revolutionary for his day. Phillip Neri and Charles Borromeo, for their part, were also giving a new value to the lay state, which can be traced back to the spiritual movements of the Rhineland mystics a century before Martin Luther, but the greater influence and unique contribution of de Sales caused him to eventually be recognized a doctor of the Church. The times were changing, and de Sales is able to translate the essence of Christian spirituality to every walk of life. He presents a new esteem to the holiness of marriage, sexuality and life in the world. The council of Trent says that if anyone holds that celibate religious life is not the highest state anathema sit. The idea that marriage is second and a vocation for the weak is found in the tradition in Church Fathers like Jerome, Athanatius, Ambrose and Origen, but de Sales taps another equally ancient and valid theology of the Catholic tradition, to say that married people are also able to attain equal heights of Christian virtue. His Christian humanism advanced a version of Christian life for all, which was at the same time both flexible and rigorous. He was able to speak to the age’s spiritual yearnings, and is credited with setting an evangelical tone of equilibrium to the Catholic reform.

The period is named “Early Modern Catholicism” by John W. O’Malley, because Reform terminology overlooks the age’s own influence upon the Catholic Church, and its reciprocal impact upon the many forces at play during the period. This is especially evident in the changing views of the

---


14 Council of Trent, session 24, canon X.


laity and marriage as the spirit of the times looked to the inner life for true Christianity.

For de Sales, the true spirit of the Catholic reform, the new Pentecost, was not limited to priests, monasteries and bishops, it was a return to the Gospel with one’s whole heart, mind and soul. The Pentecostal spirit of the reform was the search for what is true Christianity, in rejection of all hypocrisy. In today’s language, rather than reform we should also call it renewal, for it had both these dimensions of juridical reforms with fines and censures, as well as a return to the gospel spirit anew. The multitude of religious orders founded by the contemporaries of Trent attest to the fervor of the day. His vision of the Devout Life didn’t depend on external circumstances, or even vocation, because it was the interior states of heart and resolution that were to be the answer to the abuses of hypocrisy still tearing apart his age. He writes,

Let all around us be overthrown” in whatever troubles or pleasures life might bring “all the while the magnet of our heart and mind, our superior will, which is our moral compass, must continually point to the Love of God our Creator, our Savior, our only Sovereign Good…. Whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord’s. Who shall separate us from the Love of Christ?

Earlier authors, like Ignatius of Loyola, had also written spiritual works on behalf of simple or common folk, but de Sales is a new kind of master. His pragmatic and cordial spiritual counsels for those in all walks of life were, as André Ravier says, a “total and fundamental reworking of that tradition”, they were “at the same time the most common and the most original”. He depicted what was, in effect, the Christian proto-type of the honnête home, that the Seventeenth century concocted from classic liter-

\[17\] \textit{ID}, IV, 13
\[18\] In fact there was already a strong current of spiritual literature for common people. A century earlier, Gerson had inclined spirituality in this sense with his \textit{ABC’s of Simple Folk}, and the \textit{Doctrinal for Simple People}. Charles Borromeo, Philip Neri, Laurent Scupoli, and Louis de Granada are contributors. See Marc Fumaroli, \textit{L’âge de l’éloquence. Rhétorique et «res literaria» de la Renaissance au seuil de l’époque classique}, Paris, Albin Michel 1994, pp. 135-161.
And his literary style incorporates the literature, figures and examples of Pliny, Plutarch and Plato. This is also true, as I plan to show, in his teaching on Christian marriage.

One sign of de Sales’ originality is the public criticism he received shortly after The Introduction to the Devout Life was published. To some it was blasphemy to contend that dancing and such frivolous diversions were morally indifferent. De Sales addresses that “scornful censure” and “indignation” years later in the preface of his The Treatise on the Love of God. He states he is well aware of the “extreme perils” of pastimes like dancing, when he writes his counsels for persons in the world. His counsels, he notes, are drawn from the common and true teaching of the “most wise and holy theologians”, including the king St. Louis, a worthy Christian authority of the faith for the laypersons living in the court. Centuries later, Vatican II would cultivate Salesian spirituality of daily living into what is known today as “The universal call to holiness.” His Introduction to the Devout Life was burned in solemnity after an inquisition judgment. Francis himself recognizes his debt to the works of Louis de Granada, who was condemned a generation earlier by Melchior Cano of the Spanish Inquisition for; 1) pretending that contemplation and perfection is for everyone; 2) that perfection could be in every state of life without vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; and 3) because it smelled illuminist. Charles Borromeo (d.1584), chief editor of the Roman Catechism, admired Granada’s work and was able to persuade his uncle Pope Pius IV, to overturn Cano’s verdict. This no doubt helped de Sales in those controversies. It is not surprising to find polemics in changing times. Francis de Sales had a reputation during his lifetime as a living saint, besides powerful sympathies within the Church hierarchy like Cardinal Bellarmin and Possevino, that enabled his thoughts to survive and eventually triumph against those more severe ascetical versions of Christian spirituality who opposed him publicly.

De Sales’s Christian humanism and vision of holiness in the world on a par, if not equal to religious life, applies to give marriage a new fundamental goodness that is both new and old.

---

21 _OEA_ XII, 189.
22 _OEA_ I, préface (pp. XLII-XLIII).
Marriage: to live as each other’s “dear half”\textsuperscript{23}

At a time when Calvin, Luther and the Protestants had been repudiating celibacy as against God’s command in Genesis to go forth and multiply and unnatural. Luther’s argument was that celibate vows do violence to nature and the command of God, as he declares in his sermon \textit{The Estate of Marriage}.

For this word, which God speaks, “Be fruitful and multiply,” is not a command. It is more than a command, namely, a divine ordinance \textit{[werck]} which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore. … he does not command them to multiply but creates them so that they have to multiply. And wherever men try to resist this, it remains irresistible nonetheless and goes its way through fornication, adultery, and secret sins, for this is a matter of nature and not of choice.\textsuperscript{24}

Although Luther argues that marriage is not a sacrament, he says Marriage is the “most religious state of all” and “Blessed by God”, because only this – and not celibacy – leads to a real inner Spiritual life.\textsuperscript{25} Alluding to Paul’s letter to the \textit{Corinthians}, he calls marriage a “symbol of this great sacrament or mystery in Christ and the Church.”\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, he says “Conjugal love excels all other love”.\textsuperscript{27} These arguments gained widespread acceptance because they captured the Protestant spirit of the times that saw the Roman Catholic theology of celibacy as unnatural, reflecting a deeper belief in the basic natural goodness of sexuality in marriage. Luther himself went on to marry Katharina von Bora, a Benedictine 16 years his junior, and have six children together.

In response to the Protestant esteem for marriage, Trent makes marriage a sacrament for the first time, and the doctor of love is one of the earliest to formulate a theology of marriage for the age in the spirit of Christian humanism. Two chapters of \textit{The Devout Life} discuss Christian perfection in

\textsuperscript{23} L. DLVIII.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Luther’ Works} 28:17.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Luther’ Works} 41:164.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{What Luther Says} #2818.
the new sacrament, the state of married life.28 Francis felt marriage was the “root and spring of every stream” of society, and shunned any spiritual currents that denigrate it as somehow a lesser vocation for the weak.29 He says, almost emphatically, “In everything; its origin, its end, its utilities, its form and its matter it is holy”.30 Marriage is “nuptial friendship”.31 Not because of “cardinal voluptuousness”, but because it shares “life, industry, goods, affections and an indissoluble fidelity,” making it a “true and holy friendship.”32 He admired several laypersons, like Pernette Boutey, whom he considered saints living in the state of marriage.33 Throughout his writings, especially in the Introduction to the Devout Life, we find many examples of taken from the model of domestic love to explain the love of God and the spiritual life. The Song of Songs is a favorite text that de Sales often uses in his letters, describing God’s love for the soul. The trust of a child, the love of a mother, the patience of parents, the satisfaction of a suckling babe, are all used to depict family life as a model for God’s love, instead of a refuge for those burning with concupiscence.

He advises, first and foremost a mutual love, commenting on St. Paul’s Husbands, love your wives as Jesus Christ loves his Church, he writes,

Oh husbands, the weaknesses and faults, whether in mind or in body of your wives should not provoke any kind of disdain in you, but rather a gentle and loving compassion, since God created them so in order that they be dependent upon you that you might receive more honor and respect for it, and so that you might have them in this way as companions while you be nonetheless head and superior.34

And to the wives he recommends a reciprocal love, “Oh wives, love tenderly, ardently, but with a respectful love full of reverence for the husbands

28 OEA III, 263-278.
30 OEA III, 264.
31 L MDXXXV. See also, L MCCCLXXXIX.
32 ID III, 17.
33 L CCCLX. See also, L CCCLVIII.
34 OEA III, 273.
God has given you.” With such resolve to love one another through the vicissitudes of feelings and life’s trials, marriage’s first effect is therefore indissoluble union, “not principally of body, but of heart, affection and love.” Marriage’s love not only unites permanently, but with an inviolable fidelity, which is represented by the ring each wears. When love and fidelity are conjoined, marriage will always enjoy confidence and privacy. Being faithful to one’s spouse is to be faithful to God, because He has tied the “sacred bond” of their marriage and has given them to each other. He recommends that the couple pray regularly for the progress of their marriage, in “reciprocal friendship and fidelity” and attend mass together on their anniversary.

Thinking of marriage as a vocation and a sacrament, he believed married couples can easily inspire one another to virtue, “they sanctify one another in a true fear of the Lord.” Francis observes, a good husband is a great assistance, “But there are few like that, and as good as one might be, one receives more subjection from him than assistance!” The married couple’s mutual tolerance, he explains, is one of the first ways this humble love in God’s presence works. This is why he believed they must never compete with each other, thereby letting dissension or arguing creep into their relationship. Competing takes away what is best in marriage, opposing good works, instead of reciprocally fortify and console spouses. It belittles husband and wife, instead of developing and encouraging them. This is why he concludes that the Holy Spirit cannot dwell in a house full of bickering, retorts and fighting. We might consider all cajoling, kindness and encouragement between a married couple as a kind of caress. Both these verbal caresses and physical affection, “demonstrations of pure and frank friendship,” are important in marriage, he avows, for building confidence and binding hearts in endearment. A good husband or wife is a blessing.

35 *OEA* III, 273.
36 *OEA* III, 265.
37 “L’amour et la fidelité jointes ensemble engendrent tous-jours la privauté et confiance”, *OEA* III, 270.
38 *OEA* III, 273.
39 *OEA* III, 272.
40 *LDXXIV*.
41 *OEA* III, 273.
42 *OEA* III, 270.
from God, because “the yoke of the Savior, which is sweet and easy in itself, becomes more so when two carry each other together.” Yet at the same time it is very difficult requiring more unselfishness and tenacity than any other vocation. Unfortunately the Doctor of love was never able to fulfill his promise to write “a little essay” on the virtues proper to married women. His letters to women like Madame Brûlart, give the most insight. The virtues of a married woman, he notes are pleasing to God, because to endure in this vocation one need be “especially strong”.

With a true Christian humanism, in contrast to the ascetical view of marriage found in Tertullian, Origen, Jerome, Ambrose and Cyprian, sensuality had a proper, even exemplary place in human perfection in his teaching. Marriage and sexuality can be turned to the couple’s own good, their vocation, which is not in any way tainted by nuptial passion. Speaking of the chaste heart in the chapter on purity of the Introduction to the Devout Life, he says, sensual pleasures are sanctified by holy matrimony and are part of a happy married life. “Perfection,” Francis explains echoing Aquinas, “does not consist in the absence but in the ordering of the passions.” This is because, reiterating Classic Christian teaching, “the sensitive powers are, or should be, the servants of the mind.” But that acceptance was guarded, because the great force of passionate sensuality could carry one away from an honest and true love, weakening it in the process, and descend into lust. “Love is a delicate flame,” not a raging storm, he says, perhaps best summarizing his theory of the proper place of passion. He criticizes those of his generation who contend that brutal love of passion is stronger because of its violence, or more solid because of its harshness, or bigger because it is more ferocious. These may be often born of love or accompany it, but de Sales believed that lust and brutality are neither love nor part of it,

---

43 L DCCCLXXXI.
44 L CCCLXI.
45 L DXVI.
46 OEA I, 135-136.
47 OEA VIII, 355 (Sermon pour le vendredi après le premier dimance de Carême, 9 mars 1618). See too the chapters of the Treatise on the Love of God, (OEA IV, 28-34) where Francis develops the idea.
48 OEA III, 195-196 See too Francis’ explanation of the Christian tradition of right love as the “service of the passions to justice and virtue” in OEA IV, 33.
49 OEA IV, 61.
but are “excrements and superfluities.”\textsuperscript{50} Like a rainbow, he writes, “sacred love touches our passions and removes their terrestrial intent, giving them a celestial one.”\textsuperscript{51} Its place must always follow a noble spiritual love, which is difficult enough to maintain against the many ways that human love can go wrong. “In the measure that the soul converts itself to such crude and sensual unions, she diverts herself from the delicate, intellectual and cordial union,” which he contends is “more vivacious, more energetic and more solid.”\textsuperscript{52} Therefore, as Francis summarizes in one of his sermons, reminding us of Lactantius and Aquinas, “It is not in the absence but in the rectification of the passions that our perfection consists; the passions are to the heart what the strings are to a harp, they must be tuned.”\textsuperscript{53} Like everywhere else, sacred love, renders married passions good, and this makes marriage a place for the same quality of spiritual life as the vocation of religious life.

The Christian humanism of our author is seen in his esteem for the passions ability to be touched by sacred love. Likewise, he often uses the image of lover and beloved, as well as the child at his mother’s breast, as allegories of the spiritual life and God’s caring love for the soul. Both these images of women, as mother and as beloved enjoyed a natural suitable role in their particular perfection. In many places, especially in the \textit{Treatise on the Love of God}, he uses the image of a suckling child to illustrate the sensual pleasure of receiving God’s love. “If you pay attention to little children united and joined to the teats of their mothers, you will see that from time to time they embrace and squeeze by the small rushes of pleasure nursing gives them.”\textsuperscript{54} He defends such images because of their purity. In fact, pleasure is an integral part of true human happiness, even in the most spiritual activities. The “sweet emotion of heart” one experiences when one thinks of God is the natural pleasure he argues from to show the human need for God.\textsuperscript{55} It all goes against the grain of a ridged ascetical current of Jansenism in his

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{OEA} IV, 55. They risk distracting one from true and virtuous love, and dissipating it. In this context he speaks of two ecstasies: the angelic and the bestial. Cfr \textit{OEA} IV, 57.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{OEA} IV, 312-313.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{OEA} IV, 59-60.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{OEA} VIII, 355.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{OEA} V, 6-8.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{OEA} IV, 74. See too Marie-Chantal Papeix, \textit{Premières recherches sur les notions de plaisir et de bonheur chez François de Sales}, in Bordes et Hennequin (eds), \textit{L’unidivers salésien}, pp. 223-239.
contemporary Church, and fits into his global vision of exceptional moral health and a sexuality that is neither embarrassed nor polluted by a mystical and natural analogy.

His Christian humanism and new awareness of the sacramental character of marital love, leads him to be one of the first to speak of the edifying importance of marital intimacy. Mindful of his favorite spiritual text, the *Song of Songs*, in *The Treatise on the Love of God* he writes;

> Love tends to union, even so union very often extends and augments love: for love makes us seek the society of the beloved, and this often nourishes and increases love; love causes a desire of nuptial union, and this union reciprocally preserves and increases love, so that in every sense it is true that love tends to union.\(^{56}\)

**Sexuality and Parenthood**

Marriage has another purpose normal friendship does not, namely the procreation and education of children.\(^{57}\) Francis devotes an entire chapter of *The Devout Life* to what he calls the “nobility of the nuptial bed.”\(^{58}\) He recognizes a proper place for “noble eroticism” in marriage, in contrast to many of his contemporaries. He admits it can be dangerous and sometimes lead persons into mortal sin, but contends “nuptial commerce” is holy, just, recommendable, and useful for the republic.\(^{59}\) He draws a parallel between eating and the appetite for conjugal union, eating only to satisfy one’s appetite is tolerable, but not praiseworthy. Similarly, if either eating or “bodily commerce” is done only for pleasure or excessively, it is a kind of gluttony and condemnable. Thus he expressly denounces contraception. And just as it would be vulgar and abject to revel in the thought of a meal before dinner time, making as St. Paul says a God of their stomachs, so too it is reprehensible to revel in thoughts of sexuality. It must always be done with great respect and never become consuming. In summary, these physical consolations must never distract from the couple’s spiritual pretensions.

\(^{56}\) T I, 10.

\(^{57}\) “Le troysiesme fruit du marriage c’est la production et legitime nourriture des enfans [...] il vous rend les cooperateurs”, *OEA* III, 267.

\(^{58}\) *OEA* III, 274-278; i.e. III, xxxix.

\(^{59}\) *OEA* III, 276.
Use them, he counsels “like all things of the world as befits your vocation, but in such a way that they don’t engage in any way your affection, that you remain free and prompt to serve God as if you didn’t use them at all.” It doesn’t matter to him that the intention be open to having children every time a married couple are joined in the nuptial bed. Marital sexuality is good in its own right as it benefits the vocation and is part of God’s creation.

The reciprocal and legitimate satisfaction of the participants of a holy marriage, …[which is] the very same if it would be with the hope of producing children as when, on certain occasions when one might not have that hope.

When you compare Erasmus and earlier ideas of virginity being an ideal in marriage, this passage highlights the esteem de Sales gives to the marital act for its own sake. Marital union is good for more reasons that procreation, it also shares an equally important benefit to the couple’s love and marriage. He sees it as a duty to one’s vocation.

Parents are co-operators in the creation of humanity, he says, providing the body, which God then informs with a soul. One of parent’s first responsibilities in the education of their children, Francis points out, is not to fill their house with material goods, but to spare no pain in working to teach them the fear of God and virtue. Marriage is thus the vocation where two halves unite in order to accomplish both their mutual aid in living Christian virtue and participating with God to bring new persons into the world. They need each other for both of these to be best achieved, and each end of marriage is a vocation centered, like every other service, on their Creator to bring out the best in themselves. In a larger sense, this vocation not only serves God and family, but the community and polis as the bedrock of a healthy society. In marriage, the new sacrament, he finds many occasions for devotion demanding that heroic Christian virtue Clement of Alexandria writes about centuries earlier. In sexuality, as a Christian humanist, he finds that sacramental goodness not in lust, but in “chaste affection” and marital union, that is an expression of love. De Sales is one of the first to speak of

60 OEA III, 278.
61 “La reciproque et legitime satisfaction des parties au saint mariage...toute de mesme comme si c’estoit avec esperance de la production des enfans encore que pour quelque occasion on n’eust pas telle esperance”, OEA III, 274-275.
62 OEA III, 272.
sexuality’s spiritual benefits to love, intimacy and the vocation of marriage as edifying the couple’s marriage, instead of a consolation to those unfit for the demands of celibacy.

Every age has its individuals who personify its turmoil and at the same time emerge as guiding lights. Francis de Sales was able to find goodness in the whole of human life that was both contrary to the asceticism of the moderate enocratic tradition that had prevailed for a thousand years, and yet consonant with the Church Fathers like Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom, who believe the married person able to reach the same heights of holiness as the monk.63 Clement’s ideal of the true hero of Christian virtue, which he calls the Gnostic, is a person, married or celibate, detached with purposefulness (apatheia) from externalities, like the law, state of life, possessions or from worldly cares and focused on eternity and active discipleship. With an idea of the spiritual life very much like what we read in Francis de Sales’ the Introduction to the Devout Life, Clement says,

True manhood is shown not in the choice of a celibate life; on the contrary, the prize in the contest of men is won by him who has trained himself by the discharge of the duties of husband and father and by the supervision of a household, regardless of pleasure and pain –by him, I say, who in the midst of his solicitude for his family shows himself inseparable from the love of God and rises superior to every temptation which assails him through children and wife and servants and possessions.64

Clement will go on to say the celibate remains “untried” in most respects and that “both celibacy and marriage have their own different forms of service and ministry to the Lord”.65

De Sales’ Christian humanism, combined with the new esteem given the recently consecrated sacrament of marriage, allowed him to conceive the marital vocation, and human sexuality, to be good for its own sake, if not tainted by lust. He is one of the earliest to see the nuptial pleasures of a happy marriage to be salubrious for the Christian couple and the family, even when conceiving was impossible. If it is the interior state of the

64 Stromata, 7.12.70.
65 Stromata 3.12.79.
person’s love, obedience and intentions that determine the true Christian life, then the exterior state, vocation, dress, profession, all matter little. In answer to Luther and the Protestant theology that disparaged celibate life as unnatural, he will only say that it is another kind of vocation with its own obedience and mortification. And in a characteristic way, he is able to take a position counter to Trent’s anathema without contradiction, when he says marriage requires more virtue and personal sacrifice than religious life – an argument first advanced by Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom. The gift of self in marriage is thus the centerpiece of his newfound spiritual esteem. That selfless gift in turn, upholds the positive aspects of married life and makes the marital act another act of obedient service to both one’s vocation and to God, rather than a refuge for the weak. By bringing together the Christian humanist appreciation for the body and human life, and a theology of devotion that is centered on obedience to one’s vocation, he articulates the value of marriage as a sacrament and its grace in the mutual service unique to its special kind of friendship. He is able to bring together a Protestant esteem for marriage, Christian humanism and a sacramental understanding, relying on his own authority as a spiritual master of the Early Modern Catholicism. The new status of Marriage as a sacrament of the Catholic Church motivated de Sales and Catholicism of the day, to respond to the question: how marriage might be a way to receive the healing and sanctifying succor of divine love? Francis de Sales does this, despite the anathema of Trent and the clarifications of its Catechism, and yet is well represented within the Patristic tradition and true spirit of the Catholic reforms of Trent. He returns marriage to that spiritual realm, and with it sexuality, from which it has been outcast since the Neo-Platonists, because everything in marriage is holy. In this way, the doctor of love rediscovered the true spirit of Christian asceticism and discipleship, which is what the reforms of early modern Catholicism were all about.

De Sales position regarding the Catechism of Trent’s demanding abstinence from marital union for three days before receiving the Eucharist, 66 Characteristically he writes in the Entretiens bk IV, “What difference, I ask, is there between the spirit of St. Augustine and St. Jerome? On can see from their writings. There is nothing gentler than St. Augustine, his writings are sweet and graciousness itself, on the contrary, St. Jerome was extremely austere […] and yet both were exceedingly virtuous […] and grand saints”, OEA III, 316-317.
comes up in a question from Mme Brulart, which he takes up directly in a letter. He tells her that because everything about marriage is holy, and the key to holiness is obedience to God’s will, which is found in our vocation or state of life, there is no question that acquiescence to your spouse’s desire is sinful. He writes in 1602:

Receive Communion with every assurance as Messeurs de Berulle and Gallemand counsel [frequently], since you feel inclined and consoled by it. And do not trouble yourself about any irreverence for the exercise of your marital vocation my dear daughter, there is no irreverence in doing so, but only the appearance. This exercise is in no way dishonest before God’s eyes; on the contrary it is pleasing to him, it is holy, it is praiseworthy, at least for the part that is dutiful and does not seek after the act but condescends to obey the one God has given authority to obey in this way. … For the will of God is that you freely do so for the love of Him and that you love forthrightly the exercise of your vocation. I am saying not that you love and cherish it for what is exterior and may include sensuality for its own sake, but for the interior, because under this vile bark, the holy will of God is accomplished.⁶⁷

He then continues with her question, what if the spouse desiring intimacy knows that the other desires to go to communion that day? He answers citing the practice of the Early Church “I tell you no, not at all, above all when communion is frequent”. And he goes even further to emphasize this conviction that marital relations are holy, saying “There is more, if the party who has received communion seeks marital intimacy themselves, the day of communion, the sin will only be very venial and very light, since there is a bit of irreverence that enters.”⁶⁸ The essential theme here is a humble child-like obedience to one’s vocation, which Francis stresses in the letter. This is the meaning of true religion or devotion for him. The focus is upon the interior, the heart and mind, the externalities; celibate or married, religious or layman, soldier or mother, matter little.

Undoubtedly mindful of Trent’s anathema and the tradition it represented, relegating marriage as the lower state and refuge for the weak; he writes, “The state of marriage is a state that requires more virtue and tenacity than

⁶⁷ L. CCLXI.
⁶⁸ L. CCLXI.
any other, it is a perpetual exercise in mortification.”⁶⁹ Taking Trent’s notion that marriage is a sacrament and thus means to grace, he remarks that its particular spiritual sacrifices have a divine purpose. In the difficult situations of every marriage, he would advise a humble gentleness, and tenacity, which would “yield its own consolations and will render you truly holy in the end.”⁷⁰

**A New and Old Teaching**

Trent’s view of marriage as the lesser vocation traces its roots back to Tertullian, Cyprian and Origen, who all elevated those who choose to be eunuchs for the kingdom of God over marriage, yet they repudiate the radical encratism of dualist Manicheans and Gnostics like Tatian, who believe no man should touch a woman or marry, which will later be condemned by Irenaeus and Clement. Jerome will say that marriage is like silver and celibacy like gold and share the opinion with Ambrose that the celibate state is higher.

Augustine has a more nuanced position. His teaching that original sin is passed on to the next generation through the lust of intercourse, tainted marriage and sexual intimacy for generations afterwards. Later in life, in his commentary on Genesis, Augustine expounds that Adam and Eve would have had sexual relations in Paradise untainted by lust, if not for the fall. In his anti-Pelagian writings, Augustine could not agree with Pelagius, Julian and Lactantius, that lust, like other passions could be made right by moderation. He will say; “even if they [a man’s members] be restrained by temperance or continence, their use and control are not in any man’s power.”⁷¹

In a recently discovered letter to bishop Atticus of Constantinople, later (421) Augustine reverted to the three goods of marriage; procreation, fidelity and sacramental permanent unity, and conceded that perhaps in marriage there was found a “concupiscence of conjugal purity” (*concupiscentia nuptiarum*) i.e. the desire for children, different from the selfish lust of the flesh (*concupiscentia carnis*). In this later anti-Pelagian letter, his position

---

⁶⁹ *L. MCMXCVIII.*
⁷⁰ *L. DCCCCLX.*
⁷¹ *On Marriage and concupiscence*, bk 2 ch 18.
is nuanced to accede that perhaps there was such a sinless lust in Paradise before the Fall. Augustine’s *De bono conjugali*, comes to see marriage as a necessary condition for the *societas amicalis* of the human race and “the first natural bond of human society”. Augustine’s position, forged in the controversy of ascetical heresies, seeks at the same time to praise the goodness of procreation and marriage and condemn the unruly lust that abrogates reason and the order of love. As Richard Sorabji summarizes, for Augustine lust was a bad thing due to its power over the will that could be put to good use in marriage. Pelagius, Julian, Jovinian (heretics) Ambrosiaster and Lactantius (Church fathers) believed that nuptial lust was a good thing as part of God’s creation distinct from the selfish lust of the flesh.

Augustine’s theology tying original sin to lust in marriage will dominate for centuries, overshadowing sexuality with shame that will fuel the ascetical theology of the moderate encratites until Thomas Aquinas. Gratian will codify the enduring medieval teaching taken from Augustine, stating that when couples have sexual relations not for procreation, but solely for the satisfaction of their lust they are not to be accounted as married, but as fornicators. Of all the authors of antiquity that marked the Christian humanism of Francis de Sales, Augustine’s influence was clearly the largest. De Sales will come to a position soundly grounded in Augustine’s latter view that decries lust, but he will also see Marriage as a friendship, a grace and be able to find spiritual goodness in the marital act. In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, he lauds the tender caresses of spouses and contrasts their “chaste and just affection” with “unjust passion”, which is comparable to the two concupiscences of Augustine, even if that letter was probably unknown to him.

75 C. 32, q. 2, dpc. 1.
76 TVI, 8.
Two theological trends on marriage were consistently at odds over the centuries and sometimes venomously so, especially during the first three centuries of Christianity. The ascetical interpretation predominated in the Church of Trent, but there is also another interpretation that puts married life at equal status to celibacy, and to which Francis de Sales is both an heir and modern proponent.\footnote{There are many studies on the history of celibacy and sexuality in Christianity that needn't be reproduced here. An excellent resume is found in Roman CHOLIJ, \textit{Clerical Celibacy in East and West}, Leominster, Gracewing Publishing, 1990.} This view is new in response to both Christian humanism and the Protestant newfound esteem for marriage. This same esteem for marriage is well represented in the church Fathers Chrysostom, Ambrosiaster, Clement of Alexandria, and to a lesser extent Augustine. Later it is found in Aquinas and Hugh of St. Victor. I believe all are important influences of Francis de Sales, but that story, I am afraid, is the subject of another paper.