Revolution in Charity
Chapter Three

THE TREATISE ON THE LOVE OF GOD

As philosophies of life are wont to do, Francis de Sales’ concepts became more explicit with the years. His earlier works and letters of direction evidence a strong, all-pervasive spirituality. He was acquainted with mysticism, through both personal contact in the circle of Madame Acarie and his reading. The Spanish mystics were familiar to him from his university days, when Father Possevin had introduced him to the writings of Teresa of Avila which, ever after, he considered a treasure-house of spiritual teaching. It was not, however, until he had himself had mystical experiences that he isolated, as it were, the fundamental elements of his belief and lucidly expressed them in the Treatise on the Love of God. He brought himself to do so, in spite of the demands upon his time made by the affairs of his diocese and by his huge correspondence, largely because of the instigation and encouragement of Jane de Chantal, his most beloved spiritual daughter.

The Treatise was written in order to present, “simply and naively…the story of the origin, progress, decay, operation, properties, advantages and excellence of divine love.” As such, it was designed, not for the general reader of religious literature, but for those who, whether in the world or in the cloister, had already made considerable progress in devotion to God. High mysticism is not meant for the average believer, and high mysticism was precisely the subject of the Treatise.

According to Francis de Sales, man has been endowed with an innumerable variety of passions, faculties and powers. These are all governed by the will, as king reigns over his subjects. The will naturally tends towards some object; it does so by the operation of love. Love precedes hope, desire, and enjoyment. It is a spontaneous affinity of the personality for that which seems to harmonize with it or complement it. By the same token, hatred is only aversion to what is inimical to the beloved object. Love, therefore, is in one way or another the root of all human actions and emotions. It follows that a person is evil or virtuous according to the direction of his love.

The will, however, is master of man. In its search for maximum happiness it is free, with the aid of reason, to change the object of its affections. Only when it has attached itself to what it

1 St. Francis de Sales, Oeuvres de..., Mackey, Navatel, etc., eds. (Annecy: Imprimerie J. Nierat, 1932), Vols. 4 and 5.
3 St. Francis de Sales, op. cit., Vol. 4, p. 8.
4 The Treatise on the Love of God was published in 1616.
5 St. Francis de Sales, op. cit., Vol. 4, p. 8.
6 Ibid., pp. 25, 32-33.
considers the supreme good does the will cease to rule itself by is governed by love. In view of the gravity of this step, it behooves man to attach himself to the object most capable of harmonizing with his soul and of making him truly happy.\footnote{Ibid., p. 34.} This object is none other than God, the infinite source of all concord and virtue. “The highest honor belongs to the supreme excellence, and the greatest love to sovereign goodness. The love of God is without equal, because the goodness is God unparalleled.”\footnote{Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 187.} Not only does the love of God represent the complete fulfillment of the human soul - it is also the very nature of salvation. It is the most vital member of the Christian trinity of Faith, Hope and Charity:\footnote{Charity, in the Scriptural sense, as it is here used, signifies love of God. Its more restricted meaning is good works. For the sake of clarity, I shall capitalize the word when I use it with the larger meaning.} “Faith shows the way to the promised land, like a column of cloud and fire, that is to say, in twilight: Hope nourishes us with its sweet manna.; but Charity introduces us into Paradise.”\footnote{St. Francis de Sales, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. 4, p. 39.}

In surrendering himself completely to divine love, man does not forego the attachments usually associated with human life. They are, after all, comprehended with the law of God: “As God created man in his image…so did he appoint a love for man in the image and semblance of the love due his Divinity.”\footnote{Ibid.} Man must respect and love himself and in others the likeness of God. Thus divine love, like Jacob’s ladder, unites man with God and his fellows, touching, as it does, both heaven and earth.\footnote{Ibid., p. 205.} It is, therefore, necessary as well as permissible for man to cherish his family and his neighbor, not in themselves but for love of the Creator. In this way, the heart remains faithful to God in its every attachment.

Having arrived at this conclusion, Francis de Sales proceeded to differentiate between two kinds of love - the love that looks to the profit which may be derived from the loved one as opposed to that which considers solely his well-being and happiness.\footnote{Ibid., Vol. 4, pp. 71-72.} Of the two the latter is manifestly the superior, requiring the more complete surrender of self and being thereby the more disinterested. This benevolent love, as De Sales called it, is further subdivided into the feeling by which man delights in the good already possessed by the beloved, and the wish that his contentment may be increased.\footnote{Loc. Cit.} As regards God specifically, “We have rejoiced in the sovereign excellence of the perfection of God; in consequence we desire that he be sovereignly praised, honored and adored.”\footnote{Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 63.} Similarly, as man sees the will of God to be supremely right and equitable, he longs that it be followed by all.\footnote{Loc. Cit.}
Francis de Sales here made it clear that he was not speaking of the obedience due to God as Father, Master or Benefactor- “That sort of obedience pertains to the virtue of justice ad not to love…even were there not hell to punish the rebels, nor a Paradise to reward the good, and had we no obligation or duty towards God…yet benevolent love would nonetheless lead us to render all obedience and submission to God by choice and inclination, indeed even by a sweet amorous violence, on consideration of the supreme goodness, justice and rectitude of his divine Will.”\textsuperscript{17}

Needless to say, benevolent love cannot be merely passive; it must also be expressed in action. Francis de Sales did not esteem religious ecstasy very highly if it was confined to meditation. He required a lasting ecstasy of life and works, manifested by the “abnegation of worldly desires and mortification of the will and the natural inclinations, by an interior sweetness, simplicity, humility, and above all by continuous charity.”\textsuperscript{18} It is the necessary consequence that “we consecrate all the moments of our lives to divine love…relating to his glory all our objectives, all our achievements, all our works, all our actions, all our thoughts, and all our affections.”\textsuperscript{19}

Charity-in the larger sense of the love of God-is the source and fulfillment of every virtue, the root of any sanctity in man. Charity serves no one, not even God, of whom it is the companion rather than the handmaid.\textsuperscript{20} It follows that Charity alone ought to be the aim of any action. Francis de Sales was aware of the fact, however, that men generally associate secondary motives, of lesser or equal perfection, with the primary one. He therefore enjoined, “That if we are sometimes touched by a separate motive…we must immediately suffuse it with that of divine love.”\textsuperscript{21} Among the motives separate from Charity are the fear of hell and the desire of Paradise. De Sales called these the double fear – the one servile, the other mercenary.\textsuperscript{22} He did acknowledge their usefulness, in view of human inconstancy, but he emphatically stated that they are imperfect, suitable only for the mortal life and incapable in themselves of leading souls to salvation.\textsuperscript{23} The fear of those who obey the law of God like slaves in order to avoid the fires of hell is good; the fear of Christians who work like paid servants-not for love of their employers but with an eye to the promised wage-is better. Yet the man whose fear excludes the love of God, who serves only for the salary, commits blasphemy-“preferring the reward to the Master, the benefit to the Benefactor, the inheritance to the Father, and his own profit to God.”\textsuperscript{24}

Such, then, is Francis de Sales’ doctrine of all-embracing Charity or divine love. What did he say concerning charity in the narrower sense of good works done for the poor? He spoke

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 63-64.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 30.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 35.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 77.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 289.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., pp. 152-153.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., Vol. 5, pp. 303-304.
of it only in passing, for in the Treatise he was not primarily concerned with the application of theory. When he did mention the virtue of charity, however, his attitude was the one to be expected.

Although no one is obligated by the letter of the divine law to give alms to every poor person who crosses his path, yet it is well to follow the spirit of the commandments, by giving freely to all as far as possible. While it is good, moreover, to give of one’s superfluity, it is more perfect to give all one has. The highest degree of perfection, and consequently the one most suitable for loves of God, is achieved when a person gives himself in devotion to the service of the poor. More specifically, “Visiting the sick…is a praiseworthy act of charity; serving them is even better; but the dedication of one’s self to their service is excellence.” In this exercise, as in the execution of other commandments, care must be taken that the predominating motive is the desire to please God rather than man.

Incidental as these injunctions were, they nevertheless form an integral part of the philosophy of Francis de Sales, a philosophy of balance among concording parts, subject to one central aim. It seems indeed to be a matter of controversy whether the word philosophy is at all applicable to the theories of De Sales. As Bremond has pointed out, he was for a long time considered the exponent par excellence of piety and devotion who made no noteworthy pronouncements in the field of thought. Even as late as 1948, one author has stated that, if De Sales had any genius, it was confined to an extraordinary equilibrium of virtue and judgment manifested in practice. Whatever theoretical value his teaching may have had was due solely to its penetrating common sense, based on solid experience.

It is a moot point whether a man given to a considerable degree of introspection can achieve a unique balance in practical application without having developed a corresponding philosophy of life. Bremond stated what should have been obvious to everyone, namely, that the Treatise on the Love of God presents as lucid a philosophy as could be found anywhere, and one no less based on intellectual background and activity than on practical experience. This fact established, Bremond went on to classify this philosophy as Christian humanism, the off-spring of the Renaissance humanists and the theological-moral victory of Trent. Every page of the Treatise reveals a profound faith in the possibilities inherent in mankind, an emphasis on the Redemption rather than the Fall. Based on this optimism is the cry to action. Since the

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25 Ibid., p. 86.
26 Ibid., p. 87.
27 Ibid., p. 285.
30 Ibid., p. 49.
31 Henri Bremond, op. cit., p. 137.
32 Ibid., p. 140.
Renaissance also gloried in the nature of man, Francis de Sales was a humanist. Humanism has, however, been Christianized. Man was no longer to be considered self-sufficient; the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake was worthless. The pagans of antiquity were reduced to proper proportions—many of them had no doubt been worthy people, but they had lacked the divine inspiration and morality. De Sales was aware of this distinction when he wrote that the pagan sages had, to be sure, acted virtuously, yet they had done so for the sake of honor rather than from a disinterested love of righteousness. On another occasion he exclaimed: “Great is the palace, the basilica, the monument of St. Peter; that of Nero is now dust!” In short, as Bremond put it, Christian humanism grafted the spirit of the Counter-Reformation onto the flowering of the Renaissance.

The theme which Bremond popularized has been taken up by several more recent historians of Francis de Sales. They have duly pointed out that he was no dour theologian, but loved music, literature, the flowers in the meadow and the beasts in the field. The principal proof for their view, however, has been provided by the Florimontane Academy founded by De Sales in 1606. Still interested in science and letters after four years of Episcopal office, he together with his friend Antoine Favre started a learned society in Annecy, in which membership was open to “all good masters of honest arts.” At the general sessions, the subjects ranged from grammar to philosophy, cosmography, geometry, politics, and theology. The Academy enjoyed considerable popularity during its early years, but by 1612 it was visibly in a fatal decline. The two founders were no longer in a position to guide it. Favre had become President of the Senate of Savoy sitting in Chambery, while De Sales was feeling the full weight of his duties. The biographer who cited these facts did not hesitate to assert that Francis de Sales’ project, though short-lived, influenced profoundly the culture of France as well as that of Savoy. It appears that the renowned Vaugelas, one of the first members of the French Academy, had witnessed the activity of the Florimontane, for he was the son of Antoine Favre. De Sales’ reputation as a humanist was thereby sealed.

Yet such an evaluation merely scratches the surface of his philosophy. It considers the attributes while it leaves the central core untouched. It is perfectly true that Francis de Sales had considerable affection for the arts and sciences. He was, moreover, as painstaking with his literacy style as a busy man could afford to be. It is again true that he expressed what may be called Tridentine humanism in his belief that man is able to approach perfection with the help of

37 See for example Francis Trochu, Jacques Leclercq, or Soeur J. Mance.
divine inspiration. But what about the structure of the doctrine expounded in the Treatise? So far, the work has been classified as mystical writing which consolidates De Sales’ position as supreme teacher of divine love.\footnote{St. Francis de Sales, *op. cit.*, Vol. 4, xxv-Dom Mackey cited various contemporaries of De Sales on this point.} Upon closer examination of the work it seems logical to go a step further.

The most salient feature of the philosophy expressed in the Treatise is harmony. There is a perfect concordance and equilibrium of parts in the universe and in man. The cooperation of component elements is almost lyrical, under the direction of a supreme will. As Francis de Sales said in a sermon, as early as 1602, “Man is a little world unto himself; in the time of first justice, reason was his king, all the passions were ruled by it.”\footnote{Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 464.} After the Fall, when human reason was no longer consonant with the divine will, express laws and commandments became necessary, but the scheme of balance maintained by the God-given inspiration of Charity remained the same. Even the virtues form an empire, for they cannot subsist. Nor can one virtue exist apart from the others: “The queen of the bees flies into the fields surrounded by all her subjects, and Charity never enters a heart without bringing with it the whole train of other virtues.”\footnote{Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 123.}

It is for this reason that De Sales never treated separately of charity towards the poor. To him that was an exercise comprehended in the totality of Christian life, just as the poor are, as person, inalienable members of the Christian community. There is no indication in any of the works of Francis de Sales that he thought of paupers as outcasts in any way. He specifically addressed himself to all classes of society. Charity knows no boundaries; it leads the prosperous to give alms while it teaches the unfortunate to accept benefits with good grace.

“Be not ashamed of poverty nor of asking alms in charity…Remember the voyage of Our Lady into Egypt…and how much disdain, poverty, and misery she had to endure.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 194-the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. De Sales here treated of the exercise of charity. In doing so he took the unique step of considering its obverse—the attitude of the recipients. He was also addressing himself to the poor among his readers. This is the only place in his works where he condescended to differentiate between rich and poor, to the decided disadvantage of the former.} Francis de Sales thus taught not only a disinterested charity and a devotion to the personal service of the poor, but also respect for poverty. In the light of Charity every individual is worthy of the esteem of his fellows and of his own self-respect.

The view of the universe as a dynamic balance of harmonious parts whose focal point is Charity provides a deep perspective, intellectual as well as mystical. It is indeed reminiscent of the works of the great Renaissance artists. Perspective is, after all, nothing but a rational order imposed on objects so that they stand in logical relation to one another. Whereas the Renaissance, however, had favored a republican harmony of elements in which the components blend together without the domination of any single one, De Sales weighted the top and center, introducing the principle of a monarchy. In the arts, this phenomenon would be called baroque.
There is no reason why the term should not be applied to the philosophy of Francis de Sales. It is inextricably connected with the fact that his teaching was the perfect embodiment of the pronouncements of Trent, in its delicate equilibrium of faith and works, tradition and personal experience. A new humanism, a new spirituality, a new balance in life—all three are symptomatic of the baroque; all three were sublimely expressed by Francis de Sales.

How far were his concepts original? The organization of the Treatise, at any rate, had no parallel in his time. Mystical literature was largely confined to description, or exposition of method. There is no indication that anyone since Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas had written with so much authority on the physiology of divine love. The French indeed saw in Francis de Sales the eloquent echo of Bernard. The Bishop of Geneva in fact cited both saints, as well as Scripture, Spanish and Italian mystics, and other authorities. His doctrine of divine love is, therefore, old from the point of view of tradition but, as Dom Mackey has pointed out, in the Treatise, as in any mystical literature, the contribution of personal experience is an essential and ever-novel part. He cited the opinions of such contemporaries of De Sales as the Generals of the Carthusians and the Feuillants, as well as the later testimony of Bossuet—which were all to the effect that the Bishop of Geneva unquestionably ranked first among the theologians of his century by his doctrine and exposition of Charity. To reiterate: while the ideas comprised in that doctrine may have been old, the presentation was certainly new, a product of its time, filled with what may be called, for lack of a more precise term, the baroque spirit.

De Sales’ concept of divine love as the propelling force of every action was widely influential among his contemporaries. The Treatise alone had a large circulation; the editions of 1616, 1617, 1618 and 1620 were each reprinted several times, and by 1630 there had already been eighteen French editions. By the year 1661, it had been translated into English, Italian, Latin, Spanish, and German. The book was apparently highly esteemed wherever it went.

The doctrine of Francis de Sales was not confined to one book, however. It is contained in everything he ever did, said or wrote. His sermons, for example, were not only concerned with the exposition of the Scriptures and of points of faith; the theme of divine love was always dominant, whether directly or indirectly. As early as 1594 De Sales, then Cathedral Provost, preached on the service of God: God is the natural, sovereign, and absolute Lord inasmuch as there is no more just title to possession than creation; the service of God in heaven consists of adoration, but on earth love for him must be expressed in action by the virtues. More explicitly,
in 1602 he proclaimed that true charity loves God for himself alone, surrendering the whole heart to him.49

In considering the influence of Francis de Sales’ sermons, it must be remembered that he preached not only all over Savoy, but also in the principal cities of France, such as Paris, Orleans, Tours, Bourges, Grenoble, Lyon, Dijon, and Moulins. He has been credited with renewing the art of preaching, since he banished abstruse theological discussion from the pulpit in favor of an elegant yet virile ease of discourse. His methods were studied by the Jesuits, the Feuillants, the candidates for Ordination under the direction of Vincent de Paul, by ecclesiastical societies established for the purpose, and by ordinary parish priests.50 It may be supposed that, while the applied themselves to the analysis of his technique, they absorbed at least a part of his ideas.

Yet it is not because of his influence on the clergy that the Bishop of Geneva was outstanding. His principal and undisputed domain was the laity. Francis de Sales reestablished devotion among the lay population; before him “the spirit of devotion had almost been forgotten by people of the world. The interior and spiritual life was relegated to the cloister; it was considered too wild to appear at Court and in high society.”51

49 Ibid., pp. 396-397.
50 Ibid., Vol. 10, pp. lxxxvi-lxxxix.