

□ Reading time: 10 min.

At seventeen, in the heart of the Parisian carnival, Francis de Sales was looking for something quite different from amusements and shows. The young student, already fascinated by classical authors but inwardly dissatisfied, discovered the Song of Songs in the biblical lectures of Gilbert Genebrard. Those pages revealed the spiritual life to him as a love story between God and the soul, destined to forever mark his prayer, his choices, and his apostolate. Since then, the spousal language of the Song accompanied the crises of his youth, the mission in the Chablais, his preaching, spiritual direction, and his major works. In the Church, in the devout soul, and in Mary, Francis recognised the bride loved by Christ and called to respond faithfully to His love.

It was during the carnival in Paris. Francis de Sales was 17 years old and a student with the Jesuits. While everyone was thinking about having fun and amusing themselves, Francis seemed preoccupied, even sad. Not knowing whether he was ill or simply melancholy, his tutor suggested he attend the festival's shows.

Faced with this proposal, the young man suddenly formulated this prayer taken from Scripture: "Turn my eyes away from looking at vanity". He added: "Lord, make me see". See what? "Holy theology," he replied. "It is she who will teach me what God wants my soul to learn." Until then he had studied the pagan authors of antiquity, whom he liked, with great profit; but his heart was not satisfied.

A discovery

With his tutor's permission, Francis began to attend the biblical exegesis lectures of the famous Gilbert Genebrard, a Benedictine from Cluny, who was commenting on the Song of Songs. Genebrard transmitted to his listeners an allegorical and entirely spiritual interpretation that enchanted the young student, to the point that he could exclaim with the Shulammite: "I have found Him whom my heart loves".

For Francis, states Fr. André Ravier, it was a sort of revelation, and from that

moment “he could no longer conceive of the spiritual life except as a love story, the most beautiful of love stories”.

The effects of this discovery were not long in coming. The young student lived through a period of exceptional fervour. He enrolled in the Congregation of Mary, an association promoted by the Jesuits that gathered the spiritual elite of the students in their colleges. His heart was inflamed for this God who made him “taste his delights so sweetly”, who showed himself to him “so lovable”, to the point that shortly afterwards, looking back on that experience, he exclaimed: “O love, O charity, O beauty to which I have dedicated all my affections!”.

In the *Rules of Christian Life* that he imposed on himself during that period, we find the first written testimony of his devotion to the Song of Songs. To appease his desire for Eucharistic communion, he resolved never to stop “running to the odour of the Lord’s perfumes”. And in a philosophy manuscript dating back to the same period, regarding the true happiness of man, we read this quotation from the Song, a testimony to the joy of his discovery, which sounds like a motto and a programme of life: “*Tenui illum, neque dimittam*”, I have taken hold of him and I will never let him go.

This strong resolution was very useful to him during the terrible crisis that assailed him at the end of 1586 or the beginning of 1587, two or three years after his wonderful discovery. Meditating on the question of predestination and believing himself destined for hell, he despaired:

I, miserable, alas! Shall I perhaps be deprived of the grace of Him who made me taste his delights so sweetly and who showed me such benevolence?

What afflicted him in particular was the thought of being deprived of the vision of the Virgin Mary, whom the Song had described to him as “beautiful as the moon and elect as the sun”.

We know that the crisis was resolved precisely following a prayer to Mary, venerated in Paris under the title of Notre-Dame de Bonne Délivrance.

His resolution of fidelity, borrowed from the sacred text, accompanied him to Padua,

where he studied law from 1588 to 1592, while continuing his study of theology at the same time. Noting with great sorrow the religious and political division of Europe, he proclaimed his unwavering loyalty to the Catholic Church with another reference to the Song: “I am not the fox that devastates the vineyards”.

As can be seen, there is no doubt that the Song of Songs played a leading role in the formation of the young Francis, providing him with inspiration, encouragement, and a programme of life.

The Song in the works of Francis de Sales

Starting from his priestly ordination in 1593, followed by the mission in Thonon among the Calvinist Protestants of the Chablais, and especially after his episcopal consecration in 1602, the life of Francis de Sales practically merges with his work. The meditation of his favourite book never abandoned him, not even during the Chablais mission in the years 1594-1598. On a note dating back to that period, these fiery words have been found, the fruit of his apostolic and mystical conversations with the Beloved, which recall “the zeal of love strong as hell” of the Song: “*Amor meus furor meus!* My love is all my fury. It seems to me, in fact, that my zeal has turned into fury for my Beloved”. He often repeated these fiery little verses:

Is it love or fury

that spurs me on, O divine Saviour?

Yes, my God, it is both,

Because I burn when I will.

In the book of *Controversies*, written during his mission in the Chablais and initially published in the form of loose leaflets in 1595-1596, to show his readers and contradictors that the Catholic Church is the Church willed by Christ, he quotes more than twenty times “these admirable songs and pastoral representations of the

loves of the heavenly Bridegroom with the Church”.

Another polemical work, the *Defence of the Standard of the Holy Cross*, published in 1600, contains no explicit quotation, but it is possible that the author borrowed the military image of the standard from the Song of Songs, where we read, according to the Hebrew: “His standard over me is love”.

Regarding the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, published in 1609, which contains about thirty quotations, the Benedictine editor Dom Mackey rightly stated that “the bride of the Song, a model of docility to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, reappears at every moment to teach the devout soul the delicacies of sacred love, fidelity to the invitations of grace”.

It is not surprising to note that the *Treatise on the Love of God*, published in 1616 and addressed to a character named Theotimus, is the work of Francis de Sales richest in references to the Song, to the point that it has been said that this work, in its twelve books, “is itself, in a certain sense, a commentary on the Song of Songs”. The quotations and allusions, numbering around 170, abound especially in Book V, where the author deals “with the two exercises of sacred love which are accomplished by kindness and benevolence”, as well as in Books VI and VII dedicated to prayer. They are rarer in Books VIII and IX, where he deals with the love of conformity to the will of God and the love of submission to His good pleasure. They become more frequent again in the last three books dedicated to the primacy of love in the spiritual life.

The foundation in 1610 of the Institute of the Visitation gave a new impetus to the use of the sacred book. The Song of Songs was often the theme of the instructions that the founder gave to his spiritual daughters. It should also not be forgotten that the launch of the new Institute more or less coincided with the drafting of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. In the *Spiritual Conferences*, which gather his instructions to the first Visitandines, there are about thirty allusions on various topics concerning the spiritual life of the religious.

In addition to all the other biblical quotations, references to the Song and simple references to this book are very numerous in his *Sermons*, where there are up to 130 in the sermons written by his own hand or simply sketched out in the form of an outline or framework, and almost 80 in the sermons intended for the religious of the Visitation and collected by them.

Nor is there a lack of allusions to the Song in the ten volumes of the *Letters*, which contain about 110. But, as might be expected, they are identifiable almost exclusively in the letters of spiritual direction.

In the five volumes of the *Minor Works*, the quotations are distributed unevenly. In the first series, entitled “Studies and intimate life”, there are only five, but very significant because they date back to the period of Francis’s formation, and only one in the “Apostolate” series. It is not surprising to find few references to the Song in the series of polemical writings and in the normative texts of the Bishop of Geneva. In the volume dedicated to the Visitation and the rules that govern it, there are 9 important quotations. The most numerous references are found in the last volume entitled “Asceticism and mysticism”.

For our work, the analysis of the quotations from the Song traceable in the works of St. Francis de Sales is an obligatory step, because it concretely introduces us into his mental and spiritual universe, but it cannot be sufficient. It will then be necessary to arrive at the Salesian interpretation of the Song, which will essentially consist in identifying and presenting the characters of the Song chosen by the interpreter.

Interpretation of the Song of Songs

For most modern commentators, the Song was originally a series of poems that simply celebrated human love, “the most beautiful song of creation”, with all its sensuality. According to some, an editor would have gathered them together, giving them a sapiential tone and a possible allegorical meaning, such as the love between the God of Israel and His chosen people spoken of by the prophets, in particular Hosea and Ezekiel. Some contemporary exegetes actually consider it a poem about human love, not allegorical, but endowed with symbolic meanings, possibly open to the theological dimension.

Faithful to Christian tradition, the Bishop of Geneva attributes the book to Solomon. In his *Treatise on the Love of God*, Solomon represents “the Saviour”, that is, Jesus Christ, whom he calls “peaceful or peace-making Solomon”, while the Shulammite is the beloved, “tranquil and daughter of peace”.

The spiritual explanation he gives of it is the one that had been in use practically

since the time of Origen in the 3rd century. For him, the Song of Songs is a celebration of God's love, the source and model of every other love.

In line with the traditional Jewish interpretation, which read in the Song the history of the love relations between God and Israel. The Fathers of the Church saw in it the relations of God or Christ with the Church. The Song of Songs, Francis de Sales affirmed after many others, is "the epithalamium of the Church and of Christ". Very often, however, it is the relationship between God the Saviour and the individual soul that occupies the foreground for him. This is the interpretation he adopted in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, where he declares:

The great Solomon describes in a delightfully admirable way the love of the Saviour and of the devout soul, in that divine work, which for its excellent sweetness is called the Song of Songs. And to elevate us more sweetly to the consideration of this spiritual love which is exercised between God and us, through the correspondence of the movements of our hearts with the inspirations of his divine Majesty, he resorts to a perpetual representation of the loves of a chaste shepherd and a modest shepherdess.

Often, as we shall see, we will also encounter the Marian interpretation, which had taken hold in the West during the Middle Ages, in particular with Rupert of Deutz. Despite being the mother of Jesus, Mary was often considered on the spiritual plane as the new Eve alongside the new Adam, and therefore as the beloved for her unparalleled love for Christ.

All these different interpretations – collective, individual, and Marian – are present in the thought and writings of St. Francis de Sales. It will be up to us to show the use he made of them and to highlight, as far as possible, the originality of his reading and his interpretation.

The Song in the life of St. Francis de Sales

Thanks to his quotations from the Song, perhaps we are able to penetrate a little deeper into the soul of St. Francis de Sales. By studying the approximately seven hundred quotations, allusions, and references to the Song of Songs, we can intuit

something of his intimate life with God.

The soul of Francis de Sales, one might say, was the soul of the bride of the Song. It is certainly not arbitrary to state that the spirituality he drew from this biblical book and which he proposed throughout his life to his faithful, his correspondents, and his daughters of the Visitation, was first lived and practised by himself.

It is a spirituality that we can define as “spousal”, in the sense that it is entirely centred on the love of the Bridegroom for the bride and of the bride for the Bridegroom. St Francis de Sales himself experienced what he taught others, namely that the human soul is called to enter ever more into the covenant with its God and with Jesus Christ, its Saviour.

After a *Corpus Christi* procession, during which he had carried the Blessed Sacrament through the city of Annecy, he confessed to St. Jane Frances de Chantal that he had been “touched” by these words of the bride: “My Beloved is all mine, and I am all his; he dwells between my breasts”, and by these others of the Bridegroom: “Set me as a seal upon your heart”, before concluding with this exclamation: “Is there a sweetness comparable to this?”.

Nothing, in fact, equals the sweetness and strength of this Name that Francis de Sales never ceases to savour by repeating an exclamation dear to him: “Long live Jesus!”. Another time he told his usual confidante: “This morning, upon waking, I shouted in our ears: Long live Jesus! and I would have liked to *pour this sacred oil* over the whole face of the earth”.

The beauty of the Beloved, sign and testimony of His love, His voice that enchants His bride, and His whole person attract him to the utmost, so much so that his happiness is to “run” after Him, even when He proposes pains, crosses, and thorns to him.

The beauty of the soul – and of this Francis de Sales is well convinced – is not due to itself, but to the love received from the Beloved who has done everything for it. What is surprising then if this love makes it sick with that lovesickness of which Francis seems to speak from experience, seeing himself also incapable of loving Him as he would like to and unable to praise Him as he would like to and should?

To the spousal love of Francis’s soul for his Bridegroom must be added another element of his spiritual life: his love for the Church. The Song, according to an

interpretation he inherits, reminded him that the Church is the true bride of Jesus Christ, the only dove, holy and fruitful; hence his ecclesial spirituality, founded on his Catholic faith and his episcopal responsibility.

If the Catholic Church is truly the Church willed by Christ, despite the sins of its members, it deserves an ardent and jealous love like that of the Bridegroom for his bride. The apostle of the Chablais, having become Bishop of Geneva, defends it with all his strength and with the greatest possible gentleness. But above all, he shows it full of love for the Bridegroom who chose it and who continues to sanctify it. The Song also reminded him that this bride needed a company of valiant guardians and he knows he is part of it as a pastor of the Church.

As for his affection for the Mother of the Saviour, it shines through in his various commentaries on the Song. It is the last, and no less important, aspect of Francis's spiritual life. Mary is for him the perfect bride, the royal throne of the new Solomon, the masterpiece of the Redemption, wholly united to the Son and leaning on Him. She is love itself and this love only grew throughout her existence like the dawn advancing to broad daylight, to the point that in the end she died of it. From heaven, where she ascended with body and soul, she obtains many graces for us with her prayer.