 Reading time: 5 min.

(continuation from previous article)

THE PRESENCE OF MARY IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (8/8)

The first information we have about devotion to Mary in the de Sales family refers to his mother, the young Françoise de Sionnaz, a devotee of the Virgin, faithful to the Rosary. She passed love for this pious practice on to her son, who, as a young boy in Annecy, enrolled in the Confraternity of the Rosary, committing himself to say all or part of it every day. Fidelity to this would accompany him throughout his life.

Devotion to the Virgin continued during his Parisian years. “He entered the Congregation of Mary, which brought together the spiritual elite of the students at their college.”

Then there was the **spiritual crisis** that broke out at the end of 1586: for several weeks he did not eat, sleep, and was in despair. He had the idea in his head that he had been abandoned by God’s love and would “never be able to see your sweet face again”. Until one day, in January 1587, on his return from college, he entered the church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès and made an act of abandonment before the Virgin: he said the Salve Regina and was freed from temptation and regained his serenity.

His prayer and devotion to the Mother of God certainly continued during his years in Padua: he would entrust his vocation to the priesthood to her, and on 18 December 1593, he was ordained a priest and would certainly have celebrated a few masses in the church at Annecy, dedicated to Notre Dame de Liesse (Our Lady of Joy), to thank Her for taking him and leading him by the hand during those long years of study.

Years passed and August 1603 came, when Francis received the letter of invitation from the Archbishop of Bourges to preach for the upcoming Lent in Dijon.
“Our Congregation is the fruit of the journey to Dijon,” he wrote to his friend Fr Pollien.

It would be during this Lent, which began on 5 March 1604, that Francis would meet Baroness Jane Frances Frémyot de Chantal. He would begin a journey towards God

in search of His will, a journey that would last six years and end on 6 June 1610, the day on which the Visitation was born with Jane Frances and two other women entering the novitiate.
“Our little Congregation is truly a work of the Heart of Jesus and Mary,” and after a short time he confidently added: “God takes care of his servants and Our Lady provides them with what they need.”
His Daughters would be called Religious of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Four hundred years after its foundation, the Monastery of the Visitation in Paris writes that the Order has never ceased to draw all the best of its spirituality from this Gospel scene.
“Contemplation and praise of the Lord, united to the service of one’s neighbour; the spirit of thanksgiving and the humility of the Magnificat; real poverty that throws itself with infinite confidence on the goodness of the Father; availability to the Spirit; missionary ardour to reveal the presence of Christ; joy in the Lord; Mary who faithfully keeps all these things in her heart.”

Jane Frances de Chantal summarises the Salesian spirit as follows: “a spirit of profound humility towards God and of great gentleness towards one’s neighbour”, which are precisely the virtues that immediately arise from the lived contemplation of the mystery of the Visitation.

In the Treatise on the spirit of simplicity, Francis to his said to his Visitandines:
“We must have a totally simple trust which makes us remain quiet in the arms of our Father and our dear Mother, confident that Our Lord and Our Lady, our dear Mother, will always protect us with their care and motherly tenderness.”
The Visitation is the living monument of Francis’ love for the Mother of Jesus.

His friend Bishop J.P. Camus sums up Francis’ love for the Virgin in this way: “His devotion to the Mother of splendid love, of wisdom, of chaste love and of holy hope was truly great. From his earliest years he devoted himself to honouring her.”

Mary’s presence is like yeast in the dough for his letters: discreet, silent, active and effective. There is no lack of prayers composed by Francis himself.

On 8 December (!) 1621, he sent one to a Visitandine:
“May the most glorious Virgin fill us with her love, so that together, you and I, who have had the good fortune to be called and have embarked under her protection

and in her name, may accomplish our voyage in humble purity and simplicity, so that one day we may find ourselves in the port of salvation, which is Paradise."

When he wrote letters around some Marian feast, he did not miss an opportunity to mention her or make a point for reflection. Thus,
– for the Assumption of Mary into heaven: "May this holy Virgin, with her prayers, have us live in this holy love! May this love always be the sole object of our heart.
– for the Annunciation: it is the day "of the most blessed greeting ever given to anyonen. I beseech this glorious Virgin to grant you some of the consolation she received."

Who was Mary for Francis?

a. She was the Mother of God
Not only Mother, but also… grandmother!
"Honour, reverence and respect the holy and glorious Virgin Mary with a special love: she is the Mother of our sovereign Father and therefore also our dear grandmother. Let us have recourse to her as grandchildren, let us throw ourselves upon her knees with absolute trust; at all times, in all circumstances, let us appeal to this sweet Mother, let us invoke her maternal love and, making every effort to imitate her virtues, let us have the sincere heart of children for her."

She leads us to Jesus: "Do whatever He tells you!"
"If we want Our Lady to ask her Son to change the water of our lukewarmness into the wine of His love, we must do all that He will tell us. Let us do what the Saviour will tell us well, let us fill our hearts well with the water of penance, and this lukewarm water will be changed for us into the wine of fervent love."

b. She was the model we must imitate
In listening to the Word of God.
"Receive it in your heart like a precious ointment, following the example of the Blessed Virgin, who carefully kept all the praises spoken in honour of her Son in her own,"

Model for living in humility.
"The Most Blessed Virgin, Our Lady, gave us a most remarkable example of humility when she pronounced these words: Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done

to me according to your word; in saying that she is the handmaid of the Lord, she expresses the greatest act of humility that can be done and immediately performs an act of most excellent generosity, saying: Let it be done to me according to your word."

Model for living *common* holiness.
"If one wants to be a saint of true holiness, it must be common, daily, everyday holiness like that of Our Lord and Our Lady."

Model for living in serenity:
"If you feel excessively worried, soothe your soul and try to give it back its tranquillity. Imagine how the Virgin worked calmly with one hand, while with the other she held Our Lord, during her childhood: she held Him on one arm, never taking her gaze away from Him."

Model for giving ourselves to God in time:
"Oh how happy are the souls who, in imitation of this holy Virgin, consecrate themselves as first fruits, from their youth, to the service of Our Lord.".

c. Strength in suffering
Madame de Granieu's husband suffered very painful attacks of gout.
Francis shared in the gentleman's suffering sayings:
"A pain that our Blessed Lady and Abbess (the Virgin Mary) can greatly alleviate by leading you to Mount Calvary, where she holds the novitiate of her monastery, teaching you not only to suffer well, but to suffer everything that happens both for us and for our loved ones with love."

Let me conclude with this beautiful passage that underlines the bond that unites Mary and the believer every time we approach the Eucharist:
"Do you want to become relatives of the Virgin Mary? Go to communion! For in receiving the Holy Sacrament you receive the flesh of her flesh and the blood of her blood, since the precious body of the Saviour, which is in the divine Eucharist, was made and formed with her most pure blood and with the collaboration of the Holy Spirit. Since you cannot be related to Our Lady in the same way as Elizabeth, be so by imitating her virtues and holy life."