

□ Reading time: 6 min.

In the 'Song of Songs', St. Francis de Sales discovers much more than a love poem. He reads in it the mystery of God's love for man, fully revealed in Jesus Christ. The Beloved is above all the Son, the divine Bridegroom who draws the soul to Himself, but always in communion with the Father, the origin of every call, and with the Holy Spirit, who pours the gift of charity into hearts. Francis contemplates Christ as an "abyss of beauty". He admires His face, His heart, His voice, His sweetness, and His irresistible charm. The poetic images of the Song thus become a language of faith and mysticism, capable of recounting the soul's encounter with the One who loves it, calls it, and draws it into the race of love.

Who is the Beloved of the Song?

For St. Francis de Sales, who follows the line of allegorical and mystical interpretation of this Old Testament book, the answer to the question can only be found in the light of the fullness of Revelation accomplished in the New Testament.

When the doctor of divine love reads the poems of the Song of Songs, his thoughts and his heart go spontaneously to God and to Jesus Christ, more rarely to the Holy Spirit.

Often, but especially in the *Treatise on the Love of God*, he calls the Bridegroom of the Song simply God, whom he willingly designates with one of his attributes: the divine Majesty, the divine Creator, the divine Providence or the divine Goodness.

Elsewhere, particularly when he thinks more precisely of Jesus Christ, he calls him Our Lord, the Saviour, the divine Lover, the divine Enamoured, the divine Redeemer, the divine Shepherd, the King of love, the Love of our hearts, the ever so amiable Friend.

Although God can normally designate each of the persons of the Holy Trinity, the author's attention is mainly focused on Jesus Christ, but in relation to the other persons of the Trinity. The union, or rather the unity, between the Son and the Father is well expressed by the desire of the Son ascended to heaven to receive the

Father's kiss:

Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.

In reality, the Son is always turned towards the Father, attentive to praising Him as only He knows how.

Jesus is the "Voice" among all the voices that rise to heaven and on earth to praise God the Father. His is unique, "the queen voice of all voices, a voice compared to which other voices are but a mute and sad silence".

Christ, in fact, loves the melody of His Father's glory and praise more than anyone, "He exults with praises and blessings above all".

From a poem entirely dedicated to the mutual attraction of the lovers, one of the verses often quoted by Francis de Sales is the one that expresses the ardent desire of the beloved:

Draw me after you,

let us run to the scent of your perfumes.

The Beloved, who is Christ, has the initiative in this race of love in which he draws His beloved, but everything ultimately comes from the Father, as our author recalls by quoting Jesus' declaration: "No one can come to me unless the Father draws him".

The Father certainly draws every human person, but He wants them to run after the Son, freely, with the support of grace.

Love, a gift of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is not forgotten. From the very first words of the Preface to the Treatise on the Love of God, the author did not fail to recall that the Spirit is the true Author of the Song of Songs and that He speaks to us of love through the mouth of the Church:

The Holy Spirit teaches that the lips of the divine bride, that is, the Church, are like scarlet and the vessel that distils honey.

To speak of the Spirit's action in the hearts of the faithful, Francis de Sales draws heavily on the images of the Song. The Holy Spirit is the tree of life that gives us the delicious fruit of love; He is the dove of whom every consecrated person can say:

*My dear dove is all mine,
and I am all His.*

The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are like the silver pillars that support the royal palanquin of the Blessed Virgin; the wind of the Holy Spirit is the good wind of divine love, which blows from the south and drives away the cold wind. He blows in our garden and brings forth abundant perfumes; it is He who gives us the grace to aspire to Him and to breathe for Him.

The love of which Francis de Sales speaks in his commentaries cannot be the product of natural forces: it is a gift of the Holy Spirit who "gives it and pours it into our hearts".

When I pray to the Father with the words that Jesus taught me, he explains, I ask Him that the fire of the Holy Spirit "may penetrate to the marrow of my soul, so that the great waters of tribulation cannot quench charity".

Who then is the divine Lover or the divine Enamoured of the Song of Songs?
Without forgetting either the Father or the Holy Spirit, the principal Bridegroom of whom the author wishes to speak to us is Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, who speaks to me of love through His Spirit.

An “abyss of beauty”

“Oh, how beautiful you are, my Beloved, oh, how beautiful you are!” exclaims the bride of the Song describing her Beloved. God is beautiful, Jesus is beautiful, human nature is beautiful.

Let us remember that the *Treatise on the Love of God* begins with a chapter dedicated to the “beauty of human nature”, a reflection of God’s beauty.

The Beloved she admires is white and red – these are “the colours of the Bridegroom” – and is “chosen from among thousands”.

He is as bright as the sun at midday, when there are no shadows.

Beautiful is this Shepherd, whose chaste love the Song celebrates with a “modest shepherdess”.

His head is of gold, no doubt because He wears a precious crown.

His locks are like the shoots of palm trees, whose apparent darkness highlights the whiteness hidden within them.

His whole face is beautiful and graceful.

His clear and transparent eyes are doves that reveal a heart full of love.

His cheeks are like flowerbeds.

Strength is in His hands, “ringed with hyacinth”.

His legs are like marble pillars and His step is like that of the stag and the fawn, the most agile and graceful animals.

Jesus is the flower blossomed from the Virgin, he adds, the lily among the thorns, the tree of desire.

He resembles the apple tree among the bushes.

He is as delicious as the grapes of the vineyard.

It is thus that “the sacred lover arranges in the divine Songs, like a well-ordered army, all the perfections of her Bridegroom, one after the other”.

The heart of the Beloved

The divine Shepherd is beautiful outwardly, but what of his inner beauty?

In a 1598 poem on the Transfiguration, which does not quote the Song but is clearly inspired by it, the luminous beauty of Christ’s heart is exalted far beyond outward splendour:

We have seen, Lord, this face so clear,

A thousand times clearer than the beautiful sun

When at midday it shines brightest

And looks with full eye upon the universe.

But, if such is the body, how much more resplendent

The glory of your heart, of your happy heart

With such happiness abundant over all others,

That, from its very first moment, made it glorious.

Heart so full of splendours, that pours them out
Upon all His garments, which He has even shown
So white and radiant, that snow so white
To show to our eyes the sky has not the power.

Outward beauty flows from inner beauty, so much so that it is reflected in particular on the garments of the Bridegroom, whose perfumes reveal his presence.

From within, that is, from the heart of this “tranquil and peaceful Solomon”, come all His favours, far better than the wine of human and worldly consolations.

The contemplation of His beauty makes the faithful lover almost swoon:

I have become so inebriated and holily drunk with the complacency I have felt in this abyss of beauty that my soul languishes, wounded by a lovingly mortal desire that urges me to praise forever such eminent goodness.

What is surprising if the beloved pursues him, drawing the maidens with her? His charm is truly powerful.

The voice of the Beloved

And what of the charm of His voice? “Oh, how sweet is His voice!”, she exclaims, for it comes from lips “upon which the fullness of grace is poured”.

His lips are like lilies: they distil myrrh of sweetness; the words that come from

them are sweetness itself; His voice melts the heart of the listener.

Evoking the perfect praise that only the Son can render to the Father, the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God* exclaims:

Oh! What a canticle of the Son for the Father!

He continues by giving voice to the soul that exclaims: “Ah! I hear Him; oh! the voice, the voice of my Beloved, the queen voice of all voices, a voice compared to which other voices are but a mute and sad silence!”.