 Reading time: 7 min.

In his famous *Treatise on the Love of God*, St Francis de Sales wanted to present his reader with a summary of his entire doctrine in twelve points. Like Jesus, who practised twelve “acts of love”, he wants to encourage us to practise the following acts in our turn: complacency, benevolence and union; humility, ecstasy and admiration; contemplation, rest and tenderness; jealousy, sickness and the death of love. In speaking of acts of love, he by no means downplays the role of feelings, but proposes the practical exercises that true love requires. It is not surprising that the author of this treatise was proclaimed to be the “doctor of love”.

The pleasure of the human heart

The first act of love for God – but this also applies to love of neighbour – is to practise “complacency”, that is, to seek and find pleasure with him and in him. There is no love without pleasure, as they say. To illustrate this truth, St Francis de Sales offers the example of the bee: “And as the bee being born in honey, feeds on honey, and only flies for honey, so love is born of complacency, maintained by complacency, and tends to complacency.” This is true of human love, but it is also true of divine love.

When Francis was a young student in Paris, he had sought and found this pleasure in the love story told in that marvellous book of the Bible called the Canticle of Canticles, or Song of Songs, to the point of exclaiming in a transport of joy: “I have found Him whom my heart loves, and I shall never leave Him!”

Pleasure moves our hearts in the direction of a beauty that attracts us, of a goodness that delights us, of a kindness that makes us happy. As in human love, pleasure is the great motor of God’s love. The beloved of the Canticle of Canticles loves her beloved because his sight, his presence, all his qualities bring her great happiness.

Meditating on the Canticle of Canticles, the doctor of love did not want to dwell on the carnal pleasures described therein. Not that they are bad in themselves, for it is the Creator who has ordained them in his wisdom, but in certain cases they can give rise to wrong behaviour. Hence this warning, “The one who does not know how to spiritualise them well will only enjoy them in wrongdoing.”

In order to avoid any difficulties, Francis de Sales often prefers to describe the child’s pleasure at his mother’s breast: “The bosom and breasts of the mother are the storeroom of the little infant’s treasures: he has no other riches than those, which are more precious unto him than gold or the topaz, more beloved than all the

rest of the world."

With these considerations on human love, St Francis de Sales wants to introduce us to the love of God. We know by faith that "the Divinity is an incomprehensible abyss of all perfection, sovereignly infinite in excellence and infinitely sovereign in goodness." If, therefore, we carefully consider the immensity of the perfections that are in God, it is impossible for us not to experience great pleasure. It is this pleasure that makes the beloved of the Canticle say: "How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful You are all desirable, indeed you are desire itself!"

God's pleasure

The most beautiful thing is that in divine love, pleasure is reciprocal, which is not always the case in human love. On the one hand, the human soul receives pleasure in discovering all God's perfections; on the other hand, God rejoices in seeing the pleasure He gives it. In this way, these mutual pleasures 'make love of incomparable delight'. Thus the soul can cry out: "O my king how lovable are thy riches and how rich thy loves! Oh! which of us has more joy, thou that enjoyest it, or I who rejoice thereat!"

In the love duet between God and us, it is actually God who has more pleasure than we do. Francis de Sales states this explicitly: God has "more pleasure in giving his graces than we do in receiving them." Jesus loved us with a love of complacency because, as the Bible says, "Verily his *delights are to be with the children of men."*

God did not become man reluctantly, but willingly and joyfully, because he loved us from the beginning. Knowing this, and knowing that God himself is the source of our love, "we delight in God's pleasure infinitely more than in our own."

When we think of this mutual happiness, how can we not think of a meal shared with friends? It is this happiness that makes the Lord say in Revelation: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me"

Another image, also found in the Canticle of Canticles, is that of the garden full of "apple trees of his delights". It is in this garden, the image of the human soul, that the divine Bridegroom comes to dwell with all his gifts. He comes there willingly, for he delights to be with the children of men whom he has made in his image and likeness. And in this garden it is he himself who has planted the loving delight we have in his goodness.

Nothing expresses the mutual happiness of those who love each other better than the expression used by the bride in the Canticle to describe their mutual

belonging: “My beloved is mine and I am his.” In other words, she can also say: “God’s goodness is all mine since I enjoy his excellences, and I again am wholly his, seeing that his delights possess me.”

An endless desire

Those who have already tasted God’s love will not cease to desire to taste it more and more, because “while satiating ourselves we would still eat, as whilst eating we feel ourselves satisfied.”The angels who see God continue to desire him.

Enjoyment is not diminished by desire, but perfected by it; desire is not stifled, but refined by enjoyment. The enjoyment of a good that always satisfies never withers, but is continually renewed and flourishes; it is always lovable and at the same time always desirable.

It is said that there is a herb with extraordinary properties: whoever holds it in their mouth is never hungry or thirsty, so full is it, and yet it never makes one lose their appetite. Rest of heart does not consist in remaining still, but in needing nothing but God; it does not consist in not moving, but in having no impediment to move.

The chameleon is said to live on air and wind; wherever it goes, it has something to eat. So why does it always go from one place to another? Not because it is looking for something to satisfy its hunger, but because it is always practising feeding on the air of time. He who desires God by possessing Him does not desire Him to seek Him, but to exercise the affection he enjoys.

When we walk to a beautiful garden, we do not stop walking once we get there, but we take advantage of it to stroll and pass the time pleasantly.

Let us therefore follow the exhortation of the Psalmist: “*Seek ye the Lord and be strengthened, seek his face evermore*.” Let us always seek the one we love, says St Augustine; love seeks what it has found, not to have it, but to have it always.

Pleasure beyond suffering

Suffering is not contrary to pleasure. According to St Francis de Sales, Jesus took pleasure in suffering, because he loved his torments. At the height of his passion, he was content to die in pain for me. It was this pleasure that made him say on the cross:”All is accomplished.”

It will be the same for us if we share our sufferings with his. “The more our friend is dear to us,” says the doctor of love, “the more we enjoy sharing his joys and sorrows.” “*Now shall I die with joy,”* said Jacob after seeing his son Joseph, whom he thought dead. It was the delight in Jesus’ passion that drew his stigmata

to St Francis and St Catherine of Siena. Curiously, honey makes absinthe even more bitter, but the sweet scent of roses is sharpened by the proximity of sour garlic. Similarly, the compassion we feel for Jesus' sufferings does not take away our delight in his love.

St Francis de Sales wants to teach us both the suffering that comes from love and the love of suffering, loving compassion and sorrowful complacency, lovingly sorrowful ecstasy and sorrowfully loving ecstasy. When the great holy souls suffered the stigmata, they tasted the "joyous love of suffering for a beloved one" who died on the cross. The love gave them such happiness that sharing in Jesus' sufferings filled them with a sense of consolation and happiness.

St Paul's love for the life, passion and death of his Lord was so great that he derived extraordinary pleasure from it. We see this clearly when he says he wanted to glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Elsewhere he also says:"'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." St Clare so delighted in the Saviour's passion that she drew upon herself all the signs of his passion, her heart "being made such as the things it loved."

Everyone should know how much the Saviour longs to enter our souls through this love of sorrowful compassion. In the Canticle of Canticles, the beloved implores his beloved: "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night." This dew and these drops of the night are the afflictions and pains of his passion. The divine Lover, laden with the sorrows and sweats of his passion, also says to me: "Open then thy heart towards me as the pearl-mothers open their shells towards the sky, and I will shed upon thee the dew of my passion, which will be changed into pearls of consolation."