 Reading time: 6 min.

A curious episode

In the life of Francis de Sales, a young student in Paris, there is a curious episode that had great repercussions throughout the rest of his life and in his thinking. It was *Carnevale* day (Carnival). While everyone was thinking about having fun, the 17-year-old seemed preoccupied, even sad. Not knowing whether he was ill or simply melancholic, his tutor suggested he go to see the festival performances. Faced with this suggestion, the young man suddenly formulated this biblical prayer: “Turn away my eyes from seeing vain things”. Then he added: “Lord, let me see”. See what? He replied: “Sacred theology; it is this that will teach me what God wants my soul to learn.”

Until then Francis had studied the pagan authors of antiquity with great profit and even success. He liked them and was very successful in his studies. However, his heart was unsatisfied, he was looking for something or rather someone who could satisfy his desire. With the permission of his tutor, he began at that time to attend lectures given by the great professor of Sacred Scripture, Gilbert Genebrard, who was commenting on a book of the Bible that tells the love story of two lovers: the *Song of Songs*.

The love described in this book is the love between a man and a woman. However, the love celebrated in the Song of Songs can also be understood as the spiritual love of the human soul with God, Genebrard explained to his students, and it is this entirely spiritual interpretation that enchanted the young student, who rejoiced in the words of the bride: “I have found Him whom my heart loves.”

The *Song of Songs* became the favourite book of St Francis de Sales from then on. According to Father Lajeunie, the future Doctor of the Church had found in this holy book “the inspiration of his life, the theme of his masterpiece (the *Treatise on the Love of God*), and the best source of his optimism.” For Francis, Father Ravier also assures us, it was like a revelation, and from then on “he could no longer conceive of the spiritual life other than as a love story, the most beautiful of love stories.”

No wonder, then, that Francis de Sales has become the “doctor of love” and that the theme of love has been the focus of the commemoration marking the fourth centenary of his death (1622-2022). Already in 1967, on the occasion of the

fourth centenary of his birth, St Paul VI had described him as a “doctor of divine love and evangelical gentleness”. Fifty-five years later, on the anniversary of Francis de Sales’ birth to heaven, Pope Francis, with his Apostolic Letter *Totum Amoris Est*, offers us new insights into the life and doctrine of the holy bishop and authoritatively re-proposes to us the true face of God often ignored or misunderstood.

The misunderstood God

In the time of Francis de Sales, King Henry IV of France, a great admirer of the abilities and virtues of the bishop of Geneva, one day regretted with him the distorted image his contemporaries had of God. According to a witness, the king “saw several of his subjects experiencing all kinds of freedoms, saying that the goodness and greatness of God did not closely care for the deeds of men, which he was strongly critical of. He saw others, in great numbers, who had a low opinion of God, believing that he was always ready to surprise them, waiting only for the hour when they had fallen into some slight fault to condemn them eternally, which he did not approve of.”

Francis de Sales, for his part, was well aware that he was offering an image of God different from those very common in his day. In one of his sermons, he likened himself to the Apostle Paul as he announced the unknown God to the Athenians: “It is not that I want to speak to you about an unknown God” he pointed out, “since, thanks to his goodness, we know him, but I could certainly speak of a misunderstood God. I, therefore, will not make you know, but discover, that so lovable God who died for us.”

The God of St Francis de Sales is not a policeman God nor a distant God, as many of his time believed him to be, and he is not the God of “predestination”, who has always predestined some to heaven and others to hell, as many of his contemporaries claimed, but a God who wants the salvation of all. He is not a distant, solitary and indifferent God, but a God who is provident and “ready for communication”, a God who is attractive like the Bridegroom in the *Song of Songs* to whom the bride addresses these words: ‘Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes…Take me away with you—let us hurry!”

If God attracts man, it is so that man becomes a co-operator with God. This God respects man’s freedom and capacity for initiative, as Pope Francis reminds us. With a God with a loving face like the one proposed by Francis de Sales,

communication becomes a “heart to heart”, the aim of which is union with him. It is a friendship, because friendship is communication of goods, exchange and reciprocity.

The God of the human heart

In the Old Testament, God is called God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. The covenant established by God with the patriarchs truly signifies the deep, unbreakable bond between the Lord and his people. In the New Testament, the covenant established in Jesus Christ unites all men, all humanity. Henceforth, everyone can invoke God with this prayer of St Francis de Sales: “O my God, you are my God, *the God of my heart*, the God of my soul, the God of my spirit.”

These expressions mean that for St Francis de Sales, our God is not only the God of the human heart in the person of the God made man, but also the God of the human heart. True, the Son of Mary receiving from her his humanity, received a human heart, both strong and gentle. But by the expression “God of the human heart”, the doctor of love means that the face of our God corresponds to the desires, the deepest expectations of the human heart. Man finds in the heart of Jesus the unexpected fulfilment of a love he dared not even think or imagine.

The young Francis felt this when he discovered the love story delivered in the *Song of Songs*. The bride and the Bridegroom, the human soul and Jesus discover themselves made for each other. It is not possible that their meeting was accidental. God made them for each other in such a way that the bride can say: “You are mine and I am yours”. All that St Francis de Sales said and wrote vibrates with this wonderful story of mutual belonging.

In Psalm 72, St Francis de Sales read these words that struck him: “God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.” He liked the expression “God of my heart” very much. According to the doctor of love, “if man thinks with a little attention of the divinity, he immediately feels some sweet emotion in his heart, which proves that God is the God of the human heart.” To St Joan de Chantal, with whom he founded the order of the Visitation, he recommended saying often: “You are the God of my heart and the inheritance I desire eternally.”

If we have unruly affections or if our affections in this world are too strong, even if they are good and legitimate, we need to cut them off in order to be able to say to Our Lord like David: “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my

lot.” For it is for this intention that Our Lord comes to us, that we may all be in him and for him.

The heart of Jesus is the place of true rest. It is the dwelling place “most spacious and dearest to my heart”, confided St Francis de Sales, who made this intention: “I will establish my dwelling place in the furnace of love, in the divine heart pierced for me. At this burning hearth, I shall feel the flame of love, hitherto so languid, revive in the midst of my bowels. Ah! Lord, your heart is the true Jerusalem; allow me to choose it forever as the place of my rest.”

No wonder, then, that the treasures of the Heart of Jesus were revealed to a spiritual daughter of St Francis de Sales, Margaret Mary Alacoque, the religious of the Visitation of Paray-le-Monial. Jesus said to her: “Behold this Heart that so loved men, to the point of consuming itself entirely for them.”

Two centuries later, St Francis de Sales, his disciple and imitator, Don Bosco, said that “education is a thing of the heart”: all work starts here, and if the heart is not there, the work is difficult and the outcome is uncertain. He also said: “May young people not only be loved, but may they themselves know that they are loved.” Loved by God and by their educators. It is from this assumption that Don Bosco passed on to the Salesian Family, that Salesian educational activity begins.