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ST. FRANCIS DE SALES AND FEMINISM

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This paper was originally prepared for presentation at the First Salesian Conference, held at Stella Niagara, NY, in August 1983. Father Sandy's study of Francis de Sales' understanding of the value of women and the influence he had on a seventeenth century feminist contains implications for those looking at feminism today.

Introduction

The casual observer would hardly think that St. Francis de Sales could have anything positive and constructive to contribute to the woman's movement of today since he lived in an era when women were considered to be inferior to men and were kept in a submissive position. However, examination of Francis' writings on Scripture and a study of his relationships, especially that with Marie le Jars de Gournay, the leading feminist of France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, indicate otherwise.

Condition of Women in France during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

In order to appreciate Francis' position and the relevance it may have for the role of women in the Church and society today, it would be helpful to review briefly the condition of women in his time.

Philosophical and Theological Background

For many centuries, the attitude toward women had been based on myth and fallacies. Although much of the prejudice against women in the western world was influenced primarily by St. Augustine, his views were made known mainly by St. Thomas Aquinas who gave systematic expression to many of the philosophical, theological, biblical, and psychological views about women. Aquinas had enormous influence in the Middle Ages and hence in the development of the social and religious structure in sixteenth and seventeenth century France.

His basic tenets included: Woman is congenitally incapable of autonomy and independence. She is essentially a deficient being.¹ As a result, she does not have the strength to resist concupiscence.² She also cannot assume political responsibility,³ the right to teach,⁴ the sacrament of Orders, or even any spiritual jurisdiction.⁵ Because of her congenital weakness, man must exercise over her a domination like that of a master over his serf.⁶ She is destined to be man's helper only in procreation.⁷ Her weakness explains why she was able to be seduced by the demon in Paradise.⁸ Therefore, only man is a complete human being and alone can be called the image of God. Woman is the image of God only through the mediation of man.⁹ In procreation, only the man as provider of seed is active. The woman is merely a passive receptacle. Thus, there is only one sex—male; and a female is the result of a "mistake" of nature such as the blowing of wind during conception—a misbegotten male.¹⁰ The soul animates the body of a male child forty days after conception; that of a female at eighty days. Therefore she is inferior, not only physically but morally.¹¹

Psychological and Social Reality

In sixteenth and seventeenth century France, the upbringing and education of girls were greatly influenced by the misogynist views that came down from Augustine and Aquinas. Young girls were trained in civility and good manners. Before the age of five, they could already use the formulae of politeness inherited from Erasmus.¹² The emphasis was on giving them sufficient knowledge to run a household, a formation usually received in convents or in boarding schools.¹³ Intellectual development came after acquisition of practical virtues, common sense, and will power. They learned Latin, geography, and literature, but, in general, intellectual training was very limited. Too much education for a woman was looked upon with great suspicion. The Jesuit Garasse warns that one should make the Sign of the Cross as an antidote on seeing a woman reading and interpreting Sacred Scripture.¹⁴ A very well-known physician and liberal thinker of the times speaks of woman as "an animal with half an intellect." He admonishes women to "do their spinning or, at least, as St. Paul says 'keep silent.'"¹⁵

The inferior and dependent condition of women was reflected in both civil and canon law, especially regarding marriage. Women enjoyed some freedom of choice but generally followed their parents' selection of a husband. The husband possessed the right to correct his wife. The wife's primary legal duty was cohabitation, and her primary moral duty was fidelity. She was required to be indulgent and resigned in the face of her husband's infidelity. The husband could avenge his rights by killing an adulteress wife and accomplice if he caught them in the act.

During the Middle Ages in France, unmarried women and widows had held

the same rights as men; as proprietaries of fiefs, they had "administered justice, signed treatises, decreed laws." When the bourgeoisie emerged, it followed the same laws. The girl or widow had the rights of a man, but in marriage woman was a ward.¹⁶

The laws of the day denied women access to "masculine occupations." Women could not give depositions in court, and no value was given to their testimony.¹⁷ One exception to the general subservience of women may be noted: saintly women enjoyed great freedom. "Queens by divine right and saints by their dazzling virtues were assured a social support that enabled them to act on an equality with men."¹⁸

St. Francis de Sales' Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women

Treatment of Genesis

In some ways, St. Francis de Sales, as a man of his time, reflects the prejudices prevalent in his day, especially those regarding Eve. Here he is influenced by St. Paul who states that it was Eve, of the weaker sex, not Adam who was deceived. The serpent, says Francis, did not want to tempt Adam when he was alone, but "he waited to have a powerful instrument of temptation—a woman."¹⁹ "The serpent spoke to Eve as the weaker element."²⁰ Eve and all women are constitutionally weak not only physically but also spiritually. The great weakness of women is to think themselves better than they are:

Certainly, men are greatly subject to this pride and presumption, but when this vice enters the head of women, it causes great harm and works havoc. The reason is that they are . . . subject to the desire for appearances . . . Did not Eve, the first woman, only hearing it said that she was created in the image of God, presume on her own to make herself like him, for this purpose listening and doing everything possible that the enemy suggested to her?²¹

As a result of the Fall, women must be submissive. "Your sex is subject from the time of creation to the condition of obedience and will never survive before God except in submitting yourself to guidance and direction."^{22 23}

In spite of Francis' call for women's submission, he insists in the Preface he wrote for the first rules of the Visitation that woman as well as man is created in God's image. Her fundamental dignity and destiny rest on this truth. He paraphrases the words of what in his day was believed to be a sermon of St. Basil. The text is a capital one and deserves to be quoted at length:

"God created man in his image and likeness. He created him in the image of God; he created them male and female." Woman, then, as well as man, has the grace of being made to the image of God, an honor that is the same in both the sexes. Their virtues are equal. To each, the same reward is promised; and if they sin, the same damnation. . . . Now since the divine image is honored in both sexes, may virtue which makes its strength appear by good works be likewise honored in both sexes.²⁴

In quoting what he believed to be the thought of one of the Fathers of the Church, Francis manifests his concern for demonstrating the orthodoxy and continuity of his position. Interestingly enough, he could have chosen the opinion of St. Augustine, who believed that woman was God's image only through the mediation of man; but Francis did not. This fact is very significant. After all, he was familiar with Augustine's writings and later gave his Rule to the Visitation.

Francis does accept pseudo-Basil's stance that "woman must recognize in the man the advantage of superiority and pre-eminence," for man is more like God than woman.²⁵ Both pseudo-Basil and Francis are drawing from St. Paul's mandate for women to cover their heads at worship for "Man is the image of God and reflects his glory, whereas woman reflects the glory of man." (I Corinthians 11: 7) Nonetheless, Francis hastens to add that pseudo-Basil makes it clear that "in all other things woman [is] equal to man and especially in the claim of grace and glory" because they are both made in the image and likeness of God.

Although Francis points out that the submission of the wife to the husband is based on the fact that Scripture says that she was drawn from his side, he stresses that woman is meant by this to be very close to man's heart: "Woman was taken from that side of the first man which was nearest his heart to the end that she might be loved by him deeply and tenderly."^{26 27}

Francis notes that the effects of love among married partners are indissoluble union of hearts, inviolable fidelity of each to the other, and the birth and rearing of children. Thus, he does not consider procreation as the unique goal of marriage, a view not commonly held in his day.²⁸

Adam in the first three chapters of Genesis is a collective term. It denotes humanity's origin from the earth. It is a term of humility and reminds human beings of their earthly beginnings. "It denotes a quality, that of being born from dust; it has no connotation of sex. The sex name of man is Ish by which he relates to woman, Ishah."²⁹ Francis understood this usage and employed it himself in reflecting on the words of the prophet Hosea who is describing the Exodus experience: "I will draw them . . . with human cords, with bands of love and friendship." . . . In short, these are the cords of Adam and of humanity, that is, bands that are proportionate and fitted to the human heart to which liberty is natural.³⁰

Francis uses the language of Genesis, "Let us make him a helper like unto him," when he discusses marriage. He says: "Marriage is intended to be one of the best examples of friendship because according to God's plan it 'always unites like beings.'³¹ He also describes his relationship with St. Jane de Chantal in these terms: "Our Lord has given me 'a helpmate' who is not only like me, but who is the same as me, so that she and I are only one soul, spirit, or mind."³²

Imagery in the Canticle of Canticles

However, it must be frankly admitted that Francis does stereotype woman in the chapter on marriage in the Introduction to a Devout Life, and that he supports his position from Scripture. He follows St. Paul in ascribing to woman, as her portion, the care of the household and adds: "Solomon in his proverb makes the happiness of the whole family depend on the care and duty of the valiant woman he describes."³³

But in his treatment of the Canticle of Canticles, Francis transcends his times by a strongly positive view of woman. I have previously called Francis' approach the spirituality of the kiss³⁴ because this physical embrace between man and woman as envisioned in the Canticle of Canticles expresses most vividly for him both the ideal relationship between God and the individual and the ideal relationship among individuals. The kiss represents for him the spiritual union which is brought about by a reciprocal communication of souls. He speaks of the Incarnation itself as a kiss—God's kiss to humanity. Hence all the graces and consolations that flow from the Incarnation are also expressed as kisses from God.

About one-third of the numerous citations from the Old Testament in Francis' works are from the Canticle of Canticles. He takes almost 200 citations from this book, which is one of the shortest books in the Bible. The role of woman is prominent in this love song, which affirms in poetic and concrete language the mutuality of the sexes. Neither dominates the other. Nor is the wife cast in a stereotypical role; there is no mention of her having children or of raising a family. Woman is seen as an equal partner with man. She is seen as someone valuable in herself.

Feminine Themes in Isaiah

God as Nursing Mother

"Can a mother forget her infant, or be without tenderness for the child of her womb?" (Isaiah 49: 15) Francis uses this citation in the Conference on Hope to encourage a group of Visitandines to place their trust in God as they leave to found a new monastery.³⁵ This imagery recalls Francis' description of

Christ as nursing mother likened to the spouse of the Cantic of Canticles. Francis describes the beautiful breasts of the beloved in the Treatise in this way: "His breast and bosom are like those of a tender mother whose fair twin breasts are like two rooms rich in good, sweet milk."³⁶

God as Loving Mother

The love of Yahweh described in Isaiah 49:15 is also the kind of maternal love that Christ has for all people.³⁷ For Francis, "Maternal love is the most urgent, the most active, and the most ardent of all forms of love since it is an indefatigable and insatiable love."³⁸ It is interesting to note that Francis describes his love for the Visitandines in terms of this maternal love of Isaiah 49:15: "Would it be possible that I would ever forget the most cherished infants of my womb?"³⁹

God as Pregnant Mother Bringing Forth Children

The image of mother (Isaiah 66:9) is definitely part of Francis' view of the Trinity. The Father begets the Son the way a mother gives birth to a child:

He takes cognizance of himself, and understanding himself, engenders his Son completely equal to himself. "From the womb before the day star, I have begotten you." (Psalm 110: 4), expressed in the Hebrew as: "The dew of your adolescence has come forth from my womb before the dawn." "Would I who call others to give birth not give birth myself? Would I who make others fertile, be sterile myself?" (Isaiah 66: 9)⁴⁰

He compares heavenly happiness to the nursing, maternal, consoling love described in Hosea and Isaiah:

Then shall those divine promises be fulfilled in a surpassing manner: "I will lead her into the wilderness and I will speak to her heart. I will give her help." (Hosea 2: 16, 17) "Rejoice with Jerusalem, be glad with her that you may draw out milk and be filled at the breasts of her consolation, that you may suck and find delight at all the abundance of her glory. You shall be carried at the breast and upon their knees they shall caress you." (Isaiah 66: 10-12)⁴¹

St. Francis de Sales and Marie de Gournay

Francis' use of Scripture tells much about his attitude toward women; his relationship with Marie de Gournay also speaks eloquently on this subject.

Literary Influences

Marie le Jars de Gournay (1566-1645) was a contemporary of Francis and the outspoken feminist of her time, beginning her long battle for the liberation of woman in a little book Promenoir de M. de Montaigne, written as early as 1589 when she was only twenty-four years old, though not published for five years. While young, she became known as the adopted daughter of Michel Montaigne because of the great affection he had for her. She esteemed him highly, became steeped in the Essays, and while still in her twenties, published a preface to the 1595 edition, a remarkable accomplishment for a woman of that era.

One of Marie de Gournay's biographers indicates that she was a good friend of Francis. There seem to be no further particulars available concerning the origin of the relationship. There is little doubt, however, that de Gournay was familiar with the Introduction to a Devout Life, the Treatise on the Love of God, and other writings and ideas of Francis. In her essay on "False Devotions," she frequently cites St. Francis de Sales whom she knew and admired. Many passages in this essay show similarity to ideas expressed in his Introduction à la Vie Dévote.⁴²

With the Renaissance, feminism in the modern sense had taken on considerable importance. This fact was primarily caused by the rapid expansion of knowledge in all fields, the increasing role that women played in the society of that day, and the contributions they made in literature and politics.

Ever since the two authors of the Romance of the Rose had presented their opposing views on women, "The Quarrel of the Women" had sparked debate and numerous writings on the subject of women. A book entitled Paradoxical Discourse (ascribed to Acidalius Valens) appeared in 1595, attempting to prove that women were not human beings. In this discussion Marie de Gournay became an ardent, indefatigable, and articulate promoter of the equality of women and men. She brought to the whole debate "a very modern theory that early environment and habits, the 'climate' in which one lives, account for the difference in human beings and that the subordinate position of women is due neither to the will of God nor to nature but to the ever changing caprices of man."⁴³

Feminist Thrust

The work of most interest in this context is Equality of Men and Women (1622). At the beginning of this work, de Gournay states that her arguments in defense of the equality of women with men will not be based on reason, but on the authority of God, the Fathers of the Church, and the great philosophers. A closer examination of this writing indicates that she reasons strongly and persuasively from these sources, and does not merely rely on the argument from authority. Her arguments from Scripture, the Fathers, and Christian tradition show considerable influence

of Francis.

Théophile Schueller shows in The Woman and the Saint how closely Marie de Gournay's argument follows that of Francis in his Preface to first rules of the Visitation when he cites the pseudo-Basil.⁴⁴ Although the arguments of the two contemporaries are based on pseudo-Basil, Francis presents this text to emphasize that woman's dignity rests on the truth that she, like man, is made in the image and likeness of God, whereas de Gournay stresses the idea that both sexes were created directly by God and hence have the same nature and are equally responsible for their actions.

The difference in emphasis stems, in my opinion, from the different objectives of the two authors. Francis was being roundly criticized for not enclosing the Visitandines in a strict cloister, thereby giving them in both civil and canon law what was believed to be necessary protection. The critics insisted that work among the poor and the sick could not be entrusted to women because they were by nature and constitution weak and infirm. Furthermore, the kind of congregation that Francis established was not in keeping with Church law and tradition. He eloquently and effectively answered all these objections in his Preface. The text does seem to accept, however, a slight superiority of men over women.

De Gournay, on the other hand, attempts to demonstrate that women are equal to men in all respects. Any inequality results from the limited upbringing and education of women, not their nature. She argues further and more directly than Francis for the recognition of women, particularly within the Church.

Leaning heavily on information she must have gotten from Francis, de Gournay points out that from apostolic times women were honored and respected in the Church because they were helpers of the Apostles, and that St. Paul and St. John addressed epistles to them. Moreover, she says that she had recently learned from the saintly Bishop of Geneva that St. Catherine of Sienna preached. Presumably, she also learned from Francis the tradition that St. Mary Magdalene preached for thirty years in the area around Marseille.⁴⁵

In this treatment of the equality of men and women, de Gournay's references to Mary Magdalene show particular affinity to Francis' thought on this saint to whom he refers numerous times in his talks and writings. De Gournay states that St. Jerome refers to the women at the tomb as apostles to the Apostles:

Jesus Christ revealed his very happy and glorious resurrection to women first so as to make them . . . apostles to the Apostles (Apostresses aux propres Apostres), and, as we know, with an expressed mission: "Go," he says to her, "and tell the Apostles and Peter what you have seen."⁴⁶

This quotation echoes the passage of Francis in which he designates the Visitandines who are founding a new monastery as apostles:

Ah! what grace does God bestow upon you! He makes you apostles (Apostresses), not in dignity but in office and merit. You will not preach, it is true, for your sex does not permit it, although indeed St. Magdalene and her sister Martha did so, but you will not cease to exercise the apostolic office by communicating your manner of life. . . .⁴⁷

In the very next sentence after de Gournay mentions that she learned about St. Catherine's preaching from St. Francis de Sales, she tackles the question of women priests, asserting that "all nations granted the priesthood both to women as well as men." She argues that the right to administer baptism in cases of necessity implies the right to administer all sacraments. Since the argument is an intriguing one, it would be worthwhile to quote it in full:

Christians are at least forced to agree that women are capable of administering the sacrament of baptism. How can one justly deny them the right to administer the others, if they can administer baptism? To say that the necessity of dying infants forced the ancient Fathers to establish this practice against their better judgment is no answer; and certainly they would never have believed that necessity could excuse them from violating their trust to the extent of granting permission to violate and desecrate the administration of a sacrament. Consequently, one sees that the Fathers, in granting this faculty to women of administering this sacrament, considered them worthy of it, and that they forbade them to administer the other sacraments only to continue to preserve the authority of men intact either because they themselves were of the masculine sex or so that, rightly or wrongly, peace might be maintained between the two sexes by the weakness and debasement of the other. Certainly, St. Jerome wrote wisely in his Epistles that in the service of God, spirit and doctrine must be considered and not the sex.⁴⁸

Since de Gournay says that she discussed Montaigne's definition of repentance with Francis, one can speculate whether she raised with the saint the question of ordination of women to the priesthood as well as the whole issue of the equality of women with men. Since it was an explosive topic in that era blatant with prejudice against women, it is likely that Francis took up this question with her with the understanding that she would be discreet about it.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Francis de Sales lived during a period marked by discrimination against women. In some respects, he accepted the norms of the day, but much of his interpretation and use of Scripture indicate that he held women in higher esteem than did most of his contemporaries.

Through Marie de Gournay, further evidence of Francis' position on women emerges. A leading feminist of her time, she was attracted to the teaching of Francis de Sales which helped her to make a strong case for the liberation of women. The thinking of the two runs parallel, rooted as it is in the Catholic tradition of the Scriptures, the Fathers, and common sense. They took their stand on the ground where the battle was waged in that age and is still being waged today.

NOTES

- 1 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 92, Art. 1.
- 2 *Ibid.*, II, II, Q. 156, Art. 2.
- 3 *Ibid.*, I, Q. 96, Art. 4; II, II, Q. 47, Art. 12.
- 4 *Ibid.*, II, II, Q. 177, Art. 2.
- 5 *Ibid.*, Supplement, Q. 19, Art. 3.
- 6 *Ibid.*, I, Q. 92, Art. 1; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 221.
- 7 *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 98, Art. 2.
- 8 *Ibid.*, II, II, Q. 165, Art. 2.
- 9 *Ibid.*, I, Q. 93, Art. 4.
- 10 *Ibid.*, I, Q. 92, Art. 1; Q. 99, Art. 2.
- 11 Pierre Charron, *De La Sagesse* (Geneva: Astat, 1963), Livre I, Ch. 3, p. 14.
- 12 Cf. François de Sales, *Les Femmes Mariées*, introduction par Olivier de la Brosse et Henri Cafforel. Choix et présentation des textes par Marcel Georges-Thomas (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1967), p. 4.
- 13 Cf. Wright's article, p. 18 this issue and section to follow.
- 14 François Garasse, *La doctrine curieuse des beaux esprits de ce temps, ou prétendus tels* (Paris: S. Chappelet, 1623), p. 497.
- 15 Guy Patin, *Lettres de Gui Patin, 1630-1672*, ed. Triaire, nouvelle édition, (Paris: H. Champion, 1907), in a letter to Spon, 1661.
- 16 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1952; Bantam Edition, 1961) p. 93.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 19 François de Sales, *Oeuvres*, Édition Annecy, 1892-1932) VIII, p. 82. (This work will be identified hereafter as OEA.)
- 20 *Ibid.*, X, p. 172.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 22 *Ibid.*, XII, p. 150.
- 23 Modern exegesis does not accept the interpretation of woman as weak according to the Genesis account. The Priestly tradition of Genesis 1 notes maleness and femaleness as integral to humanity's imaging of God.
- 24 OEA, XXV, pp. 291-3.

²⁵Ibid., p. 293.

²⁶Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, translated by John K. Ryan (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), Part 3, Ch. XXXVII, p. 164.

²⁷The Yahwist version of creation in Chapter 2 of Genesis has sometimes been construed as misogynist. However, the rib does not indicate submission, subordination, or inferiority. "Superiority, strength, aggressiveness, domination, and power do not characterize man in Genesis 2. By contrast, he is formed from dirt, his life hangs from a breath which he does not control, and he himself remains silent and passive while the Deity plans and interprets his existence." (Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 1973, pp. 34-8.) "The rib means solidarity and equality. . . . From this one androgynous creation came two (male and female). The two return to their original unity as Ish and Ishah and become one flesh." (Ibid., p. 39.)

²⁸Introduction, Part 3, Ch. XXXVIII, pp. 163-4.

²⁹George Tavard, Woman in Christian Tradition (Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), p. 6.

³⁰Francis de Sales, Treatise on the Love of God, translated by John K. Ryan (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 1974), Vol. I, Book 2, Ch. 12, p. 132.

³¹OEA, VIII, p. 87.

³²Ibid., XXI, p. 109.

³³Introduction, Part III, Ch. XXXVIII, p. 167.

³⁴Alexander Pocetto, OSFS, "The Distinctive Features of a Religious Family and Christianity," Salesian Studies (Autumn, 1966), 3, pp. 68-77.

³⁵OEA, VI, p. 88.

³⁶Treatise, I, Book 5, Ch. 2, p. 238.

³⁷OEA, X, p. 244.

³⁸Treatise, I, Book 3, Ch. 8, p. 183.

³⁹OEA, XV, p. 205.

⁴⁰Ibid., VII, p. 258.

⁴¹Treatise, I, Book 3, Ch. 11, p. 191.

⁴²Marjorie B. Halsey, A Daughter of the Renaissance, Marie le Jars de Gournay, Her Life and Works (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1963), p. 174.

⁴³Ibid., p. 202.

⁴⁴Théophile Schueller, OSFS, Le Femme et le Saint: la Femme et ses problèmes d'après S. François de Sales (Paris: Les Éditions Ouvrières, 1970), pp. 247-8.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 249.

⁴⁶Marie le Jars de Gournay, Les Advis ou les Presens de la demoiselle de Gournay (Paris: T. Du Bray, 1641), p. 308.

⁴⁷OEA, VI, pp. 90-1.

⁴⁸De Gournay, p. 306.

⁴⁹Cf. Schueller, p. 249.