



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

ALEXANDER T. POCETTO, O.S.F.S., PH.D.

Senior Salesian Scholar

The Image of Jacob's Ladder in the Writings of St. Francis de Sales

Introduction

The metaphor of a spiritual ladder or stairway is deeply embedded in our human consciousness. For many cultures, religions and thinkers, this image conveys both the deep longing and striving for self-transcendence and a higher or more perfect form of human existence and blessedness. It connotes an innate desire to be part of or in communion with a higher power or person that is believed to be capable of bringing about this transformation by degrees or in a gradual manner. Thus the ancient Egyptians built one of their pyramids as an enormous stairway designed “to facilitate the ascension of the soul of the king toward his father Rê, the sun-god.” A similar idea is found in the ziggurats in the Assyrian-Babylonian culture. These were constructed with the purpose of assisting those mounting toward heaven by steps to encounter the divine being. Taoism in China described the various stages or steps required to come in contact with “the mysterious heaven.” Various Indian philosophies spoke of the different rungs on “the ladder of salvation” to achieve perfect happiness. We find the image of the ladder in Plato which, after various steps, leads to the contemplation of the Idea. Among Muslims, there is a legend that Mohammed ascended to heaven by means of a ladder, and the Islamic writer, Avicenna, wrote at length on the “mystical ascension.”¹

The use of the imagery of the ladder is certainly not confined to ancient and pre-modern civilizations or to religious and philosophical contexts. The success of the Alcoholics Anonymous program is based on the well-known twelve steps to attain and maintain sobriety. Writers and critics of the Cannes Film Festival frequently use the expression “going up the stairway” which is a well-worn metaphor for those being singled out for excellence in filmmaking.² The phrase “career ladder” refers to ways of advancing in one’s profession. The

symbol of Jacob's ladder as having implications for our common humanity is the title of a recently published book on the human genome and the future of what it means to be human.³ It is not surprising, then, to see why the very wide appeal of the image of the ladder, especially that of Jacob's ladder, had such a fascination for numerous Christian writers and thinkers over the centuries. It gave rise to an extensive and flourishing spiritual literature called "the literary genre of the ladder [which] describes in a metaphorical way ... the ascension of the soul toward God and progress in the spiritual life."⁴

The object of this investigation is to examine how St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), the Doctor of Love, utilizes the image of Jacob's ladder to deepen and enrich our understanding of his spirituality and of our humanity.

Images and Reason

Although Francis had a high regard for the faculties of reason and the intellect, he knew their limitations and how they can be reinforced by powerful images. Reasoning takes effort and time. Something that modern-day marketers know very well. This is why they appeal to images and symbols.⁵ Although images and symbols are used by marketers to appeal to our acquisitive appetites, they also have the power of reaching our hearts when logic leaves them cold and unmoved. Francis is a very clever marketer not in the sense that he wants us to buy what he is offering but rather to "buy into" his conception of the devout life. By "buying into it," persons are convinced of its value and are prepared to be actively involved.

Polysemous Nature of Jacob's Ladder

Symbols by their very nature lend themselves to multiple levels of interpretation. This is especially true of Jacob's ladder, which has a marvelous plasticity. It can signify the cross, the Incarnation, the humanity of Christ, the Redemption, the Paschal mystery, various virtues and ascetical practices. The classic typology of Jacob's ladder based on the account of Jacob's vision in the Book of Genesis 28:12, was set forth centuries ago by St. Cesarius of Arles (+543): "Isaac, who sends forth his son, represents God the Father. Jacob, who is sent, designates the Christ our Teacher. The stone which he places under his head and which he anoints with oil, signifies the Savior. The ladder which reaches to the heavens is the figure of the Cross. The Lord supported on the ladder is Christ on the Cross. The angels, who ascend and descend, are the apostles, the apostolic men and all of the doctors of the churches. They ascend when they preach perfection to the perfect. They descend when they explain to children and the illiterate that which they can understand."⁶

There were a number of spiritual ladders dealing with ways to grow in virtue. Other ladders described the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit which naturally had seven steps. The number of steps or degrees of the many different ladders varied considerably. St. John Climachus, a sixth century Sinai monk, composed a ladder of thirty steps for living the monastic life. This work, inspired by Jacob's ladder, stressed ascetical practices and the struggle between body and soul.⁷ It had such a great impact over the centuries that the image of the spiritual ladder became associated with the monastic life.⁸ One of Francis de Sales' favorite spiritual authors was St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who wrote a work on the degrees of humility and pride, *De gradibus*

humilitatis et superbiae, in which he sets forth twelve gradations of pride.⁹ St. Bonaventure (1221-1274), whose writings were very familiar to St. Francis de Sales, promoted a ladder spirituality that led to contemplation through a reflection and use of the created universe, which he viewed as a “*speculum Dei*” (a reflection of God).¹⁰ This work served as the basis for Cardinal Bellarmine’s (1542-1621) *The Mind’s Ascent To God*.¹¹ In his *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales describes this work as “admirable.”¹²

Having read extensively in the Fathers and Doctors of the Church and many other spiritual writers, Francis de Sales was steeped in the tradition of the literary genre of the spiritual ladder. So it is not surprising to find frequent references to this image and its attendant circumstances in his writings. Although he certainly was greatly shaped by the Renaissance, patristic and medieval thinkers had a considerable influence on the manner in which he presented Christian truths, beliefs and practices. This accounts for the richness of biblical imagery that abounds in the saint’s writings. He reveled in the medieval hermeneutics of the four senses or levels of biblical interpretation – the literal, allegorical, anagogical and tropological – but not uncritically. In a letter advising a young and inexperienced prelate on preaching, he warns him against the excesses in the use of Sacred Scripture that were all too prevalent in his day. He sets down several rules for utilizing the allegorical method of interpretation, thereby demonstrating a great prudence and restraint in its application, especially in the pulpit. In summary form, here is how he states the rules for using the allegorical meanings : a) do not utilize an allegorical meaning that is too forced, but let it be solidly based on the literal meaning, b) when it is not very apparent that one thing is the figure of another, we must not treat it as such but simply make a comparison between them, c) the allegory must not be inappropriate but *bienséant*, d) the allegory must not be too drawn out because it loses its effectiveness and can manifest affectation, e) the application must be done clearly and with great prudence to skillfully relate the parts to each other. The same rules apply also to the anagogic and tropological meanings.¹³ These rules can help us better appreciate the balanced and effective ways in which the Doctor of Love utilized the image of Jacob’s ladder in his writings.

Suggestive Power of Jacob’s Ladder

The saint’s writings reveal a pervasive presence of the image of Jacob’s ladder either explicitly or implicitly. The earliest written reference, an oblique one, occurs in one of his sermon plans written for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross where he mentions Jacob on his way to Bethel leaving all of his idols at the foot of the terebinth near the town of Sichem.¹⁴ He urges his listeners like Jacob to leave all of their sins by repentance at the foot of the Cross.

The mention of Jacob traveling to Bethel associates in his mind the widely accepted image of Jacob’s ladder in his day as a symbol of the Cross. This association is evident in his *Defense de l’estendart de la Croix*, a response to the attack by the Calvinist minister Antoine de la Faye.¹⁵ It becomes more explicit and detailed in his later writings. The saint first refers to Jacob’s ladder as an implied image of the Cross by arguing that, although God is everywhere, certain places noted in Sacred Scripture where God has appeared are venerated and honored in a special way. He gives as examples, among others, Mt. Sinai, Solomon’s temple, the ark of the covenant and specifically notes, “How highly Jacob, having seen God and the angels at Bethel, esteemed this place.”¹⁶ There are two other references in this work to Jacob’s ladder as the image of the Cross.

To de la Faye's accusation that Catholics by adoring the Cross are idolators, the saint responds: "Jesus Christ protests that if one day 'he is lifted up, he will draw all things to himself,' [Jn 12:31] and the prince of this world will be chased away. And you desire that the ladder of his exaltation be diminished and its honor and service be brought down. All of those who have gone before us made use of the Cross against the devil, and you say that this Cross is the throne of his idolatry."¹⁷ Another reference to Jacob's ladder as an image of the Cross emphasizes it as "the royal ladder to God's kingdom."¹⁸ So the expressions "the ladder of his exaltation" and the "royal ladder to God's kingdom" were readily understood by his readers to be referring to the Cross and indicate how pervasive in his day the association of Jacob's ladder was with the Cross. In his *Meditations on the Church*, more commonly but unfortunately known as the *Controversies*,¹⁹ the experience of Jacob at Bethel is evoked to demonstrate that the Catholic Church is the true church because it has always had solid and well attested miracles, which gives evidence in the words of Jacob, "God is truly in this place."²⁰

Portrait of the Devout Life

St. Francis de Sales was very fond of visual imagery as can be seen by the innumerable visual images that he uses in his writings, especially in the *Introduction to a Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*. In the opening pages of the former work, he uses examples of painters three times. In the Preface, he mentions the painter Pausias who was unable to paint the great variety and beauty of the bouquets that Glycera made. Appelles, he tells us, in painting the portrait of "the beautiful Campaspe, the love of Alexander the Great, fell in love with her because he not only traced her features on the tablet (canvas), but also on his heart."²¹ He actually compares himself to an artist like Appelles in the sense that as he looks long and hard at devotion (seen here as a beautiful woman) and traces her features for others to admire, he expresses the desire that her beauty will also be traced in his heart so that God will give her to him in marriage as Alexander gave Campaspe to Appelles. Once this portrait is painted in his heart, he can then more readily paint its beauty for others to admire. He sees himself as an artist or an image maker who desires to paint beautiful word pictures.

Of course, not all painters are able to depict accurately and without distortions the true nature of devotion. Like Arelias, who painted all faces after the manner and appearance of the women he loved, "so too everyone paints devotion according to his own passions and fantasies."²² The implication here is that he desires to paint the true portrait of devotion as it should be and as he himself is committed to teaching and living it and not letting his imagination run wild. He does this by grounding it firmly in the Scriptures and in sound tradition.

As a deft and gifted artist, Francis presents Jacob's ladder as the perfect portrait of the devout life:

[Contemplate] Jacob's ladder, for it is a true picture of the devout life. The two sides between which we climb upward and to which the rungs are fastened represent prayer, which calls down God's love, and the sacraments which confer it. The rungs are the various degrees of charity by which we advance from virtue to virtue, either descending by deeds of help and support for our neighbor or by contemplation ascending to a loving union with God. I ask you to regard attentively those who are on this ladder. They are either men with angelic hearts or angels in human bodies. They are not young, although they seem to be so because they are full of vigor and spiritual agility. They have wings to soar aloft to God in holy prayer and they also have feet to

walk among men in a holy and lovable way of life. Their faces are beautiful and joyous because they accept all things [gently] and mildly. Their legs, arms and heads are uncovered because in their thoughts, affections, and deeds they have no purpose or motive but that of pleasing God. The rest of their body is clothed but only by a decent light robe because they use the world and worldly things but do so in a most pure and proper way, taking of them only what is necessary for their condition. Such are devout persons.²³

This portrait contains in germ the basic features of his spirituality.

The fact that the saint compares his conception of the spiritual life to Jacob's ladder and states unequivocally that it is the perfect picture of true devotion speaks volumes of how this image looms large in his mind. In many instances, he never makes an abrupt break with the past but ingeniously and engagingly takes traditional views like beautiful flowers left by his predecessors and creates new, and appealing bouquets after the fashion of Glycera, the incomparable florist. Despite the many levels of meanings that Jacob's ladder had in its long Christian tradition, the one that was uppermost in the minds of the people of his day was that of a monastic and strictly contemplative life. As noted above, one monastery had the name of "Scala Dei" (the Ladder of God). So Jacob's ladder represented holiness to the saint's contemporaries as being solely accessible to those who left the world, to those who lived as hermits and/or shut themselves up in cloistered monasteries and practiced an extreme asceticism pitting body against soul. This is a view which he completely rejects as being not only erroneous but heretical. It symbolized a vertical spirituality – God and me, me and God. Now Francis was certainly not opposed to monastic and religious life. In fact, he praises and defends it as one of the marks of the true Church.²⁴

It is instructive to note that he invites us to "contemplate" this portrait he draws of Jacob's ladder. This suggests a prayerful and all-absorbing approach that does not make us view it as a detached observer but rather as one who is drawn into the tableau to be transformed by it as Jacob was by his vision since it is an encounter with the living and loving God. With great verbal artistry, he draws our attention to the structure of the ladder which by its two sides have a twofold function – one to draw us to God by prayer, the other to draw down God's love by means of the sacraments. This aspect of the portrait announces the second part of his spiritual classic where he gives detailed advice on prayer and the sacraments of the Eucharist and matrimony. At the outset, he establishes a dual upward and downward movement in our relationship with God stressing our involvement and activity as well as our receptivity. Following the many spiritual ladders that preceded, he insists that our progression toward God is a gradual one, rung by rung, or step by step, from virtue to virtue. So each movement up or down on the ladder is a step of charity, a step of love, i.e., love of God even those that descend to assist our neighbor.²⁵ It is an important aspect of his conception of growth in the spiritual life that we will dwell on below in greater detail. This also foreshadows his treatment of the virtues in Part three of this spiritual classic.

The perspective of Jacob's ladder that the saint paints stresses not only a vertical up and down movement but also a horizontal one, a reaching out to the neighbor by the power of love received through contemplative prayer and the sacraments. So the descending movement of supporting and helping our neighbor is paradoxically not only vertical, but also horizontal. With a skillful, light brush stroke, Francis paints here and embeds the Cross in his portrait. It readily evokes for

the contemplator the crucifying and sacrificial aspects that the demands of fraternal love can make. This also points to the criterion that the saint later sets forth of the "ecstasy of work and life"²⁶ to authenticate our prayer experiences, especially contemplative or mystical prayer. This vision of Jacob's ladder is firmly planted and grounded in our earthly human existence. We are not to remain up in the clouds in flights of contemplative prayer but must descend so as to walk lovingly among and with our fellow human beings in our journey towards God.

Our saint stresses the agility and strength of these not so young devout people that have "hearts of angels" and "bodies of humans." What are we to make of this distinction which on its face appears to put the devout life out of the reach of ordinary human beings? We must remember that he is painting here the portrait of the devout life in broad strokes and that we have to look elsewhere for a deeper understanding of what he means. In the *Treatise*, which is intended for those who are more advanced in the devout life, he describes human beings as in a middle state between animals and angels. In view of this, they can experience two kinds of ecstasies, one that draws them out of and below themselves on an animal level, the other draws them out of themselves when they are affected by "divine and intellectual pleasures." In the latter case, "they are as much angels by operation of their soul as they are men in natural substance, and they should be called human angels or angelic men."²⁷ Devout persons become angelic-human persons by loving objects worthy of their higher faculties and not their lower inclinations.

Like a TV camera, the saint wants us to zoom in on the faces of these devout persons to admire their beauty and joyfulness. Presenting the devout life as something very beautiful was a clear objective of the saint because of the prevailing view that most people had of holiness. Before drawing the portrait of the devout life, the Doctor of Love notes in the very same chapter: "The world vilifies holy devotion as much as it can. It pictures devout persons as having discontented gloomy, sullen faces and claims that devotion brings on depression and unbearable moods."²⁸ This is the view propounded in one of the most influential books of the time, *La Sagesse* (Wisdom) by Pierre Charron (1541-1603). It's not like the wisdom or holiness the theologians speak about, Charron asserts, a wisdom which he describes as "morose, austere, sad and apprehensive," a wisdom made for the cloistered life. He wanted to reform men capable of living in the world and not the cloister. This was certainly Francis' objective, viz., to correct the distorted and false view of true devotion, which is beautiful to behold in the truly devout. It is the beauty of truth that is revealed in the countenances of devout people in as much as they receive whatever life dishes out to them in a spirit of gentleness and mildness. Francis realized, as Cardinal Ratzinger expressed it: "Nothing can bring us into contact with the beauty of Christ himself more than the world of beauty created by faith and the light that shines upon the faces of the saints through which his own light becomes visible."²⁹

Devout persons can move with great strength and agility because of their purposefulness and simplicity, i.e., their singlemindedness, their primary focus and intention of pleasing God. They are not sidetracked or bogged down by ulterior motives or secondary considerations but are driven solely by the love of God. Francis makes this clear by noting that their legs, arms and head are uncovered. Moreover, although they have to live in the world, they do not let material or worldly things get in the way of their total commitment to serving God and the neighbor.

In this portrait, we readily recognize many of the essential elements of the saint's spirituality which will be further elucidated in his various uses of the image of Jacob's ladder.

Jacob's Ladder and the Perfectibility of Man³⁰

Those who are eager to live a more deeply spiritual life often mistakenly believe that this goal can be achieved overnight and seldom realize that it is a life-long project. To guard against this overeagerness and unrealistic attitude, the saint advises that unlike St. Paul's conversion, "The usual purgation and healing, whether of body or soul, takes place only little by little and by passing from one advance to another with difficulty and patience. Although the angels on Jacob's ladder had wings, they did not fly but went up and down in order step by step." Purging sin from our souls occurs gradually, It is like the dawning of day when daylight slowly dispels the darkness of night. "Diseases of the soul as well as of the body, » he remarks, « come posting on horseback but leave slowly and on foot."³¹

Francis tells a story of a young man who wanted to be perfect and asked a monk to teach him how. The monk approved of his plan and told him : "My son, as far as teaching you the way to become perfect, I will do that gladly, but if you think that you can become perfect as soon as you would like, that I cannot promise. For in this community we do not have a ready-made perfection. Each has to devise his own." The saint goes on to say : « This poor soul thought that perfection would be given to him like one gives him the religious habit. » He recounts the monk saying to him : "My son, perfection is not acquired all of a sudden... You have to climb all of the steps, beginning with the lowest and climbing one after the other to reach the top. Don't you see that on Jacob's ladder there were rungs which you have to climb one after the other until you reach the top where you encounter the bosom of the heavenly Father ?" The monk tells the young man that he would be willing to teach him how to climb this ladder of perfection if he faithfully does for three years what he advises him. The young man agrees. The monk has him practice the virtues in general and advises him to help all of his brothers "in such a way, for example, that if you see the cook going to draw water or cut wood, you would go and do that for him... In a word, that you make yourself the servant of all of the servants in the house without reserve."³²

This little story illustrates how essential Francis considered our interpersonal relationships to be in order to advance on this ladder of perfection. He wanted to show how climbing the heights of perfection is not accomplished by lofty things but by the most ordinary, menial and practical, descending the rungs to help our neighbor in order to be able to ascend.

Growth for human beings, Francis notes, is unlimited like the crocodile. They can either continue to grow in goodness or in evil. There is no standing still or treading water in the devout or spiritual life. We either grow in love or we fall behind ; there is no in-between state for any length of time. "To remain stationary for a long time is impossible. The man who makes no gain loses in such traffic. The man who does not climb upward goes down on this ladder"³³ The upward movement here signifies an advancement, a growth, a progression, and the descent a going backward. In his usual optimistic tone, he states « our souls...as long as they are in this fleeting life...can still grow without limit, passing from more to more in their love of God, 'Slowly we climb th' eternal stair, Each step a virtue firm and fair' [Ps. 83 :6]"³⁴

The ladder also symbolizes our faith journey or earthly pilgrimage of love, one that we do not make alone but guided and led by our Savior as Jacob was led by God ; "The soul, wholly ravished with love for its beloved, sets before its eyes the manifold favors and help whereby it was prepared and aided while on its pilgrimage. Unceasingly it kisses that gentle, helping hand which led, drew, and carried it on the way. It confesses that it is to this divine Savior that it owes all its happiness since he has done for it all that Jacob, the great patriarch desired for his journey when he saw the ladder to heaven." Jacob's ladder is seen here as the locus in which God's provident activity makes it possible for us to make this pilgrimage. Toward the end of this journey, we can more fully realize that nourishment from "the bread of your sacraments for food" and being clothed "with the wedding garment of charity" made it possible for us to reach our final destination.³⁵ These two expressions evoke here the portrait of the devout life that he has painted earlier. It is a life-long journey of love, reaching the summit of the ladder at our death : "When after the labours and the dangers of this moral life, good souls arrive at the port of the eternal, they ascend to the highest and utmost degree of love they can attain."³⁶

Jacob's ladder is mentioned twice in this same chapter which stresses the truth that the Redemption wrought by Christ is the source of all of God's provident care :

Hence we can give an account of the order found in the effects of providence as concerned with our salvation. We descend from the first to the last, that is, from the fruit, which is glory, to the root of this fair tree, which is the redemption wrought by our Savior. God's bounty gives glory in succession to merit, merit in succession to charity, charity in succession to penitence, penitence in succession to obedience, obedience in succession to vocation, vocation in succession to our Savior's redemption. On this last is based that whole mystical ladder of the greater Jacob, both at its end in heaven, since it rests on the loving bosom of the eternal Father, in which he receives, and glorifies the elect, and at its end on earth, since it is planted in the bosom of the pierced side of our Savior, who for this cause died upon Mount Calvary.³⁷

The richness of the imagery in this passage needs to be carefully mined. Clearly in this chapter, Jacob's ladder, among other things symbolizes for our saint divine providence. One contemporary writer has pointed out the importance of this signification : "What does this symbol [of the ladder] indicate ? God is interested in us. In those situations in which we think we are deprived of precise reference points there remains an absolute reference point in our life—that we call Providence, the mysterious presence of God in our lives."³⁸

Francis associates the tree of the Cross grounded in the redemption with Jacob's ladder so that it readily signifies the redemption. However, the cross in the form of this "fair tree" is viewed as a source of glory or of glorification since glory or union with God is its fruit and ultimate destination. The firmness and stability of Jacob's ladder derives from its being grounded on its upper end in the « bosom of the eternal Father » and its earthly end "in the bosom and the pierced side of our Savior." In other words, the Salesian spiritual ladder is seen as rooted in the heart of the son and reaches into the heart of the Father, with both hearts beating in perfect rhythm with each other. Furthermore, the pierced side of Jesus evokes the birth of the Church as many of the early Church fathers understood this description of the death of Jesus pouring out the richness of his love, in particular, the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, symbolized by the water and blood when his heart was pierced. This clearly tells us that the Jacob's ladder of the devout or spiritual life constructed so carefully and ingeniously by the saint must be rooted in the Church and receives all of its graces and power from the Church. The ecclesial dimension of

his spirituality stresses the necessity of the devout person to be in solidarity with the Church and *sentire cum ecclesia*, in the phrase of St. Ignatius of Loyola.³⁹

The Church, as this passage demonstrates, is firmly rooted in the humanity of Jesus, which Jacob's ladder also symbolizes. This is the significance of the expression « the whole mystical ladder of the greater Jacob, » referring, no doubt, to Jesus' saying to Nathanael that he will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. (See Jn 1 :51). Jesus is the « greater Jacob » because all of the promises made to Jacob are now made available only in and through his humanity and his crucifixion, the one through whom all of God's graces flow. In this same chapter, a few lines after this passage, Francis asserts: « The cross is the root of every grace received by us who are spiritual grafts engrafted on his body. »⁴⁰ The words «spiritual grafts » and « engrafted » strongly suggest our solidarity with the body of Christ, i.e., the Church. So these graces are mediated through the Church, the body of Christ, to its members.

The vision of Jacob's ladder drawn by Francis clearly envisions Jesus as the one Mediator between God and man, which coincides with John Calvin's (1509-1564) interpretation of Jacob's ladder. Francis makes this more explicit in a sermon delivered toward the end of his life. " 'In my name,' as Mediator (Those who have gone before us prayed in this way but implicitly ; we pray in this way more explicitly, more formally)...Prayer is all powerful, for 'it is truly worthy and just' that the Son be heard by the Father." In this context, he mentions, « Jacob at the foot of the ladder. From its origins, the Church begins and ends all of its prayers by the sign of the Cross."⁴¹ So everytime we make the sign of the cross, we are, in Francis' mind, in solidarity with Jacob and his experience at Bethel, viz., of having God in our midst with all of the graces and favors needed to obtain eternal glory" in the number, distinction and succession ...necessary to it together with their dependence on one another."⁴² However, unlike Calvin, the Doctor of Love makes allowances on his spiritual ladder for a participated mediation through the Church, its sacraments, the angels and saints.⁴³

This whole chapter appears to be a response in an irenic tone to the position regarding justification by faith alone and predestination and merit of the reformers, especially Calvin. The word "merit" on the part of humans is systematically attacked by Calvin throughout his best known work. He believes it is a useless and misleading term : "I ask, what need was there to introduce the word Merit, when the value of works might have been fully expressed by another term, and without offense? The quantity of offense contained in it the world shows to its great loss. It is certain that, being a high sounding term, it can only obscure the grace of God, and inspire men with pernicious pride."⁴⁴ Our saint, who was very familiar with Calvin's work, purposely uses the word merit in giving the order of graces in a descending fashion, rung by rung provided by the redemption. The fact the predestination was on his mind is seen when he states : "First of all God willed with a true will that even after Adam's sin all men should be saved, but in a way and by means proper to their natural condition, which is endowed with free will." Also the use of the word « elect » in the above cited passage corroborates this view. Calvin takes great pains throughout his *Institutes* in debunking man's merit with frequent citations from Augustine's works which tend to diminish the role of free will. Where Calvin uses the term election with its connotation of being independent of God's foreknowledge, Francis prefers the term « vocation » or calling and stresses that the Church in her liturgical prayer gives evidence of the importance of the foreknowledge of man's merits or good works: 'Everlasting and almighty

God, who are Lord of the living and the dead and art merciful to all those who thou foreknowest be thine by faith and good works,' as though to declare that glory, which is the fruit of God's mercy toward men, is destined only for those who, as divine wisdom has foreseen, will by future obedience to their vocation attain to that living 'faith which works through charity.'"⁴⁵ There are a number of other elements in this brief chapter that make allusions to Calvin's position. However, to elucidate them would take us too far afield.

Francis also associates Jacob's ladder in the *Treatise* with the notion of merit in the context of obeying the will of God's good pleasure : "Hence death, affliction, sweat, and toil with which life abounds are by God's just decree punishments for sin, but they are also by his sweet mercy [rungs or steps] to ascend to heaven, means to increase in grace, and merits to obtain glory."⁴⁶ Jacob's ladder also represents for him the necessity of man's cooperation in God's plan for his redemption.

Not a Self-propelled Journey or Perfectibility

One might easily get the impression that advances on Jacob's ladder are made through self-propelled movements because of the vitality, agility and energy those on the ladder display. This would be a serious misreading of this symbol which the saint wants to use to signify how our whole lives are immersed in God's life and love. Jacob's ladder also represents for him the mysterious, powerful but gentle attractions of God's grace. "See how gently God proceeds. In hearts that give this consent, he strengthens little by little the grace that comes from his inspiration, and step by step as it were he leads them after himself up this Jacob's ladder....'Draw me,' says the sacred spouse. [Cant. 1 :3]. That is, make the first start since of myself I cannot awaken, nor can I move myself unless you move me. But when you have moved me, then, O beloved spouse of my soul, 'we run,' we two." So these movements of advancement can only be done through the grace of God which attracts us through its gentle power, totally respecting our individual freedom. And so Francis insists : "Let no man think that you drag me after you like a forced slave or like a lifeless cart... Your ways of drawing are mighty, but not violent, since all their strength consists in [gentleness]."⁴⁷

Jacob's Ladder and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The marvelous plasticity of the image of Jacob's ladder makes the saint readily mold the rungs of charity into another ladder of charity consisting of seven rungs, one for each of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, : "Thus, Theotimus, charity will be for us another Jacob's ladder made up of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as of so many steps. Upon them angelic men will ascend from earth to heaven, to be united to the breast of God almighty, and upon them they will descend from heaven to earth to take their neighbor by the hand and to lead him to heaven." ⁴⁸ These seven gifts, as Francis explains, are "the properties, virtues and qualities of charity." He places these gifts first in an ascending, then in a descending order. The devout person ascends these step by step in the following order: « fear makes us give up evil ;...piety arouses us to desire to do good ; ...[knowledge] enables us to know the good we must do and the evil we must flee ; ... by fortitude we take courage against all the difficulties in our enterprise ; ...by counsel we choose the means proper to it ; ...we unite our understanding to God so as to behold the features of his infinite beauty ; ...[by wisdom] we join our will to God to savor and experience the sweetness of

his incomparable goodness, for at the top of this ladder God bends toward us, gives us the kiss of love, and makes us taste the sacred breasts of his sweetness, which 'are better than wine.'

At first glance, it appears that this view of Jacob's ladder expresses a vertical spirituality that runs counter to the perfect portrait of the devout life. However, as we read on, the devout person ascends to the heights of contemplative prayer not to remain there to enjoy in solitude the heavenly consolations but rather to utilize this ascending experience to be able to better descend to earth step by step to the neighbor utilizing the same gifts « to win our neighbor to the same happiness." Here Francis shows his genius for transforming a symbol traditionally associated with the cloistered and strictly contemplative life and total self-awareness bordering on self-absorption to one of "other awareness" :

From the first and highest step, where we have filled our will with most ardent zeal and have perfumed our soul with the perfumes of God's supreme charity, we descend to the second step. There our understanding receives incomparable light and makes provision of the most excellent thoughts and maxims for the glory of God's beauty and goodness. From the second step, we go to the third, where by the gift of counsel we consider by what means we may instill in our neighbor's minds the relish and esteem of God's [gentleness]. On the fourth step, we gain courage and receive holy fortitude to overcome difficulties that may be met in this project. Upon the fifth step, by the gift of knowledge we begin to preach and exhort souls to follow virtue and to fly from vice. Upon the sixth step, we strive to impress holy fear upon them so that they may acknowledge God as their loving Father and obey him with filial fear. Upon the last step, we urge them to fear God's judgments, so that mingling such fear of damnation with filial reverence they may more earnestly forsake earth to ascend to heaven with us. »⁴⁹

Here we have a very instructive and illuminating explanation of what Francis means by descending to our neighbor on the ladder of the devout life. The journey of love in his vision of Jacob's ladder is not to be made all alone but in consort with others. The love that has been poured out into our souls by the Holy Spirit and the gifts it includes are not meant for our perfection or advancement alone. This detailed depiction of Jacob's ladder as representing the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit expresses the nature of Salesian love as a dynamic, benevolent reaching out toward our neighbor.

There is not an exact equivalence in the meaning he gives to the gift of fear in the ascent to God. In the latter case, "fear," he says "is love in as much as it causes us to shun what is displeasing to God's majesty." This filial fear when used in the service of the neighbor is mingled with a servile fear. Interestingly, Francis advises us to utilize the gift of knowledge on the fifth step down, which is frequently and inappropriately translated as science, "to preach and exhort souls to follow virtue and to fly from vice." Alain de Lille used the image of Jacob's ladder to construct a ladder with seven rungs whose summit was preaching but not specifically related to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰ Of course, our saint thought very highly of the importance of preaching and was credited for its revival in the Church. But what is particularly noteworthy in this passage is that he appears to assign an evangelizing role to devout persons, whether priests or lay, since he makes no distinction, "to preach and exhort souls" to live a virtuous life. This evangelizing role is not to be understood as formal preaching but more by way of good example and/or by praying for those who have the ministry of preaching.⁵¹

The Salesian ladder of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit emphasizes the inseparability of the love of God from the love of neighbor. There is no ascending movement toward God without a

corresponding descending movement toward the neighbor. One writer aptly observes that these two movements rather than being successive are simultaneous as suggested by the following passage :⁵²

Hence the same charity that produces acts of love of God produces at the same time those of love of neighbor. Just as Jacob saw that one and the same ladder touched heaven and earth and equally served the angels both to descend and to ascend, so also we know that one and the same dilection reaches out to cherish both God and neighbor. Thus it raises us up to unite our spirit with God and it brings us back again to loving association with our neighbors. However, this is always on condition that we love our neighbor in as much as he is God's image and likeness, created to communicate with the divine goodness, to participate in his grace, and to enjoy his glory. Theotimus to love our neighbor in charity is to love God in man or man in God.⁵³

Jacob's Ladder and the Paschal Mystery

Jacob's ladder has long been seen as a symbol of our passage from this world to the next with varying twists and emphasis. St. Bonaventure envisions it in this fashion: "Since we must ascend Jacob's ladder before we descend it, let us place our first step in the ascent at the bottom, presenting to ourselves the whole material world as a mirror through which we may pass over to God, the supreme Craftsman. Thus we shall be true Hebrews passing over from Egypt to the land promised to their fathers (Exod. 13:3ff; we shall also be Christians passing over with Christ *from this world to the Father* (John 13:1)."⁵⁴

Francis' concatenates creation, the cross, the Transfiguration and Jacob's ladder with the Paschal Mystery. We can best observe this by first noting the spiritual advice that he gives to St. Jane: "My dear daughter, death is only life when we die in God's sight. Lean your spirit against the stone which was represented by one Jacob had beneath his head when he saw his beautiful ladder, for it is the same stone against which St. John the Evangelist rested on the day of the exceeding great charity [*l'exces de la charité*] of his Master Jesus. May our heart and the Heart of your heart watch lovingly over you."⁵⁵

The purpose of this whole letter written on 12 August 1613 as she was working to close the estate of her father-in-law, was to console and guide her in the midst of experiencing great spiritual dryness and the feeling of being abandoned by God. He ends the letter by referring to Jacob's mystical experience at Bethel and transposes the rock on which Jacob rested his head after being wearied and tired by his journey. In one stroke of his pen, he transforms this hard, sterile, cold and lifeless rock into the pulsating, vibrant and life-giving heart of Jesus, the same heart upon which John the Evangelist laid his head. Here the saint clearly identifies Jacob's ladder and this mystical experience as a deep, profound and consoling encounter with Jesus himself. The whole experience symbolized by Jacob's ladder is transposed into the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He ends this letter with a sentence that may be a bit precious but certainly expresses the depth of his compassion and love for her.

The expression "*l'exces de la charité*" associates in the saint's mind the spiritual trials and tribulations Jane was experiencing with Jesus' Passover which was brought about by an excess, a superabundance of love, that would make him exit this life in order to redeem or transform it by his death and resurrection. This is certainly the note struck in the opening verse of this chapter in which the saint alludes to the scriptural passage: "Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that

his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father.” (Jn 13:1). Francis uses this same term “*exces*” in describing the mystical experience on the Mount of Transfiguration where the Exodus from Egypt is alluded to and symbolizes for our saint Jesus’ exodus or Passover from this life. The French word “*excès*” is derived from the Latin “*excessus*.” This is the word used in the Vulgate edition describing the conversation between Moses and Elijah in Lk. 9:31 to speak of Jesus’ exodus from this life or Passover. Here is the manner in which Francis understands the French word “*exces*” in this context:

The Apostles saw Moses and Elija speaking to our Lord of the *exces* which he was to undergo in Jerusalem [Lk 9:30-31]. During the Transfiguration, the Passion is mentioned, for this *exces* is nothing other than the Passion. Our divine Master made his excesses (ses *exces*) in many ways different from ours, for we make ours from below to on high. “*Exces*” means ecstasy. So he spoke about his “*exces*.” What “*exces*”? That God descends from his supreme glory. And for what purpose? To take on our humanity and make it subject to men, indeed even to all human miseries, to the extent that being immortal, he made himself subject to death and to death on the cross [Phil 2:6-8]. Love does not nourish itself in the manner we think. Our Savior then is talking about his Passion and death because it is the sovereign act of his love. Hence the blessed in eternal glory will speak about nor rejoice in nothing so much as in this death.⁵⁶

Jacob’s ladder is evoked in this passage when the saint notes that by his “*exces*,” his ecstasy of the Incarnation, he took on our humanity with all of its miseries. This, as he notes in the beginning of this sermon, is the inferior part of Jesus’ soul, which he compares to the bottom of the Jacob’s ladder that is planted on earth. Moreover, by noting that the blessed in heaven sing of the glory of this *exces*, the death of the Lord indicates that it is a triumphant event because it brings them and us glory. In other words, Jesus’ death as envisioned by Francis here is understood in the Johannine sense of his glorification, i.e., his *trèpas*,⁵⁷ his passing over to his Father.

As mentioned above, at the very outset of this sermon he compares the soul of Jesus to Jacob’s ladder, linking heaven and earth, divinity with humanity: “The soul of our Savior was blessed from the very moment of its conception. It resembled Jacob’s ladder which from one end touched heaven and from the other earth [Gen. 28:12]. The same applies to the saintly soul of our Master, for his superior part was leaning on the bosom of his Father, and his inferior part touched the earth by the choice he had made of our miseries, trials, and weaknesses.”⁵⁸ This sermon was delivered at the time the saint was working on his *Treatise on the Love of God*.⁵⁹ So by comparing Jesus’ soul to Jacob’s ladder and noting the inferior and superior part, he is alluding also to this distinction he makes in this work and particularly associating it not only with Jacob’s ladder, but also with the Temple of Solomon without going into the further levels he distinguishes in the superior part of the soul.

This link between the mystery of the Passover and Jacob’s ladder is also seen in a letter when the saint compares Jacob’s ladder to the Cross. Leading up to this is a reflection on the transcendent longing built into our human nature:

Whenever I think of eternity, I am always filled with a great deal of calmness. For, I say to myself, how is it possible that my soul could extend its thinking to this infinity if it did not have some kind of proportion with it? Indeed, it is always true that the faculty which attains an object have some sort of affinity with it. [S. Th. Ia IIae 5,1]. But when I sense that my desire runs after my reflection on this same eternity, my contentment reaches an unparalleled intensity. For I know that we only

desire with a true desire possible things. My desire then assures me that I can have eternity. So the only thing that remains is for me to hope that I will attain it. And this is given to me by the infinite goodness of the One who would not have created a soul capable of thinking about and tending toward eternity, if he had not willed to give it the means to attain it. So... we find ourselves at the foot of the Cross, which is the ladder by which we pass from this world to eternity.⁶⁰

So the cross is our Passover, or passage, our exodus. Our way out of this world to eternity is right through and by means of the Cross. There is no end-run around the cross.

Jacob's Ladder and Virtues of Humility and Charity

A number of spiritual ladders devised by the saint's predecessors dealt with the virtue of humility, especially that of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who exercised a considerable influence on him. Ladders of humility are particularly associated with Benedictine and monastic spirituality. In the society of Francis' day, the remnants of a feudal hierarchy were still very much in evidence with a good deal of class consciousness and the so-called honors and privileges attached to the higher classes like the nobility and those of the robe, i.e., judges and lawyers. This class consciousness was even evident in the religious life. Francis recounted to the Visitandines that one nun would not even address another nun in her convent as "sister" because she considered her to be below her station.⁶¹ We can easily understand why Francis considered it necessary to give a Spiritual Conference to the early Visitandines on the "Five Degrees of Humility" since there was a mixture of nuns from different social classes at the very outset.⁶²

Although, Jacob's ladder is not explicitly mentioned in this very short conference, the title and its structure clearly indicate that it is conceived in the tradition of the many spiritual ladders. Self-knowledge is the first rung or step of this ladder. It is a knowledge of our own nothingness, misery and poverty. This, Francis states, is not so very great since most people are aware of their shortcomings and inadequacy. However, these people would be easily offended if people thought of them in this fashion. This is why we have to go higher. The second rung is an acknowledgement of our lowliness because "there is a difference between knowledge and acknowledgement."⁶³ At this second stage, we readily acknowledge our inadequacy and abjection if need be with a sincere sentiment because many people do so in words and not in reality. The third step consists in admitting our meanness and abjection when another sees these in us. But if we want to advance higher, we have to be willing to love the scorn that others heap on us and rejoice in it. The fifth and highest degree is not only to love our abjection but to desire and seek it out. Those who do are truly happy or blessed, but they are few in number.⁶⁴

In the saint's spirituality, the virtue of humility cannot be fully understood apart from the virtue of charity. They are interdependent:

[S]eparation cannot exist between humility and charity. They are indivisible, and so joined and united together that one is never found without the other, if they are true and unfeigned. When the activity of the one ceases, it is followed immediately by the activity of the other; as soon as humility has abased itself, charity raises itself up toward Heaven. These two virtues are like Jacob's ladder, upon which the angels were going up and coming down.[Gen.28:12-13] This does not mean that of themselves they could ascend and descend at the same time; these angels did not do this, for they ascended in order to descend again. Humility would seem to remove us from God, who abides at the top of the ladder, because it always makes us descend, in order to lower,

despise, and abase ourselves; nevertheless, it is quite the contrary, for in proportion as we abase ourselves, we render ourselves more capable of ascending to the top of this ladder where we shall meet the Eternal Father.”⁶⁵

The paradox of ascending as we descend into our vileness and love of our abjection or of coming closer to God as we appear to move farther from him is resolved or understood by the experience that true humility, by emptying us of ourselves, makes us more capable of being filled with God’s love and the love of others. Pride closes us to God and others, humility opens us to love of God, a true love of ourselves and of others. In explaining the apparent turn-off of Francis’ saying that “humility causes us to love our our abjection,”⁶⁶ Wendy Wright has beautifully captured the saint’s meaning: “To love our abjections is to shatter the images of self-perfection we would like to project. It is thus to enter into the mystery of loving all that is human, and from there to begin to love all humans most truly.”⁶⁷

The saint continues in this sermon to the Visitandines by urging them to be like the Virgin Mary who wonderfully combined virginity and humility with charity: “If we act thus, my dear daughters, and unite virginity with humility, immediately accompanying it with most holy charity, which will raise us to the top of Jacob’s mystical ladder, we shall certainly be received into the bosom of the Eternal Father who will cover us with a thousand heavenly consolations.”⁶⁸ The saint begins this sermon by pointing out that a number of the Fathers of the Church describe the Incarnation as God’s kiss to the world by elaborating on the opening verse of the *Canticle of Canticles*, “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth, for your breasts are better than wine” This kiss he says was given to the “sacred lover, Our Lady.” So the kiss of the Incarnation indicating the joining of humanity to divinity makes it possible for all true lovers of God to ascend Jacob’s ladder and be united in contemplative prayer with God. In other words, the kiss of the Incarnation makes possible and is intended to lead to the contemplative kiss or embrace.⁶⁹ He says of Mary that she has admirably passed from one degree of perfection to a higher...her life was nothing else but a continual passage from virtue to virtue.”⁷⁰ So Mary in his eyes reflected Jacob’s ladder to an exemplary degree and epitomized the Paschal mystery as a lifetime process.

Jacob’s Ladder and the Mystery of the Visitation

The saint begins a sermon for the Feast of the Visitation on a note of unity, viz., that God is a God who loves and creates union and unity and dislikes and abhors disunity: “[He] has made three admirable ones in the Blessed Virgin Our Lady not including the natural union of body and soul.”⁷¹ The first is the union of the human and divine natures in her sacred womb, the second is that of maternity with virginity and the third the union of humility and charity. Regarding the latter union, Francis asks rhetorically: “How can we harmonize, unite and join together humility and charity since the nature of one is to ascend on high and that of the other to descend downward?” He responds by saying, “It is impossible on the natural level.”⁷²

The paradoxical union of a descending and ascending movement recalls to his listeners what he had previously spoken to them about the relationship of these two virtues to Jacob’s ladder. Our Lady particularly exemplified these two virtues when visiting her cousin Elizabeth. “For what is the Visitation of Our Lady to holy Elizabeth if not a meeting of humility and charity, or a summary of the effects of these two virtues practiced by the holy Virgin toward her cousin [Lk.

1:39-56]. Humility and charity have only one object, God, as they tend toward union with Him; nevertheless, they pass from God to the neighbor, and it is in this transfer that they attain their perfection.”⁷³ So he portrays the Blessed Mother as the great exemplar of experiencing unity or communion within her very body and life and assisting her son to create an interior union or unity or integration and a communion and unity among human beings.

Furthermore, the ascending movement of charity and the descending movement of humility noted by the saint in speaking of the mystery of the Visitation reveals in his mind and imagination a connection to the image and symbol of Jacob’s ladder – as the perfect example of the union of the contemplative and active life or of the devout life. In the original rule of the Visitation, the saint mentions that after having exercised this act of charity toward her neighbor, she expressed and experienced an unsurpassable contemplative prayer – the Magnificat.⁷⁴

Jacob’s Ladder and the Reception of Holy Communion

In a little treatise on the Reception of Holy Communion written for Anne de Bourgeois, Francis advises her to recite the Magnificat to enhance her fervor and love for this sacrament. He also recommends that she, in resolving to serve God, utilize the words of Jacob after he saw the holy ladder: “God will be my God, and the stone of my heart, heretofore hardened will become his dwelling. In this way” he tells her, “you can draw a thousand affections from Holy Communion.”⁷⁵ It is noteworthy that Jacob’s disposition at Bethel can be of great help and understanding for the proper reception of this sacrament so that it will substantially affect our lives and change the disposition of our heart so as to place them at the disposition of serving others.

Conclusion

What this study demonstrates is the preoccupation and prominence that the image of Jacob’s ladder had in the mind and literary expression of Francis de Sales. It appears in one form or another and casts its light on all of his various writings. We see it in the early polemic ones, his letters, sermons, spiritual conferences and most notably in his two spiritual masterpieces, not always explicitly, but also implicitly by such evocative phrases as “*de degrees en degrees*,” “*de vertu en vertu*,” “*descendant et montant*.” It is also present by its numerous associations with other biblical images and the attendant circumstances of Jacob’s vision, in particular, the place, the stone, the promises of God, and Jacob’s response. The image of Jacob’s ladder with its long, interesting and rich history offered him the opportunity to root his spirituality firmly in Sacred Scripture and make intriguing, enlightening and original connections with early Christian writers and Church tradition.

Although Salesian spirituality is often looked upon as a lay spirituality, it is not exclusively so.⁷⁶ The ladder image in his works helps us to focus on and appreciate more deeply his creativity, originality and sense of the importance of sound doctrine and tradition in constructing a spirituality intended for people in all walks of life. There is a certain boldness and yet fittingness in presenting Jacob’s ladder as the perfect portrait of the devout life. He took a symbol, which was almost exclusively associated with the monastic life and a flight from the world, and transformed it into an appealing symbol for a universal call to holiness, including the monastic

life itself as exemplified by the Visitation nuns. Moreover, the Christian ladder tradition represented many legitimate forms of Christian spirituality whether desert, monastic, Benedictine or Franciscan, to mention some of the more prominent ones. The polysemousness of Jacob's ladder with its allegorical chain had a great attraction for Francis because of its great diversity in unity or 'university,' a neologism he coined.⁷⁷ This oneness in great diversity belongs to the essence of the Triune God and is experienced in human encounters with God as particularly reflected in Jacob's vision of the ladder. University allows for a great variety of ways of our search for God and holiness within God's providential plan. So Jacob's ladder as envisioned and presented by Francis is a polyvalent image symbolizing the Cross; the Crucifixion; the Redemption; the Paschal mystery; the combining of the contemplative and active life; the gifts of the Holy Spirit; as well as the Church; the body, the soul and humanity of Jesus who gives the symbol a oneness, a unity amid this great diversity.

Jacque Sarvoy (+521) was one of the earliest writers to compare Jacob's ladder to the Cross of Christ which unites those in heaven with those on earth.⁷⁸ It was for him a symbol of the communion of saints and hence not divisive but a symbol that unites. The unifying power of Jacob's ladder as reflecting the communion of saints is brought out by Francis when he states that the Church militant is united with the Church triumphant on this ladder in singing the praises of God: "In this holy exercise, we mount upward step by step. By means of all the creatures we call on to praise God, we pass from [non-rational] objects to rational and intellectual beings, and from the Church militant to the Church triumphant in which we rise through the angels and saints until above all of them we meet the most sacred Virgin who with incomparable melody praises and magnifies the divinity more highly, more nobly, and more delightfully than all other creatures together could ever do."⁷⁹ The ascent of praise is made possible through the humanity of Jesus and his redemptive act. He is our only way to the Father. However, the communion of saints as symbolized by Jacob's ladder serves for Francis as the basis for a participated mediation without denying the essential and indispensable mediation of Christ. So it serves as a possible sign and symbol of reconciliation and rapprochement with our separated brethren on the understanding of mediation and also predestination since Jacob is seen in both Catholic and Reform writers as the prime example of God's free election over his brother Esau.

Francis would have readily identified with the saying attributed to Doestevsky, viz., "It is not the love of beauty, but the beauty of love that will save the world." He has amply and effectively demonstrated the beauty and attractiveness of love in the *Introduction to a Devout Life* and, notably, in the *Treatise on the Love of God* by his striking and captivating images and illustrations. His concern to make the spiritual life not a turn-off but a turn-on, a thing of inviting and entrancing beauty shines through in the portrait he paints of the devout life. Its beauty is not inaccessible but readily available because it is deeply rooted in the humanity of Jesus and in the human condition. He made an image, Jacob's ladder, that symbolized for many a spirituality of the elite and the remoteness of God into a refreshing and reinvigorating symbol of the "amongness" of God, the reality of God in our midst, especially by linking and intertwining it closely with the love story of the Canticle of Canticles. Jacob's ladder in his hands is fashioned into a ladder of love. It is essentially the locus of God's unfolding love for us and our unfolding love for God and for others.

Needless to say, his optimism contributes greatly to the transformation of the ladder imagery into something beautiful and attractive. The harsh, ascetical and body-denying aspects conveyed by many of the preceding spiritual ladders are practically absent or greatly diminished and replaced by a more interior and demanding asceticism, viz., that of descending the ladder by loving others more intensely and doing and accepting all things to please God. This is the epitome of the devout life which begins with the interior, with the heart. Although Jacob's ladder symbolizes for him as for many others the Cross and the crucifixion, the aspect he emphasizes of the Passion is the Johannine view, which presents it as Jesus' glorification, the Paschal mystery. As the image of the Paschal mystery, it offers to human beings the means to gradually grow from virtue to virtue and be perfected as exemplified by the Virgin Mary, especially through the virtues of humility and charity.

The delicate balancing act the saint performs on Jacob's ladder between the power of God's grace and man's freedom and initiative gives to his conception of this image its special Salesian cachet and appeal. It is a balancing act that has challenged humankind since its origins and is now intensified by the promises and perils of modern science and technology. Many reflective people wonder how man will use his frightening and formidable freedom in the future. One science writer observes: "In the book of Genesis, God gave Jacob a vision of angels ascending to heaven and told him how his descendants would inherit the Earth." He then asks, "Does this licence extend to becoming angels ourselves?"⁸⁰ Of course, the biblical source does not grant Jacob "licence" but a promise based on adhering to God's covenant love. This author ponders whether modern genetics will cause man to brutalize himself or to become more human in an ennobling sense. It is a question that has haunted humanity since the Fall and continues to bedevil us today. In dialogue with modern science, especially biogenetics, what possible guidance and help can the Salesian ladder of spirituality fashioned after Jacob's ladder give us with regard to the future of humanity as pursued by modern science? The saint's cosmological conception of "university" can be of help in understanding a basic unity in the created world amidst such bewildering diversity and complexity. Let me also suggest that the emphasis on the virtues of humility and charity as described by the saint against the background of Jacob's ladder point to the limited essence and the transcendental possibilities of human nature. The virtue of humility makes us understand our own limitations as well as our giftedness and opens us to a true knowledge and love of ourselves and of humanity as reflections of the image of God. Charity as seen by Francis makes us ponder what promotes true human flourishing. This charity or genuine love for God and other human beings is a gift poured out to us from the pierced side of Christ, that is from the Church. Humility makes us realize that we do not have all of the answers to life's mysteries and makes us seek guidance and help from authentic Church teaching and thereby discovering the plan of the Creator. So the ecclesial dimension of the Salesian spiritual ladder can help religion play an important and essential supportive role in understanding man's perfectibility through scientific advances, a perfectibility that does not ignore or diminish his transcendent dimensions.

Endnotes

¹ See Émile Bertaud and André Rayez, “Échelle spirituelle,” *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, publié sous la direction de Marcel Viller, S.J., assisté de F. Cavallera, S.J., et J. de Guibert, S.J., avec le concours d’un grand nombre de collaborateurs (Paris: G. Beauchesnes et ses fils, 1932) vol. , col. 62-64. Hereafter designated as Bertaud.

² Yvan Amar et Evelyne Lattanzio, “L’actualité du Festival de Cannes nous force à entendre tous les jours un certain nombre de clichés ; dont par exemple le fameux ‘monter les marches...’, ‘monter l’escalier du palais du festival.’ Et ce qui est à la fois une réalité, une image, un cliché et un symbole donne un relief particulier à ces quelques degrés.” “Escalier,” <http://www.chilton.com/paq/archive/PAQ-02-137.html>.

³ See Henry Gee, *Jacob's Ladder : The History of the Human Genome* (New York : W.W. Norton & Co., 2004).

⁴ Bertaud, col. 62.

⁵ “The first problem is our inability to reason. Reasoning takes time. It needs a vocabulary of ideas. Reasoning forces us to test and compare competing arguments. But the America we live in today is a culture built on marketing, and marketing works in just the opposite way. Marketing feeds our desires and emotions, and it suppresses critical thought, because thinking gets in the way of buying the product or the message. That's why marketing is tied so tightly to images -- like fast cars on an empty road. Images work on our appetites, quickly and very effectively, at the subconscious level” Chaput, “Women and the Culture of Life,” “Address to the Catholic Daughters of America, Oct. 23, 2003.

⁶ Sermon 87, éd. G. Morin, t. 1, Maredsous, 1937, p. 342-45; sermon du pseudo-Augustin, PL 39, 1760-1762 ,as cited by Bertaud, col 69. All translations from the French are the author’s unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ *St. John Climachus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, introd. by Kallistos Ware, pref. by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

⁸ “A cette époque le vocable de l’échelle pénètre meme dans la toponymie, le monastère étant considéré comme une échelle spirituelle...un monastère cartusien était fondé à Poblet, près de Tarragone, sous le nom de Scala Dei,” col. 69.

⁹ PL 182, 941-972. Bertaud, col. 70. The complete Latin text may be accessed online at: <http://www.binetti.ru/bernardus/16.shtml>.

¹⁰ See *Bonaventure: The Souls Journey into God • The Tree of Life • The Life of St. Francis* trans. By Ewert Cousins with preface by Ignatius Brady, OFM (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

¹¹ See *Robert Bellarmine: Spiritual Writings* trans. and ed. by John P. Donnelly, SJ, and Roland J. Teske, SJ, introd. by John P. Donnelly, SJ. and pref. by John O’Malley, SJ (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

¹² *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, Edition Complète, 27 vols (Annecy: J. Niérat et al., 1892-1964), 4, p. 6: “Ce grand et celebre cardinal Belarmin a aussi depuis peu fait voir un petit livret intitulé *l’Escalier pour monter a dieu par les creatures [De ascensione mentis in Deum per scalas rerum creatarum]*, qui ne peut estre qu’admirable”. Hereafter this work will be cited as OEA.

¹³ OEA, 12, pp.309-310. For some examples of how the saint utilizes these four dimensions or meanings of Sacred Scripture, see Philippe Legros, *François de Sales, une poétique de l’imaginaire: Étude des représentations visuelles dans l’Introduction à la vie devote et le Traité de l’amour de Dieu* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004), pp. 199-241, where he discusses Jacob’s ladder, the sacrifice of Abraham, and the Canticle of Canticles and indicates how the latter two examples are connected in the saint’s mind with the first. Despite the many recent advances in biblical scholarship, Pope Benedict XVI notes: “The doctrine of the multiple senses of Scripture...is recognized again today as being scientifically appropriate, given the nature of this unique structure of texts.” Joseph Ratzinger, *On The Way to Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 150ff.

¹⁴ « Je vis jamais chose qui se rapportat mieux a un'autre que le therebinthe qui estoit aupres de la ville de Sichem, rencontré par Jacob quand il alloit en Bethel, au pied duquel il enterra tous les idoles des siens(Gn 35,4). Mes Freres, nous allons en Bethel : Bethel veut dire mayson de Dieu; nostre Jacob sera pour ceste heure saint Pol, qui crie (Ph 2,5) : *Hoc sentite in vobis, quod est in Christo* ; comme s’il disoit : *Abjicite deos alienos* (Gn 35,2). Faysons, de grace, paenitence et remettons a nos peres spirituels le fardeau de nos pechés, affin qu’on les ensevelisse *subter therebinthum, quae est post Sichem*, id est, *humerum Christi*. Ainsi nous exalterons la Croix. » OEA, 7, p. 44, Sermon Plan for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, 14 September, 1593.

¹⁵ *Replique Chrestienne à la response de M.F. De Sales, se disant evesque de Geneve, sur Traicté de la vertu et l’adoration de la Croix, par Antoine de la Faye, minister de la parole de Dieu en l’Eglise de Geneve.* (De l’imprimerie de Jacob Stoer, MDCIII).

¹⁶ OEA, 2, p. 51: “Jacob ayant veu Dieu et les Anges en Bethel, combien tient-il ce lieu pour honorable.” His argument here is that just as angels as messengers of God appeared on a ladder in Jacob’s dream and sanctified Bethel so the Cross, upon which Jesus hung and died is a special place of veneration: “Le bois de la Croix a eu des qualités qui le rendent venerable; c’est qu’il a esté le siege de la Royauté de Nostre Seigneur.” OEA, 2, p. 53.

¹⁷ OEA, 2, p. 60: “Jesus Christ proteste que si un jour *il est eslevé en haut il tirera toutes choses a soy*, et le *prince du monde sera chassé* (Jn 12,31); et vous voules que l’eschelle de son exaltation ait deprimé et abattu son honneur et service. Toute l’ancienneté s’est servie de la Croix contre le diable, et vous dites que ceste Croix est le throsne de son idolatrie.”

¹⁸ OEA, 2, p. 191: “Il est bien vray que mourant pour Dieu ou la patrie, la mort en est glorieuse; en rmeoire de laquelle on pourroit en honorer les instruments : sur tout si cela avoit causé quelque grand bien, comme a fait la Croix, vray autel du souverain sacrifice qui est Jesus Christ, selon saint Paul, Heb. ch 7, et Coloss 1 : *Pacifiant par le sang de sa Croix*, c’est à dire, respandu en icelle comme sur un autel; vraye eschelle à son Royaume, selon saint Jean, 12 et Philipp., 2 ; instrument de sa victoire et de son triomphe, selon saint Paul, Coloss. 2,15 où l’ancien Origene, homilie 8 sur Josué, lict, “ triomphant d’eux au bois de la Croix.”

¹⁹ See Elizabeth Stopp, “Meditations on the Church (1595-96),” in *A Man to Heal Differences: Essays and Talks on St. Francis de Sales* (Philadelphia: St. Joseph’s University Press, 1997),pp. 51-74.

²⁰ OEA, 1, p.105: “Fermons donques ce propos. L’Eglise a tousjours esté accompagnée de miracles solides et bien assurés, comme ceux de son Espoux, donques c’est la vraye Eglise; car, me servant en cas pareil de la rayon du bon Nicodeme (Jn 3,2), je dirai : *Nulla societas potest haec signa facere quae haec facit, tam illustria aut tam constanter, nisi Dominus fuerit cum illa*; et comme disoit Nostre Seigneur aux disciples de saint Jan , *Dicite, coeci vident, claudi ambulat, surdi audiunt* (Mt 11,4 ; Lc 7,22),. pour monstrier qu’il estoit le Messie, ainsy, oyant qu’en l’Église se font de si solemnelz miracles, il faut conclure que *vere Dominus est in loco isto* (Gn 28,16). »

²¹ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, trans. and ed. By J. K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 37. Several reprintings of this same translation with the identical ISBN unfortunately have different pagination. Hence future citations for this work will be noted by section and chapter number. by Hereafter noted as Devout Life.

²² Devout life, Preface.

²³ Devout Life, Part 1, ch.2, J.K. Ryan translates “*contemplés*” by “consider.” For reasons given above, it should be translated “contemplate.” “Contemplés l’échelle de Jacob (car c’est le vrai portrait de la vie dévotte): les deux côtés entre lesquels on monte, et auxquels les échellons se tiennent, représentent l’orayson qui impètre l’amour de Dieu et les Sacrements qui le confèrent; les échellons ne sont autre chose que les divers degrés de charité par lesquels l’on va de vertu en vertu, ou descendant par l’action au secours et support du prochain, ou montant par la contemplation à l’union amoureuse de Dieu. Or voyez, je vous prie, ceux qui sont sur l’eschelle ce sont des hommes qui ont des coeurs angéliques, ou des Anges qui ont des corps humains; ils ne sont pas jeunes, mais ils le semblent être, parce qu’ils sont pleins de vigueur et agilité spirituelle ; ils ont des ailes pour voler, et s’élancent en Dieu par la sainte oraison, mais ils ont des pieds aussi pour cheminer avec les hommes par une sainte et amiable conversation ; leurs visages sont beaux et gais, d’autant qu’ils reçoivent toutes choses avec douceur et suavité; leurs jambes, leurs bras et leurs têtes sont tout a découvert, d’autant que leurs pensées, leurs affections et leurs actions n’ont aucun dessein ni motif que de plaire a Dieu. Le reste de leurs corps est couvert, mais d’une belle et légère robe, parce qu’il usent voirement de ce monde et des choses mondaines, mais d’une façon toute pure et sincère, n’en prenans que légèrement ce qui est requis pour leur condition : telles sont les personnes devotes. » *Saint François de Sales, Oeuvres: Introduction à la vie devotte, Traité de l’Amour de Dieu, Recueil des Entretiens spirituals*, préface et chronologie par André Ravier, texts présentés par André Ravier et annotés par André Ravier avec la collaboration de Roger Devos (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, 1969), p. 35. Hereafter designated as Pleiade.

²⁴ “L’Eglise qui est a present, suivant la voix de son Pasteur et Sauveur, et le chemin battu des devanciers, loüe, approuve et prise beaucoup la résolution de ceux qui se rangent a la pratique des conseilz evangeliques, desquelz elle a un tres grand nombre. Je ne doute point que si vous avies hanté les congrégations des Chartreux, Camaldulenses, Celestins, Minimes, Capucins, Jesuites, Theatins, et autres en grand nombre esquelles fleurit la discipline religieuse, vous ne fussies en doute si vous les devries appeller anges terrestres ou hommes celestes, et ne sçauries quoy plus admirer, ou en une si grande jeunesse une si parfaicte chasteté, ou parmi tant de doctrine une si profonde humilité, ou entre tant de diversité une si grande fraternité ; et tous, comme celestes abeilles, menagent en l’Église et y brassent le miel de l’Evangile avec le reste du Christianisme, qui par prédications, qui par compositions, qui par meditations et oraisons, qui par leçons et disputes, qui par le soin des malades, qui par l’administration des Sacremens sous l’autorité des pasteurs » (OEA, 1, p. 118).

²⁵ Although Francis gives a more complete exposition of the concept of charity in the *Treatise*, it is useful to remember that the final edition of the *Introduction of the Devout Life*, was published in 1619 three years after the publication of the *Treatise*. So, as he was working on this final redaction, he certainly was fully aware of what he had already written in the *Treatise*. Since charity in his spirituality is the highest form of the love of friendship with God, it is not a stretch to say that acts of love for our neighbor as expressed in his understanding of Jacob's ladder bind us not only more closely to our neighbor but also to God, viz., they deepen our friendship with God.

²⁶ *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. with intro. by J.K. Ryan (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1975), vol. 1, p. 30. Hereafter *Treatise*, Ryan.

²⁷ *Treatise*, Ryan, vol. 1, p. 78. The French reads as follows: "ilz sont hommes par la substance de leur nature, et doivent estre ditz ou anges humains ou hommes angeliques." OEA, 1, pp. 57-58.

²⁸ Francis de Sales *Introduction to a Devout Life*, and trans. and ed. by J.K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1966), Part 1, ch. 2. Hereafter *Devout Life*, Ryan.

²⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), p. 41.

³⁰ The idea of the ladder symbolizing the perfectibility of man is clearly conveyed by Alan de Lille (c. 1128 – c. 1202) : "Vidit scalam Jacob a terra usque ad coelum attingentem, per quam ascendebant et descendebant angeli (Gn 28). Scala est profectus viri catholici, qui congeritur ab initio fidei, usque ad consummationem viri perfecti. *Summa de arte praedicatoria*, Praefatio. (available at:

<http://homepages.wmich.edu/~johnsorgh/MedievalLatin/Texts/Alan.html>

³¹ *Devout Life*, Ryan, Part 1, ch. 5.

³² OEA, 9, p. 144, Sermon for Tuesday of Easter Week, 21 April 1620.

³³ *Treatise*, Bk. 3, ch. 1; Ryan, vol. 1, p. 163.

³⁴ *Treatise*, Bk. 3, ch. 1; Ryan, vol. 1, p.165.

³⁵ *Treatise*, Bk. 3, ch. 5; Ryan, vol. 1, p. 177.

³⁶ St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, intro. and trans. by Dom Mackey (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1997), Bk. 3, ch. 7, p. 145. Hereafter Mackey.

³⁷ *Treatise*, Ryan, vol. 1, Bk. 3, ch. 5, p. 178. "The theme of the tree—the tree of paradise and that of the Cross—and the theme of the ladder have a parallel existence, whatever their origin may be. They ordinarily are superimposed or complement each other" (Bertaud, col. 79). Here Francis appears to superimpose or intermingle these two images.

³⁸ Carlo Montini, *Jacob's Dream: Setting Out on a Spiritual Journey* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 17.

³⁹ In an interview, Father Richard John Neuhaus explained his understanding of the phrase "*sentire cum ecclesia*." "It is a marvelous expression: '*sentire cum ecclesia*.' It means to think with the Church, but also to feel with the Church. In short, to love the Church. If we love the Church, as a lover loves the beloved, then we will her to be; we will her to flourish; we will her to succeed in the mission she has been given by Christ. As in a good marriage, the Catholic never thinks 'I' without thinking 'we.' It is necessary to cultivate this communion of shared devotion, affection and purpose in a very disciplined way, for not all aspects of the Church are lovable, just as we are not always lovable. Nonetheless, we are loved by the Church, and most particularly by all the saints in the Church Triumphant. '*Sentire cum ecclesia*' means being concerned never to betray St. Paul, St. Irenaeus, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, St. Theresa and the faith for which they and innumerable others lived and died. And, for all the inadequacies and sins of the Church and her leadership in our time, it means always doing one's best to support, and never to undermine, the effectiveness of her teaching ministry." Zenit News Agency, 23 May 2006. This understanding of this phrase accords extremely well with Francis' teaching.

⁴⁰ *Treatise*, Bk. 3, ch. 5; Ryan, vol. 1, p. 178.

⁴¹ OEA, 8, pp.408-09. Sermon for the Feast of Sts. Philip and James, 1 May 1622. The original is in Latin.

⁴² *Treatise*, Bk. 3, ch. 5; Ryan vol. , p. 177.

⁴³ See *Calvin's Institutes*, trans. by Henry Beveridge, published online by Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI, created 2002-08-31, ch. 14, no. 4, where he excoriates those who pray to angels and asserts that Jesus is the only Mediator between God and man. "If they are not regarded merely as hands moving to our assistance just as he directs--if they do not direct us to Christ as the only Mediator on whom we must wholly depend and recline, looking towards him, and resting in him. Our minds ought to give thorough heed to what Jacob saw in his vision (Gen. 28:12),--angels descending to the earth to men, and again mounting up from men to heaven, by means of a ladder, at the head of which the Lord of Hosts was seated, intimating that it is solely by the intercession of Christ that the ministry of angels extends to us, as he himself declares, 'Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man,' (John 1:51)... Away, then, with that Platonic philosophy of seeking access to God by means of angels and courting them with the view of making God more

propitious (Plat. in Epinomide et Cratylo),--a philosophy which presumptuous and superstitious men attempted at first to introduce into our religion, and which they persist in even to this day.”

<http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/institutes/booki/booki21.htm>.

⁴⁴ Calvin's Institutes, ch. 15, no. 2.

⁴⁵ Treatise, , Bk. 3, ch. 5; Ryan, vol. 1 p. 178. The prayer he quotes is from the Third Sunday of Lent. Calvin categorically denies that God's foreknowledge of man's merit is the basis for election: “Many controvert all the positions which we have laid down, especially the gratuitous election of believers, which, however, cannot be overthrown. For they commonly imagine that God distinguishes between men according to the merits which he foresees that each individual is to have, giving the adoption of sons to those whom he foreknows will not be unworthy of his grace, and dooming those to destruction whose dispositions he perceives will be prone to mischief and wickedness. Thus by interposing foreknowledge as a veil, they not only obscure election, but pretend to give it a different origin.” *Calvin's Institutes*, ch. 22, no. 1). Cardinal Bellarmine, whose work Francis qualified as “admirable” appears to echo Calvin's position on foreknowledge: “Who shall find the answer to why God loved Jacob and hated Esau before they had done anything good or evil? This is what caused the Apostle to wonder in his Letter to the Romans; they were twin brothers, sons of the same father and mother, but God loved and predestined one and hated and reprobated the other (Rom 9:10f). Nor should anyone say that God foresaw the future works of one and the evil ones of the other; the Apostle anticipates this argument and says that this happened ‘in order that the selective purpose of God might stand’ and adds the words given to Moses, ‘I have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I show pity on whom I show pity’ (Rom 9:11), 15; Ex 13:19). Robert Bellarmine: *The Mind's Ascent to God*, trans. and ed. By J. P. Donnelly, SJ, and R.J Teske, SJ with intro. By J. P. Donnelly and John O'Malley, SJ (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), step 13, ch. 5 “On the Mystery of Predestination and Reprobation,” p.199. We know what agony this position caused Francis as a student in Paris. See A. Pocetto, “From Despair to Hope: One Student's (Francis de Sales 1567-1622) Struggle with Truth,” <http://www4.desales.edu/SCFC/Studies/ATP-Newman.htm>

⁴⁶ Treatise, Bk. 9, ch. 1; Ryan vol. 2, p. 98. Both Ryan and Mackey translate the French word “eschelons” as ladders. However, the context plainly indicates the ordinary meaning of this word. So rungs of virtue are transmuted into rungs of difficulties which challenge us to grow in virtue.

⁴⁷ Treatise, Bk. 2, ch. 13; Ryan, vol. 1, 137-38. The connection between the Canticle of Canticles and Jacob's ladder is evident here. For a more detailed explanation of the relationship of the image of Jacob's ladder to the Canticle, see Legros, pp. 226-41 where he points out that that certain verses of the Canticles evoke the image of Jacob's ladder in the saint's writings, especially in the *Treatise*.

⁴⁸ Treatise, Bk. 11, ch. 15; Ryan, vol. 2, p. 240.

⁴⁹ Treatise, Bk. 11, ch. 15; Ryan, vol. 2 p. 241. For two other shorter versions of the seven step ladder of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, see OEA, 9, p. 150; 10, p. 430.

⁵⁰ “In hac scala primus gradus est, confessio; secundus, oratio; tertius, gratiarum actio; quartus, scripturarum perscrutatio; quintus, si aliquid occurrat dubium in Scriptura, a majore inquisitio; sextus, Scripturae expositio; septimus, praedicatio.” Alan de Insulia, *Summa arte de praedicatoria*.

<http://homepages.wmich.edu/~johnsorb/MedievalLatin/Texts/Alan.html>

⁵¹ Francis writes to a nun who apparently envies his preaching of the praises of God: “ But if you desire to preach with me, I beg you, do it always, my daughter by praying God that he give me the words according to his heart and his wishes. How often does it occur that we say good things because some good soul prays that we do. We're like organs, where the one who pumps does all the work and doesn't get any credit. Pray then often for me, my daughter, and you will preach with me.” (OEA, 18, 335). See also his Spiritual Conference on Modesty where he gives examples of those who preached effectively by their behavior without saying a word. (Pleiade, pp. 1044-45).

⁵² Legros, p. 210.

⁵³ Treatise, Bk. 10, ch. 11, Ryan, vol 2, p. 171.

⁵⁴ *Soul's Journey*, ch. 1, p. 63.

⁵⁵ St. Francis de Sales, *Selected Letters*, trans. by Elizabeth Stopp ((New York: Harpeer & Brothers, 1960), p. 210; OEA, 16, p.50.

⁵⁶ “Les Apostres virent *Moyse et Elie qui parloyent* à Nostre Seigneur *de l'exces* qu'il devoit faire *en Hierusalem* [Lk 9:30-31]. Voyez-vous, emmy la Transfiguration l'on parle de la Passion; car cet *exces* n'estoit autre que la Passion. Nostre divin Maistre faisoit ses exces bien d'autres façons que non pas nous autres; car nous, nous jettons de bas en haut. Exces veut dire extase: il parloit donques *de l'exces*. Quel *exces*? Celuy ci, que Dieu descende de sa gloire supreme. Et pour quoi faire? Pour prendre nostre humanité et se rendre sujet aux hommes, voire mesme à toutes les miseres humaines, jusques là qu'estant immortel il s'est rendu sujet *à la mort et à la mort de la croix* [Phil

2:6-8]. L'amour ne se repaist point comme nous pensons. Nostre Seigneur parle donques de sa Passion et de sa Mort parce que c'est le souverain acte de son amour; aussi les Bienheureux, en la gloire eternelle, ne parleront ni ne se resjouiront de rien tant que de cette morte [Rev 5:9,11]." OEA, 9, pp. 28-29, Sermon for the 2nd Sun. in Lent, 23 février 1614.

⁵⁷ "Nous parlons avec une propreté toute particuliere de la mort des hommes, en nostre language françois, car nous l'appelons trespas, et le morts, trespasés; signifian que la mort entre les hommes n'est qu'un passage d'une vie a l'autre, et que mourir n'est autre chose sinon outrepasser les confins de cette vie mortelle pour aller à l'immortelle" (OEA, Bk 9, ch. 13, p. 149).

⁵⁸ OEA, 9, p. 27

⁵⁹ See Bk. 1, ch. 11 & 12.

⁶⁰ OEA, 14, p. 396.

⁶¹ OEA, 10, p. 93: "Il faut que j'adjouste encores cecy : je ne peux supporter cette grande mollesse de la fille du mareschal de Brissac, laquelle est morte maintenant, mais saintement. L'histoire est toute recente. Cette fille ne se pouvoit resoudre d'appeller Sœur une autre Religieuse qui estoit de plus basse condition qu'elle ; si qu'il luy fallut faire de grans efforts sur soy mesme pour cela."

⁶² See Pléaïde, pp. 1087-88.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 1087.

⁶⁴ This final step goes beyond what the saint exposes in the *Introduction to a Devout Life* (see Part 1, ch. 4-7) since he is addressing here those who are advanced or desire to be more advanced in the devout life.

⁶⁵ *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Our Lady*, ed. by Lewis Fiorelli, OSFS, trans. by the nuns of the Visitation, (Rockford, IL.: Tan, 1985), p. 147; OEA, 10, pp. 53-54.

⁶⁶ *Devout Life*, Ryan, Part 3, ch. 6.

⁶⁷ Wendy Wright, *Francis de Sales' Introduction to a Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 87.

⁶⁸ *Sermons on Our Lady*, 147; OEA, 10, p. 54.

⁶⁹ See OEA, 10, pp. 41-42.

⁷⁰ *Sermons on Our Lady*, 152; OEA, 10, p. 59

⁷¹ OEA, 10, p. 61.

⁷² *Sermons on Our Lady*, p. 157.

⁷³ *Sermons on Our Lady*, p. 157.

⁷⁴ "En ce mistere la tres glorieuse Vierge fit cet acte solemnel de sa charité envers le prochain que d'aller visiter et servir sainte Elizabeth au travail de sa grossesse, et composa neanmoins le cantique du Magnificat, le plus doux, le plus relevé, plus spirituel et plus contemplative qui soit escrit jamais esté fait." (OEA, 25, p. 214).

⁷⁵ "Petit Traité sur la sainte Communion Rédigé pour Mme Rose Bourgeois, Abbessé du Puits-d'Orbe, [Dec. 1604 or Jan. 1605] OEA, 26, 221. "A Little Treatise on Holy Communion Written for Madame Rose Bourgeois, Abbess of Puits-d'Orbe," trans. by Alexander Pocetto, OSFS (available in pdf at <http://www4.desales.edu/SCFC/SalStudies2.htm#SFDS>).

⁷⁶ See Joseph Power, OSFS, "St. Francis de Sales and 'Lay Spirituality,'" in *God of the Ordinary: A Spirituality for All*, ed. by John Sankarathil, OSFS (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Company, 1999).

⁷⁷ See *Treatise*, Bk. 2, ch. 2 regarding the polyvalence of symbols, One writer explains: "The most constant and not least disconcerting characteristic of the symbol was its polysemousness. So essential a characteristic was this that to constrict its meaning for the sake of conceptual clarity would have been to sterilize it, to kill its vitality. By nature the symbol was seen as ambiguous. Fire warms, casts light, purifies, burns, regenerates, consumes; it symbolized the Holy Spirit or concupiscence equally well" [See Alan of Lille, *Distinctiones dictionum* s.v. 'ignis' (PL, CCX, 815)]." (M.-D. Chenu, O.P., *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, p. 136). Chenu also gives the example of the spouse's breast in the Song of Songs which Francis frequently uses: "(*Meliora sunt ubera tua vino*—'Your breasts are better than wine') signified chastity and humility; they were the arms of love with which the Virgin held Christ, God and man; they were flesh and spirit; they were carnal sin and sophistries of concupiscence." [See Alain of Lille *Elucidatio in Cant. cant.* (PL, CCX, 54, 62, 79, 98, 100)] (Chenu, p. 136). The multiple levels of meaning are concocted by what was called by Alain de Lille the "allegorical chain." This chain "linked together the temple of Christ's body, the temples in which men worship, the earthly church, and the heavenly city as so many expressions of one metaphoric temple in which Christ offers himself to the Father, afforded a real understanding of many elements, one though diverse, that coalesced in the structured economy of salvation." (See *Liber sententiarum* 16 (PL, CCX, 236D) (Chenu, p. 113). Those who have strictly logical minds

have difficulty with the ambiguity of polysemousness. “‘To have more than one sense is to have no sense at all,’ Aristotle had said.” (Chenu, 137).

⁷⁸ See Berthaud, col. 68.

⁷⁹ Treatise, Bk. 5, ch. 11; Ryan, vol. 1, pp. 260-261. Legros points out the influence here of Pseudo-Dionysius that gives the passage the flavor of Platonism. However, the Platonism is only apparent. “La conception dionysienne relève du platonisme par sa conception des deux mondes, mais il la transforme en introduisant une division ternaire à l’intérieur de chacun de ces deux mondes. L’échelle a une extension à la fois terrestre et céleste. La différence majeure avec Platon est que l’échelle salésienne n’a pas un caractère intellectuel. Elle n’a pas un caractère cosmologique: en effet, François de Sales ne mentionne ni la terre, ni le ciel; son échelle relie Dieu et les hommes.” (Legros, p. 212).

⁸⁰ Henry McGee, *Jacob’s Ladder: The History of the Human Genome* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 251.