Images of the Cross in St. Francis de Sales

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While doing research on the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the *Treatise on the Love of God*, the sermons, and letters, I noticed that the Cross is a recurrent theme in the work of Francis de Sales. This is partly explained by the polemic against Protestant iconoclasm. Let us recall that the *Defense of the Standard of the Holy Cross* was written during Francis’s missionary work in the Chablais in the 1590s and that the Forty Hours ceremonies of Annemasse and Thonon involved the solemn erecting of the Cross that had been torn down by the Calvinists. These acts of reparation are alluded to in the sermon for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (image 14 in the Appendix to this article): “Faithful Jews always tried to rebuild their Temple when enemies tore it down or made breaches in it. In the same way, faithful Christians must always work to exalt the holy Cross the more the enemies endeavor to fight against its honor and devotion.”

Francis treats the recurrent theme of the Crucifixion with the help of visual representations, of concrete images which become veritable paintings, indeed dramatic scenes. Francis calls these images “similitudes.” In the example above, the Cross is compared to the Temple of Jerusalem, and elsewhere to a tree, a

Grégoire Huret (1606-70). *The Crucifixion with St. Francis de Sales, St. Jane Frances de Chantal, and Visitandine Nuns*, engraving in Henri de Maupas du Tour, *La vie de la venerable Mère Jeanne Françoise Frémiot* (Paris, 1644). Guided by Francis de Sales and Mother de Chantal, the Visitandines gather the flowers of the little virtues that blossom at the foot of the cross of the crucified Savior: humility, simplicity, charity, purity, and gentleness. The engraving’s inscription, whose source is Mother Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy’s biography of Jane, further draws out its meaning: “It is on this sacred mount where the chaste bees gather the honey of divine virtues on these lovely flowers.”
vine, a book, etc. The crucified Christ is compared to a pregnant woman, a spouse, a serpent, an oriole. These similitudes should not be regarded as mere embellishments, but as symbols which express the meaning the Cross had for Francis.

In the first part of this article, which is an analysis, I will explain some particularly interesting symbols employed by Francis to speak about the Cross and the crucified Christ. In the first place, there are symbols that are universally present in different cultures; and, secondly, symbols that are more specifically characteristic of Francis and that constitute in some way his personal signature and assist us in understanding his particular interest in the theme of the Cross. Given the abundance of the material and space constraints, I will limit myself to the symbol of the serpent (associated with the symbol of the oriole) and the symbolism of the wounds of Christ for the first category of images; and to the mother who gives birth, the balance pole, and piece of wood in the bucket of water for the second category.

In the second part, which is a synthesis, I will discuss Salesian similitudes in general. At the outset, we shall see that Francis draws them from two sources: Sacred Scripture and natural history (see the sources column of the Appendix). Then, I will show in what consists the power of the symbolic representations of the Cross, their “inestimable efficacy to enlighten the understanding and move the will”—to use the very words of Francis’s famous letter of 1604 to Archbishop Frémion on the preacher and preaching.

In this study, I essentially rely on two works: Gilbert Durand’s Les structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire (1960) [The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary], and Carl Gustav Jung’s Métamorphose de l’âme et ses symbols (1953) [The Metamorphosis of the Soul and Its Symbols].

I. The Symbols of the Cross and of the Crucified Jesus: Meaning and Effects

A. Universal Symbols

1. The Serpent (and the Associated Symbol of the Oriole)

According to Gilbert Durand, the serpent is “one of the most important symbols of the human imagination.” Francis applies the symbol of the serpent to the crucified Jesus in his sermon for Good Friday, 25 March 1622, beginning with the scriptural passage about the bronze serpent in the Old Testament Book of Numbers, chapter 21 (Appendix: image no. 31).

Here . . . are the causes of the death of Jesus Christ: the first is that He was Savior, holy and King; the second, that He wished to redeem those who acknowledge Him, which is what the word “Jews” means that Pilate had written on the standard of the Cross.

The Old Testament taught us this truth by many figures and images, particularly that of the brass serpent that Moses erected on the pole to protect the Israelites from serpent bites. You know the whole story, I am sure, and how it happened [Numbers 21:6-9]. . . . [Jesus], a Nazarene, [flowering] in all holiness, . . . [was not] a serpent, actually or figuratively, except to cure us from the bites of the true serpent. Because of His great love for us, He burdened Himself with our sins, with our miseries and weaknesses [Isaiah 53:4ff]; He clothed Himself with our plumage and shell. In short, He became the serpent placed on the wood of the Cross to preserve from death and give life to all who would gaze upon Him.3

The symbolism of the serpent is very rich. It is an ambivalent symbol, that is, “a good symbol and evil symbol” at the same time. In the text from the Book of Numbers, “small serpents came out from the earth and overran the desert where the poor Israelites were. Their bite, though apparently not very painful, was certainly very dangerous. It was so venomous that all those bitten would surely have died if, in His goodness and divine Providence, God had not provided a remedy.”4 At the same time, the brazen serpent heals from the bite.

The serpent is a symbol of the diabolic tempter, as well as of Christ the Savior. In both instances, the serpent is “entwined with” the tree. With regard to the brazen serpent, which serves as a remedy, it forms with the tree a “caducean assemblage” (Durand). The bite symbolizes the “instinctive forces that enter into opposition” with the subject.

The serpent, by its movement, by its molting, is also a symbol of metamorphosis. The metamorphosis, as noted above, is that of the Cross, which is covered with flowers and fruits, symbolic of Jesus’s passing over into the life of God. For those who look at this serpent hanging from the pole, the passing which occurs leads them from brutish ecstasy to angelic ecstasy, a movement described in this important passage of the Treatise, Book 1, chapter 10:

Since ecstasy is nothing else than going out of oneself, to whichever side one goes out, one is in ecstasy. Those who, touched by divine and intellectual delights, allow their hearts to be enraptured by such feelings are certainly out of themselves. It means that they are above their natural state. By going out in this happy and longed for way, they enter a nobler and higher state. They are more like angels in their activity though they are humans by the substance of their nature. They should be called human angels or angelic humans. On the contrary, those who are attracted by sensual pleasures and give themselves up to their enjoyment descend from their middle state to the lowest of the beasts. They deserve to be called brutes because of their activity though they are humans by nature. Unhappy are those who are out of themselves only to reach a condition infinitely unworthy of the natural state.5

Here two observations may be offered. First, the movement of ecstasy is made vertically—upwards or downwards—which refers to the verticality of the Cross. In the works of the poet Henri Michaux (1899-1984), the upward movement symbolizes
salvation. Second, those who go out of themselves by an upward movement are called “human angels or angelic humans,” expressions which are found in the Introduction, Part I, chapter 2, to designate those who ascend and descend Jacob’s ladder, the “devout.”

Francis makes his thought clearer in the Treatise, Book 7, chapters 6-8, where what he calls “the ecstasy of work and life” is the transformation that makes mutants of those who experience it. It is not a question of a change but of a mutation, of “not only living a normal, upright, and Christian life, but a superhuman life . . . a life which is in every way above and beyond our natural condition” (Book 7, chapter 6).

Not to steal, not to lie, not to be lustful (impure), not to swear in vain, to love and honor one’s parents, not to kill, to pray to God—all that is to live in accordance with natural human reason. But to give up our possessions, to love poverty, to call and esteem it as one’s most delightful lady, to value disgrace, contempt, abjection, persecutions, martyrdom as happiness and beatitudes, to keep absolute chastity and finally to live in the midst of the world and in this mortal life against all the opinions and maxims of the world and to go against the current of the river of this life by habitual resignations, renunciations and self-denial—this is not to live humanly but superhumanly. This is not to live within ourselves but beyond ourselves. For no one can transcend self in this way, unless the eternal Father draws him [John 6:44]. Hence this kind of life must be a continual and permanent ecstasy of activity and work.

Thus, St. Ignatius [of Antioch], as told by St. Denis, used to say that his love was crucified. It is as though he wanted to say: “My natural, human love, with all the passions which arise from it, is nailed to the Cross. I have made it to die as a mortal love which was leading my heart to live a perishable life in order to rise again to an immortal life. So also I have died with Him on the Cross to my natural love which was the temporal life of my soul. Thus I may rise to the supernatural life of love to be practiced in heaven, hence unending.

The theme of transmutation is taken up again in the last paragraph of Book 11, chapter 20, of the Treatise:

In this way then divine love supplants and subjects the affections and passions, turning them from the end to which self-love wants to take them and directing them to its spiritual intention. The rainbow touching the aspalathus plant deprives it of its odor and gives it a far more excellent one. So also sacred love touching our passions takes them from their earthly end and gives them a heavenly end. The appetite for food is made very spiritual if before gratifying it one gives it the motive of love. . . . O holy and sacred alchemy!
O divine alchemy powder by which all the metals of our passions, affections and actions are transformed into the most pure gold of heavenly love.8

The symbol of the serpent allows us to broach the theme of sacrifice. In numerous myths, just as in Nietzsche's Glory and Eternity, the saving hero, likened to a serpent, is in his person both priest and victim. In the Gospel of John 3:14, cited in Francis's sermon for Good Friday 1622, Christ compares Himself to the serpent lifted up by Moses: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but may have eternal life.” Moreover, Jesus points out that He gives His life and no one takes it from Him. The metamorphosis operates by the “sacrifice of an instinctive indomitability.” The symbol of the Cross corresponds to the theme of sacrifice. (Appendix: images nos. 23 and 44). This is the meaning that is to be given to asceticism or “mortification.”

In this connection, let us reread the Introduction, Part I, chapter 5:

“The flowers have appeared in our land; the time of pruning the vines has come,” says the Sacred Spouse [Song of Songs 2:12]. What other flowers do we have in our hearts, Philothea, except good desires? As soon as they appear, we must take a pruning knife in order to remove from our conscience all dead and worthless works. Before an alien girl was permitted to marry an Israelite, she had to put aside her clothing as a captive, pare her nails, and shave her hair [Deuteronomy 21:12]. So also a soul that hopes for the honor of being made spouse of the Son of God must “put off the old man and put on the new” [Ephesians 4:22], by forsaking sin and removing and cutting away whatever obstructs union with God. For us the beginning of good health is to be purged of our sinful tendencies.9

To put off the old man and put on the new, as St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, is to bring about a change, in contradistinction to that of Christ who, by His incarnation “burdened Himself with our sins, with our miseries and weaknesses [Isaiah 53:4]; He clothed Himself with our plumage and shell. In short, He became the serpent placed on the wood of the Cross to preserve from death and give life to all who would gaze upon Him.”10

Durand observes that “the serpent has other animal qualities,” in particular those of a bird (consider the plumed serpent of the Aztecs with wings of a dragon—a variant of the serpent—and what Francis de Sales says about Christ who “clothed Himself with our plumage and shell”). In the same sermon of Good Friday 1622, we also find the similitude of the oriole associated with that of the serpent, two animal healers.

Here, where I always speak freely and frankly, I must tell you what happened to me once when I was about to preach on the Passion of Jesus Christ in one of the most famous cities of France. I needed some appropriate symbol to describe my subject more clearly. Not finding any elsewhere, I found one in a book which told of a bird which was placed on earth—I have always since thought, only as a figure of the Passion [Pliny, Natural History, 30, 11; Plutarch, Colloq. Mensal, 5,7] . . . .

This symbol . . . is the bird called the oriole in French and icterus in Latin. This bird is entirely yellow, but not because of jaundice. It has this special property: from a treetop, it cures those afflicted with serious jaundice, always at the expense of its own life. When the jaundice person and this bird exchange glances, the
oriole, as it were, so pities man, his good friend, that he draws to himself the man's jaundice. Then the bird's whole body turns completely yellow. His wings, which were already yellow, become more so; then his stomach, feet, all his feathers, and his little body. Meanwhile, man, his great friend, becomes white, clean, and completely cured. This poor bird then flies away, sighing and singing a song pitifully loving for the delight he experiences in dying to save his human friend. A truly admirable phenomenon! This bird is never afflicted with jaundice, yet he dies of it when curing a man so afflicted. Indeed, it takes pleasure in dying to save him.

Our Lord is certainly this divine Bird of Paradise, the divine Oriole, attached to the tree of the Cross to save and deliver us from the serious jaundice of sin...11

An ever present theme in this sermon, which expounds on the symbols of the serpent and the oriole, is that of the glance. To be healed from the bite of the diabolical serpent, one must look at the brazen serpent, a prefiguration of the crucified Savior. To be healed of the jaundice of sin, one must look at the oriole. To look or consider. Here it should be recalled that the “considerations” constitute the second part of the method of meditation presented by Francis de Sales in the Introduction (Part 2, chapter 5).

Why is looking upon the crucified Jesus saving or salvific? Francis gives the following answer:

The implication in all this is clear: since He died of love for us, we also should die of love for Him; or, if we cannot die of love, at least we should live for Him alone [2 Corinthians 5:24-25; cf. Treatise, Book 7, chapter 8].

He died, then. But although He died for us and was lifted up on the Cross, those who refuse to look upon Him will surely die, for there is no other redemption but in this Cross. O God, how spiritually beneficial and profitable is a consideration of Your Cross and Passion! Can we contemplate our Savior's humility on the Cross without becoming humble and having some affection for humiliations? Can we see His obedience without being obedient? Certainly not! No one has ever looked upon Our Lord crucified and remained dead or sick. On the other hand, all who have died have done so because they were unwilling to gaze upon Him, just as the Israelites died who were unwilling to gaze upon the serpent that Moses had raised upon the pole.12

Francis's response is more explicit in the Treatise, Book 7, chapter 8 (Appendix: image no. 18):

Yes, Theotimus, nothing compels the human heart so much as love. If one knows to be loved, by whomsoever it is, one is urged to return love. If it is a common man who is loved by a great king, how much more is he compelled to do so? And now we know that Jesus Christ, true God, eternal, all powerful, has loved us to such an extent as to will to suffer for us death and the death of the Cross [Philippians 2:8]. O my dear Theotimus, is our heart not under pressure and do we not feel pressed hard by its force? Does it not compel us to show our love by a compelling love and an intensity as violent as it is all lovable and affectionate? How does this divine Lover impel us...?

A little girl in the island of Sestos had reared a small eagle. She took care of it with such tender concern which children are accustomed to in such tasks. The eagle grew up and began to fly little by little. It began hunting small birds according to its natural instinct. As it became stronger it swooped down on wild animals. It never failed to faithfully bring its prey to its dear little mistress, as if to show gratitude for the food it had received from her. Now it happened that one day that little girl died while the eagle was on chase.
According to the customs of that time and of that country, her body was laid on a funeral pyre in public to be cremated. When the flames of fire began to rise, the eagle came over with a flapping of wings. It saw this suddenly unexpected sad sight. Overcome by grief it loosened its claws, dropped the prey, came, and cast itself over its poor beloved mistress. It covered her body with its wings as if to protect her from the fire or to embrace her out of pity. It remained determined and still dying and courageously burning to death with her. The intensity of its affection could not give way to the burning flames of fire.

Let us [gaze upon], Theotimus, the divine Redeemer stretched on the Cross, as on His funeral pyre of honor, where He dies of love for us. But it is a love more painful than death itself or a death more affectionate, tender than love itself. Well, should we not cast ourselves in spirit upon Him to die on the cross with Him who for love of us wanted so much to die for us? I will hold on to him and will never let him go [Song of Songs 3:4]. I shall die for love of Him and will be burned within the flames of His love. One same [fire] will consume this divine Creator and His little creature. My Jesus is all mine and I am all His [Song of Songs 2:16]. I will live and die on His bosom. Neither death nor life will ever separate me from Him [Romans 8:38-39].

It is the sight of the love of the crucified Jesus which calls forth the love of those who gaze at Him. “Let us [gaze upon] (voyons), Theotimus, the divine Redeemer stretched on the Cross.” Francis de Sales puts the verb “gaze upon” (voir) in the present imperative. In effect, the visual representation elaborated by the author transports the reader to the place and moment of the Crucifixion. In the “subject of the mystery, the third point of preparation” of meditation (Introduction, Part 2, chapter 4), Francis advises “to picture in imagination the entire mystery you wish to meditate on as if it really took place here before us.”

Such is the power of interior images, of mental representations, namely, to make the one who gazes at them contemporary with no matter what period, to transport us to no matter what place, by the power of the imagination. Thus this excerpt of the Treatise allows the reader to be present at the Passion, at the “death [of Jesus] more affectionate, tender than love itself,” so as to be moved by it.

Note that the effectiveness of the sacrifice derives not from the suffering but love, which is manifested through the sacrifice, a “love more painful than death itself.” In this regard, two conceptions of the Redemption are revealed by means of the images employed by Francis de Sales when he pictures the scene of the Crucifixion, two conceptions concurrent if not opposed. The first, dominant, is that which I have just explained. The second appears surreptitiously in his sermon for Good Friday, 17 April 1620 (Appendix: image 26):

But in addition to the grace which He gives to sinners, [our divine Master] asks it for them from His heavenly Father. . . . My Father, forgive [Luke 23:34] these poor sinners and even those who crucify Me for I am here to pay for them. I do not ask that You forgive Me for I have been mounted on the bank of the Cross in order to satisfy all of their debts and so that You may not ask anything of them and that Your goodness may forgive them, I will pour out My blood to the very last drop, even though just one drop would be sufficient. I willingly agree to undergo the effects of Your justice. Put on Me the punishment of their sins, but as regards sinners, forgive them [Luke 23:34] for such is My will [author's emphasis].

Francis de Sales could have relied upon his courses on the theology of expiatory redemption. Rather, he prefers to present his interpretation of the mystery of Jesus’s Crucifixion by means of similitudes that he collected over the years and that were very personal for him, symbols which he retrieved from his collective imagination. This was all the better since presenting Jesus as an expiatory victim to appease the divine anger is a teaching which unsettles consciences.

2. The Symbolism of the Wounds
   a) Tabernacle (Tent), Dwelling, Tree for Nesting, Cave

Let us bring together several passages, on which I then comment.

And you, o most saintly and seraphic doctor Bonaventure . . . O how marvelous is your saying when you write [Stimulus Amoris 1]: “O how good it is to be with the Crucifix! I would like to set up there three tents [Matthew 17:4]: one for His hands, the other for His feet, and the third for the wound in His side. There I want to rest; I want to keep vigil, I want to read, I want to speak” (Appendix: image no. 9).16

In a word, go further and further, my dear daughter, accomplishing your good intentions and your holy resolutions. Deepen more and more your considerations in the wounds of our Lord, where you will find an abyss of reasons that will affirm you in your generous undertaking, and you will experience how vain and vile is the heart that makes its dwelling elsewhere, which makes its nest in another tree than in the one of the Cross. O my God, how happy we will be if we live and die in this holy tabernacle! No, nothing in the world is worthy of our love. It owes everything to this Savior who has given us everything of His (Appendix: image no. 35).17

I don’t know where you will be this Lent according to the body. According to the spirit, I hope that you will be in the clefts [Song of Songs 2:14] of the dove and in
the pierced side of our dear Savior. I very much desire to be there often with you. May God in His sovereign goodness grant us this grace. Yesterday, I saw you, it seems to me, that gazing upon the open side of our Savior, you wanted to take His heart and put it in yours, like a king in a small kingdom. Even though His heart is larger than yours, maybe He could make it smaller to make it fit. O how good is this Savior, my dear daughter! How lovable His heart! Let us dwell there in this holy domicile. May this heart always live in our hearts, this blood always pulse in the veins of our souls (Appendix: image no. 41).18

We may add to these this passage from the Introduction to the Devout Life, Part 2, chapter 12, “Spiritual Retreat”:

Birds have nests in trees and can retire to them when need arises and stags have bushes and thickets where they take cover, hide, and enjoy the cool shade during the summer. So also, Philothea, our hearts should each day pick and choose some place, either on Mount Calvary or within our Lord’s wounds or in some other place near Him, as a retreat where they can retire at various times to refresh and restore themselves during their exterior occupations. There, as in a stronghold, they can defend themselves against temptations. . . .

When Blessed Elzear, Count of Arian in Provence, had been away for a long time from his devout and chaste wife Delphina, she sent a messenger to him to inquire about his health and he returned this answer: “I am very well, my dear wife, but if you desire to see me, you must seek me in the wound in the side of our beloved Jesus, for it is there that I dwell and there that you shall find me. If you seek me elsewhere, you will seek in vain.”19

In the Treatise, Book 5, chapter 11, the Beloved, addressing His beloved, associates His wound, “the cleft of the opening of His side,” with a garden in springtime. And in Book 3, chapter 8, Francis de Sales says regarding Mary, alluding to Song of Songs 2:14: “Perhaps she often dreamed that as our Lord had formerly comparison to the three tents (or tabernacles) that Peter wanted to set up during the Transfiguration, to a dwelling, a nest in a tree, a cleft for a dove, a domicile, bushes where stags hide, and a cleft of a rock. The wounds of Christ become the ideal place for finding refuge and peace. But there is more. Mary’s dream is to sleep in the wounded side of this Son whom she had carried within her. This figure of reversal establishes an equivalence between the womb and the wound. The bird makes its nest in the tree to lay eggs and hatch them there. The grotto and the opening in the rock are maternal symbols. Francis presents the wounds of Christ as the place of rebirth. For Gilbert Durand, “the complex of retreat” is a synonym for a return to the mother, not in the regressive sense as in Francis de Sales, but in the hope of engendering a superior life. Let us remember that we are confronted with symbols that are not to be taken literally, as Nicodemus does in John 3, when Jesus spoke to him about being born again: “How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time in the womb of his mother to be born?” (John 3:4).

b) The Nourishing Breast

At the end of the Treatise on the Love of God, Book 12, chapter 13 (Appendix: image no. 4), we read:

Finally, to conclude . . . the Death and Passion of our Lord are the sweetest and strongest motive that can inflame our hearts in this life. Truly, the mystical bees make their most delicious honey in the wounds of this Lion of the tribe of Juda [Revelation 5:5]. He was killed, pierced, and torn on Calvary. The children of the Cross glory in their admirable riddle (paradox) which the world does not understand. From death which swallows up everything comes out the food of our consolation. From death stronger than anything comes the sweetness of the honey of our love [Judges 14:8, 14]. O Jesus, my Savior, how lovable is Your death because it is the supreme expression of Your love!21

The similitude of the bees comes from the Old Testament Book of Judges 14:5-14. Here is this passage from the English translation of The New Jerusalem Bible:

Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he noticed a woman, a Philistine girl. He went home and told his father and mother about this. “At Timnah,” he said, “I noticed a woman, a Philistine girl. So now get her for me, to be my wife.” His father and mother said to him, “Is there no woman among your brothers’ daughters or in our entire nation, for you to go and take a wife among these uncircumcised Philistines?” But Samson said to his father, “Get that one for me; for she is the one I am fond of.” His father and mother did not know at all that all this came from Yahweh, who was seeking grounds for a quarrel with the Philistines, since at this time the Philistines dominated Israel.

Samson went down to Timnah and, as he reached the vineyards of Timnah, he saw a young lion coming roaring towards him. The spirit of Yahweh seized on him and he tore the lion to pieces with his bare hands as though it was a kid; but he did not tell his father or mother what he had done. He went down and talked to the woman, and he became fond of her. Not long after this, Samson went back to marry her. He went out of his way to look at the carcass of the lion, and there was a
swarm of bees in the lion's body, and honey. He took some honey in his hand and ate it as he went along. On returning to his father and mother, he gave some to them, which they ate too, but he did not tell them that he had taken it from the lion's carcass. His father then went down to the woman, and Samson made a feast there, as is the custom for young men. And when the Philistines saw him, they chose thirty companions to stay with him.

Samson then said to them, “Let me ask you a riddle. . . . “Out of the eater came what is eaten, out of the strong came what is sweet.” But three days went by and they could not solve the riddle.

The bees of the biblical text symbolize Theotimus whom Francis de Sales addresseses. The honey symbolizes the love that Theotimus has for Jesus as Savior; the lion torn apart symbolizes Jesus crucified; the riddle proposed by Samson to this thirty companions corresponds to the problem solved by the children of the Cross. Note that the adjective “mystical” is used to characterize the bees. This epithet is frequently assigned in Salesian texts to elements of nature, plants, or animals: “mystical” indicating something secret that needs to be deciphered. This adjective signals a similitude which necessitates what Francis calls in his letter to Archbishop Frémyot a “meditation” on the word “bee” in the story of Samson: that is to say, an effort of ingenious interpretation to find in this word something pertinent and applicable to the spiritual life of his readers.

Let us now read an excerpt from Francis's letter of 12 October 1608 to Mme. de la Fléchère, in which the wound in the side is explicitly likened to nourishing breasts (Appendix: image no. 38):

I have heard that you were ahead of schedule with your grape harvest. . . . In the Song of Songs [1:1], the sacred spouse, speaking to her divine spouse, says that His breasts are better than wine, fragrant with precious ointment. But what breasts does this Spouse have? They are His grace and His promise; for His breast, amorous of our salvation, is full of graces which He distils from hour to hour, yes from moment to moment, into our minds. If we really think about it, we will discover that it is so. From the other side, He has the promise of eternal life [John 6:69], with which like a holy and lovable milk, He nourishes our hope, with His grace He nourishes our love. This precious liqueur is much more enjoyable than wine. . . .

Still reflecting, my dear daughter, on the breasts of the Spouse being the pierced side on the Cross, O God, how impressively does this Cross represent a serpentine vine, but an abundantly fruitful one! There is only one grape on it, but it is worth more than a thousand. How many seeds have saintly souls found in it by the consideration of so many graces and virtues that this Savior of the world has displayed there.22

B. Original Symbols

1. The Mother Who Gives Birth

(Appendix: image no. 1)

See, my Philothea, it is certain that on the tree of the Cross the Heart of Jesus, our beloved, beheld your heart and loved it. By the love He bore it, He obtained every good that you shall ever have, among others our resolutions. Just as an expectant mother prepares cradle, linen, swaddling clothes, and even a nurse for the child she hopes to bring forth, although it is not yet in the world, so also since our Lord's bounty is fruitful and heavy with you and He plans to bring you forth to salvation and make you His child, He prepared on the tree of the Cross whatever was necessary for you—a spiritual cradle, linen, swaddling clothes, nurse, and all else needed to make you happy. Such are all those means, all those attractions, all those graces by which He leads your soul and seeks to bring it to perfection.23

The “means . . . attractions . . . graces,” whereby we increase and advance in perfection, are the fruits of the Passion that grow under the tree of the Cross. In painting, this is called an anamorphosis that brings birth out of death: the sufferings of Christ are like the pains of childbirth, the shroud becomes the newborn's linen and swaddling clothes, the tomb is the cradle. It does not extend to Christ Himself, who is not represented under the aspect of a wet nurse, with breasts full of the milk of the movements and attractions, as we read in the Treatise.

2. The Balance Pole;

The Piece of Wood in the Water Bucket

Here are two original similitudes that speak of a state of mind, whose seeking and achieving are of capital importance for Francis de Sales, namely, equanimity of spirit, the antidote for all anxieties and interior troubles.

Just as tightrope walkers always carry a pole to counterbalance the body in the various movements they make on a dangerous plank, so must you also firmly hold in your hand the holy Cross of our Lord so as to walk with confidence amid the perils that the variety of encounters and conversations can cause to your affections. In this way, all of your movements will be balanced or counterbalanced by the unique and very lovable will of the One to whom you have vowed your
whole body and your whole heart (Appendix: image no. 39).24

I saw a while ago a girl carrying a bucket of water on her head. In the middle of the bucket she had placed a piece of wood. I wanted to know why, and she said that it was to prevent the water from moving for fear that it would spill. From that time on, I said to myself, we have to put the Cross in the middle of our hearts to stop the movements of our affections in this wood and by this wood so that they do not otherwise spill out through anxiety and disturbances of the spirit. I always have to tell you my little thoughts (Appendix: image no. 37).25

II. Salesian Similitudes

A. Their Sources

Similitudes (which consist in the symbolic use of concrete things) can be taken directly from nature or, more sublety, from Scripture, this second source being more preferable according to Francis de Sales. That which holds for the sermons is likewise obviously applicable to all Salesian writings.

When similitudes are drawn directly from nature, Francis de Sales looks for them in the Latin version of Pliny the Elder’s Natural History, an encyclopedia dating from the first century A.D., or from his personal experience. An example is the image of the oriole discussed above (Appendix: image no. 32, drawn from Pliny).

The visual representations proposed by Francis prompt us to look anew at the Cross and the Crucifixion and to consider them from a fresh perspective that attracts our attention. Moreover, it is Francis’s use of symbols and images that makes his writings still readable today with interest and pleasure.

B. The “Inestimable Efficacy” of Similitudes

Francis de Sales does not essentially have recourse to images for the sake of stylistic embellishment or out of purely aesthetic concerns. Aesthetics has for him a pedagogical and moral goal, as it has for all baroque art, the art form of the Counter-Reformation issuing from the Council of Trent (1545-63). In his letter of 1604 to St. Jane de Chantal’s brother, Archbishop Frémyot, Francis avers that similitudes “have an inestimable efficacy to enlighten the understanding and move the will.”26

From another perspective, the symbol has an anthropological dimension because it makes salient that which characterizes the human condition: birth, death, the world beyond death, the masculine and the feminine, family relationships to mother and father. This is why I am interested in the images used by Francis de Sales and the evangelical message that these images convey. “The words of Jesus have a very great suggestive power because they express symbolic truths based on the psychic structure of man.”27 Francis de Sales, by breaking open the symbolic and spiritual meaning of Christian dogma, thus allows it to speak, because the symbols utilized touch psychological depths and are found in all cultures.

Francis’s purpose does not derive from speculative theology but from mystical theology, what he calls in the Treatise on the Love of God “the science of the saints.” “The depths of a science,” he continues, “are always somewhat hard to sound.” Symbols work to bring to “the most difficult parts of this discussion a good and loveable light.”28 The image allows us to investigate that which is out of reach of the intellect. Faced with the ineffability of spiritual experience and of the mystery of God, the image is indispensable for the one who wants to understand and make others understand. It does not enclose the unfathomable mystery of Jesus and of God in a language of objective truth. One can only speak of God in a poetic language. The manifestation of an invisible God cannot be realized except by means of plastic and symbolic forms. The symbolic object par excellence is precisely constituted by the body of the crucified Jesus that makes visible to the eyes of flesh the infinite love of God (Appendix: image no. 3).

Contemplate this divine love of the Beloved as He stands behind the wall of His humanity. See, He can be seen through the wounds of His body and the opening on His side as if through some windows. He is there as if looking at us through the lattice [Song of Songs 2:9].

It is certain, Theotimus, that divine love is seated on the heart of the Savior as on a royal throne. Through the cleft of His pierced side, He looks at the children of humans. For this heart, being the King of hearts, always keeps His eyes on our hearts. Those who look through the lattice see yet only a glimpse of it. So too, the divine love of this heart, rather this heart of divine love, always sees our hearts clearly. Nevertheless, we do not see Him; we have only a glimpse of Him. O God, if we saw Him as He is, then we would die of love for Him because we are mortals. In fact, He Himself died for us while He was mortal. He would still have died for us, had He not been immortal.29
This image demonstrates well what a symbol is. It both obscures and reveals at the same time.

2. “To Affect the Will”:
The Ethical Orientation of Desire

To enlighten the understanding and to move the will. The symbol, besides revealing meaning, is effective. The symbol is dynamic. To speak in the manner of Francis de Sales, the symbol has "an inestimable efficacy to . . . move the will." We are not in the realm of sentiment, much less of sentimentality.

With regard to the effectiveness of the symbol, it must not be forgotten that in the sacraments, the grace of God acts through symbols, which accounts for the catechesis called mystagogy. We have seen in the first part of this paper how the Salesian symbolism of the Cross is a sacrament of life.

The power of the symbol derives from the fact that it is elaborated and operates in conjunction with the body and the mind. Desire, or what Francis de Sales calls the passions, is fluid, an energy which seeks to be channeled and directed. By its nature, the symbol is both corporeal (its concrete trait) and spiritual (its hidden meaning); it harnesses instinctive, animal drives of the human person either toward good and life—drives that are transformed into virtues—or toward evil and death—drives that become vices.

This study of the literary nature and the aims of the Salesian œuvre shows that Francis de Sales's visual representations are comparable to the devotional images and paintings created by the artists and painters of his day. Francis's visual representations of the Cross and the crucified Jesus are veritable meditations. The symbolic image gives rise to what he calls in the Introduction to the Devout Life, Part 2, chapter, 5, “considerations.” These considerations, as Francis specifies in the next chapter, are to produce "devout movements in the will, the affective part of our soul, such as love of God and neighbor, desire for heaven and glory, zeal for the salvation of souls, imitation of the life of our Lord, compassion, awe, joy . . . ."30

Three observations may serve as a kind of conclusion. In the first place, the symbols Francis de Sales employs to speak of the Cross and the crucified Jesus all evoke life. It allows his readers, his listeners to accept the destiny, the fatality of death. Secondly, the specifically Christian approach relies on the fact that all the symbols Francis uses refer not to mythological beings but to a concrete, historical person: Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Thirdly, Francis's theology of the Cross is very similar to that of St. John the Evangelist. Francis refers to the encounter with Nicodemus in John 3, where Jesus compares Himself to the bronze serpent. As we have seen, the notion of rebirth stands out in that encounter. Moreover, for Francis de Sales, as for John, the Crucifixion is the glorification of the Son of Man.

Translated from French by Alexander T. Pocetto, OSFS

The ICSS NEWSLETTER was founded in 1997 and is published biannually by the International Commission for Salesian Studies (ICSS) of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales (Joseph F. Chorpenning, OSFS, Chairman; Valdir Fornentini, OSFS; Dirk Koster, OSFS; Herbert Winklehner, OSFS). Its primary purpose is to disseminate on a global scale information dealing with Salesian Studies (St. Francis de Sales; St. Jane Frances de Chantal; Bl. Louis Brison, founder of the De Sales Oblates and the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales; the Visitation of Holy Mary; Lay Institutes and other Religious who are members of the Salesian Family).

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News Editor: Alexander T. Pocetto, OSFS. News items for future issues should be sent to Fr. Pocetto via e-mail (alexander.pocetto@desales.edu), fax (610/282-2059), or by mail (De Sales University, 2755 Station Avenue, Center Valley, PA 18034-9568, USA).

Design and typesetting: Carol McLaughlin
## APPENDIX
### IMAGES OF THE CROSS AND OF THE CRUCIFIED JESUS IN ST. FRANCIS DE SALES
or HOW THE CROSS GUSHES FORTH LIFE!

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SALESIAN STUDIES
WORLDWIDE

May 2013: The Netherlands Province of the De Sales Oblates established a Steering Committee for Disseminating the Dutch Salesian Heritage, which refers to the province’s spiritual rather than the material legacy. The Committee, which meets every six weeks, is comprised of five members (one from each of the five circles of the Dutch Salesian family), and its task is to ensure the future viability and vitality of the Dutch Salesian family.

26-30 August 2013: The Journées Salésiennes du Benin, with the theme “The New Evangelization,” was held at Bamé in the Cardinal Bernardin Gantin Pastoral Center, with more than forty participants, representing all of the various Salesian groups in Benin: De Sales Oblates, Priests of St. Francis de Sales, Salesian Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate, Salesian Sisters of the Visitation, the Sons and Daughters of St. Francis de Sales, as well as novices, postulants, and aspirants to the Salesian religious life.

5 September 2013: The “fifth consecration renewal,” i.e., final commitment, of Monika Rauh as a member of the Secular Institute of St. Francis de Sales took place during a solemn celebration of the Eucharist at the Retreat House St. Paul in Leitershofen near Augsburg, Bavaria, and as the culmination of “Community Week,” the annual convocation of the Secular Institute from Germany and Austria. The week’s speakers included Fr. Konrad Esser, OSFS, General Assistant of the Secular Institute, and Fr. Hans-Werner Günther, OSFS, Spiritual Assistant of the German-Speaking Region.

13-15 September 2013: Fourteen Visitandines from monasteries in Germany and Austria gathered, with Sr. Lioba Zeulka, VHM, superior of the German-Speaking Federation, and Fr. Herbert Winklehner, OSFS, Regional Assistant of the Federation, at the Visitation Monastery of St. Joseph in Zangberg, Bavaria, to reflect on the topic, “God Says Yes to Us. Living the Vows Today.”

September 2013-January 2014: Under the auspices of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture (SCF&C) at De Sales University (DSU), Fr. John Fisher, OSFS, Acting SCF&C Director, continued the “inculturation program” for all new DSU faculty and staff. This program consisted of monthly luncheon sessions, each with a different Salesian theme: September’s was Envisioning (vision and mission: “Be who you are…”); October’s, Enabling (strategies and objectives: The Little Virtues); November’s, Enacting (highly effective habits: The Preparation of the Day and Examen); and January’s, Evaluating.

October 2013: The De Sales Oblates of the German-Speaking Province organized two pilgrimages for vocations in Austria and Bavaria. The pilgrimage site in Austria was the parish church of St. Francis de Sales in Lichtenberg near Linz an der Donau, Upper Austria, and in Bavaria, Eichstätt, where the De Sales Oblates have lived and worked for ninety years (1923-2013).

18-20 October 2013: The 2nd Forum of Salesian Spirituality, organized by the De Sales Oblates of the South American and Caribbean Province in collaboration with the Salesians of Don Bosco of the South Brazilian Province, took place at the Paróquia Santa Isabel-Viamão, with more than 125 participants. The highlight of the Forum was the ordination of two De Sales Oblates to the diaconate on October 19: Jude Jean-Louis, OSFS, and Moise Jean, OSFS.

3 November 2013: The musical, “The Baroness,” about St. Jane Frances de Chantal (www.musical-diebaronin.de) was performed in Bad Endorf, near Munich, Bavaria, and this performance was completely sold out, with an audience of more than 600.

6-10 November 2013: A three-day Renewal Workshop organized around the blessed Trinity was offered to the perpetually professed members of the India Mission by the General Council of the De Sales Oblates. This was followed by a two-day Spiritual Retreat led by Fr. Barry Strong, OSFS, whose theme was “Spirituality of the Heart.” Both took place at the Camillian’s Pastoral Health Center in Carmalaram (India).

Advent 2013: The SCF&C at DSU offered three free online courses during Advent: St. John Marie, OSFS, presented “Grace and Filled Waiting,” Deacon George Kelly hosted an “Advent Walk with St. Francis de Sales and St. Matthew” (Sunday Gospel Readings), and Fr. John Fisher, OSFS, introduced “Virtuous Life,” incorporating among other works, the Introduction to the Devout Life and Wendy Wright’s series, St. Francis de Sales and the Salesians: A Spirituality for the Modern World (see below). Fifty-seven people from various states participated in these courses.

December 2013-January 2014: The India Mission of the De Sales Oblates celebrated the ordination to the priesthood of four deacons: Kala Sleeva Raju, OSFS (Dec. 18); Paul Raj, OSFS (Dec. 20); Asish Mukalath, OSFS (Jan. 4); and John Gali, OSFS (Jan. 9).

10-12 January 2014: The Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales celebrated the 100th anniversary of the death of their foundress, St. Léonie Frances de Sales Aviat (1844-1914), at their Motherhouse in Troyes. The celebratory triduum opened on 10 January, with a presentation by Sr. Geneviève-Agnès Poinset, OSFS, on “St. Léonie Frances de Sales Aviat, Educator and Mother,” followed by an hour of prayer, led by the novices of the Oblate Sisters, in the crypt of the Motherhouse where Mother Aviat is buried. On 11 January, a Solemn Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated by Bishop Marc Stenger of Troyes, in the church of Saint-Jean, the former parish church of the Motherhouse. The triduum concluded on 12 January with the solemn profession of Sister François-Bernard Grossman, OSFS, at which about eighty Oblate Sisters were present and renewed their vows.
24 January 2014: Celebration of the Solemnity of St. Francis de Sales by the Salesian Family worldwide.

14-17 February 2014: Eight young men participated in an "information weekend," conducted by Fr. Dominic Nguyen OSFS, at the Provincialate of the De Sales Oblates of the German-Speaking Province, in Vienna, Austria. An interesting outcome was the participants' characterization of the perfect De Sales Oblate: "He is gentle, open-minded, confident, humorous, and profound. He is an original character, a person who loves the world and silence at the same time. In him lives the desire for God, who is love.


28-30 April 2014: The 3rd annual meeting of the North American Salesian Network (NASN), hosted by De Sales Resources & Ministries (DR&M), will take place in Detroit, MI. This meeting brings together leadership from Salesian organizations in the U.S.A., with a view to sharing resources to aid in the dissemination of the Salesian charism.

1-4 May 2014: Pilgrimage to Assisi and Perugia (Italy), organized by the Oblate Sisters of Soyhières (Switzerland), as part of the centenary observance of the death of St. Léonie Frances de Sales Aviat, who died in Perugia in exile in 1914. For information, go to: www.maisonchappuis.ch.


8-13 July 2014: “The Salesian Pilgrimage for Youth,” hosted by the Committee for the Salesian Education of Youth, will take place in Annecy for high school students from the schools of the De Sales Oblates and of the Visitandines from various countries. The Committee will also meet in Annecy (1) to plan the Salesian Education Conference scheduled for July 2015, (2) to form a Salesian Education Consortium of the schools of the De Sales Oblates, Oblate Sisters, and Visitandine Holy Mary, and (3) to explore ways to increase participation in faculty and student exchange programs already in place at Salesian schools in South America, North America, and Europe. Inquiries, suggestions or questions may be sent to Fr. William McCandless, OSFS, at wmcandl@salesianum.org.

8-12 October 2014: The biennial Salesian Scholars Seminar will be held at De Sales Resources & Ministries, Stella Niagara, NY. This year's theme is “Love in the Salesian Tradition and the Treatise on the Love of God.” For further information, please contact the Seminar's co-chairs: jchorpen@sju.edu, or wmwright@creighton.edu.

Salesian Publications and Resources

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

The Annales Salésiennes, nouvelle série no 8, 2ème semestre (2013), includes the following articles that were originally presentations made at the 2013 Journées Salésiennes, whose theme was “Faith, Love, and Freedom with St. Francis de Sales”: Sr. Claire-Elisabeth Coque, VHM, “La Foi de François de Sales d’après Jeanne de Chantal” (The Faith of Francis de Sales According to Jane de Chantal); Fr. Jean-Claude Mutabazi, Priest of St. Francis de Sales, “François de Sales, homme de foi et de charité” (Francis de Sales, Man of Faith and of Charity); Sr. Geneviève-Agnes Poinset, OSFS, “Images et figures de la foi chez François de Sales” (Images and Figures of Faith in Francis de Sales); and Luc Ametodou, OSFS, "La foi d’un disciple de François de Sales, Louis Brisson" (The Faith of a Disciple of Francis de Sales, Louis Brisson).

André Brix, OSFS, Initiation à la lecture du "Traité de l’amour de Dieu," Texte établie d’après l’enregistrement des conférences données au cours de plusieurs weekends de 1977 à 1984 à Ellezelles (Belgique). Conferences typed by the Visitation Sisters of Ellezelles (Belgium) from recordings and then computerized.


The journal *Salesianum* 75/4 (Oct.-Dec. 2013), publishes the proceedings of the conference, “Al Cuore della Spiritualità di San Francesco di Sales” (At the Heart of the Spirituality of St. Francis de Sales), at the Università Pontificia Salesiana in Rome in 2009 to mark the 400th anniversary of the publication of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*: Joseph Boenzi, SDB, “Francesco di Sales e l’Introduzione alla vita devota” (Francis de Sales and the *Introduction to the Devout Life*); Eugenio Alburquerque Frutos, SDB, “El influjo de los escritores espirituales españoles del siglo XVI en la *Introducción a la vida devota* de san Francisco de Sales” (The Influence of 16th-Century Spanish Spiritual Writers on the *Introduction to the Devout Life*); Eunac Mc Donnell, SDB, “Understanding the Spirituality of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* as an Asceticism of Love”; Morand Wirth, SDB, “Cultura umanistica e umanesimo nell’*Introduzione alla vita devota* di san Francesco di Sales” (Humanistic Culture and Humanism in the *Introduction to the Devout Life* of St. Francis de Sales); Valentín Viguera, SDB, “Elementi caratterizzanti della direzione spiritual de san Francesco di Sales” (Characteristic Aspects of the Spiritual Direction of St. Francis de Sales); Anne-Marie Baud, “Des ‘philothées’ à la *Philothée* ou saint François de Sales et ses ‘philothées’” (The “Philothées” to the *Philothée*, or St. Francis de Sales and His ‘Philothées’); Terence McGoldrick, “Everything in Marriage Is Holy: A Christian Theology of Marriage.”

Francien van de Beek, *Heilige aandacht* (Holy Attention) (Berne, 2013). A book of meditations, inspired by the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and with a preface by Fr. Kees Jongeneelen, OSFS.


**VARIA**

Assisted by an ICSS grant, Fr. John M. O’Neill, OSFS, has developed, over the past year and a half, a number of Salesian podcasts, “In the Footsteps of St. Francis de Sales,” which give very good and detailed explanations, with appropriate photographs/maps, of the various Salesian sites in Annecy and its environs. They may be accessed at: http://deit.desales.edu/itunes/. There are more such podcasts in preparation that will be added as they are completed.

Fr. Michael Murray, OSFS, Director of De Sales Spirituality Services (DSS), Wilmington-Philadelphia Province of the De Sales Oblates, continues to provide a rich variety of new and familiar Salesian homiletic resources on the DSS website (www.oblates.org/dss) for Sundays and weekdays, as well as “Retreats on the Run” for both Advent and Lent.

Blessed Louis Brisson’s retreats to the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales during the years 1873-76 have been translated into German by Adelinde Heidenreich and are posted on the website www.louisbrisson.org.


**The Cross, Heaven, and the World**

Up to the very sky, the topmost heaven
This tree that is the Cross projects its height
And power to reach its Empire’s roof is given
Only to him who made it with his might.

To shape this All from nothing, be its guard
Breathe life into this dust which sometimes plots
A course for heaven, sometime against heaven plots
Was for our great Redeemer nothing hard.

That for this dust he should be made to suffer
To hang for it – oh no, our thought can offer
No explanation in its vain pursuit.

Full well we know this Tree is planted clean
In the world’s center, showing that its fruit
Is for all commons of the round machine.

This sonnet by Jean de La Cèppe (c. 1548-1623), a magistrate and religious poet from Aix-en-Provence, is from his major work, *Theorems on the Holy Mystery of Our Redemption*, which was published in two parts (1613, 1621). Comprised of over 500 sonnets, accompanied by prose commentaries, the *Theorems* offer an extended semi-narrative meditation on the life of Christ from the Last Supper to the Ascension. *Theorema* is a Greek word meaning a spectacle, an object of study; thus in mathematics, a demonstration of a truth not self-evident. To La Cèppe, the truths of the Catholic faith were best presented by being visualized—an approach akin to St. Francis de Sales’s use of visual representations. As it happens, Francis and La Cèppe even communicated. The An necy edition contains a letter Francis wrote to La Cèppe, who had sent the bishop a copy of the first part of the *Theorems*. Francis declares himself “drawn by that learned piety which so felicitously makes you transform the pagan muses into Christian ones” (*OEA*, 16:287). The sonnet above is from the *Theorems*, Part 1, book 3, and the translation, *From the Theorems of Master Jean de La Cèppe, LXX Sonnets*, a bilingual edition selected and translated with an introduction and notes by Keith Bosley (Ashington: Mid Northumberland Arts Group/ Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1983), 63.