Readings by Monsieur Vincent
The Treatise on the Love of God

André DODIN, C.M.
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(The green numbers in brackets refer to the pages of the Annals)

(See *Annals,* vol. 106-107, pp. 239-248, continued

TESTIMONY OF MONSIEUR VINCENT

On Monday, April 17, 1628, in Paris, Monsieur Vincent went to the first convent of the Visitation of Holy Mary, on Rue du Petit-Musc, where he had been summoned by Mr. René Ferrier, on behalf of the Reverend Father Justin Guérin, of the Congregation of Clerics Regular of Saint Paul, to testify at the beatification trial of Mr. François de Sales, Bishop of Geneva. He was led into the chapel of Sainte-Monique where the judges were sitting and he swore, in the manner of the clergy, with his hand on his chest, to tell the truth. *"My name is Vincent de Paul,"* he added shortly afterwards, *"I am a priest, though unworthy, Superior of the Priests of the Mission and chaplain of the Royal Galleys of France, aged about forty-eight years."* [1]

He answered the various questions put to him, but his testimony was particularly assured when he spoke of the love that the Bishop of Geneva showed for God. *"The servant of God loved the Lord with an ardent love."* And to support his assertion, he gave, among other arguments: *"Driven by a divine love whose sweetness he knew, he published this immortal and quite extraordinary work,* De l'Amour de Dieu (*On the Love* of God). *This admirable book has as many witnesses to the sweetness of* [448] *its author as it has readers."* As he knew this work well, he then detailed his argument.

It is a book that I took great care to have read in our community as a universal remedy for all languor, a stimulant for anyone in a state of torpor, a furnace of love, a ladder for all those who strive for perfection. Oh! Would to God that it were treated by all as it deserves! No one could escape the action of this fire." [2]

We are therefore learning about a work that was not only esteemed, but also adopted as a *"master book"* by Saint Vincent de Paul. Let us try to determine more precisely the influence it had on his religious life and moral teaching.

THE EXPERIENCE OF MONSIEUR VINCENT

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1 *Annals of the Congregation of the Mission, vol. LXXI (1908), 264.* Cf. St. Vincent, 1. XIII, p. 67.

2 Annals, L LXXI, p. 269.

It was in 1617, most likely before 1620, that Monsieur Vincent had the opportunity to read this Treatise *on the Love of God*[3] What were his experiences at that time, the desires of his soul, the insights that illuminated the book he was reading?

Since 1616, Monsieur Vincent had been freed from his violent temptation against the faith and had devoted himself to the service of God present in the poor. He did not yet discover the entire path he had to follow in order to obey the orders of Providence; at least he knew in what direction God was calling him, and courageously he set out toward Him. It was a laborious, energetic, and at times even violent journey. Anxious above all not to lose sight of the obvious evidence of the divine will that alone would save him, he left the Gondis distraught and went to Châtillon-les-Dombes, where God would be more present to him. He returned six months later to the family of the General of the Galleys, because Father de Bérulle showed him that God was still calling him there. But from then on, he was devoted to the poor and carried out his mission in the lands of the Count of Joigny. However, he still had to achieve, through greater openness of soul and flexible obedience to all expressions of divine will, that inner balance without which he would be out of place in the world and inept in the Kingdom of God.

He liked to isolate himself, and his natural seriousness took on an air of sombre sadness that worried the Mother Superior of the Galères a little. She pointed this out to him[4] . The fact was that he was maturing and assimilating the lessons taught by Father de Bérulle on the misery of man and the wretched poverty of human nature. *"We are nothingness opposed to God, worthy of his wrath and eternal anger"*[5] *"We are entitled only to nothingness, sin, hell, that is to say, nothingness in any case."*[6] Two sermons from this period convey this Augustinian pessimism. *We are but worms, a vapor, a bag filled with garbage and a cave of a thousand evil thoughts."*[7] *"Just as a vessel filled with garbage cannot preserve the purity of its contents, so too will a proud, greedy, and stubborn child be unable to preserve the purity of doctrine."* [8]

A period of crisis, too, when the soul silently searches within itself and anxiously strives to strip itself bare in order to better perceive its ideal of holiness.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Vincent de Paul may not ask any very specific questions. At the very least, he allows himself to be imbued with the Salesian spirit, which exerts an ineffable seduction on him. He understands, or rather feels, that God manifests himself in the soul through a sweet goodness.

Years later, the reading of *the Treatise on the Love of God* would take on a whole new meaning.

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3 The Treatise was completed on July 31, 1616. By 1620, it had reached its sixth edition (cf. Letter from St. François de Sales to Fr. Antoniotti, August 16, 1620); the 1617 edition was reproduced several times, and there are three reprints of the 1618 and 1620 editions (cf. D. Mackey, Introduction to the Treatise on the Love of God, Annecy edition, T. IV, pp. XVI-XVII). Saint Vincent's high regard for the Introduction to the Devout Life must have prompted him to read the new work by the Bishop of Geneva. His conversations with the bishop in 1619 seem to indicate that he had read Saint Francis de Sales' masterpiece.

4 Abelly (L.). *La Vie du Vénérable Vincent de Paul,* Paris, 1664, L. III, chap. XII, p. 173.

5 Bérulle. *Complete Works.* Paris; 1856 (ed. Mlgne), col. 858.

6 Bérulle. *Complete Works,* col. 1165.

7 *Saint Vincent,* vol. XIII, pp. 36-37.
In 1607, Saint Vincent described Barbary as "a den and lair of thieves" (1, p. 4).
The expression in the sermon recalls the idea and well-known words of Saint Bernard: "Nihil aliud est homo quam sperma fetidum, taccus stercorum, cibus vermium" *(Meditatio de humana conditione,* Pat. lat, vol. CLXXXIV, col. 490).

8 Saint Vincent, XIII, 29.

Having known and loved the Bishop of Geneva, he will still hear his voice repeating to him the entire mystical doctrine of the Treatise. He will see his face again and be influenced by this soul so similar to that of Jesus[9] . *"As I reviewed in my mind all the words of the servant of God,"* he said, "*I felt such admiration that I was inclined to believe him to be the man who best imitated the mortal life of the Son of God"*[10] [450].

The retreat that Monsieur Vincent made in Soissons in 1621 developed in the atmosphere and inspiration of Saint Francis de Sales[11] . His presence had, in fact, changed something in the moral outlook of the Gondi chaplain. He realized that his conduct deserved greater attention. While working with other priests in Folleville, Paillart, Sérévillers, Joigny, Mâcon, and Marchais, he felt great desires stirring in his heart. This "constant preoccupation of the mind" troubled him. He now knew that God did not act in this way[12] . *"This made me suspect that the thing came from nature or from the evil spirit, and... I made a special retreat to Soissons, so that God might remove* from *my mind the pleasure and eagerness I had for this matter. God was pleased to hear my prayer, so that, through His mercy, He removed both from me and allowed me to fall into the opposite disposition.* [13]

On the other hand, working with the poor and the need to get along and share his heart more fully with those around him drew his attention to this "dry mood," which can be explained by great mental tension but which hinders the growth of others. Later, he found himself *to be "rude," with a "*stiff expression," "sad or unfriendly"[14] . *"I turned to God and prayed earnestly that He would change this dry and repellent mood and give me a gentle and kind spirit: and by the grace of Our Lord,* he confessed, *with a little attention on my part to repressing the impulses of my nature, I have somewhat abandoned my dark mood"*[15] We can easily recognize in these two resolutions the Salesian influence and the spirit *of the Treatise on the Love of God.*

Out of obedience and duty, Monsieur Vincent will soon be obliged to use the Treatise as a breviary of spiritual life. Placed in 1622 at the head of the Visitation of Paris and charged with the spiritual guidance of the Daughters of St. Mary, he drew from the volume of St. Francis de Sales the fundamental principles of spirituality that he was to not only teach but also apply [451] and develop[16] . Saint Chantal was entrusted to him in 1623, and although he had already guided Mme

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9 A portrait of Saint Francis de Sales was displayed at Saint-Lazare. *Saint Vincent,* XI, 393.

10 *Annales,* vol. LXXI, p. 270.
Saint Francis de Sales stayed in Paris from November 7, 1618, to September 12, 1619. (Works, Annecy edition, vol. XIX, p. 15.) On November 11, while Francis de Sales was delivering the panegyric of Saint Martin at the oratory (Maupas du Tour, *La Vie du Vénérable serviteur de Dieu François de Sales,* Paris, 1657, p. 370; cf. *Saint Vincent,* V, 472), Saint Vincent was in Montmirail for the establishment of the Charity *(Saint Vincent,* XIII, p. 464). He was still there on December 7 *(Saint Vincent,* XIII, p. 467). The first meetings undoubtedly took place after that date. The first convent of the Visitation was opened on May 1, 1619.

11 *Saint Vincent,* II, 246-247 (and Abelly, *La Vie du Vénérable Vincent de Paul,* L. III, p. 177; Collet P., *La Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul,* Nancy, t. I, p. 99).

12 "It is a maxim that the spirit of Our Lord acts gently and sweetly, while that of nature and the evil spirit acts harshly and bitterly." (*St. Vincent,* IV, 577.) "God's inspirations are gentle and peaceful, lovingly inclining us toward the good that He desires for us. (IV, 596)
The movements that come from God are gentle and tranquil." IV, p. 620)

13 *Saint Vincent,* II 947.

14 *Saint Vincent,* XII, 189.

15 Abelly (L.). *The Life of the Venerable... Vincent de Paul,* L III, p. 177.

16 Saint Vincent was appointed superior of the Visitation of Paris after the death of Charles de la Saussaye, canon of Orléans de Paris, parish priest of Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie (September 21, 1621), as noted by Mr. Joseph Guichard in his Notes and Documents on Saint Vincent de Paul (cf. de la Saussaye, Abrégé de la Vie et de la Mort de Messire Charles de la Saussaye, Curé de Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie, Paris, 1722) and before the death of

de Gondi and a few ladies from Châtillon, Florence Baschet de Mizeriac and Charlotte de Brie, in order to satisfy the demands of this mystical soul, he had to consult the map of God's paths as established by the Bishop of Geneva,[17] . By referring to the blessed Father in this way, Vincent de Paul asserted his authority and smoothly ensured the union of two spiritual regimes that did not differ significantly.

Shortly thereafter, Bishop J.-P. Camus of Belley asked him to take charge of the tormented soul of a young widow whom only Francis de Sales had perhaps managed to calm[18] Vincent de Paul advised her to read the *Treatise on the Love of God* and, to better dispel her melancholic mood, adopted the tone and style of the late spiritual director[19] .

This approach was familiar to him. The letters addressed to Saint Chantal have such a Salesian tone that it seems clear that, for a time, Monsieur Vincent had no other ambition than to echo the voice of Monsieur de Genève. [20]

The Conversations with the Daughters of Charity and the Missionaries are imbued with Salesian doctrine. At Saint-Lazare, the Treatise *on the Love of God* was read not only privately but also publicly in the refectory[21] . Vincent de Paul also recommended reading it to the ladies of the court who wished to form a charity[22] , and he found that the comparisons in the Treatise could very happily establish the common doctrine of grace[23] .

This persistent use will help us to recognize more clearly the paths of Salesian influence [452] in the work of Saint Vincent and will allow us, by broadening our investigation, to situate the Founder of the Mission in the French spiritual tradition as it manifested itself at the dawn of the Grand Siècle.

I. - THE RICHES OF THE TREATISE ON THE LOVE OF GOD

The *Treatise on the Love of God* is not a circumstantial work written by a theorist of spirituality. It is a masterpiece, and for St. Vincent as for us, it has a threefold advantage:

a) it summarizes an experience of religious life

b) it organizes the principles of spiritual direction.

c) to clearly systematize a traditional and very reliable mystical doctrine.

François de Sales (December 28, 1622). (Cf. Abelly (L.). La Vie du Vénérable... Vincent de Paul, 1. II p. 314; cf. Saint Vincent, vol. IV, p. 316, 287; vol. V, p. 603; vol. VII, p. 200; vol. XI, p. 167; vol. XII, p. 422.

17 Saint Vincent, XIII, p. 51.

18 Coste (P.). Monsieur Vincent, 1. I, p. 217.

19 Saint Vincent, I, p. 86.

20 "I am quite certain that, in order to better model himself on the example he was to follow, he studied the saint's letters to the saint at length. He even adopted his style." (Bremond. Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux, vol. III, p. 23.)

21 Saint Vincent, XII, p. 195, (December 13, 1658. Cf. Treatise on the Love of God, L. IX, ch. XI (Annecy edition, vol. V, p. 123).

22 Saint Vincent, XII, p. 821.

23 Saint Vincent, XIII, p. 153 (cf. Treatise on the Love of God, 1. IV, ch. VI, Annecy edition, vol. IV, p. 229) and Saint Vincent, XIII, p. 15 (cf. Treatise on the Love of God, 1. II. ch. IX, Annecy edition, vol. IV, p. 115. Comparison of apodes, taken from Aristotle, Historia animalium, 1. I,c. 1.).

1° The religious experience of Saint Francis de Sales

How the Treatise summarized it. The author, like all the classics of French literature and spirituality, had long matured his work. We take as evidence his constant concern to compose a treatise on divine charity. He first proposes to group his reflections according to a very simple plan, that of a biography. *"When I can get a quarter of an hour's respite, I write an admirable life of a saint of whom you have not yet heard,"* he wrote on February 11, 1607, to Baroness de Chantal... *a long-term project that I would not have dared to undertake if some of my confidants had not encouraged me... It will be at least twice as long as the great life of Mother Teresa"*[24] .

Two years later, his plan had changed and his intentions were much clearer. The Treatise will show the practice of the Love of God according to the first and second tables of God's commandments. In contrast to very obscure books that tread the heights of the mountains, such as... *The Method of Setting God,* by Father Alonso de Madrid[25] , *The Abridgment of Perfection*[26] *, or The Evangelical Pearl*[27] , he wanted a clear, simple, practical Treatise. It would probably be aimed at beginners. [453]

But in 1610, taking into account the experiences of the Visitation, he abandoned this overly academic plan, returned to his original idea of a psychological biography, and decided to emphasize the perfections of God's love.

In short, by searching for and reworking his plan, he was searching for himself, discovering himself, and asserting himself. When the volume appeared, he discreetly highlighted the story of a soul trying to understand and explain the mysterious workings of grace. "This Blessed One *has composed an admirable treatise of twelve books... in which I believe he has portrayed himself naively,"* testified St. Chantal at the beatification process[28] .

In this soul, abundant knowledge was accumulated over nearly half a century. Artfully, Francis de Sales used it to compose this precious tapestry that would make us forget the many colored threads that crossed and that all have their attachment point in the life of the Bishop of Geneva.

Born at the Château de Thorens on August 21, 1567, into a noble family from Savoy, Francis moved slowly but surely towards God. He was educated in Paris under the supervision of the Jesuits and benefited greatly from the literary and artistic springtime of the French Renaissance. At the age of nineteen, he was subjected for six weeks to a series of "great temptations and extreme anguish of mind" that brought the religious question to the forefront of his mind and flesh. He believed himself to be damned, and one day, entering the church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès, he offered himself to the immense mercy of God. *"Well, so be it, O my God,"* he cried out in his soul, *"if I am condemned not to love you in eternity, I want at least to love you with all my strength during this life"*[29] . He read

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24 Annecy edition, vol. VIII, p. 265.

25 Annecy edition, vol. XIV, p. 126.

26 Cf. *Œuvres,* Annecy edition, vol. XIII, p. 335. On *the Abrégé de la perfection, a work* by Bellinzaga (Isabelle), see Viller (M.). *L'Abrégé de la perfection de la dame milanaise,* in *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique,* vol. XIII (1931), pp. 44-89; and by the same author, *Autour de l'Abrégé de la perfection, l'influence,* in *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique,* vol. XIII (1932), pp. 34-59, 257-293.
Dagens (J.). *The source of the Brief Discourse on Interior Abnegation,* in *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique de Louvain,* vol. XXXVII (1931), pp. 318-352.
Bremond (H.). *Literary History of Religious Sentiment,* vol. XI.

27 On the *Perle Evangélique,* edited by Dom Thierry Loer in 1535 in Utrecht, see Dom J. Huyben, *Aux sources de la spiritualité française du XVIIe siècle,* in *Supplément de la Vie Spirituelle,* 1931, pp. 75-111.

28 Works of St. Chantal (ed. Migne, 1862), 1. 1, col. 1l27.

29 Cf. Bremond (H.). Histoire Littéraire, 1. I. pp. 86-87.

the *Memorare* and was suddenly freed from this mental anguish. This deliverance manifested itself externally in an almost solemn abandonment of Thomist doctrine, which did not fit well with his spiritual temperament. He moved, lock, stock, and barrel, into the ranks of his Jesuit masters, who were beginning to spread the new theology of grace brought to light by Molina. This "truer and more lovable" Molinism would serve as the basis for his asceticism and mysticism. It would give all his work a sweet fragrance of humanity[30] .

He had now found the springboard and the path for his progress. In Padua, he completed his studies; Pancirole introduced him to law and Possevin, S.J., to theology. After his ordination, his zeal was exercised, instructed, and refined in an active ministry, especially in the famous mission of [454] Chablais. Appointed coadjutor to Bishop de Granier, he was introduced to ecclesiastical government. He came to Paris in 1602, and on this second visit, the capital taught him mysticism, after having imbued him with Renaissance humanism during his first stay. He became acquainted with Asseline, Gallemant, Duval, Marillac, and Dom Beaucousin. He listened to and advised Marie de Beauvilliers, and he entered the Hôtel Acarie. This spiritual season completed his development and maturation. "He understood," says Henri Bremond, "the danger of vain and irritating quarrels. Through their qualities and their faults, his teachers formed him twice over"[31] .

His inner life quickly grew richer and stronger. He soon became aware of the extraordinary heights of spiritual life, but, cautious and reserved, he did not commit himself fully to it[32] . Like Vincent de Paul later on, he waited for God's will to become clear to him, because "he did not want to go to God unless God came to him."[33] But the mystical nature of his inner life was no longer in doubt. The texts of Scripture took on a new and mysterious meaning for him[34] . He put the finishing touches *to his Treatise on the Love of God* with particular religious fervor. Extraordinary phenomena accompanied this composition. Witnesses declared that a globe of fire descended on his head as he was composing the chapters relating to the mystery of the Incarnation. When he reread his work, he confided to St. Vincent, recognizing all that God had inspired him, he shed abundant tears.[35] The Treatise would therefore appear to the Founder of the Mission as a breviary of the mystical life, but a breviary born of experience and witness to supernatural wisdom.

2. The Principles of Spiritual Direction

Another experience was recorded in the book dedicated to Theotimus: that of delicate spiritual direction. It was translated into clear, limpid language, accessible to all. [455]

Monsignor de Genêve was familiar with most, if not all, of the mystical books of his time. But he found them very obscure and too theoretical, and therefore unsuitable for meeting the needs of souls and guiding them[36] . In his new work, he intended to complete the work begun in *the Introduction à la Vïe dévote* and provide more advanced souls with reliable guidance, verified by experience. Just

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30 Cf. Calvet. La Littérature religieuse de saint François de Sales à Fénelon, Paris, 1938, p. 24.

31 Bremond (H.). *Literary History,* vol. I, p. 98.

32 *Saint Vincent,* XI, p. 221. *Cf. Vrais enretien,* Annecy edition, vol. VI (1805), p. 384.

33 Bremond (H.). *Sainte Chantal.* Paris, 1912, p. 59.

34 Cf. *L'Evolution mystique de saint François de Sales,* in *Rencontres,*
no. 4, pp. 93-118.

35 Louis de La Rivière, *Vie,* Lyon, 1625, book IV, eh. XLIV. Testifying at the beatification trial, Mother Angélique Arnauld said: "Once, when talking to him about this book, I told him that it was not he who had written it, but the Holy Spirit. He replied: 'I can tell you that, since you are the first to say so. It is true that I found myself writing several times without really being myself, and that when I stopped writing, I would start again without seeing what I had done, in order to continue the discourse, and yet this book is well organized." In *Revue d'histoire et de littérature religieuses,* vol. XI, (1906), p. 179.

36 Works, Annecy edition, vol. XIII, 315. Cf. J.-P., Camus. The Spirit of Blessed Francis de Sales, p. VII, s. VII.

as Philothea's book represents the sum of the guidelines given to Mlle de Charmoisy, Théotime's book, inspired by the needs of the nascent Visitation, groups and organizes the general guidelines given to St. Chantal. "The book of *the Love of God*, my dear daughter," he wrote to her, "is made especially for you."[37] .

The soul of Saint Chantal.

She knows this well, since for more than eight years she has been urging him on and encouraging him in the still unfinished composition of the Treatise.

From *the Introduction,* Francis de Sales admits to us that he has learned a great deal[38] . We readily believe him. In particular, he has catalogued the spiritual resources of this Baroness de Chantal, whom he met in March 1604 in Dijon, where he was preaching Lent[39] . On August 22 of the same year, he agreed to guide her in the ways of God. This woman's generosity and weaknesses compelled him to develop the principles of judicious guidance. He knew that it was necessary to wait until the initial impulse had subsided somewhat in order to better recognize its value and thus appreciate its degree of fervor or spontaneity. Rather than leading according to inflexible principles or preconceived ideas, it is better to place one's soul "at the disposal of the Spirit of God"[40] .

Thanks to Saint Chantal, Saint Francis de Sales clarified and strengthened his spiritual dialectic. Through her, he also came into direct and lively contact with the Carmelite tradition and Saint Teresa, whose life and works he studied[41] . Through his spiritual daughter, he questioned the Carmelites of Dijon about the relationship between quiet prayer and ordinary prayer. What a precious source of information for the very teachable Monsieur Vincent!

The Visitation Sisters.

Other souls, no doubt more discreet, shared their experiences with the Doctor of Mystical Life, namely the whole swarm of the young Visitation. They literally amazed the Founder. Mother Fichet assures us that the first Visitandines "lived like angels in purity and fervor and were favored with many extraordinary graces"[42] . Francis de Sales intervened to reassure them, moderate their ardor, and explain it to them. He wrote for them and even included some excerpts from conversations in his Treatise [43]

3° The Mystical Doctrine.

Saint Francis de Sales' dual experience, that of his own life and that of spiritual direction, enabled him to easily make a rigorous selection of works on spirituality.

One could indeed be somewhat stunned by the almost torrential influx of spiritual currents that penetrated France through the monasteries, those privileged places from which the most significant movements of the Counter-Reformation originated. In all directions, across all borders, the mystical invasion penetrated the kingdom.

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37 Works, Annecy edition, vol. XXVI, p. 284.

38 Treatise on the Love of God, Annecy edition, L. IV, p. 20 (preface).

39 Bremond (H.). *Saint Chantal*, pp. 42-46.

40 Deposition of Saint Chantal. Works (ed. Migne), L I, p. 1105.

41 Works of Saint Francis de Sales, Annecy edition, vol. XIV, p. 266.

42 *Annals of the First Monastery,* manuscript cited by Trochu (F.). *Saint Francis de Sales,* vol. II, p. 472.

43 *Treatise on the Love of God,* ed. Annecy, vol. IV, p. 20.

Spanish contingent.

In the direction of Spain, we can distinguish three groups.

— The Ignatian school, still in its infancy, which drew heavily on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Francis de Sales read them and most likely practiced them. He certainly borrowed the optimistic, active, and energetic character of his spirituality from his college teachers.

— The Carmelites who, with Father de Bérulle, crossed the Pyrenees in September 1604, took with them the works and spirit of Blessed Mother Teresa of Jesus[44] . At the Carmelite convents in Paris, Dijon, Rouen, Besançon, and Beaune, elite souls lived according to her doctrine[45] . François de Sales, who read the saint's life at a very early age, waited until 1605 or 1606 to study her writings, especially *The Castle of the Soul* and *The Way of Perfection*[46] .

— And then there are, less grouped together but just as remarkable, John of Avila[47] , Francis of Ossuma[48] , Diego, [457] Stella[49] , Louis, of Granada[50] . These are old companions whom Francis de Sales never lost sight of since they provided him with the solid doctrine of *the Introduction to the Devout Life.*

The Spanish group thus formed an important battalion that Francis de Sales would line up to support his Theotimus.

Italian spirituality.

He made less use of Italian spiritual writers. No doubt he read and continued to study the life of St. Charles Borromeo and Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat*[51] . He held St. Philip Neri in high esteem, and his studies in Padua and Rome gave him the opportunity to glean the finest fruits of Italian spirituality, which were so well suited to his temperament. But around 1610-1616, his gaze no longer seems to linger on them so much.

Mystics of the North.

On the northern borders, a group of spiritual figures patronized by Ruysbroeck, Harphius, and Benedict of Canfeld caught his attention and at times inspired a certain mistrust in him. He knew them well. Their number—three hundred works out of four hundred and fifty recorded between

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44 The first French translation of The Life of Saint Teresa was by Jean de Quintanadoine de Brétigny, Paris, 1601, 3 vols. in-18. It contained, along with the *Additions, The Way of Perfection,* with the *Advice, the Castle*, and the *Exclamations.*

45 The Carmelite convent in Dijon was founded in 1605, the one in Rouen in 1609, the one in Besançon in 1614, and the second Carmelite convent in Paris in 1616. By the end of the 17th century, there were sixty-two in France.

46 It is mainly these two works that he draws on in his *Treatise on the Love of God.*

47 John of Avila (1500-1569) Cf. Pourrat: *Christian Spirituality,* vol. III, pp. 159-163. St. Francis de Sales quotes him in *the Introduction* (Annecy edition, vol. III, pp. 22, 25, 107).

48 See P. Pourrat. *Christian Spirituality,* vol. III, p. 133.

49 Stella Diego (ofm) 1524-1598. Saint Francis de Sales also recommended him in *the Introduction to the Devout Life,* Annecy edition, vol. III, p. 107.

50 Louis de Grenade (O.P.), 1505-1588. Francis de Sales praised him in *Introduction to the Devout Life* (Annecy edition, vol. III, pp. 28, 71, 107).

51 We know how highly he praised him. Cf. J.-P. Camus. *The Spirit of Blessed Francis de Sales, III p,* sect. XII (ed. Migne, col. 135-136).

1550 and 1610—as well as their quality impressed all the spiritual figures of the 17th century. He revered them, but his sympathy was somewhat embarrassed[52] .

Writing to President Brulart in September 1606, he severely criticized "the *Method, the Perfection, the Pearl...* books that are very obscure and that walk on the mountaintops; there is little to enjoy in them. Read and reread The *Spiritual Combat: it* should be your favorite book, it is clear and entirely practical"[53] . He does not encourage Philothea to frequent authors who deal with ecstasy, rapture, insensitivity, impassivity, and divine unions"[54] . He admits in the Treatise that he did not want to follow those who despise certain books that deal with a certain life that is preeminent in perfection, so I did not want to speak of this preeminence; for I cannot censure the authors, nor authorize the censors of a doctrine that I do not understand. [55]

However, he draws inspiration from their doctrine to distinguish the dual function of the intellect: the rational exercise of the truths of faith and the adherence that comes through the fine point. [458]

It is in this part that the theological virtues reside, in particular the ineffable and supernatural charity[56] .

In the whirlwind of ideas and authors, Francis de Sales thus established himself. He filtered and assimilated everything that the honest man and French saint could borrow from foreign schools. Vincent de Paul, who esteemed him, followed him and intended to continue his work, benefited from the work accomplished. Inspired by his conduct, he will easily find his way among the colorful crowd of spiritual authors. Even if he does not take exactly the same path and occupies different positions, at least Francis de Sales will have helped him to assert himself and steer his little boat.

By comparing the teachings of Saint Vincent de Paul with the guiding principles of the Treatise *on the Love of God*—essential principles of Salesian spirituality—we can more easily see the flexible docility and supernatural independence of the Founder of the Mission.

II - MONSIEUR VINCENT'S BORROWINGS FROM THE TREATISE ON THE LOVE OF GOD

The spiritual doctrine of St. Francis de Sales depends on his dogmatics, which are based on certain philosophical presuppositions. It is in this order that we will try to discern what St. Vincent de Paul borrowed from *the Treatise on the Love of God.*

1° Philosophical assumptions

"He is a philosopher," said Abbé Bremond, speaking of the Bishop of Geneva, "a good-natured, modest philosopher, without the toga and cap, but who knows the finer points of the craft better than anyone[57] . A few years later, still enthralled by his new contact with the author , *he wrote*: "I

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52 Cf. Périnelle (J.). *Saint François de Sales, Harphius et le P. Philippi,* in *Vie Spirituelle,* supplement, November 1931, pp. 65-95.

53 Saint Francis de Sales, *Works,* XIII, p. 334.

54 Saint Francis de Sales, *Works,* III, pp. 131-133.

55 Saint Francis de Sales, *Works,* IV, p. 13.

56 Saint Francis de Sales, *Works,* IV, p. 69.

57 Bremond (H) *Autour de l'humanisme*, Paris, 1936, p. 132.

cannot repeat it often enough: Francis de Sales is a true philosopher in the strict sense of the word. He has a passion for clear ideas and a genius for definition"[58] . This philosophy is undoubtedly scattered throughout the twenty-six volumes of the Annecy edition, but our saint condensed it in the introductory chapters of the Treatise. Three fundamental theses guide its entire structure.

Definition of Love.

Love is the central idea, the key concept of the entire work. François de Sales breaks love down into five elements. The metaphysical foundation of this feeling is not complacency, but the *willingness* of the will to do good. It is this that [459] determines *complacency*—the second phase. Love consists essentially in *the movement* of the soul toward the beloved object. Love, to speak distinctly and precisely, is nothing other than the movement, flow, and advancement of the heart toward the good. [59]

The desire for union is the fourth element, and *the search* for the means to achieve it is the fifth.

This doctrine, inspired by St. Thomas, Louis of Granada, and Louis Vives, is not foreign to Vincent de Paul. When he defines love, he too says that *"affective love is a certain flowing of the loving person into the beloved, or a complacency or tenderness that one has for the thing one loves [60]*

The psychological foundation of the love of God.

Based on the assertions of St. Bernard and some medieval authors, Francis de Sales derived charity from natural love. He discerned in the human heart an inclination to love God above all things[61] , the last vestige of original integrity and righteousness.

St. Vincent is far from such optimism. He nurtures a suspicious and methodical distrust of human nature. *"What can we expect from human weakness?*" he asks the missionaries. "*What can this nothingness produce? What can sin do? And what else are we? If, then, each one considers himself well, he will see that he deserves only contempt, not only in certain things, but generally in all things... Let us study ourselves well, and we will find that in everything we think, say, and do, either in substance or in circumstance, we are full of and surrounded by subjects of opprobrium and contempt... Let us examine ourselves closely, very closely; we will find ourselves not only worse than men, but worse than devils. There are some in the Society who believe themselves to be worse than the demons of hell, for if those wretched spirits had the means that we have to become better, they would make a thousand times more use of them than we do.[62]* .

We are far from the smiling optimism of the Bishop of Geneva. These lines betray the deep kinship that unites Vincent de Paul with the masters of the French School. Port-Royal is not yet organized as a citadel, but Pascal has already, at the time Saint Vincent is speaking, published his Provinciales, and he is meditating on the plan for his Pensées sur la religion chrétienne (Thoughts on Christian Religion) (1659), and he is meditating on the plan for his *Pensées sur la religion chrétienne*[63] . Apologists oppose overly humanistic philosophers who lavish admiration and praise

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58 Bremond (H.). Histoire littéraire, Paris, 1928, vol. VII, p. 52.

59 Saint Francis de Sales, *Works,* IV, p. 43.

60 Saint Vincent, XI, p. 43.

61 Saint Francis de Sales, Works, vol. IV, p. 77. (Moreover ineffective, vol. IV, p. 80.)

62 Saint Vincent, XII, 207; and XII, 198.

63 The Provincial Letters were published between January 23 and March 24, 1657.

on the virtues of pagans and the wisdom of [460] Seneca, Epictetus, and Cicero[64] Inspired by the PP. de Bérulle, Senault, and Vincent de Rouen, they brought to light all the miseries and compromises of human nature[65] . This pessimism, which claimed to be inspired by Saint Augustine and was decidedly opposed to the optimism of the deists and Epicureans, counted Vincent de Paul among its followers. He had long been among those who despised the deceitful nature of the world. As much out of a lack of taste and inclination for purely literary entertainment as out of method, he refrained from quoting secular authors[66] . Seneca and Epictetus converted what little light remained in nature into darkness," said Bérulle, and Monsieur Vincent seems to have agreed. He has forgotten the optimism of *the Treatise on the Love of God* and deserted Monsignor de Genève.

The structure of the soul.

However, he usually returns to him and listens attentively as he expounds his psychological ideas.

If love is essentially a movement based on convenience, where and how will the union between God and the soul take place? wondered François de Sales. It can only take place at the summit of the soul, at its very tip.

Indeed, the soul is divided into two parts. The lower part is based on sensory experience, while the upper part uses the judgment of the mind. But this upper "portion" operates in very different ways; it is multiple and subdivides itself into three parts.

— The lowest part, one might say, corresponds to the courtyard of the Israelites. It is the domain of pure and simple human reason.

— At the higher level, reminiscent of the priests' courtyard, the mind pays attention to the reasoning and discourse of faith. It explains revealed truths in its own way.

At the very top, which corresponds to the sanctuaries of the Temple and constitutes the sanctuary of the soul, the three theological virtues [461] have their special dwelling place. It is there that, through a simple vision and a simple feeling, the soul acquiesces and submits to the truth and will of God[67] .

This way of seeing, which came rather late in the work of Francis de Sales, made it possible to clarify certain points of mystical doctrine and to lead souls more simply along the paths of prayer[68] . Vincent de Paul, without using the technical terms of this description , nevertheless retained certain modes of prayer that the Bishop of Geneva clearly explained with this structure of the soul.

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64 Among others, P.A. Sirmond: La défencse de la vertu, Paris, 1641; La Mothe le Vayer, La vertu des païens, Paris, 1641.
Montaigne treats them well: "I chew these great names between my teeth and make them ring in my ears." (Essays, L. I, chap. 9)

65 In particular, J.-F. Senault (Oratorian). *Traité de l'usage des Passions,* Paris, 1641*; L'homme criminel ou la corruption de la nature par le péché selon les sentiments de saint Augustin,* Paris, 1644; *L'homme chrétien ou la réparation de la nature par la grâce,* Paris, 1648.
See *Dictionnaire de Théologie catholique.* "Senault," by Molien, vol. XIV, col. 1854-1858.
"The Criminal Man" was found in the library of Saint-Lazare (Bibliothèque Mazarine catalog, manuscript 4169 p. 634).

66 Saint Vincent quotes Seneca once (X, 606), Aristotle three times (XII, 64, 196; XIII, 341), and a poet once (XI, 405). This makes the transcription questionable. See XI, 403, note.
He quotes Pliny once, who provided so much to Saint Francis de Sales (thirty quotations in *the Introduction to the Devout Life).*

67 Saint Francis de Sales. *Works,* L IV, pp. 62-69.

68 It is not used in the first editions of *the Introduction,* but only in the definitive edition (Part IV, Chapters XIII-XV).

2° Dogmatic theses.

Two major theses mainly characterize the dogmatic theology of St. Francis de Sales: the place of Christ and the role of human activity in the human plan. They are, moreover, latently linked to the philosophical principles we have just examined.

a) The place of Christ in the divine plan.

— The philosophy of love taught by the Bishop of Geneva favors the vision of a certain continuity in the divine plan and even the foresight of the Incarnation in the hypothesis that Adam had not failed.

This is why the author of *the Treatise on the Love of God* asserts that the determining motive for the Incarnation is not Redemption, but the "intrinsic goodness of God, who of himself and by himself is inclined to communicate." It is God who, considering that among all the ways of communicating himself, there was nothing more excellent than to join himself to some created nature in such a way that the creature was known and grafted and inserted into the divinity to become one person with it...[69] .

In no text does St. Vincent formally reject the possibility of Christ's Incarnation in the hypothetical case that Adam had not sinned. But the content of his missionary theology as well as the general lines of his dogmatics show us that he was unfamiliar with this conception of the divine plan. Here again, he is closer to Bérulle and follows the teachings of a fervent Thomist, the good Mr. Duval[70] .

b) Human activity and grace.

— This position must have seemed of little importance to him [462]; it stirred up far fewer feelings than the explicit profession of Thomism or Molinism that circumstances pressed him to make when he explained how to submit his will to that of God.

François de Sales, for his part, had unreservedly and unequivocally adopted this opinion, which seemed to him to be more true[71] . Vincent de Paul never took such a decisive stance. He waited a long time before engaging in the debate, and when his assistant, Mr. Jean Dehorgny, persuaded by the Jansenist J. Bourgeois, brought him into the fray, he was able to give a response that was all the clearer for having been more carefully considered.

He proceeded cautiously, heavily. He was aware of the defense that Clement VIII and Paul V had put forward to dispute matters of grace, but he also knew that "this refers to matters that are not determined." As for those that are determined, it is important to know them carefully so that "all Christians may know and believe that God is so good that all can work out their salvation with the grace of Jesus Christ, that he gives them the means through Jesus Christ, and that this manifests and magnifies the infinite goodness of God"[72] .

It is against Jansenius, Arnauld, and Saint-Cyran that he maintains the Catholic positions common to Thomists and Molinists: the necessity of grace for salvation, and the nature of this grace, which

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69 Saint Francis de Sales, *Works,* vol. IV, pp. 99-100.

70 Bérulle. *Works* (ed. Migne), col. 324. "If there were no sinners on earth, there would be no Man-God in heaven and on earth."
André Duval had commented on Saint Thomas (cf. Bibliothèque Mazarine, manuscript 4169, pp. 221, 223).
Abelly also followed St. Thomas's thinking in *MedulaTheologica,* Paris, 2nd ed., 1652-1653.

71 Bremond (H.) *Historie Littéraire,* L I, p. 91.

72 *Saint Vincent,* vol. III, p. 327; cf. vol. XIII, p. 147.

does not violate freedom since all men can resist it. He illustrates this doctrine with comparisons taken from *the Treatise on the Love of God*: that of pilgrims, all awakened by the sun, but who stray because they do not bother to set out immediately; that of apodes who must spread their wings if they want to be carried away by the wind, which alone can move them,[73] . He does not venture outside this very safe domain.

His interlocutor, however, provoked him. He evades the question. No doubt "Molina is the author of what is called median science, which is strictly speaking only the means by which we show how it is done and why it is that two men who have the same mind, the same dispositions, and the same degree of grace to do the works of their salvation, and yet one does it and the other does not, one is saved and the other is lost. But what, sir, this is not a matter of faith"[74] .

He does not indicate the precise manner of reconciling freedom, even physical freedom, with the grace of God, and perhaps [463] it escapes him. He once attempted to give a brief explanation concerning the death of M. de Comet. *"Man's days are numbered before God. This is true, but it is not because God had counted his days to be of a certain number, but the number was counted before God because it happened that way; or, to put it more clearly, he did not die when he died because God had foreseen or counted the number of his days to be such, but God had foreseen it and the number of his days was known to be such as it was, because he died when he died.[75]*

Thirty years later, his reasoning would be quite different. *We must mortify our affections,* he would write to Robert de Sergis, *"in the thought that our days are numbered and that we cannot add a moment of life to the last that God has determined for us"[76]* On the other hand, when addressing the Daughters of Charity, to whom he wanted to instill the need to work actively for the salvation of their souls, he was much less nuanced, and his expression—or that of the listeners who recorded his words—remained more within the bounds of rigorous orthodoxy. *"These five virgins were lost in the spirit of God before the Bridegroom arrived; and those who are not preparing to go out to meet the Bridegroom, like the wise virgins, are lost before God, who sees their miserable state. They are not lost because he saw them, but he saw them because they are lost. He simply sees the truth." [77]*

This text would clearly affirm a certain submission of God to creation and to human will, and would seem to call for a certain super-understanding of secondary causes, familiar to various Molinist systems. But we can also interpret them more naturally, especially if we take into account the saint's numerous instructions calling for waiting on divine will, as somewhat awkward defenses—ill-conceived, he might have said—against an overly narrow conception, which risks provoking quietism or dizzying fatalism in simple minds. This second interpretation ems to us to be more in line with the psychology of the catechist of the poor, who intended to submit himself in all things, actively and passively, to the guidance of Providence.

If, before following St. Francis de Sales in the practical indications of his direction, we try to see how Vincent de Paul followed the guiding principles of his spirituality, we are forced to note that he was often unfaithful to them. Of the major theses, he retained only the definition of love in its entirety. While he may have taken into account the tripartite division of the soul, it was the Thomist or Berullian conceptions that he adopted and referred to in his prudence and concrete action. When, as we shall see, he borrows Salesian principles of action and even vocabulary, we must remember, in order to understand and grasp the originality of our saint, that he articulates them on the basis of

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73 *Saint Vincent,* vol. XIII, p. 154. Cf. Saint Francis de Sales, Works, IV, p. 115

74 *Saint Vincent,* vol. III, 325.

75 *Saint Vincent, vol. I p. 8.*

76 *Saint Vincent, vol. I, p. 356.*

77 *Saint Vincent, vol. X, p. 617.*

a philosophy and dogma foreign to the thinking of the man whom Vincent de Paul never ceased to call his "Blessed Father."

André Dodin, C.M.
Annals of the Congregation of the Mission, 1942: Volumes 111-112, pp. 447-464.

To be continued