



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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### *Birthing Jesus: A Salesian Understanding of the Christian Life*

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Our souls must give birth, not outside themselves but inside themselves, to the sweetest, gentlest and most beautiful male child imaginable. It is Jesus whom we must bring to birth and produce in ourselves. You are pregnant with him, my dear sister, and blessed by God who is his Father.<sup>1</sup>

When Francis de Sales, early seventeenth century bishop and spiritual advisor, wrote these words to his friend and advisee Jane de Chantal, he was asserting his belief that the ultimate meaning of human life is to be found in bringing Jesus into the world. The core of Salesian spirituality, that tradition of Christian devotion articulated by de Sales and de Chantal, can in fact be summed up in the phrase “Live Jesus!”<sup>2</sup>

These two pregnant words are packed with theological claims. They assert that the divine enters history and takes flesh through the medium of the human person. They affirm that this can happen at any point in history. The individual, like the Virgin Mary, can be a mother of God. He or she becomes so by being receptive to the Spirit of God which hovers in anticipation around the human soul, desiring to enter it, to cause it to conceive and then give birth, making divine life present in the world.

The purpose of this article is to look closely at this maternal symbolism associated with the Virgin Mary, which is so foundational to the Salesian conception of the Christian life and in so doing make three assertions about it. First, the language of spiritual motherhood – what might be termed the *Imitatio Mariae* tradition – has a long and richly textured pedigree which informs its use in Salesian circles. Second, this maternal symbolism is descriptive of the mystical

process of union with the divine. Third, this symbolism is not only descriptive of union but is the *means* to union itself, the medium through which one *becomes* a mother of God.

### *The Tradition of Imitatio Mariae*

The spiritual vision that emerged from the lives and ministry of Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and Jane de Chantal (1572-1641) was rooted in the vitality of the early seventeenth century Counter-Reformation. These two friends and co-founders of the community of the Visitation of Holy Mary experienced themselves as intensely involved in the revitalization of Christian society, especially as it flowered in France and Savoy in the renewal of “devotion” and the mystical life. In the context of the emergent Tridentine Catholicism of the time this meant a reaffirmation and revitalization of the traditional images and symbols that had grown up in Christendom over the centuries. Central among these was the image of the Virgin Mary. For de Sales and de Chantal, along with the rest of the Roman church, Mary as queen of saints, queen of and bridge to heaven, intermetrix and nourishing compassionate presence who intercedes on behalf of humanity, was a living faith reality. Her presence and her image were celebrated liturgically, her hymns sung, her picture painted, her silhouette carved, the spiritual meaning of her earthly and heavenly existence explored both doctrinally and experientially in public prayer and private devotion.

Embedded in this churchwide reaffirmation of the Marian tradition was the ancient contemplative notion of spiritual motherhood. Salesian spirituality as a school that drew heavily on past tradition explored the contours of that notion.

It should be noted, however, that Marian symbolism is not the only or even most obvious symbolism defining Salesian spirituality.<sup>3</sup> Nor, as has been suggested, is it unique to the Salesian world. It has a long and illustrious Christian pedigree. Presumably taking its inspiration from the notion given expression in any number of biblical passages (i.e., 1 Cor 3:16, 6:9, Acts 2:4, 17-18, John 14ff., Mark 3:35) that the human person revitalized in Christ becomes the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, early Christian writers gradually formulated a teaching about spiritual motherhood which came to be expressed through the symbol of the Virgin Mary.

The early Fathers contemplated Mary. For them she stood for both the Church – the body of Christ – and the individual Christian. Irenaeus called her the womb of God, the receptive element in each human being which, like an empty vessel, receives into itself the word of God.<sup>4</sup> For John Damascene she was the “hearing womb.”<sup>5</sup> The Byzantine vespers for the Feast of the Annunciation emphasized her capacity as God-bearer by focusing on her receptivity to the indwelling spirit which allowed the incarnation to occur.

She realized that the overshadowing of her all her lifetime by God’s spirit of love was truly an indwelling effecting the miracle of miracles whereby God took flesh in her.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the Christian centuries this maternal imagery continued to reassert itself. The wombs of Mary, the Church, and the individual soul: these were sacred space, the hallowed ground where divinity and humanity converged and intersected.

Thus Gueric of Igny, the twelfth century Cistercian monk, could preach at length in his homilies prepared for the feast of the Annunciation on the conception of God in the human soul and could enjoin his monastic listeners to take care lest they injure the fetal word growing inside them.<sup>7</sup>

And Hadewijch, the beguine of the following century, could speak of being pregnant with love, a sweet child which is carried and nourished in pain, which finally “wholly engulfs from within the mothering soul.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Francis of Assisi in the same century could see the Church as a mother and all his friars (indeed, all the faithful) as potential spiritual mothers just as was Mary.<sup>9</sup>

We are mothers when we carry him in our heart and body through love and pure and sincere conscience; we give birth to him through his holy manner of working which should shine before others as an example.<sup>10</sup>

Among the next generation of Franciscans, St. Bonaventure gave expression to the *Imitatio Mariae* theme in his “Five Feasts of the Child Jesus,” a liturgical exploration which treats of the mystical impregnation, birth, nourishing, naming, adoration, and presentation of the child in the soul of each “Mary.”<sup>11</sup>

This Marian tradition continued to be echoed in the writings of the thirteenth century Italian women, in fourteenth century Dominican convent chronicles, and in the mystical pregnancy visions of Brigette of Sweden. It continues to resonate in the voices of Christian spiritual masters into the twentieth century, perhaps achieving its fullest expression in *The Reed of God* by Caryll Houselander, a mid-century English laywoman whose pre-Vatican II piety is focused keenly on Mary.

... it is our Lady whom we can really imitate ... Our Lady had to include in her vocation, in her life's work, the essential thing that was to be hidden in every other vocation, in every life ... the one thing that she did and does is the one thing we all have to do, namely, bear Christ into the world.<sup>12</sup>

Even after Vatican II, we find that contemporary voice of monastic renewal, Thomas Merton, affirming that

The whole monastic life is lived in and with Mary the Virgin Mother who has given us the word incarnate. She is the model and summary of all monastic spirituality and the Fathers could call her the “rule of monks” – “*Maria regula monachorum.*”<sup>13</sup>

Salesian spirituality thus is part of an ancient, rich, and ongoing symbolic heritage when it claims that “You are pregnant with him ... and blessed be God who is his father.”

Two things should be evident from our few illustrations of *Imitatio Mariae*. First, interest in feminine, maternal imagery is not confined to the writings of women.<sup>14</sup> Second, this Marian symbolism is depicted in Christian literature and iconography as a series of set “mysteries” or

snapshot-like moments that portray phases of motherhood. These mysteries correspond to celebrations on the liturgical calendar and are captured iconographically in stone, paint, ink, gold leaf, stained glass, and wood, and are displayed all over the visual canvas of Christendom. The Annunciation (conception), the Visitation and the season of Advent (pregnancy), and the Nativity (birth) are aspects (there are others as well) of spiritual motherhood in which both Mary of Nazareth, the Church and the individual soul are thought to participate. In this motherhood divine and human realities become intertwined.

Third, while this maternal symbolism extends deep and wide into the spiritual tradition, it certainly cannot be assumed that it was uniformly interpreted throughout the centuries. I would like therefore to focus on its interpretation in the rather broad period that runs from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries. That is the era in which Christian spirituality seems to take on a new affective literalism.<sup>15</sup> This is the great age of *Imitatio Christi*, the time when imaginative immersion in both the events portrayed in scripture and the central symbols of the Church such as the Eucharist functioned to open devotees to deeper archetypal levels of significance hidden in event and symbol and which lead ultimately to a fusion or literal identification with the object of devotion. The Christ-centered mysticism of Francis of Assisi is typically seen as the genesis of this devotional trend and Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* as its apex.<sup>16</sup> Francis de Sales, named for the poor man of Assisi, trained by Ignatius' own followers and an early practitioner of the *Exercises* throughout his life, falls firmly within and extends somewhat the historical confines of this type of affective, literal spirituality. It is my impression that in the writings of the Salesian tradition, as in the writings throughout the preceding era, the notion of *Imitatio Mariae* is as literally and affectively interpreted by these generations of Christians as is the notion of *Imitatio Christi*.

One further comment is in order. The gospel in this period (and this includes the nativity narratives) – the Word – was seen and heard, not read in the literary sense we are accustomed to today. Its truths were preached, presented, acted out, drawn, sung, sculpted, and commented on through the lens of tradition. It was also thought to be lived out, enfleshed in the lives of holy men and women. Even among the literati, those supplied with the tools to unlock the text itself, the scriptures were thought to contain at least four levels of meaning, each of which might legitimately be drawn out. The literal, allegorical, moral, and mystical meanings of scripture were all carried in the word itself, not something imposed on it.<sup>17</sup>

Thus Mary at the moment of the Annunciation, greeted by the Angel Gabriel, was also, in the mystical sense of scripture, the human soul hearing the word of God. To receive the living word rightly, the individual, like Mary, must become receptive ground, fertile soil in which the seed of divine life is planted. One's fruitfulness depends on one's openness. This fertile openness depicted in the Marian soul is in contrast to ordinary conception and is depicted as a selective openness. One is open only to God (i.e., one is virgin). One is closed to all other seeds but the divine. The virginity and enclosure of this spiritual womb that gives itself to God and God's word alone is an essential element of the symbol.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, the Visitation mystery, in which the pregnant Mary is depicted embracing her similarly expectant cousin Elizabeth, becomes a symbol for the human soul as bearer of God. This particular mystery is, in fact, the iconographic expression of the charism of the community

founded by Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal in 1610. The Visitation of Holy Mary was a religious congregation that was dedicated to the arts of spiritual motherhood in imitation of Mary. Live Jesus! was their motto. Like Mary at the Visitation, they would unobtrusively and under the guise of the most ordinary activities be gestating, giving the very substance of their lives over to the mysterious incarnation of God in the world.<sup>19</sup>

### *Imitatio Mariae as Descriptive of Union*

How are we to evaluate this devotional phenomenon – this contemplative reading of the Marian infancy narrative? What does it have to do with authentic Christian life? What is its place in the mystical life or life of special intimacy with God?

I would like to suggest that in Christendom (especially in the period of which we are speaking) *Imitatio Mariae* is descriptive of an essential dimension of the mystical process of union with the divine. All religious traditions witness to the fact that there is a common human religious impulse which seeks to distinguish “sacred” from “ordinary” reality. There are, within all traditions, persons who seek or experience a special intimacy and/or identity with this sacred reality. These persons tend loosely to be described as “mystics.” While intermittent “peak” experiences of sacred reality (everything ranging from a heightened sense of oneness with all things to visions, locations, raptures, etc.) may be attested to by many persons who are not otherwise described as mystics, these fleeting intuitions cannot, in a Christian context especially, be said to define mysticism or the mystical life. Rather, the mystical life is a pattern of living through which an individual gradually comes into deep intimacy and identity with the sacred. It is usual to speak of the culminating phase of this process (and one which is often seen as permanent) as union. *Imitatio Mariae*, as I have suggested, is descriptive of such union in the Christian mystical life.

Unfortunately, scholars of mysticism have not given much attention to the *Imitatio Mariae* tradition, leaving it to the purview of Mariologists, art historians, and students of popular devotion. Furthermore, most writers on topics mystical, despite the fact that as an academic field the study of mysticism is fraught with thorny methodological issues, insist on assuming that the mystical process is primarily and adequately described with terminology derived mostly from the speculative writings of mystics who are immersed in the Neo-Platonic thought-world.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, there is a long tradition of such thought in the Christian world which claims the Pseudo-Dionysius as father. Such a schema images the process of union as a journey or an ascent. When looking for evidence of mysticism, terms that suggest “up,” “above,” “going to,” “going out of,” “going away from” are picked out. The Neo-Platonic impulse turns attention away from the material world and its individual creatures to scale the metaphysical ladder to the spiritual realms by means of universal concepts. The human is sloughed off. Particular concepts, image, symbol, and knowledge are transcended in ecstasy. The human, stripped of the world of becoming and the many, soars to pure being and the unity of the One. In this schema, union, the ultimate identity of divine and human, is located outside and above all that is characteristic of human creatureliness.

Scholars of mysticism are not alone in assuming this to be the normative description of the mystical life. The architecture of the upward journey is found throughout Christian spiritual

literature (both before and after Pseudo-Dionysius). The titles of some of the classics of western spirituality suggest its omnipresence: John Climacus's *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Guigo II's *Ladder of Monks*, Bonaventure's *Ascent of the Mind to God*, John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, and Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* are cases in point.

But if we turn to the Marian mystical tradition with its accounts of spiritual motherhood, we find a different description of a special and intense intimacy and identity with the divine. It is a description that employs the language not of ascent but of descent, not of journeying but of dwelling and indwelling. It suggests that union is something that is initiated from above. It seems to describe not the movement of the human person toward God but the movement of God toward the person and the corresponding human response called forth.

This descent imagery is not, however, analogous to the Neo-Platonic downward movement of emanation by which the One becomes the many. For in the Neo-Platonic cosmos, union is achieved only by the re-emanation of the many to the One. In the architecture of Marian union, it is *here*, not there, in the created world, not the uncreated, that the intimate identity with sacred reality is believed to occur.

The key concepts in this frankly feminine depiction of union (which, it should be recalled, is used by both male and female mystics) are receiving, being known, being impregnated, gestating, enclosing, surrounding, bringing forth, nurturing, and mothering. This is, of course, radically incarnational and therefore very Christian imagery. It affirms that the location of union with God is not beyond but within human history, that the intimate and special encounter occurs through the descent of the spirit which comes to dwell in the womb of humankind, is gestated and born there. Its claim is that God did not come to remove the reality of the human situation but to *fill it* with divine presence.

The human person's part in union is that of receptivity, becoming a womb, allowing the divine to enter, to grow within and transform the self. One is reminded of the gospel parable of the seeds in which the word of God is sown on various soils. It is the fertile, receptive soil that bears fruit. That the Marian symbol encodes this reality would have been evident to the Christian communities in the era with which we are concerned. The cluster of images – human, female, ground – were contrasted with the alternate cluster of images – divine, male, seed.<sup>21</sup>

The two descriptions of union we have alluded to – ascending to God and opening to God – are not necessarily contradictory. They are both evident in and integrated with one another in the tradition itself. The issue is that in interpreting the literature and practices of the Christian faith, scholars have tended to focus on the ascending dimension of the process of union and have for the most part left the corresponding feminine dimension out of consideration. But the Marian incarnational tradition is in fact a necessary part of Christian mysticism. Christianity not only mirrors the Neo-Platonic cosmos but focuses as well on the incarnational indwelling of the spirit in history and in the human heart. This spirit is a vital presence which the *Imitatio Mariae* tradition asserts acts not to free the soul to ascent to higher spiritual realms but opens the soul to let Jesus be enfleshed once again, be birthed into the world through the mystical, motherly body of the Church and all receptive souls.

### *Imitatio Mariae As a Means to Union*

The question remains, what is the role and meaning of this Marian symbol in the mystical life, the life of the person transformed in intimate union with the divine? What I will present here in response to this question is not so much a definitive answer but a series of suggestions that have intuitively presented themselves to me as possible ways of thinking about the Christian practice of *Imitatio Mariae*.

First, is the Marian symbol essentially a metaphor? Do the accounts of the masters of the Christian spiritual life in fact say that “The experience of union *is like* being pregnant?” or “Being filled with God is something like being a mother?” I think that the study of mysticism has for the most part been carried on in just this way. For instance, bridal or nuptial mysticism is generally spoken of as essentially a metaphorical language for an experience about which little can actually be uttered.

But does this approach do justice to the actual power of religious symbol? A religious symbol is neither a sign nor a metaphor. As analyzed by any number of scholars of religion, a symbol not only points to but *participates* in what it signifies. It is likewise the means of *fusion* by which an individual or group becomes united with and transformed by the reality to which the symbol points and in which it participates. The symbol is the means of transition from “ordinary” to “sacred” reality, the medium through which access to a transformed life is gained.<sup>22</sup>

I would suggest that this Marian spiritual motherhood symbol that on one level is descriptive of union is, on another, a *means* to union. It is a transformative symbolic medium by which the human person *becomes* a mother of God. This assertion thrusts us deeply into the methodological minefield of the scholarly arguments about the relationship between mysticism and symbol. Two distinct interpretive approaches to this topic have been evident in the last century. The first of these, exemplified in the writings of William Stace, Evelyn Underhill, and others, assumes that mysticism, and especially union, is a phenomenon that transcends the specific formulations of any given religious tradition. In this view mysticism is “pure religion,” a universal and non-mediated process characterized by an apprehension which is essentially inexpressible, beyond symbolic and discursive articulation.<sup>23</sup>

The second scholarly approach, critical of this first and older view and championed by Steven T. Katz and others, argues that mysticism is always firmly embedded in the context of a given tradition. What mystics experience, in this recent view, is “pre-formed” by the doctrinal-symbolic view out of which they come. Thus mystics have the experiences they are conditioned to have – Buddhists apprehend the void, Christians may come to union through the medium of Marian spiritual motherhood, and so forth.<sup>24</sup>

Although I am sympathetic to this critique of the older approach which has little use for symbols within its schema, I am not wholly satisfied with the new interpretive lens. The “context” approach tends to infer that mysticism can somehow be explained away as a highly affective projection of a humanly constructed theological concept.<sup>25</sup> However, from the interior vantage point of a tradition as well as from the perspective of the study of religious symbol, such

symbols are not arbitrary or replaceable constructs. They are revealed. Their source is not primarily human cognition or imagination but divine wisdom from which they take their power and as such are saturated with cosmic and particular meaning. The symbol participates in the reality to which it points.

Thus when approaching the Christian symbol of Mary, Mother of God, and its relationship to mysticism, we need to probe beyond the notion of metaphor. This symbol is more aptly described as a transformative means to union. Imitation – entry into the milieu to which the symbol invites – initiates a process of internal and structural change in the individual or community to whom the symbol is addressed. This initiation is neither emulation or modeling but *becoming* Mary, becoming a mother of God, allowing the word of God to become incarnate, to enter one's most intimate self, to change that self from the inside and then birth Jesus (the Word) through that flesh.

### *Contemplative Prayer and the Imitation of Mary*

It is to the tradition of Christian mystical or contemplative prayer<sup>26</sup> that we need to look to understand fully this Marian internalization of the world. Not accidentally Mary is identified with and claimed by the contemplative tradition of the Church. She is the image of the Church at prayer, the symbol of the Church and the individual Christian opened to receive the seed of the divine word.

Christian prayer, especially in its contemplative mode, has primarily to do with the reception of the word – that mosaic of revealed narrative and symbol that constitutes the scriptures. Scripture both *informs* Christians (to the extent that they organize their cognitive worlds around the ideas set forth there) and forms them. The word provides not only a conceptual framework but an internal paradigm that structures reality on conscious and unconscious levels of personality.

Prayer, not intellectual inquiry or instruction, is the method by which this paradigm formation occurs. It is helpful to recall that, while the term “prayer” has a multitude of meanings in different times and places in the Christian past, the ongoing scripturally-based tradition of formative prayer, arising from the monastic milieu, which is the root form of prayer out of which the majority of Christian contemplative practices emerge, is *lectio divina*.

*Lectio*, the discipline of patterned yet creative rumination on the revealed word, consists in its classic form of four phases. First (*lectio*), one reads or hears a passage from scripture. One focuses one's attention on it. Second, one ruminates or reflects on what one has heard (*meditatio*). Third, one returns to the source of the word, perhaps in praise, petition, contrition, or adoration. One speaks to God (*oratio*). Finally, one rests in God. In stillness and silence one abides in the divine presence (*contemplatio*).

*Lectio divina* consists not of mechanical stages of prayer but of organic movements that flow out of one another and cumulatively engage the whole person. One senses the word, thinks about it, has feelings about it, and grasps it intuitively. The art of *lectio* is the means by which scripture has been affectively and behaviorally assimilated in monastic circles for centuries.

Its practice, although modified over the years, undergirds the entire scope of the Christian prayer tradition. Systematized in the period of the *devotio moderna*, made more formal and affectively dramatized – more imaginative one might say – in the Counter-Reformation period, the dynamics of *lectio* as the hallowed method of internalizing the word continue to operate in Christian prayer into and beyond the seventeenth century.

We find in Salesian literature a neat summary of this formative tradition of prayer. Simplified and divided into two phases – meditation and contemplation – it depicts this general internalizing dynamic. Francis de Sales' most synthetic work, *Treatise on the Love of God*, expresses the difference between the dual prayer phases by characterizing meditation as

...attentive and reiterated thought... voluntarily reiterated or entertained in the mind to excite the will to holy and salutary affections and resolutions....<sup>27</sup>

Focused on the scriptures and especially on the gospel accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (including the infancy narratives), meditation is first a cognitive and imaginative exercise undertaken with systematic purpose to direct the person toward God.

...the devout soul in meditation...passes from mystery to mystery, not at random...but deliberately and of set purpose, to find out motives of love...and having found them she draws them to her, she relishes them, she loads herself with them, and having brought them back and put them within her heart, she lays up what she sees as most useful to her advancement, by finally making resolutions suitable for the time of temptation.<sup>28</sup>

Contemplation, in contrast, is described as

...a simple and a permanent attention of the spirit to divine things...which surpasses the limits of knowledge gained by the understanding.<sup>29</sup>

Meditation and contemplation are distinguished from one another. First, meditation is seen as prior to and opening into contemplation. Second,

...meditation considers [a mystery] in detail and as it were piece by piece,...but contemplation takes a very simple and collected view of the object which it loves...In meditating we, as it were, count the divine perfections we find in a mystery but in contemplating we sum up their total.<sup>30</sup>

Third, while meditation is “Always performed with difficulty, labor and reasoning,” contemplation is “made with delight.”<sup>31</sup> This last difference is highlighted by de Sales by comparing the effort of eating to the ease of drinking, contemplation being the more “liquid” of the two forms of prayer.

Despite these dissimilarities, meditation and contemplation are intimately related. In fact they represent, for the author of the *Treatise*, a continuum of prayer, the first phase being seen as the “mother” and the second the “daughter.”<sup>32</sup>

While contemplative prayer is, in the Salesian world, conceived of as non-discursive, holistic, and somehow “raising” us above ourselves “...so that we may live more in God than in ourselves...,”<sup>33</sup> it does *not* seem to escape, with a Neo-Platonic impulse, from the word (and thus from symbol or doctrine). Rather, it seems to simplify and summarize all the discursive means of receiving the word in a profound way. Contemplation does not discard these means as much as embrace them and translate them to a new depth of internalization:

Now whereas to attain to contemplation we stand ordinarily in need of hearing the word of God, of having spiritual discourse and conference with others, like the ancient anchorites, of reading, praying, meditating, singing canticles, conceiving good thoughts – for this reason, holy contemplation being the end and aim of all these exercises, they are all reduced to it,...and those who practice them are called contemplatives.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, when one looks to the more formally contemplative Salesian lifestyle – the Order of the Visitation of which Jane de Chantal was the first superior – one finds a similar account of prayer. Meditation involves cognitive reflection on the word by entering imaginatively into the events of scripture, pondering the meaning of the stories recorded there and participating in the narrative tales that define the Christian world of meaning. Especially in the era that is our focus, when devotion was undertaken with heightened affectivity, the meditated word informed thought, feeling, and sense experience by gathering up the whole person into the world.

Jane de Chantal, addressing her spiritual daughters in the nascent Visitation, describes the meditative art in a way that recalls the practice of *lectio* in its first three phases, though it is nuanced with a characteristic Salesian gentleness of style:

The most usual and useful subjects are the life, death, passion and resurrection of our Lord, from which we derive a holy imitation...When the affectations are stirred we must stop a little to relish them and compress them gently on our hearts, looking with simplicity at what our Lord does in the mystery and speaking to him from time to time a few words according to the subject, or else words of love, abandonment, of compunction, and other similar ones as we are moved...<sup>35</sup>

Meditation thus involves cognitive reflection on the word by entering affectively and imaginatively into the events of the Christian narrative. Jane goes on to say that meditation can lead into a contemplative type of prayer. Indeed, she sees this, which she terms a prayer of “simple unity” or “simple abiding in the presence of God,” as the unique calling of the Visitation sisters:

We are not to leave this method of mental prayer by ourselves for it is very good and useful – we must only try to simplify it more and more, as we advance, and if the soul corresponds by the faithful practice of virtue she will not stop there. We may repose our souls and all our affections with a simple confidence on [the Savior’s] loving breast. There are different degrees in this method of prayer...They who are led to it are obliged to great purity of heart, abasement, submission and total dependence on God... they should look at God and forget themselves...and that very simply.<sup>36</sup>

Elsewhere she describes the person engaged in this non-discursive prayer in a manner which vividly recalls the Marian tradition to which we have been alluding:

When the time comes for us to place ourselves before his divine goodness to communicate with him alone, which is prayer, simply the presence of our spirit before his, and his before ours, forms prayer, whether or not we have holy thoughts or feelings. It is only necessary, in all simplicity and without any violent effort of spirit, to hold ourselves before him.

As we pray we must be like an empty vessel, vulnerable before God so that he can distill his grace in us little by little as he pleases, as content to remain in such emptiness as we would be content to be filled to the brim.<sup>37</sup>

A thorough survey of Salesian thought on prayer will yield the insight that, while prayer is not always schematized in this exact twofold fashion of meditation and contemplation, the contemplative phase always is further nuanced and described as deepening or opening out into a variety of further phases (i.e., prayer of recollection, liquefaction, etc.).<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the dynamic of internalizing the word remains the dominant characteristic of the Salesian prayer experience.

As has been noted, it has been customary, especially in scholarship, to depict growing intimacy with the divine with the language of ascent that takes one beyond human concept, symbol, or faculty. Certainly contemplation as Jane de Chantal speaks of it does abandon the discursive, cognitive activity of the mind and even moves beyond feeling in a simple intuitive grasp of the “meaning” of the object of contemplation. But I would suggest that what has happened in this prayer is not the transcendence of symbol but the internalization of level – the root paradigm through which reality from that time onwards becomes structured.

As I have noted, my assertions about the internalization of the word encoded in the Marian symbol must be viewed as essentially suggestive. Nevertheless, I would note that the fields of healing and psychotherapy provide us with many attestations to the experience of such a paradigm shift achieved through the use of symbol and imagination. Such shifts occur not only or even primarily in the cognitive field but in the entire human organism, affecting structural, emotional, intellectual, and bodily process. In fact healing, both psychological and somatic, is often more likely to be facilitated by the creative use of imagery than by traditional discursive psycho-analytical processes or by the use of chemical treatment.<sup>39</sup>

The deep internalization of the word, achieved through years of prayer, I would suggest, affects the internal structure of the contemplative person so that all human processes become ordered by and subject to the symbolic paradigm that has become the contemplative ground of being. This could account for the fact that in the mystical life unusual somatic occurrences are frequently recounted. Stigmata, miraculous bleeding or effluvia, healings, and the like could be said to represent psychic energy released and structured by the power of symbol operating beyond the readily accessible levels of consciousness.

### *Contemplation and Symbol*

What is there, then, about contemplative prayer that makes this type of restructuring possible? Meditation, as we have noted, is discursive. It deals primarily with the word as narrative. It picks apart and analyzes the word in its discrete parts or enters affectively into the word experienced sequentially as story.

Contemplation, on the other hand, is holistic and intuitive. It focuses on the word expressed as symbol. In fact, it is extremely interesting that as the biblical narrative is used by the Christian tradition of formative prayer it is those snap-shot moments, those framed images of exemplary events, that are featured most prominently in monastic and monastically inspired spirituality. Those moments, like the Marian mysteries to which we have referred, are lifted out to the narrative, celebrated liturgically, and made objects of contemplation in and of themselves. They seem to stand independently of the narrative in the sense that the whole of the Christian story becomes encoded in the mystery. They become multilayered, multivocal codes that – because they are so tightly encapsulated or “packed” – can be made available to and internalized by areas of the human psyche accessible only by non-discursive, non-conceptual means.

One is tempted to see the internalization of the word as symbol as occurring in the operations of that area of human consciousness described in recent years as responsible for intuitive, holistic, non-analytic, creative, and visually receptive operations. Recent reflection has in fact suggested that there is a mode of consciousness, possibly identifiable in the right brain, which gives rise to both contemplative and awareness and aesthetic perception and which is a distinctly different mode of consciousness from either cognition or emotion.<sup>40</sup> This mode of consciousness “frames apart” the object of attention from its environment (either visual or narrative) to favor the concentration of attention. The object observed, in this mode, is not the source of intellectualization or analysis or emotional response or even imaginative reflection but rather is grasped in its fullness.<sup>41</sup> There is an absorption of subject into object that occurs, a loss of self, an invasion of the object into the field of consciousness so that the contemplative and the object of contemplation are experienced as one.

What this suggests is that there is, in the tradition of Christian formative mysticism, a practice – contemplative seeing, one might call it – which involves the use of non-discursive, non-analytic, creative capacities to seize upon the word in a holistic and self-forgetful way so that the word and the one who sees are united. The word, in the form of particular mystery, is thus a framed, thickly packed, and multivocal symbol well designed to be received and absorbed in this field of consciousness.

When this internalization begins to be achieved so that the object of contemplation is no longer simply “before” the contemplative as object but “within,” the person, operating as a paradigm that structures (forms) and directs the entire field of consciousness, the religious symbols could be seen to enter a new depth of absorption so that one no longer experiences contemplative prayer as something one “does” as much as something generated from a source outside ordinary conscious control. The traditional Christian division of the major phases of contemplation into “acquired” and “infused” could be understood in this manner.<sup>42</sup>

If the word as a symbol becomes thus ingested or internalized as paradigm, it would make sense that not only would the individual's perceptions be formed by that paradigm, the symbol becoming the *internal* guide, but that the symbol would emerge again and be "seen" once more as an exterior guide that *informs* the individual in a new way. Thus it might be possible to understand visionary experience (like the pregnancy visions of Brigette of Sweden) as arising from this internalization. Not that visions are simply auditory, visual, or mental experience "performed" by the symbolic milieu of a tradition. Rather visions – or dreams for that matter – could be understood as creative, intuitively apprehended solutions or guides arising from an internalized symbolic paradigm. The emergence of particular symbols or constellations of symbols at a given time might thus be discerned as invitations to the individual growth and wholeness in a direction pointed to by the symbol.

The word as symbol which has made the individual "pregnant" contains within itself the embryo of the transformation that he or she must gestate and into which he or she is invited to grow. The mystic, through vision, audition, or dream, is in this way offered a new or renewed mystery for contemplation. The invitation is to further internalization, new "conception," so that rebirth might become reality and be enfolded once again.

The process just described – the contemplation, internalization, and subsequent externalization of the word – is exactly the process symbolically coded in the Marian mysteries.

Let us return, after all these various and tentative digressions, to the Salesian starting point of this inquiry: "You are pregnant with Him...and blessed be God who is his Father." Behind it lies the theological assertion of the Incarnation, a divine/human reality that, as the formative tradition of Christian prayer insists, is an ongoing and unfolding event. Behind it lies the symbol of the Virgin Mary whose own conception, gestation, and birthing of the divine seed is a paradigm for the Church and the individual Christian, called like her to spiritual motherhood.

Mary as symbol *is* the Church at prayer, hearing the word, allowing it to enter, gestate, transform, and be born in her, giving new life to the world, allowing Jesus to live. She is the diagram of the formative process that makes this transformation possible. She bespeaks the openness of womb and ear to seed and word. She is the dwelling place of the incarnate God. She is a statement of the radically incarnational mysticism that affirms the intimate union of the divine and human in history and flesh and the ever-present moment. She is both descriptive of that union and the means to it.

Mary is at once the object of contemplation and the contemplative. She is the icon to be venerated. She is humanity receiving the fruits of veneration. She *is* what the Christian mystical tradition proclaims all persons are and must become. To imitate her is to let Jesus live, to become a Mother of God.

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## NOTES

1. *Oeuvres de Saint Francois de Sales*, Edition complete d'arees les autograhes et les editions originales, par les soins des Religieuses de la Visitation du Premier Monastere d'Annecy, 26 vols. (Annecy: 1892-1932) 12, *Lettres* 2, p. 287.
2. These words became the motto of the community established by these two saints, the Visitation of Holy Mary. The claim that Salesian spirituality was co-created by both Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal is a somewhat recent one. The usual interpretation is that the male of the couple was the primary creator of the spiritual legacy that bears his name. For a discussion of the alternate version, refer to the introduction by Wendy M. Wright and Joseph F. Power, O.S.F.S., in *Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp.11-13.
3. More obviously, Salesian spirituality speaks of the Christian life as embodying the "gentle humble Jesus" or, in Visitation literature, as entailing a "martyrdom of love." On the gentle Jesus, see Wright and Power, *Letters*. On the martyrdom of love, consult Wendy M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal and Francis de Sales* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 153-5. Salesian thought on the Virgin Mary has been studied by Edward J. Carney, O.S.F.S. in his *The Mariology of St. Francis de Sales* (West Germany: Oblate Generalate, 1963). See also Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.F.S., ed. and Frances Therese Leary, F.J.M., trans., *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Our Lady* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books, 1985).
4. George A. Maloney, *Mary, the Womb of God* (New York: Dimension Books, 1976), p. 14.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
7. Guerric of Igny, *Liturgical Sermons* 2 (Spencer, Massachusettes: Cistercian Publications, 1971), p.46. All three of the sermons on the Annunciation are filled with the language of spiritual motherhood. Compare pp. 32-54. The wider theme of the motherhood of the church runs throughout Guerric's sermons. Thus see also his *Liturgical Sermons I* (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1971).
8. Columbia Hart, trans. *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 345-50.
9. Reis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. and Ignatius Brady, O.F.M., trans. *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
11. Eric Doyle, trans., *St. Bonaventure: Bringing Forth Christ: Five Feasts of the Child Jesus* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1988).
12. Caryll Houselander, *the Reed of God*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1987), p. xi.
13. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* ( New York: Doubleday, 1978), p. 54.
14. In fact, recent research shows that it is as much or more a concern of male Christian authors. See Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Pres, 1982), esp. pp. 110-169.
15. Carolyn Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) focuses on this period, highlighting its affective literalism by a study of the way in which medieval omen focused on the idea of eating God in the Eucharist and becoming food to be eaten.
16. In an essay dealing with the spirituality of Francis of Assisi in its historical context, Ewert Cousins describes the thirteenth century as the beginning of the "mysticism of the historical event" which, cultivated in the Franciscan milieu, reached its zenith in Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. See Ewert Cousins, "Francis of Assisi and Christian Mysticism" in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 163-190.
17. On the medieval exegetical tradition, see Beryl Smalley, *Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952).
18. I am struck with the contrast of openness and closure found in the Marian symbol that seems also to be a structural element of the feeding and fasting behavior of the women Bynum studied. Their closure (to ordinary food, to ordinary bodily excretions and fluids) was in contrast to their openness (to extraordinary food – i.e., the Eucharist – and to extraordinary effluvia). See Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

19. On the Visitation mystery as expressive of the structure and inner meaning of the life of the congregation, see Wright, *Bond of Perfection*, p. 92.
20. Take, as an example of this distillation, Evelyn Underhill's classic *Practical Mysticism*, which divides contemplation into three ascending phases of the natural world of becoming, the metaphysical world of being, and the divine reality.
21. See Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, pp. 260 ff.
22. Robert S. Ellwood, Jr. in his *Introducing Religion From Inside and Outside* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1978), pp. 89-113 pens a clear and concise description of this view of religious symbol.
23. Among the standard texts outlining this approach are W. T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York, 1960), Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (London, 1930), and William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, n.d.).
24. Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983).
25. While I am not sure that this oversimplification does justice to the way Katz views mysticism, this is in fact the view of Robert Gimello, whose work is part of *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, pp. 170-199.
26. I am aware that the terms "mysticism" and "contemplation" are not necessarily synonymous. They are both terms that have a variety of meanings. I have alluded to the difficulty in defining mysticism. This work of definition is further complicated by the common use in Catholic spiritual literature of the phrase "mystical theology," used to describe the whole of the spiritual life of the individual. The term "contemplation" is also as loosely and variously used both in the tradition and in the secondary literature. A broad term referring more to a way of seeing in the world a Christian wisdom acquired through prayer and the presence of the indwelling spirit, contemplation as used by the early Fathers and the medieval monastic world could be contrasted with intellectual knowledge. On this contemplative tradition, see Dom Cuthbert Butler's 'Classic *Western Mysticism: The Teachings of Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harper, 1966). It became popular in later centuries to conceive of contemplation as a special state of prayer reserved mostly for the chosen elite. Contemplation was understood to be of two varieties, acquired and infused, the former being achievable by human effort, the latter a pure gift of God. Contemplation, in this esoteric sense, is described as culminating in a state of union. Mysticism, as scholars tend to use it, somehow overlaps and includes the phenomena and states of consciousness included in infused contemplation. I, however, would like to be a good deal simpler about the use of the term "contemplative prayer," using it more in the holistic way that the earlier masters of the tradition did. Union, described as a state of heightened identity or intimacy with the divine, would be the natural outcome of a continually deepening experience of contemplative prayer.
27. St. François de Sales, *Oeuvres*, 4, *Traité*, p. 307.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 312.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 318-319.
31. *Ibid.*, p.323-4.
32. *Ibid.*, p.313.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Answers of Our Holy Mother St. Jane Frances Fremiot, Baroness de Chantal* (Clifton: E. Austin and Son, 1882), pp. 399-401.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 402-4.
37. Ste. Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot de Chantal, *Sa Vie et ses oeuvres*, 8 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1874-79) 2, Entretien 30, pp. 324-5.
38. St. François de Sales, *Oeuvres 4 Traité*, 326-61.
39. For example, see the very mainstream treatment of this by Dennis and Mathew Linn and Shiela Fabricant, *Healing the Eight States of Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); and the much more alternative healing tradition described in Magaly Rodriguez Mossman and James Frank Mossman, *Light Imagery Work* (St. Paul, 1988). There are likewise whole systems of psychotherapy, namely Ericksonian hypnosis and some

applications of Neuro-linguistic Programming, that are based upon changing the unconscious through fantasies and imagination. Even dream states can evoke change through symbols. See Ernest L. Rossi, *Dreams and the Growth of Personality* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1972).

40. Jaques Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 44. Maquet focuses primarily on eastern meditative disciplines, as do Ken Wilber, Jack Engle, and Daniel Brown in their *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development* (Boston: Shambala, 1986). The only article on this latter volume dealing with Christian mysticism concerns the mystical tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, one saturated with Neo-Platonic schema.
  41. Maquet, p. 32.
  42. See note 26.
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