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### Mother of Our Savior and Cooperator in Our Salvation: Imitatio Mariae and the Biblical Mystery of the Visitation in St. Francis De Sales

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**"MOTHER OF OUR SAVIOR AND  
COOPERATOR IN OUR SALVATION:"<sup>1</sup>  
IMITATIO MARIAE AND THE  
BIBLICAL MYSTERY OF THE  
VISITATION IN ST. FRANCIS DE SALES**

*Joseph F. Chorprenning, O.S.F.S. \**

**Introduction: State of the Question**

Scholarship on the great veneration accorded the Biblical mystery of the Visitation in the early modern Francophone world has elucidated two pivotal episodes in this fascinating story. One is the French School of Spirituality's meditation on the eternal and interior "states" of Christ's "life and wayfaring condition . . . on earth" as archetypes of "states" in the Christian—in this instance, the first "state" of His prenatal life in Mary's womb.<sup>2</sup> The other is the interpretation of Mary's visit to her

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<sup>1</sup>Saint François de Sales, "Sermon pour la fête de la Visitation de la Sainte Vierge (2 juillet 1621)," in *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, Édition complète, 27 vols. (An-necy: J. Niérat et al., 1892-1964), 10:61-77, at 72. All references to Francis's works are to this edition; English translations of citations are my own.

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., John Saward, *Redeemer in the Womb: Jesus Living in Mary* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 83-101. The quotation is from Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629), as cited in translation by Saward, *Redeemer in the Womb*, 88. For an excellent introduction to the French School, see *Bérulle and the French School: Selected Writings*, ed. with an introduction by William M. Thompson, trans. Lowell M. Glendon, S.S., *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

cousin Elizabeth as the prototype of women religious exercising an active apostolate.<sup>3</sup>

As helpful and insightful as this scholarship is, it either overlooks or does not fully account for the rich theology of this mystery elaborated by the early seventeenth-century Savoyard bishop St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), "the most respected Francophone bishop of his time"<sup>4</sup> and the only French-speaking saint canonized in the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> Study of the French School's appreciation of the mystery of the Redeemer in the womb does not encompass Francis. Although Francis shared a common historical matrix with this movement's founders, Salesian spirituality and the French School are two distinct and original currents in the spiritual renewal of Catholicism during the early modern period.<sup>6</sup>

Discussion of the role of the Visitation in the development of female religious communities focuses on the link between this mystery and Francis's foundational vision of the Order of the

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévots: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 171-72; Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 465-66; Mary Anne Foley, "Spirituality for Mission: Marguerite Bourgeoys and the Ignatian Tradition," *Review for Religious* 60 (2001): 48-61, esp. 56-58; and Donna Spivey Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 259-60.

<sup>4</sup>John Bossy, *Peace in the Post-Reformation*, The Birkbeck Lectures 1995 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 37.

<sup>5</sup>Fourteen saints were canonized in the seventeenth century. Most can be gathered into one of two clusters. Six saints were canonized during Francis's lifetime: Charles Borromeo in 1610, Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Philip Neri, Isidore of Madrid, and Teresa of Avila in 1622. After a lengthy hiatus, a second cluster was canonized between 1664 and 1671: Thomas of Villanova, Francis Borgia, Francis de Sales, Peter of Alcántara, Mary Magdalen dei Pazzi, Cajetan, Louis Bertrand, and Rose of Lima. See R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal 1540-1770* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 122-37.

<sup>6</sup>For example, Saward's excellent study, *Redeemer in the Womb*, does not even mention Francis. On the contrast between Francis and the French School, see Wendy M. Wright, "The Salesian and Bérullian Traditions," in *Alive for God in Christ Jesus*, Proceedings of the Conference on the Contemporary Significance of the French School of Spirituality, August 18-24, 1995, Simpsonwood Conference and Retreat Center, Norcross, Ga. (Buffalo: St. John Eudes Center, 1996), 157-67.

Visitation of Holy Mary, which he co-founded with St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641) in 1610. This perspective emphasizes that Francis chose the title of "Visitation" in recognition of the congregation's "mixed" vocation of the inner life of prayer and the active life of service to the poor and sick outside the community. This primitive vision was altered when, in 1616, Francis reluctantly agreed to this institute, originally planned as a single house in his own diocese, becoming an enclosed monastic order, so that it could expand into France, where it would enjoy immense popularity and prodigious growth.<sup>7</sup>

Francis once stated that he found in the mystery of the Visitation "a thousand spiritual particularities, which gave him a special light concerning the spirit that he desired to establish in his Institute."<sup>8</sup> Recently, there has been a tendency to consider Francis's appreciation of this mystery beyond the confines of the polemic concerning the early history of the Visitation Order.<sup>9</sup> This approach has facilitated recovery of more of the richness and variety of Francis's insights into the mystery of the Visitation, making it possible to define more precisely his contribution to the history of veneration of this Biblical event.

I propose to continue this line of investigation by examining three major, but neglected, themes of Francis's theology of

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., Rapley, *The Dévots*, 36-37, 172; McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 465-66; and Ellington, *From Sacred Body*, 145-46, 259-60.

<sup>8</sup>*Année sainte des religieuses de la Visitation Sainte-Marie*, 12 vols. (Annecy: C. Burdet/ Lyon: P.-N. Josserand, 1867-1871), 7:2, quoted in André Ravier, S.J., *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint*, trans. Joseph D. Bowler, O.S.E.S. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 191. This statement is recorded in the oldest manuscript of the *Année sainte*: see *Oeuvres*, 14:349, note 1.

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., Wendy M. Wright, "Birthing Jesus: A Salesian Understanding of the Christian Life," *Studia Mystica* 13 (Spring 1990): 23-44; Joseph F. Chorprenning, O.S.E.S., "Connecting Mysteries: The Visitation and the Holy Family in the Salesian Tradition (from St. Francis de Sales to the *Année Sainte* [1867-1871])," in *La Sagrada Familia en el siglo XIX: Actas del Cuatro Congreso Internacional sobre la Sagrada Familia en ocasión del Centenario de la revista "La Sagrada Familia," Barcelona/Begues, 8-13 de septiembre de 1998* (Barcelona: Hijos de la Sagrada Familia/Nazarenium, 1999), 811-33 (Spanish translation: *Estudios Josefinos* 53, no. 105 [1999]: 3-30); and Hélène Bordes, "La méditation du mystère de la Visitation par François de Sales et l'esprit de l'ordre de la Visitation," in *Visitation et Visitationnaires aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2001), 69-88.

the mystery of the Visitation: first, the salvific (Mary's active co-operation in Jesus' redemptive mission that commences while He is in the womb); second, the communal (the Redeemer in the womb is welcomed by the community of faith of His nuclear and extended family that is the first beneficiary of His work of sanctification); and, third, the exemplary (in this mystery Mary is the prototype of Salesian spirituality to be imitated by Christians in all walks of life). These themes are salient in three key Salesian texts dedicated to this mystery: Francis's letter (June 30, 1610) to Mother de Chantal as their newly founded institute prepared to celebrate its patronal feast for the first time, and his sermons preached on the Feast of the Visitation in 1618 and 1621.<sup>10</sup>

**1. "Her sacred heart was entirely filled with love and with desire for the salvation of humankind . . ."**  
(*Oeuvres*, 9:160).

Christian art has been variously described as "a concrete mode of catechesis" in times "when few could read or write";<sup>11</sup> as a form of exegesis that "select[s], focus[es] in on, abstract[s] or expand[s] the meaning derived from texts in a way that augments the viewer's appreciation," and "clarifies the theological meaning of the narrative and makes the text more accessible to the faithful";<sup>12</sup> and as "not only aesthetic representations, but genuine 'sources' of theology."<sup>13</sup> The pictorial history of the mystery of the Visitation can be traced back as far as the fifth

<sup>10</sup>For the text of the letter, see *Oeuvres*, 14:323-25 (Lettre 608); for that of the 1618 and 1621 sermons, see *Oeuvres*, 9:157-69, and 10:61-77, respectively. These two sermons are transcribed, i.e., they were written down either as Francis spoke, or immediately afterwards by a sister-scribe with a prodigious trained memory (not uncommon in the early modern period) who could recall word-for-word what Francis said. For a full discussion of this form of Francis's sacred oratory, particularly vis-à-vis the autograph sermon, see *Sermon Texts on Saint Joseph*, trans. and ed., with an introductory essay and commentary, by Joseph F. Chorprenning, O.S.F.S. (Toronto: Peregrina, 2000), 41-47.

<sup>11</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (4 April 1999), n. 5.

<sup>12</sup>Marcus B. Burke, "The Life of Faith and Contemporary Art—by way of a sermon," in *The Word as Art: Contemporary Renderings*, exhib. cat. (New York: The Gallery at the American Bible Society, 2000), 37-55, at 42.

<sup>13</sup>Marie Dominique Chenu, O.P., quoted in John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (4 April 1999), n. 11.

century.<sup>14</sup> In the medieval and early modern periods, examples of this subject abound in the visual arts. For example, it is found in most Books of Hours in the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary or Hours of the Virgin. The eight Hours of the Virgin are illustrated by the joyous events in Mary's life surrounding the infancy of Christ, and the Visitation is the traditional illustration for Lauds.<sup>15</sup> Catalogues documenting the quantity and diversity of the subject of the Visitation in the history of art may be found in the standard handbooks of Christian iconography.<sup>16</sup> Here my interest in the iconographic tradition is to appeal to one or another element of these representations as points of entry into Francis's theology of this mystery, mindful that in the period preceding him and in his own day the gospel was more often than not seen and heard (preached, acted out, painted, sculpted, sung), rather than read in the literary sense.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, 3 vols. (1955-1959; Millwood, NY: Kraus Reprint, 1988), vol. 2, part 2, 203, and Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. Janet Seligman, 2 vols. (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971-72), 1:55.

<sup>15</sup>Roger S. Wieck, "The Book of Hours and Medieval Art: Hours of the Virgin," in Roger Wieck, Lawrence R. Poos, Virginia Reinburg, and John Plummer, *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life*, exhib. cat. (New York: George Braziller/Baltimore: The Walters Art Gallery, 1988), 60-72, and his book *Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art*, exhib. cat. (New York: George Braziller/Pierpont Morgan Library 1997), 51-78.

<sup>16</sup>See Anna Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna*, ed. Estelle M. Hurl (Boston/New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1897), 228-35; Réau, *Iconographie*, vol. 2, part 2, 195-210; Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:55-56; and Alicia Craig Faxon, "Visiting/Visitation," in *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art*, ed. Helene E. Roberts, 2 vols. (Chicago/London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), 2:923-28.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Wright, "Birthing Jesus," 27, and Ellington, *From Sacred Body*, 68. On the interpretation of the history of human culture as the history of communication, see the groundbreaking books of Walter J. Ong, S.J.: *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, The Terry Lectures (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1967), and *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958). For a guide to the seminal thought of this prolific scholar, see Thomas J. Farrell, *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication*, with an introduction by Robert A. White (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2000). Farrell's bibliography includes a list of Ong's publications over the period of six decades (1939-1999): 263-76.

Late medieval artists sometimes depict, as if visible through X-ray vision, the fully intact figures of the unborn Christ and John the Baptist framed in a medallion or mandorla, in the wombs of their mothers, as Mary and Elizabeth greet one another. John kneels in adoration of Jesus, who blesses him.<sup>18</sup> In Francis's 1622 sermon for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (three weeks before his death), we find a word-image that approximates the iconographic tradition: "Our Lord and St. John the Baptist visited each other in the wombs of their mothers . . . , and it is said that the glorious Precursor placed himself on his knees to adore his Savior and that at that very instant he was given the use of reason" (*Oeuvres*, 10:403). This genre of images of the Visitation are a vivid reminder that "the chief actors in the drama of the Visitation are two babes in the womb, Jesus in Mary, John in Elizabeth, the Prince and the Prophet, the Word and the Voice."<sup>19</sup> However, this visual/verbal statement may also be liable to misunderstanding Mary's role in this mystery, her active engagement and personal involvement, through her faith as well as in her flesh, in the Incarnation.<sup>20</sup> For example, while, as noted, for many seventeenth-century Francophone spiritual writers, the Virgin of the Visitation was the model of the active life, for others she was the model of contemplation and solitude, being "essentially passive in the encounter with Elizabeth, simply allowing the Word within her to speak in her voice."<sup>21</sup>

Among the distinctive characteristics of Francis's appreciation of the mystery of the Visitation are its integration, balance, and equilibrium—also hallmarks of his personality and thought as a whole. This balance is achieved by Francis's harmonizing,

<sup>18</sup>See Réau, *Iconographie*, vol. 2, part 2, 199–202; Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:56; and Seward, *Redeemer in the Womb*, 131. In this connection, Seward (*Redeemer in the Womb*, 131–32) recalls St. Antoninus of Florence's criticism of images of the Annunciation that show the Son in infant form descending from heaven into Mary's womb: they are dangerously suggestive of the heresy of Valentinus, because they make it look as if Christ's body was brought down from heaven rather than taken from the substance of the Virgin, undermining the doctrine of the Incarnation.

<sup>19</sup>Seward, *Redeemer in the Womb*, 24.

<sup>20</sup>Seward, *Redeemer in the Womb*, 56.

<sup>21</sup>Foley, "Spirituality for Mission," 57.

here as throughout his writings, the *vita contemplativa* with the *vita activa*, or the “inner” and “outer” man,<sup>22</sup> reflective as well of the ideal of the *bonnête homme*: one is to maintain a contemplative core—devotion, holiness, union with God—in the midst of the busyness of one’s state of life in the world. This characteristic of Francis’s understanding of the Visitation has often been noted by Salesian scholars, but perhaps none as elegantly as Elisabeth Stopp:

Mary went with haste into the hill country to visit her cousin who needed her, not so much for practical help, but for moral support and for a strengthening of her faith in the situation in which she found herself. But Mary went there carrying Jesus hidden within her, and she took His sanctifying presence to Elizabeth and to her child. The Visitation was therefore a mystery of worship and adoration, expressed in the insight of Elizabeth’s cry of faith, and then immediately offered back to God in the exultation and thanksgiving of the Magnificat. The time these two women spent together was one of prayer in the living presence of the God Incarnate, as well as a time of hidden, mutually rendered service.<sup>23</sup>

A less remarked facet of Francis’s thought on this Biblical mystery is his dual emphasis on the Redeemer in the womb as the primary actor in this mystery and on Mary’s active, continual, and creative participation and cooperation in this first manifestation of the Savior’s redemptive presence and activity, for “God does not force His Son upon mankind. He wants humanity to welcome Him.”<sup>24</sup> The experience to which Francis appeals, in his 1618 sermon for the Feast of the Visitation, to explain the divine-human dynamic in this mystery is divine inspiration. Inspirations have a primary role in the Salesian spiritual universe: “Inspiration and Church are the doors through which every person, in freedom, may pass into the realm of salvation.”<sup>25</sup> Francis addresses the role of divine inspirations in the

<sup>22</sup>Ellington, *From Sacred Body*, 260.

<sup>23</sup>*Madame de Chantal: Portrait of a Saint* (London: Faber and Faber/Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962), 125.

<sup>24</sup>Saward, *Redeemer in the Womb*, 56.

<sup>25</sup>Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.E.S., “The Holy Spirit in the Thought of St. Francis de Sales,” *Salesianum* 52 (1990): 309–332, at 317.



Christian life in his most popular and best-selling book *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609), Part 2, chapter 18, and in his masterwork *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616), Books 2 and 8.

Francis avers, in the *Introduction*, that divine inspirations are divine visitations, weaving together images from Song of Songs 5:2, Isaiah 40:2, and Revelation 3:20 to convey his idea more clearly: "the Spouse calls knocking at the door and speaking to the heart of his bride" (*Oeuvres*, 3:109). "We call 'inspirations' all those interior attractions, motions, . . . lights and conceptions that God works in us, predisposing our heart . . . in order to awaken, stimulate, urge, and attract us to holy virtues, to heavenly love, to good resolutions, in short, to everything that sends us on our way to our eternal well-being" (*Oeuvres*, 3:108-109). In this process, the recipient of the inspiration is not passive. Rather, Francis explains, "Thus when God wishes to do some act of great charity in us, by us, or with us, first, He proposes it to us by His inspiration; secondly, we approve it; thirdly, we consent to it. For, just as there are three steps for descending to sin—temptation, delectation, and consent—so also there are three steps for ascending to virtue. . . ." (*Oeuvres*, 3:109).

The importance that Francis ascribes to divine inspirations is underscored by the link that he posits, in the *Treatise*, Book 8, chapter 10, between divine inspirations and God's creation of humankind, specifically His breathing life into Adam's nostrils (Gn 2:7; in the Vulgate, *Dominus Deus . . . inspiravit in faciem eius spiraculum vitae*): "this same eternal God breathes and infuses into our souls the inspirations of supernatural life. . . . [this] vital breath is called 'inspiration' since by it this supreme Goodness breathes and inspires in us the desires and intentions of His heart" (*Oeuvres*, 5:90). By cooperating with divine inspirations, we become, in a sense, co-creators with God's will to be done on earth.<sup>26</sup> Francis also speaks of inspi-

<sup>26</sup>In Salesian terminology, this is called the "signified will of God," i.e., God's will *to be done* that is made known by what God says, directs, and inspires. Francis also held that God's will is revealed in the events, facts, and existing realities of human life. This is the "will of God's good pleasure," i.e., God's will *done*, that happens independently of human consent. Consequently, Francis often speaks of "living between" the two wills of God. For further discussion of this central theme of Salesian spirituality, see Wendy M. Wright and Joseph F. Power, O.S.F.S., "Introduction" to Francis de Sales,

rations as a "heavenly ray that brings into our hearts a warm light that makes us see the good and fires us on to its pursuit" (*Oeuvres*, 5:89). The image of the divine ray of light finds a particular resonance in Francis's theology of the Visitation, because, as we will see, our saint selects the same imagery to describe the impact of the Redeemer in the womb upon St. Joseph and St. John the Baptist.

In Francis's view, Mary's setting out to visit Elizabeth was her consent and response to a "divine inspiration" she received upon hearing from the angel Gabriel that Elizabeth had in her old age conceived a son (Lk 1:36) (*Oeuvres*, 9:158). Francis puts it this way: "The Evangelist says that the Virgin rose up in haste and went into the mountain country of Judah, to show the promptitude with which we should respond to divine inspirations; for it is the Holy Spirit's hallmark that when He touches a heart, He puts to flight all tepidity: He loves diligence and promptitude, and is the enemy of procrastination and delays in the performance of the divine will" (*Oeuvres*, 9:165). Reprising the image of God knocking at the door of the human heart, our saint makes the lesson that he draws from the Virgin of the Visitation even clearer: "O how . . . you should be overwhelmed with joy when you are visited . . . by the interior graces that you receive daily from His divine Majesty by means of so many inspirations and words that He speaks to your hearts! For He is always near, knocking and speaking to you about what He desires you to do for His love. . . . You should listen to Him with great attention, and faithfully and promptly carry out His divine will!" (*Oeuvres*, 9:168).

The source of Mary's inspiration is the Redeemer in the womb: "Ah! the first fruits of the movements of Him whom she has in her womb. . . . the Virgin is conscious only of what is within her, and . . . she breathes only the Savior" (*Oeuvres*, 14:324).<sup>27</sup> The idea that the unborn Jesus, eager to begin His

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Jane de Chantal, *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, trans. Péronne-Marie Thibert, V.H.M., The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 7-90, esp 40-43.

<sup>27</sup>Francis further develops the theme of Mary rapt in contemplation of the Redeemer in the womb in the *Treatise of the Love of God*, Bk. 6, ch. 7 (*Oeuvres*, 4:328). Also see *Treatise*, Bk. 6, ch. 9 (*Oeuvres*, 4:335).

work of salvation, inspired Mary to undertake her visit to Elizabeth was not new. It is found in the Fathers of the Church and was commonplace in devotional authors whom Francis recommends to Philothea and Madame de Chantal for spiritual reading.<sup>28</sup> But what is original in Francis's treatment of this theme is his extensive development of it in terms of love.

The love of the Mother and Son is not static, but ecstatic, not only affective but also effective: it reaches outward to the neighbor in a manner in which Mary is transformed into love itself. "For charity is never idle: it burns in the hearts where it reigns and dwells, and the most blessed Virgin was completely filled with it, because she bore Love Himself in her womb" (*Oeuvres*, 9:159). Mary "made continual acts of love, not only to God, with whom she was united by the most perfect pure and tender love possible, but she also possessed love of neighbor in a most perfect degree, which made her ardently desire the salvation of the whole world and the sanctification of souls; and, knowing that she could cooperate with that of St. John, still in the womb of St. Elizabeth, she went there in all haste" (*Oeuvres*, 9:159). Francis insists on this point: "Charity, therefore, was the reason that the most blessed Virgin cooperated in this sanctification. But it is no wonder since her sacred heart was entirely filled with love and with desire for the salvation of humankind, since she carried within her chaste womb Love Himself, the Savior and Redeemer of the world" (*Oeuvres*, 9:160).<sup>29</sup> The effect upon Mary was transformative: "she not only possessed charity, but she had also received it in such

<sup>28</sup>See, e.g., Origen, *Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 28; Ludolphus de Saxonia, *Vita Jesu Christi*, 2 vols. (Paris: Victor Palmé/Rome: Libreria S. Congreg. de Propaganda Fide, 1870), 1:56; and Luis de la Puente, S.J., *Meditaciones de los misterios de nuestra santa fe*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., 2 vols. (Madrid: Apostolado de la Prensa, 1953), 1:411-14. For Francis's recommendation of La Puente and Ludolph of Saxony, see *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Pt. 2, chs. 1, 17 (*Oeuvres*, 3:71, 107), and his letter of November 21, 1604, to Madame de Chantal (*Oeuvres*, 12:387; Lettre 240).

<sup>29</sup>On the heart of Mary in the theological and devotional tradition preceding Francis, see Théodore A. Koehler, S.M., "The Heart of Mary in the Latin Tradition from the Seventh to the Sixteenth Century," *Marian Library Studies*, n. s., 25 (1996-97): 91-175.

plentitude that she was charity itself. She had conceived Him who, being all love, had transformed her into love itself" (*Oeuvres*, 9:161).

A point of no small interest is Francis's emphasis that the sanctification of souls often takes place through Mary's mediation, that is, her complete and unreserved cooperation with the redemptive action of her Son, "the unique mediator between God and humanity" (1 Tm 2:5). Accordingly, because of her role as "Mother of our Savior and cooperator in our salvation," Mary should be rendered "a very special honor," "a cult and an honor greater than that given to all the other saints" (*Oeuvres*, 10:72).<sup>30</sup> This emphasis on Mary as mediatrix with her Son also serves as a bridge to the next element of Francis's theology of the mystery of the Visitation, its communal dimension.

## 2. Connecting Mysteries: The Visitation, Holy Family, Pentecost, and Trinity

While many images of the Visitation depict only Mary and Elizabeth, more than a few also include Joseph and Zechariah in this scene. It is sometimes suggested that the addition of Joseph and Zechariah to form a "double visitation" was a phenomenon that began in the period after the Council of Trent (1545-1563).<sup>31</sup> In fact, one of the earliest illustrations of the Visitation, an ivory relief on Archbishop Maximian's Throne in Ravenna (545-556), shows Joseph and Zechariah present at the encounter of Mary and Elizabeth.<sup>32</sup> Joseph and Zechariah are also included and the double visitation is represented in a

<sup>30</sup>Michael O'Carroll, C.S.Sp., *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982), 241-42, assesses Francis's place in the history of theological reflection on Mary's role in the work of salvation and her ceaseless heavenly intercession as follows: in the face of the Protestant reformers' rejection of Mary's mediatory role, "the Counter-Reformation Doctors—Peter Canisius, Robert Bellarmine, Lawrence of Brindisi, and Francis de Sales—continued the tradition, and clung to the title [mediatrix], with the exception of St. Francis, who preferred 'treasurer of graces,' 'advocate,' and 'collaborator [*coopératrice*] in our salvation.'"

<sup>31</sup>See, e.g., Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:56, and Charlene Villaseñor Black, "Love and Marriage in the Spanish Empire: Depictions of Holy Matrimony and Gender Discourses in the Seventeenth Century," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 32 (2001): 637-67, esp. 654-55.

<sup>32</sup>Réau, *Iconographie*, vol. 2, part 2, 203.

series of pictures of the Visitation illustrating a manuscript of the Pseudo-Bonaventure's enormously popular and influential *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (ca. 1300): one illustration shows Joseph and Mary traveling to visit Elizabeth, another depicts the "double visitation," with the traditional embrace of Mary and Elizabeth being repeated by Joseph and Zechariah, and a third portrays Mary and Joseph making the return trip to Nazareth.<sup>33</sup> During Francis's lifetime, Joseph and Zechariah were often included in artistic representations of the Visitation.<sup>34</sup>

Images of the Visitation showing Jesus and John the Baptist in their mothers' wombs, as well as those portraying Joseph and Zechariah, point to this mystery being broader and more inclusive than the persons of Mary and Elizabeth. Francis also regarded this mystery in this way, as he reveals when he enumerates "the saints who were present at the mystery of the Visitation, namely, the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist, patriarch of hermits, St. Zechariah, and St. Elizabeth."<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere he speaks of this mystery as "the Visitation of Our Lady and of the glorious

<sup>33</sup>*Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Ital. 115, trans. and eds. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 22, 26.

<sup>34</sup>For example, Federico Barroci's *Visitation* (1584-1586) in the Cappella Pozzomiglio in the Chiesa Nuova (S. Maria in Vallicella) in Rome, before which St. Philip Neri had an apparition of the Virgin; Hieronymus Wierix's engraving of the subject for Jerome Nadal's *Adnotationes et Meditationes in Evangelia* . . . (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> editions, 1595; 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1607); and the mosaic of the Visitation in the Clementine Chapel in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome installed by Pope Clement VIII (reigned 1592-1605) to celebrate the Holy Year of 1600. On the reasons for Joseph's inclusion, as well as the textual and artistic sources of this tradition, see *Sermon Texts on Saint Joseph*, 144-50 (Appendix 2, "St. Joseph and the Biblical Mystery of the Visitation"), and Carolyn C. Wilson, "St. Joseph as *Custos* in the *Summa* of Isidoro Isolano and in Italian Renaissance Art," in *Saint Joseph Studies. Papers in English from the Seventh and Eighth International St. Joseph Symposia: Malta 1997 and El Salvador 2001*, ed. Larry Toschi, O.S.J. (Santa Cruz, CA: Guardian of the Redeemer Books, 2002), 89-120, esp. 99-103.

<sup>35</sup>*Oeuvres*, 24:490 ("Abrégé des Constitutions des Ermites du Mont-Voiron"). E.-J. Lajeunie, O.P. (*St. Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence*, 2 vols., trans. Rory O'Sullivan, O.S.F.S. [Bangalore, India: S.F.S. Publications, 1986-1987], 2:457), points out that Francis intended these hermits living in the Voirons Mountains to be "the brothers of the Visitandines . . . under the patronage of Our Lady of the Visitation."

St. Joseph.”<sup>36</sup> Francis understands the Visitation as a relational, and, more specifically, a family mystery. The chief actor in this drama is Jesus hidden in the womb who, through the mediation of Mary, commences His work of sanctification among the members of what today we would refer to as His nuclear family—Mary and Joseph—and His extended family—in this instance, John the Baptist, Elizabeth, and Zechariah.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the mystery the Holy Family is inseparably linked to is that of the Visitation. This facet of Francis’s theology of the Visitation is best appreciated when viewed through the lens of his heart-centered, relational spiritual vision.

It has been observed that “the entire edifice of the Salesian spiritual vision is undergirded by the image of the heart. . . . a vision of an ‘interconnected world of hearts’—the hearts of God and humankind bridged by the crucified heart of Jesus.”<sup>38</sup> In Francis’s thought, the word *heart* “designates . . . , as [it does] in the Bible, that which is most profound, most inalienable, most personal, most divine in us; it is that mysterious center where each encounters God, acquiesces to His appeals or refuses to do so.”<sup>39</sup> The heart is the hidden inner core of the unique self where, in the words of St. Augustine, “I am whatever I am” (*Confessions*, Bk. 10, ch. 3). In the Salesian tradition, union with God, to which all—layperson or cleric, man or woman, celibate or married—are invited, is essentially a union of hearts, the most profound communion possible. Francis images this reciprocal human-divine love relationship as a mutual breathing and beating of hearts. God’s heart breathes out love and draws love back again. Humankind,

<sup>36</sup>*Oeuvres*, 18:142 (Lettre 1386). In this letter of early January 1618 to the Barnabite priest Don Juste Guérin, who was charged with handling the Visitation Order’s affairs with the Holy See, Francis refers to “the Visitation of Our Lady and of the glorious St. Joseph” as the titular patronage of the church of the Visitation monastery in Annecy.

<sup>37</sup>It should be noted that well into the seventeenth century, the word “family” was generally understood to mean “extended family,” or all those living under the authority of the *paterfamilias*, rather than nuclear family as it does today: see Irénée Noye, S.S., “Famille (Dévotion à la sainte Famille),” *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. 5 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1964), 84–93, esp. 84–85.

<sup>38</sup>Wendy M. Wright, *Sacred Heart: Gateway to God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 52.

<sup>39</sup>Ravier, *Francis de Sales*, 146.

breathing in concert with the divine heart, breathes in love (inspiration) and breathes it back again (aspiration). This is the ideal. In practice, however, because of sin, human hearts do not always beat in rhythm with divine love. Much discipline and serious formation are required to recover the ability to love purely. The gentle and humble heart of Jesus (Mt. 11:29, "Come to Me.. and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble of heart," which was Francis's favorite Biblical verse) is the mediator between the worlds of divine and human hearts and the model for the transformation of the human heart into a heart that pulses in union with God.

The Salesian world of hearts, however, is not only vertical—human hearts linked to the divine heart by the heart of Jesus, but also horizontal—human hearts pulsing in union with one another. Human hearts in loving, God-centered relationships inflame, attune, and make each other responsive to the loving heart of God. Salesian spirituality, then, is profoundly relational, even to the point of regarding human friendships as requisite for attaining salvation, as indicated in the *Introduction*, Part 3, chapter 19: "the delightful balm of devotion is distilled from one heart into another. . . . For those who live in the midst of the worldly-minded and who embrace true virtue, it is necessary to join with other like-minded persons by holy and sacred friendship; for, by this means they encourage, assist, and lead one another to goodness" (*Oeuvres*, 3:203–204). Love of God and love of others are two facets of one love that grows or diminishes in one heart. "For it is not that one glimpses God despite the persons around one but that one finds God precisely through and with those persons."<sup>40</sup> Francis wrote extensively on human relationships; his *Treatise on the Love of God* was to be but the first in a series of four treatises on the four loves, the others being love of self, love of friends, and love of enemies. Francis himself has been described as having "more friendships than would seem humanly possible" so that he "breathed friendship."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Wright and Power, "Introduction," to *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 46.

<sup>41</sup>Terence A. McGoldrick, *The Sweet and Gentle Struggle: Francis de Sales on the Necessity of Spiritual Friendship* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1996),

"The true mark of a divine visitation," Francis maintains, "is transformation" (*Oeuvres*, 10:76). As already seen, the first person transformed by the advent of the Word made flesh is His mother. After Mary, St. Joseph is the first to experience the sanctifying power of the Redeemer in the womb. In his letter of June 30, 1610, to Mother de Chantal, Francis recounts that, on her journey to Elizabeth, Mary is accompanied by the angels and led "with heartfelt affection" by Joseph (*Oeuvres*, 14:324). Francis characterizes this journey as "a glorious pilgrimage," adding "I would very much like to know something of the conversations between these two great souls, because you would indeed be pleased that I should tell it to you" (*Oeuvres*, 14:324). He invites Jane to consider that while "the Virgin is conscious only of what is within her, and that she breathes only the Savior; St. Joseph, for his part, yearns only for the Savior, who, with hidden rays, touches his heart with a thousand extraordinary sentiments. And as wines shut up in cellars subtly exude the fragrance of 'flowering vines' [Sg. 2:13], so the heart of this holy Patriarch subtly exudes the fragrance, vigor, and strength of this little Infant who blossoms within his beautiful vineyard" (*Oeuvres*, 14:324).

In his reflections on the bond of deep mutual affection among the members of the Holy Family after Jesus' birth, Francis especially singles out the warm and tender affectionate relationship between Jesus and Joseph.<sup>42</sup> In this letter, Francis establishes that this privileged relationship commenced while Jesus was still in the womb. The heart of the prenatal Jesus beats with love for Joseph and draws forth the saint's love. The word-picture that Francis draws of the unborn Christ quickening

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introduction (unnumbered pages). For further discussion of Francis's heart-centered, relational spirituality, see Wright, "The Salesian and Bérullian Traditions," 159-60, "That Is What It Is Made For": The Image of the Heart in the Spirituality of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal," in *Spiritualities of the Heart: Approaches to Personal Wholeness in Christian Tradition*, ed. Annice Callahan, R.S.C.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 143-58, and *Sacred Heart*, 51-53. Also see Wright and Power, "Introduction," to *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 54-61.

<sup>42</sup>See Joseph F. Chorprenning, O.S.E.S., "The Guidance and Education of His Divine Infancy: The Holy Family's Mission in St. Francis de Sales," in *The Holy Family in Art and Devotion* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 1998), 38-52, esp. 44-45.



Joseph's heart with hidden rays evokes the image, found in the visual arts of the Baroque, of the Christ Child as the heavenly and divine Cupid who shoots His arrows into human hearts to set them afire with love of God.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Francis's envisioning the impact of the unborn Jesus, here on Joseph and elsewhere on John the Baptist, as a ray of light connotes the Biblical image of Jesus as the Sun of Justice (Mal. 3:20—an identification explicitly made in Francis's explanation, in his 1622 sermon on the virtues of St. Joseph, of the process of this saint's sanctification [*Oeuvres*, 6:355-56]). Bérulle also uses this image to speak of John's sanctification.<sup>44</sup> Mary, inside of whom Jesus lives, plays a necessary and essential mediatory role in the prenatal relationship between Jesus and Joseph. This is another key theme of Francis's theology of the Holy Family, namely, that Joseph's sanctification takes place through Mary's mediation and that it is the fruit of Mary's prayer and also her love.<sup>45</sup>

Mary likewise plays a mediatory role with her Son in the effusion of blessings conferred upon Jesus' extended family. Francis expresses it in this way: "This incomparable Virgin then

<sup>43</sup>On this iconographic tradition, specifically in relation to St. Joseph, see *Just Man, Husband of Mary, Guardian of Christ: An Anthology of Readings from Jerónimo Gracián's "Summary of the Excellencies of St. Joseph" (1597)*, trans. and ed., with an introductory essay and commentary, by Joseph F. Chorprenning, O.S.F.S. (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 1993), 35-43.

<sup>44</sup>"Theologians assure us that Our Lord, casting a ray of His light and grace into the soul of St. John the Baptist when he was still in the womb of St. Elizabeth, sanctified him and gave him the use of reason with the gift of faith by which, having recognized his God in the womb of the most holy Virgin, he adored Him and consecrated himself to His service" (*Oeuvres*, 9:384-85; Sermon for the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lady in the Temple, November 21, 1620). On Bérulle, see Saward, *Redeemer in the Womb*, 91. On light as a metaphor for explaining Christian mysteries, see Millard Meiss, "Light as Form and Symbol in Some Fifteenth-Century Paintings," *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945): 175-81.

<sup>45</sup>See Irénée Noye, S.S., "La Sainte Famille vue par les prédicateurs et auteurs spirituels français jusqu'au XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle," in *La Sagrada Família en el siglo XVIII: Actas del Tercer Congreso Internacional sobre la Sagrada Família en ocasión del LXXV Aniversario de la extensión de la fiesta litúrgica de la Sagrada Família a la Iglesia Universal, Barcelona/Begues, 6-10 de septiembre de 1996* (Barcelona: Hijos de la Sagrada Família/Nazarenum, 1997), 633-44, esp. 637, and Chorprenning, "The Guidance," 46-47.

enters Zechariah's house, and with her a superabundance of blessings for this family" (*Oeuvres*, 10:69). Mary's "visit," he continues, "filled the whole family of Zechariah with the Holy Spirit" (*Oeuvres*, 10:71): "Indeed, the whole house was overwhelmed with joy: the infant leapt for joy, the father recovered his speech, the mother was filled with the Holy Spirit and received the gift of prophecy, for on seeing this blessed Lady enter her house, she exclaimed: 'Who am I that the Mother of my Lord should come to visit me? [Lk. 1:43]'" (*Oeuvres*, 9:166-67).<sup>46</sup>

René Laurentin has called the Visitation a "proto-Pentecost."<sup>47</sup> As a newly ordained priest, Francis had also perceived this connection between the Visitation and Pentecost. He linked these two events in a sermon for the Feast of St. Peter in 1593. The person of the Virgin Mary connects the Visitation and Pentecost, because on both occasions—first, when she brings the Redeemer in the womb to Zechariah's house, and, then, when she is present with the Apostles gathered together in prayer in the Upper Room—the Holy Spirit is poured forth through her mediation and intercession: "St. John was sanctified in the womb of his mother in the presence of the holy Virgin; and, likewise, St. Peter was sanctified in the womb of the Church Militant" (*Oeuvres*, 7:37).<sup>48</sup> In heaven, Mary continues to exercise her intercessory and mediatory role: "St. Elizabeth received the Holy Spirit by means of the Virgin. Indeed, we must avail ourselves of her as a mediatrix with her Son in order to obtain this divine Spirit" (*Oeuvres*, 10:72). And, as Francis

<sup>46</sup>The Visitation thus also commences a unique relationship between the Redeemer in the womb and His precursor in the womb of Elizabeth: "While yet in their mothers' wombs, Our Lord and St. John the Baptist knew each other, conversed together, and loved each other, having the use of affection, judgment, and reason" (*Oeuvres*, 10:67). According to Francis, three persons had the use of reason before birth: Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and John the Baptist. See *Oeuvres*, 9:346 (Sermon for the Feast of St. Nicholas of Tolentine, September 10, 1620).

<sup>47</sup>*The Truth of Christmas beyond the Myths: The Gospels of the Infancy of Christ*, trans. Michael J. Wrenn et al. (Petersham, Mass.: St. Bede's Publications, 1986), 99.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Louis Comte, *Marte, mère et éducatrice selon Saint François de Sales, Vatican II et Paul VI* (Paris: Éditions P. Lethielleux, 1970), 152-57. On the exploration of these events later in seventeenth-century France, see Mary Anne Foley, "Uncloistered Apostolic Life for Women: Marguerite Bourgeoys's Experiment in Ville-Marie" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1991), 187-98.

explains in his sermon for Pentecost, 1593, the efficacy of Mary's intercession flows from her unique relationship with the three Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity: "she is the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, Daughter of the eternal Father, Mother of the eternal Son" (*Oeuvres*, 7:29). With this background in mind, it is noteworthy that Francis had originally planned to inaugurate the new Visitation congregation on Pentecost Sunday, May 30, 1610, but, as all was not ready, had to postpone it until June 6, the Feast of the Blessed Trinity—both feasts being rich in meaning for this new undertaking and intimately related to the mystery of the Visitation to which the new institute was dedicated.

### **3. Mary as a Model for Spiritual Renewal in an Age of Religious Reform**

The Feast of the Visitation was instituted and promoted at a moment of crisis in the late Middle Ages in the hope that "the Christ-bearing Holy Virgin might 'visit' the Church anew to put an end to the Great Schism and preserve Christ's Mystical Body in peace."<sup>49</sup> Francis invokes this Biblical mystery at another moment of crisis in the Church's life, namely, as it was striving to reform and renew itself in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation and according to the directives of the Council of Trent. Francis's life and ministry were totally dedicated to this process of reform and renewal, as he sought to realize his "long-range vision of a renewed world, in which devout persons from all walks of life, in all states and conditions, would be raised up to leaven the whole loaf of Christendom."<sup>50</sup> As we have seen, Francis's exploration of the mystery of the Visitation gives substantial attention to Mary's role as mediator and intercessor with her Son. It equally emphasizes, reflecting one of the principal trends of his age, the primary role of Mary and

<sup>49</sup>Saward, *Redeemer in the Womb*, 122. Also see R. W. Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 40-61.

<sup>50</sup>Wendy M. Wright, "The Visitation of Holy Mary: The First Years (1610-1618)," in *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: In Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 217-50, at 229.

the saints as models of virtue to be imitated, an emphasis reflective of the moral reform promoted by the post-Tridentine Church.<sup>51</sup> On these, as well as other, points, Francis's theology of the Visitation unpolemically affirms Catholic doctrines denied by the Protestant Reformers.

Among the hallmarks of Francis's personality are his "uncompromising realism and common sense."<sup>52</sup> Francis has been characterized as "spiritual" and "mystical."<sup>53</sup> Francis *is* a mystic, but it must not be forgotten that "for Francis the mystical life is life—everyday life, with events foreseen and unforeseeable, with its sufferings and its joys, its friendships and its separations, its worries and its consolations—natural life but totally penetrated, 'soaked through and through' to use his expression, by and in the will of God. . . ."<sup>54</sup> What is salient in Francis's treatment of the mystery of the Visitation is his realism and practicality that take the form of his conviction that the Visitation is not an event consigned to the past, but ever present in the here and now in daily experience: God "breaks into" human life at every turn, and Mary, in the first place, and the "saints of the Visitation" model the appropriate human response to these daily divine visitations. This is consonant with Salesian spirituality's stress not on dramatic exploits, acts of great heroism, and visible mortification, but on a deep appreciation for the significance of little things, the ordinary, and the everyday: doing the ordinary with extraordinary care, attention, and, most importantly, love. Francis's interpretation of this Biblical mystery contrasts sharply with Calvin's theology of sacred transcendence that posited a radical disjuncture

<sup>51</sup>See, e.g., Ellington, *From Sacred Body*, 149–50.

<sup>52</sup>Elisabeth Stopp, "Introduction" to her *A Man to Heal Differences: Essays and Talks on St. Francis de Sales* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 1997), 1–17, at 1; originally published as the introduction to her translation of St. Francis de Sales, *Selected Letters* (New York: Harper, 1960), 15–41.

<sup>53</sup>Ellington, *From Sacred Body*, 238.

<sup>54</sup>André Ravier, "Preface" to his edition of St. François de Sales, *Oeuvres*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), ix–cix, at lxxxix–lxxxii, quoted and translated into English by Joseph F. Power, O.S.F.S., *Francis de Sales: Finding God Wherever You Are* (New Rochelle: New City Press, 1993), 14.

between the corporeal and the spiritual that separated the body of Christ, the signified, from its sign, the Eucharist, and excluded the sacred and miraculous from this world and everyday life.<sup>55</sup>

In his two extant sermons on the Visitation, Francis identifies three "divine visitations" that occur within the context of daily life and that correspond to three primary Catholic doctrines: the profoundly sacramental nature of daily life, the Eucharist as truly the body and blood of Christ, and the necessity of good works. In the Salesian order of things, these quotidian visitations are part and parcel of the progressive and continuing unfolding of salvation history. God often visits His people, beginning with the visitation of God the Creator in Genesis who creates humankind in the divine image and likeness of the Trinity, and culminating at the inauguration of the New Covenant with the annunciation of the Incarnation: Gabriel, as the messenger of the eternal Father, makes a visitation to Mary, and at her *fiat* the Son becomes flesh in her womb through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Visitation is the immediate and direct result of the primordial divine visitation of the Incarnation.<sup>56</sup>

The first divine visitation in the everyday, as discussed above, is divine inspirations. The Council of Trent had singled out good and solid public preaching as a principal means of ecclesial renewal.<sup>57</sup> Significantly, Francis avers that "Preaching is the ordinary means of inspiration," because it "is the publication and declaration of God's will, made to men by one who is lawfully ordained, to the end of instructing and moving them to serve His divine Majesty in this world in order to be saved in the next."<sup>58</sup> Mary, who undertakes her visit to Elizabeth in response to the inspiration of the Redeemer in the womb, models the joy, attention, fidelity, and promptitude that should characterize our response to God knocking at the door of the

<sup>55</sup>See Ann W. Ramsey, *Liturgy, Politics, and Salvation: The Catholic League in Paris and the Nature of Catholic Reform, 1540-1630* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1999), 35-43.

<sup>56</sup>Bordes, "La méditation," 73, 77, 81-84.

<sup>57</sup>See, e.g., Ellington, *From Sacred Body*, 146-47.

<sup>58</sup>*Oeuvres*, 5:90 (*Treatise*, Bk. 8, ch. 10), and 12:323 (Lettre 229, to Archbishop André Frémyot, archbishop of Bourges), respectively.

human heart by means of His inspirations. Just as Mary cooperated in the mystery of Redemption by her exemplary responsiveness to divine inspiration, so too we can, by cooperating with God's inspirations, be co-creators of His signified will being done on earth.

The second is, Francis declares, "when you are visited by the divine Savior in the most blessed Sacrament of the altar" at Mass (*Oeuvres*, 9:168), and in the reception of Holy Communion. The latter makes it possible to become a member of the Holy Family: "Do you want to be a relative of the Virgin? Receive Communion, for in receiving the holy Sacrament, you receive the flesh of her flesh and the blood of her blood, since the Savior's precious body, which is present in the divine Eucharist, was made and formed of her most pure blood by the operation of the Holy Spirit" (*Oeuvres*, 10:75). This brief passage synthesizes three principal late medieval Marian themes: Mary's physical maternity of Jesus, the consequent mystical union of Mother and Son, and Mary's advocacy as "Mother of the Eucharist."<sup>59</sup> It is also notable for "its focus on the communal nature of the sacrament at a time when many developments in Catholic practice regarding the Eucharist were causing it to become an individualized and private experience."<sup>60</sup>

Finally, God visits us many times each day in the needs of our neighbor. The Virgin of the Visitation models the love of God being perfected in love of neighbor, for charity is "not in [its] perfection if [it] is not transferred to the neighbor" (*Oeuvres*, 10:65). As Francis exhorts the Visitandines, "O my dear Sisters, you who have this Virgin as your Mother, daughters of the Visitation of Our Lady and of St. Elizabeth, what great care you should take to imitate her, especially her humility and charity, which were the chief virtues that moved her to make this visitation. You should, therefore, be outstanding in their practice, which will move you to go with haste and joy to visit your sick sisters, cordially helping and serving one another in your infirmities, whether they be spiritual or corporal. . . . To be a daughter of Our Lady it is not enough to be content with living in a

<sup>59</sup>Ellington masterfully surveys these themes in *From Sacred Body*, 47-141.

<sup>60</sup>Ellington, *From Sacred Body*, 239.

convent of the Visitation and wearing the veil of a nun. . . . Rather, you must imitate [Our Lady] in her holiness and her virtues. . . . Be most careful to model your lives on hers: be gentle, humble, charitable and affable, and magnify the Lord with her during this life" (*Oeuvres*, 9:168-69). This harmonizing of the active and the contemplative, the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the Salesian spiritual universe, is achievable both within and outside the monastery cloister. Again, Francis insists, "The true mark of a divine visitation is transformation," and so "if you want to know if you have received Him, examine your works, for it is thus that we know the answer" (*Oeuvres*, 10:76, 72).

### Conclusion

In the early modern period, Francis de Sales, who was "known internationally for his preaching and also for his ardent love for Mary,"<sup>61</sup> proffers a compelling multifaceted appreciation of the Biblical mystery of the Visitation. This theology reveals and makes accessible the transcendent presence and power of this event in salvation history that is daily experienced in divine inspirations, the Eucharist, and practical charity. For Francis, the Visitation is a mystery of salvation that radiates from the Redeemer in the womb, first, to His nuclear family, then, to His extended family, and, finally, to the family of humankind—an intensely communal and relational understanding of this episode of Luke's infancy narrative. Consequently, the significance and scope of the mystery of the Visitation is broader and richer than discussions of its relevance for the initial vision of the Order bearing its name often indicate. The influence of this mystery, with its emphasis on the ubiquitous hidden presence of the divine in everyday events and human encounters, permeates Francis's thought and writings, even when he does not explicitly refer to it.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup>Ellington, *From Sacred Body*, 7.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. Bordes, "La méditation," 69, who comments on the pervasive formative influence that the mystery of the Visitation had on Francis's approach to the world, theology, spirituality, and linguistic expression.

This mystery is a microcosm of the macrocosm of Salesian spirituality, specifically its heart-centeredness, relational quality, and stress on hiddenness. The Visitation Order institutionalizes this spirituality and the living out of this mystery for which it is named and to which it is dedicated; however, both Francis's spirituality and his vision of the mystery of the Visitation are larger than this Order. His is a spirituality for all, regardless of state of life, and this paper has attempted to offer a glimpse of the broader implications of his theology of the mystery of the Visitation of which he was so fond, to which he was so devoted, and into which he had so many insights. It is more than appropriate that we pause, during this year marking the fourth centenary of Francis's episcopal consecration and the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his declaration as "Doctor of the Universal Church," to consider the splendor of the gift that the Holy Spirit has given to the Church in the gentle person and in the profound and practical doctrine of this great saint.