

“Gentle and Humble of Heart”
(Matthew 11:29)

The Christological Image That Gives Rise to Salesian Spirituality

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A contemporary French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), famously claimed that “the symbol gives rise to thought.”¹ In analyzing the power of language, he argues that symbols generate a unique sort of cognition by virtue of their double intentionality; that is, in and through the literal meaning of the symbol, another, non-literal understanding is given, one that evokes greater meaning precisely through the transparency of the symbol itself. In this way, symbolism operates as a distinct type of poetic language and contributes to the distinctive power of human narratives. Whereas ordinary language provides information about the external world, symbols direct us to a meaning within, to a mood, to the soul. Differing from the precision sought by scientific language, symbols are inherently ambiguous as they convey experiences not otherwise open to articulation. And unlike rhetorical language, symbols seek catharsis rather than persuasion, in the creative or imaginative reconstruction of our understanding amid the narrative of our lives.

Four centuries prior to Ricoeur, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) understood the power of symbols, even if he did not articulate it philosophically. One symbol, in particular, gives rise to his distinctive understanding of our human existence, our Christian faith, and our spiritual lives. Drawn from the Gospel of St. Matthew (11:29), the humble and gentle heart of Jesus is the real symbol that informs the saint’s Christology. Literally referring to the bodily organ, the poetic picture of Jesus’s sacred heart points us inward, toward our own hearts, where it touches upon the realm of experience unique to human beings,² in the hope of effecting a transformation of our

lives. For Salesian spirituality, then, the humble, gentle heart of Jesus operates as a controlling image, a dominant thought, and a directional principle.

The Humble and Gentle Heart of Jesus as a Salesian Paradigm

In several scholarly studies,³ Wendy Wright explores the poetic image of the heart in Salesian spirituality. She provides a succinct depiction of the “world of interconnected divine and human hearts” as an image that controls the thrust of all Salesian thought:

For the Savoyard bishop all human hearts were created to beat in rhythm with their Creator’s dynamic, creative, and generative heart. Because human hearts are created by God who is goodness and love itself, they too are essentially good and always retain their original orientation to love. Yet as they are wounded by sin, human hearts are, as it were, arrhythmic and must be restored to their intended pulse by “living Jesus.” They do this through the mediation of the one heart that is both fully human and fully divine. The heart of Jesus thus must be exchanged for human hearts.⁴

That exchange of hearts characterizes the interiorizing process of devotion championed by de Sales and the tradition of spirituality that bears his name. At the heart of his devout Christian humanism lies *the* heart, the Sacred Heart of Jesus narrated in the Gospels: the pulsing heart of the Mary’s child, the beloved heart of God’s own Son, a heart at once compassionate and encouraging, broken and troubled, the heart pierced on the cross for human salvation, the heart abiding in love and living eternally.⁵

Specifically, Francis de Sales devotes great attention to the specific qualities of gentleness and humility which Jesus ascribes to His own heart in the Gospel of Matthew 11:29. Fr. Thomas McHugh, in fact, has argued that the emphasis on these twin characteristics, appropriated as virtues, distinguishes St. Francis de Sales from all other spiritual masters and makes him a sure guide for souls seeking the life of Christian holiness.⁶

Renowned for his sacred eloquence⁷ and his visionary spiritual direction,⁸ St. Francis de Sales relied heavily on the power of the imagination; in the various forms of his spiritual teaching, he used symbols creatively and deliberately to convey spiritual meaning.⁹ As a visual thinker and visual communicator,¹⁰ he would find in the humble, gentle heart of Jesus an image that captured the Christological thought at the core of his own contribution to Christian humanism.¹¹

The Humble and Gentle Heart of Jesus at the Foundation of a Salesian Christology

To appreciate the dominance of this image in the thinking and teaching of St. Francis de Sales, a closer examination of the gospel text is in order. To this end, we turn first to contemporary scholarship for an exegetical summary. Then, in light of how St. Francis de Sales

approached the interpretation of Scripture, we will demonstrate how his more “mystical” hermeneutic informs his understanding of, and teaching about, Christology.

In a recent study of the semantics of this gospel text,¹² Kim Jeong-Rae highlights the uniqueness of Jesus’s self-description in Matthew 11:29. The term for “meek” (πρᾶος) only occurs in the Gospel of Matthew (also in 5:5 and 21:5) and in 1 Peter 3:4; it signifies not a weak person, but one without harshness, someone “*gentle, benevolent, meek and clement.*” The adjective “humble” (ταπεινός) occurs only in one other Gospel passage (Luke 1:52) and six times in the letters (Rom 12:16; 1 Cor 7:6 and 10:1; James 1:9 and 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5); depending on the context, it means “*needy, insignificant, weak and humble.*” More notably, says the author, “the quality of ‘meek’ is a predicate of the person of Christ in Matt 21:5 and 2 Cor 10:1, while the connection between the two terms appears exclusively in the attributive form in this text, Matt 11:29.”¹³

Jeong-Rae further explains that, in calling the disciples to “learn from me,” the Master refers not to research or study, but to “a learning that presupposes an unconditional dedication to the person of Jesus, in whom the will of God is manifested.”¹⁴ What they are to learn is the novel and powerful Christological accent on meekness and humility. “Jesus, who is meek, does not react with violence when he is rejected, but rather seeks to please the Father, trusting in Him. Jesus, who is humble, submits to God and becomes his servant for all the needy, accepting the sinners and outcasts.”¹⁵ Given the direct and personal manner with which Jesus here explains who He is, those devoted to following Him are invited to learn that “as the meek and humble Son of the Father he fulfills the call of Israel, incarnating Law and Wisdom in his own person and disclosing the will of God.”¹⁶ In sum, Jesus’s autobiographical affirmation conveys Him to be the authentic Revealer of the Father and expresses the essential qualities with which His disciples are to conform themselves to Him in order to reveal Jesus the Christ to all the world.¹⁷

For his part, Francis de Sales does not approach the gospel text with today’s manner of biblical exegesis. Rather than providing a lexical analysis, he approaches the interpretation of Scripture in spiritual or mystical terms.¹⁸ Often recalling the biblical words from memory, rather than citing them,¹⁹ he certainly held a commanding grasp of the texts, even in the ancient languages, so much so that St. Vincent de Paul is reported to have described Francis as “the Gospel speaking.”²⁰ In turn, the Bishop of Geneva makes extensive use of the Word in his preaching and writing, with a decidedly pastoral or “apostolic” intent to allow the inspired Word to provide the grounding for, and give illumination to, the wisdom with which he directed others in the way of living a Christian life.²¹

In his interpretation of Matthew 11:28-30, Francis offers no exegesis of the text. Nevertheless, he finds in this gospel passage the image that will give rise to his distinctive thought on the devout life. Specifically, he makes at least twenty-five references to Matthew’s meek and humble-hearted Jesus throughout his collected works.²² A brief exploration of these references shows how this particular image of the Sacred Heart informs the saint’s Christology, which in turn creates the foundation to the Salesian understanding of the spiritual life.

Although St. Francis de Sales offers no systematic treatment of Christology, he does share the apostolic faith and writes often of Jesus as true God and true Man, as Messiah and

Savior, as head of the Church that is His body, and as the One to whom believers owe due worship. But especially in his works of spiritual guidance, he affirms and upholds Jesus as the perfect model for us, the one in whom a humble and gentle heart is revealed at key moments of his life on earth and by whom we learn the dual source of human flourishing in this world and beyond.

Consider, first, the “narrative” character of Francis’s Christology, in the sense that he sees in the gospel mysteries a continual manifestation of the humble and gentle heart of Jesus.

For Francis, the story begins with divine decision underlying the Incarnation. Intimating St. Paul’s Christological hymn (Phil. 2:5-11), he writes to a Visitation sister (Sr. Marie Adrienne Fichet) in words that focus his advice to her on the gospel image:

Our Lord, seeing himself to be God, and therefore not seeing anything to humble in himself, nevertheless wanted to humble himself and has said: “Learn from me that I am meek and humble of heart and your will find rest in your souls” (Mt 11, 29). It is the highest point of humility to be humble for Our Lord, because he humbled himself for love of us, to give us an example to do as he did (XXVI:295).²³

Writing to a novice, the saint continues the Pauline imagery, explaining that the humble heart of Jesus would lead Him from the divine royalty in heaven to the abasement of the Cross (XXI:48).

That heart takes bodily shape in the Incarnation. The saint sees in Mary’s newborn child the beginnings of the Christ-like character of heart about which he will preach and write. In the plan for a sermon on Christmas eve (VIII:127), he invites the Sisters of the Visitation to see in this child the qualities of religious life, one of which is “his love of abjection”:

Placed among the animals, he gently welcomes their breath, even their stupidity. Besides, they are animals that he loves, because one bears the yoke (Mt 21,5), the other the burden; one is laborious, the other laden. And Jesus will say: “Come to me you who labor and are laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11, 28).

Elsewhere he counsels Madame Arnaud to abide prayerfully in this Nativity scene, kissing the child’s feet, begging him to be her king, and learning from him “that he is meek, humble (Mt 11, 29), simple, and amiable” (XIX:102).

That humble heart of Jesus manifests itself as the Gospel story progresses. Francis sees it in the Presentation of Jesus, for the Son of God certainly was not obliged to come to the Temple for purification (IX:251-253). He notices it in Jesus’s early ministry, when the Lord instructs the disciples of John the Baptist to tell him what they see in Jesus’s works, namely, the “admirable humility” that serves “to confound our pride and destroy our superbia” (IX:407).

Most notably, the saint recognizes the humble heart of the Savior at his Passion, when Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on an ass (X:354), when He shows no repugnance at the humiliation He undergoes before the Jewish and Roman leaders (X:337), and when, with a “most profound, true, and sincere” humility, he dies as a lowly Nazorean (IX:278-279). No wonder, then, that in preaching about the veneration of the holy cross, Francis acclaims that “Our Lord does not wish us to learn anything more particularly than gentleness and humility (Mt 11, 29). And where else would you go to learn this if not to the Cross?” (VII:175).

While St. Francis de Sales sees the humble, gentle heart of Jesus in multiple Gospel mysteries, it is particularly through the ministry of Jesus as Teacher that the saint shapes his Christological thinking. This becomes evident in the repeated counsel he shares with those who seek his spiritual direction, wherein he highlights both the centrality of the lesson Jesus teaches and the primacy of the virtues His heart embodies.

For Francis, the lesson in Matthew 11:29 holds a place of central importance. As he writes to Madame de Limojon (XII:59),

Remember the principal lesson, which he left us in three words, so that we would never forget it and so that a hundred times a day, we could repeat it: “Learn from me,” he says, “that I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11, 29). In sum, it is all about having a heart gentle toward the neighbor and humble toward God. Give this heart to our Savior at every moment; make it be the heart of your heart. You will see that in the measure that this holy and delicate Lover will take (His) place in your spirit, the world with its vanities and its superfluities will exit from it.

This lesson, says Francis, is the “unique” teaching of the Master (XIV:237-238 and XIII:194). It is the one which He has “singularly recommended” (IX:102; cf. XVIII:326), “as if by these (virtues of humility and gentleness) our hearts should be especially consecrated to his service and applied to his imitation” (III:161).

Moreover, this image of the heart of Jesus comprehensively and sufficiently communicates what the Lord desires to teach us. In an early work arising from his mission to the Chablais (I:113), Francis argues that Jesus’s own obedience to his heavenly Father, to his Blessed Mother, to civil leaders – indeed his very desire to serve – are “perpetual replicas and expositions of this entirely sweet lesson: ‘Learn from me that I am gracious (*débonnaire*) and humble of courage (Mt 11, 29).’” Later, in a letter to a religious, Madame de Vignod (XV:51), he writes that the “heart of our Savior has no laws more affectionate than those of meekness, humility, and charity (Mt 11, 29).” In sum, as he explains to Madame de Chantal, this Doctor of the Church believes that “Our Lord has formed all his doctrine in these words: *Learn from me that I am meek and humble of heart*” (XIV:105).

St. Francis de Sales elucidates that doctrine through his emphasis on humility and gentleness as critical components of his vision of Christian humanism. His admiration for these two virtues of the heart of Jesus draws on his Christological understanding that both of them

“shine in the sacred Person of Our Lord” (III:161). The saint often describes this pair of virtues as the most “honored” (III:139), “beloved” (III:161), “loveable” (XIV:339), or “dear” (XX:298) virtues that the Lord desires us to learn and live.

Thus, as he writes in a letter to Madame de Villevain (XVIII:417), St. Francis de Sales considers the practice of a “humble gentleness” as representing “the virtue of virtues that Our Lord has so much recommended to us (Mt 11, 29).” When rooted in the hearts of those desiring holiness (cf. XXI:143), this dual Christological virtue serves as a reliable steppingstone to eternity. As he writes to Madame de Peyzieu (XVII:44):

My God, my good Mother, how deceptive this life is and how desirable eternity is! How blessed are those who desire it! Let us hold strongly onto the merciful hand of our good God, for he wishes to draw us after himself. Let us be entirely gracious (*débonnaire*) and humble of heart (Mt 11, 29) toward all, but especially toward our own. Let us not hurry; let us go quite gently (*doucement*), supporting each other.

The Humble and Gentle Heart of Jesus as the Guiding Principle to Salesian Devotion

Sifting through the numerous references to Matthew 11:29 in the writings of St. Francis de Sales, we can see not only his personal preference for this biblical image of Jesus but the very foundation on which he conceives his Christology. Returning to the gospel passage as a whole, we can see that from Jesus’s call and affirmation and promise, the Doctor of the Church also directs followers of Christ to the devout life.

Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light. (Matt. 11:28-30)

St. Francis de Sales knew well the burden of laboring for holiness in a secular world. First as a missionary, later as a bishop, he interacted daily with people of all walks of life, teaching them in various ways that the fullness of their (our) lives can only be found in the love of God. He knew, as Augustine did before him, that human hearts are restless until they rest in God.

That God in whom we will find rest comes to this world in the person of Jesus, whose own “yoke” was to live completely in loving obedience to the will of His heavenly Father. To take that yoke upon ourselves is, for Francis de Sales, the way to holiness and happiness. Emblematic of his emphasis on Christ-like obedience are two aphorisms that the saint writes in capital letters to signal their importance. The first, in a letter to Madame de Chantal, advises her on the necessity of doing “ALL THROUGH LOVE, NOTHING THROUGH FORCE,” in the spirit of loving obedience rather than fearing disobedience (XII:359). The second he wishes to inscribe on the heart of Philothea, to whom he addresses the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, when he tells her simply to “LIVE JESUS” (III:217).

This emphasis on a living obedience *to* Christ and *as* Christ undergirds the novel Salesian sense of devotion. In an historical age in which fanatical fervor and harsh penitence fueled a religious militancy, Francis de Sales finds in this gospel passage the basis for a new approach to spirituality.²⁴

On the one hand, his pedagogy of holiness works primarily from “inside out.”²⁵ In keeping with his profound respect for human freedom, Francis de Sales is convinced that Jesus’s call to “learn from me” is directed not simply to our minds, but to our hearts and souls; in it we hear a Christological summons to sanctity, an invitation better accepted through persuasion than through compulsion. As he points out to Philothea, “the heart being the source of (our) actions, they are such as it is,” and “the one who wins over the heart of man has gained the whole man” (III:217).

And what the human heart learns best, for St. Francis de Sales, is that which is found in Jesus’s sacred heart, the humility and gentleness that infuse the mysteries of his life and reflect the manner by which He has redeemed the world. From this Christology, Francis also derives a sense of realized eschatology. As Wendy Wright puts it:

The invitation to learn from, to imitate, to follow, to be as Jesus receives the stress. And what is Jesus like? He is gentle and humble of heart. That is, the core of his being, his most essential self, the point from which all actions and thoughts flow – the heart – has the qualities of gentleness and humility. For Francis this was a radically countercultural idea, for most hearts are not gentle and humble but proud, grasping, and envious. ... For him, this truth had eschatological significance, for Jesus the Christ came to overturn the standards of the world and en flesh a new standard of reality. Gentleness and humility were signs of the presence of the kingdom.²⁶

This countercultural and eschatologically significant idea is, for Francis de Sales and the tradition of Salesian spirituality, what will give people “rest.” In the practice of what the saint calls the “little virtues” of humility toward God and gentleness toward neighbors, we find the easy yoke and light burden of which Jesus speaks.

In this manner, the symbol in Matthew 11:29 gives rise to the thought of Salesian spirituality. For St. Francis de Sales, the Jesus who is gentle and humble of heart communicates the love of God by embodying those virtues in his saving words and deeds. For the Lord’s disciples, then as now, learning to appropriate those same virtues in our hearts and to witness to them in our lives is how to “Live Jesus” every day.

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¹ Paul Ricoeur, “The Symbol ... Food for Thought,” *Philosophy Today* 4 (1960): 196-207. On this notion, see David Pellauer, “The Symbol Gave Rise to Thought,” in Lewis E. Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. XXII (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 99-122, with a reply by Ricoeur, 123-125.

² André Brix, “Saint François de Sales et le ‘Coeur,’” in Raymond Darricau and Bernard Peyrous (eds.) *Sainte Marguerite-Marie et le message de Paray-le-Monial* (Paris: Desclée, 1993), 66, notes that for Francis de Sales, “the ‘heart,’ which is the human being taken integrally, body and soul, in an indissociable unity, is also the deepest ‘me’ and our mask, or better our ‘person’ who, by the heart, is known and recognized.”

³ Cf. “‘That Is What It Is Made For’: The Image of the Heart in the Spirituality of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal,” in Annice Callahan (ed.), *Spiritualities of the Heart: Approaches to Personal Wholeness in Christian Tradition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 143–158; “A Wide and Fleshy Love: Images, Imagination, and the Heart of God,” *Studies in Spirituality* 10 (2000): 255–274; “Transformed Seeing: Visual Devotional Imagery and the Shape of the Imagination—The Case of the Sacred Heart,” *Studia Mystica* 22 (2001): 97–109; *Sacred Heart: Gateway to God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); and *Heart Speaks to Heart: The Salesian Tradition*. Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

⁴ W. Wright, “He Opened His Side: Francis de Sales and the Exchange of Divine and Human Hearts,” in John J. Markey and J. August Higgins (eds.), *Mysticism and Contemporary Life: Essays in Honor of Bernard McGinn* (New York: Crossroad, 2019): 190.

⁵ See Thomas Dailey, *Behold This Heart: St. Francis de Sales and Devotion to the Sacred Heart* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2021).

⁶ Thomas A. McHugh, “The Distinctive Salesian Virtues ... Humility and Gentleness,” *Salesian Studies* 2 (October 1963): 45-74.

⁷ In *St. Francis de Sales as Preacher: A Study by Dom B. Mackey*, trans. Thomas Dailey, OSFS (Bangalore, India: Indian Institute of Spirituality, 1992-93), the author makes the case for designating St. Francis de Sales as the “master” and “model” and “restorer” of sacred eloquence.

⁸ In a letter to the bishop of Annecy (23 Nov 2002), commemorating the fourth centenary of the episcopal ordination of St. Francis de Sales, Pope John Paul II wrote: “With a particularly voluminous correspondence, he also accompanied with great discernment and a gradual pedagogy adapted to each situation, appropriately using highly coloured images, the souls who entrusted themselves to his spiritual direction. ... Still today, and I am very glad of it, the works of Francis de Sales are part of our classical literature; it is the sign that his teaching as a priest and bishop finds an echo in the human heart and has an affinity with the deepest human aspirations.”

⁹ Cf. Thomas Dailey, “Playful Prayer: Imagination and the Task of Theology in a Salesian Perspective,” in William Ruhl (ed.), *Salesian Spirituality: Catalyst to Collaboration*. (Washington, DC: De Sales School of Theology, 1993), 169–188, and “Eucharist and the Theopoetics of Encounter according to St. Francis de Sales,” in Joseph Chorprenning, OSFS (ed.), *Human Encounter in the Salesian Tradition* (Roma: International Commission on Salesian Studies, 2007), 63-76.

¹⁰ Joseph Chorprenning, “Visual, Verbal, Mental, and Living Images in Early Modern Catholicism: Francis de Sales and Adrien Gambart,” in R.A. Simkins and W.M. Wright (eds.), *Religion and the Visual*, *Journal of Religion and Society Supplement* 8 (2012), 60: “Francis was not only a visual thinker, but he was also a visual communicator, believing that vivid imagery was the most effective means of getting his message across and impressing it on the memory of his reader or congregation.”

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI concluded his general audience on March 2, 2011 with this accolade: “St. Francis de Sales is an exemplary witness of Christian humanism: with his familiar style, with words which at times have a poetic touch, he reminds us that human beings have planted in their innermost depths the longing for God and that in him alone can they find true joy and the most complete fulfillment.”

¹² Kim Jeong-Rae Bonaventura, MSC, “*Because I am Meek and Humble in Heart*” (*Matthew 11:29*). *An Exegetical and Theological Study on the Humility of the Messiah according to Matthew: The Christological Dimension and its Ecclesiological Implications*, trans. Kelly Anderson (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publication, 2013).

¹³ Jeong-Rae, “*Because I am Meek and Humble in Heart*,” 85-86.

¹⁴ Jeong-Rae, “*Because I am Meek and Humble in Heart*,” 81.

¹⁵ Jeong-Rae, “*Because I am Meek and Humble in Heart*,” 87.

¹⁶ Jeong-Rae, “*Because I am Meek and Humble in Heart*,” 90.

¹⁷ Jeong-Rae, “*Because I am Meek and Humble in Heart*,” 90-91.

¹⁸ This approach is especially evident in his preaching and writing about the biblical Song of Songs. See Thomas Dailey, “A Song of Prayer: Reading the Canticle of Canticles with St. Francis de Sales,” *Studia Mystica* 15/4 (Winter 1992): 65-82.

¹⁹ In referring to Matthew 11:29, Francis usually writes “Learn from me that I am meek (*doux*) and humble of heart.” Occasionally, he makes use of related vocabulary. For an analysis of the various facets of his terminology, see V. Mellinghoff-Bourgerie, “*Dulcedo Dei, Lenitas Hominis*: Théorique et pratique de la douceur selon François de Sales,” in Hélène Baby et Josiane Rieu (eds.), *La Douceur en Littérature de l’Antiquité au XVIIe Siècle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012), 223-243.

²⁰ Luigi Groppi, “Formazione teologica di S. Francesco di Sales” (estratto dalla tesi di laurea, *La formazione di San Francesco di Sales al suo magistero ecclesiastico*) (Roma: n.p., 1951), 87, claims that Francis “had so assimilated the Sacred Bible that he possessed its language, its content, and its phrases in such a way that he used them as we do the words of our mother tongue.”

²¹ For a comprehensive explanation of Francis’s study of Sacred Scripture and his use of it in his writings, see André Ravier, “St. François de Sales et la Bible,” in Jean-Robert Armogathe (ed.), *Le Grand Siècle et la Bible*, Bible de tous les temps (Paris: Beauchesne, 1989), 617-626.

²² *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales, édition complete*, 26 tomes (Annecy, France: J. Niérat, 1892-1964). No reference to Matthew 11:29 is found in the *Defense of the Standard of the Cross* or, interestingly, in the *Treatise on the Love of God*.

²³ References to the *Oeuvres* are given in-text by tome:page(s). Translations are by this author.

²⁴ See Thomas A. Donlan, *The Reform of Zeal: François de Sales and Militant French Catholicism*, St. Andrews Studies in French History and Culture (Scotland: University of St. Andrews, 2018).

²⁵ See Thomas F. Dailey, *Live Today Well: St. Francis de Sales’s Simple Approach to Holiness* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2015), 30-35.

²⁶ Wendy Wright, *Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God*, The Crossroad Spiritual Legacy Series (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 78-79.