

**THE MYSTICAL FLORA OF  
ST. FRANCIS DE SALES: OR,  
THE CHRISTIAN LIFE UNDER  
THE EMBLEM OF PLANTS**

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The mystical flora of St. Francis de Sales: or, The Christian life under the emblem of plants by Francis de Sales & Clara Mulholland

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**FRANCIS DE SALES & CLARA MULHOLLAND**

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## INTRODUCTION.

OD." says St. Thomas Aquinas, "like the excellent master that He is, has taken care to provide us with writings of the best kind. 'What things soever were written,' He tells us, 'were written for our learning.' Now, these writings are comprised in two books—that is to say, in the Book of Creation and in the Book of Scripture. The first of these books has as many most perfect writings as it has creatures, and these writings teach us the truth without a lie" (*Serm. in Dom. ii. Advent*).

But, men have not always read aright the lessons presented in the book of nature. The first lesson which the world teaches by itself is that it is God's work, for, "by the greatness and the beauty of the creature, the Creator of them may be seen so as to be known thereby" (*Wisd. xii. 5*). And yet, how many in all ages have closed their minds against this teaching, saying in their hearts there is no God. And of those whose ear has listened to the silent voices by which the universe proclaims a God, how many "have imagined either the fire, or the wind, or the swift air, or the circle of the stars, or the sun and moon, to be the gods that rule the world" (*Ibid. v. 3*); being fascinated by the thousand lovelinesses of earth into forgetting "how much the Lord of them is more beautiful than they; for the first author of beauty made all these things." Others, again, in the soul's natural recoil from this drear materialism, have so spiritualised the sensible beauty of nature as to become themselves the prey of a weak and

morbid sentimentalism. This last is a characteristic of English literature in the present century, and its influence on the public mind has been injurious at least in one important respect. The soul it loves to trace in nature is not the soul which the Apostle describes as groaning and travailing in supernatural longing after its own restoration by grace; to the lessons it sets forth from the Book of Creation it subjoins no parallel, though loftier, teachings from the Book of Scripture. Hence it is that the love of nature in our days has gone so far apart from Christian feeling. Men have forgotten that God's thoughts find expression in the visible, as well as in the invisible, world, and that inner and secret harmonies bind the natural and the supernatural together. The things of beauty which God has bidden arise on the earth lose half their grace, because men do not mount by them to the better understanding of the supernal beauty of the operations of that world which Faith reveals to our gaze.

The God who writes his thoughts in the Book of Nature is the same who writes in the Book of Scripture. And those whom He sent to expound to mankind the teachings of the latter have ever loved to illustrate its heavenly doctrine from the pages of the former. At sundry times and in divers manners He spoke his thoughts in times past by the prophets. Chief of these was Isaias; and his graphic pen borrows, from all parts of creation, figures that express, with a reality and a force that can never die, the Divine thought of which he was the inspired messenger. And when the line of the prophets was ended, and His Son had come to reveal His Father's will, He, too, loved to employ the objects belonging to the visible world He Himself had made to describe the secret things He beheld in the bosom of His Father. The spiritual edifice of His Church was as a city built upon a rock; His apostles were the salt of the earth and the light of the world; His faithful were sheep whose Shepherd He was; the history of man's soul was the history of

the seed that is sown ; His followers were to learn confidence in His Providence from the bird that lives in the air, and from the lilies that neither toil nor spin. And so was it also with the teachers whom He appointed to continue his work. In the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church the eternal truths are continually presented to the mind imaged in comparisons borrowed from natural objects. St. Gregory the Great speaks of the visible creation as bearing upon it traces of the footprints of God, and he describes the world's beauty as a glad smile lighted by its conscious knowledge of its Maker's secrets, and nature's voices as the murmur of Divine truth rising upon the soul from all that lives and moves within the universe. It is the sense of this harmony between the natural and the spiritual worlds that gives its clearness and freshness to the language of the Catholic liturgy; it is the key to the pregnant symbolism of the sacraments. This it is which forms the "right heart," which the author of the "Imitation" tells us "finds in every creature a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine. To it no creature is so small and vile that it does not show forth the goodness of God."

Few among the Church's writers surpass St. Francis de Sales in the skilful use of comparisons drawn from nature to illustrate the operations of grace in the spiritual life. In this he holds a place peculiarly his own. His images do not recall scenes of Cappadocian gloom, like those of St. Basil, nor, like St. Jerome's, the harshness of the desert. But rather as the clear blue waters of the lakes of his own Savoy soften, without distorting, the rugged outlines of the overhanging hills, which they reflect bright with sunshine, gay with flowers, and crowned with teeming vines, so does his gentle spirit present to our minds the loftiest doctrines in all the grandeur of truth, and yet clothed in images of beauty that charm the fancy, while they flash new light upon the understanding. But most of all is this true of him as he comes in from the

garden with hands full of comparisons gathered from the flowers that bloom therein. So delicate at such times is his taste, so exquisite his choice of language, so refined the analogies he unfolds, that beneath the spell of his words our souls become as vividly conscious of the truth he seeks to convey as our senses would be of the flower of which he speaks, were we to hold its stem in our hands and breathe the fragrance it sheds around.

In the MYSTICAL FLORA, which is now for the first time offered in an English dress, a loving hand has collected the choicest of St. Francis's spiritual comparisons drawn from plants and flowers. Nor have the specimens been gathered at random. They have been so arranged that they form a perfect treatise on the devout life, from its first principles to its consummation, according to the plan laid down by the Saint himself in his ascetic writings. It is a book that will bring pleasure to the lover of nature, as well as profit to the seeker after grace. It exhibits in one of the fairest pages of the Book of Creation, a commentary on one of the most difficult in the Book of Scripture; and whosoever, under the guidance of the Saint, will earnestly study its teaching, cannot fail to learn, with Philothea, "how one may draw good thoughts and holy aspirations from everything that presents itself in all the variety of this mortal life" (*Devout Life*, part II. ch. 13).

✠ GEORGE CONROY,

*Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise.*

*Longford, Nov. 21, 1876.*



# MYSTICAL FLORA.

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## GENERAL NOTIONS.

### 1. *Principles and Characteristics of a Christian Life.*



I AM about to tell all those who listen to me, that their souls are God's vineyard, in which faith is the cistern, hope the tower, holy charity the wine-press, and the law of God the hedge that separates them from unfaithful people. To you, dear daughter, I say, that your will is your vineyard; the Divine inspirations poured into your soul by God, the cistern; holy chastity, the tower, which, like that of David, should be made of ivory; obedience, by which all your actions become meritorious, the wine-press. Oh! may God preserve this vineyard which He has planted with his own hand. May He fill the cistern with the abundant waters of Divine grace. May He protect his tower; may his wine-press, beneath the pressure of his hand, teem with good wine; may He always keep the beautiful hedge with which He has surrounded his vineyard close and thick; and may his holy angels be the immortal vine-dressers.

*Letter to Me, de Chantal, February 21, 1606.*

I have seen a tree planted by St. Dominick at Rome;\* every body visits it and loves it for the sake of the planter. Thus having seen the tree of the desire of sanctity planted in your soul by our Lord, I love it dearly, and take the greatest delight in considering it, and I exhort you to do likewise, and to say with me, "God grant that you may flourish, O fair plant; nurseling of heaven, God grant you may bring to maturity your fruit; and may He preserve it in its ripeness, day and night, from the cruel winds which cast our earthly fruit upon the ground, where wild and hungry animals devour it.

*Letter to St. Chantal, 21.*

The longing for holiness should be like the orange trees of the sea-coast of Genoa, which are covered with fruit, flowers, and leaves, nearly all the year round. For your desire should daily ripen into fruit on every occasion of doing good that offers, while it should never cease to yearn after fresh opportunities of advancement. These yearnings are the flowers of the tree; its leaves, the frequent acknowledgment of your own weakness, which preserves both your good works and your good desires.

*Letter to St. Chantal, 21.*

There are a great many persons who, when they think of the goodness of God and the passion of our Saviour, are so much overcome that they sigh and weep, with much emotion praying and thanking God for his goodness. To see them one would imagine that they were filled with great devotion, but when the moment of trial comes, we find

\* The saint here alludes to the well-known orange tree in the convent of Santa Sabina.

that, like the hot summer rain which falls in thick drops upon the earth, without penetrating it thoroughly, producing nothing but mushrooms, these tears, falling upon a wicked, sinful heart, without truly penetrating it, are quite useless; because, in spite of all this sensible devotion, these poor creatures would not part with one farthing of their ill-gotten gains, nor renounce one of their perverse inclinations, nor suffer the slightest inconvenience for the love of the Saviour over whom they have wept. So we may say that these feelings of devotion are a kind of spiritual mushroom, which are not only far from being true devotion, but are very often so many snares laid by the devil, who satisfies these souls with small consolations, and thereby hinders them from seeking true and solid devotion, which consists in a constant and resolute will, prompt and active in executing whatever we know to be agreeable to God.

*Devout Life, part iv, ch. 13.*

But then, you may say, since there are some feelings of sensible devotion which come from God, and are consequently good, whilst others come either from nature or from the enemy, and are useless, dangerous, and pernicious, how am I to distinguish them and know the bad and useless from the good?

As a general rule, my dear Philothea, the affections and passions of our souls are to be judged by their fruits. Our hearts are trees, the affections and passions their branches, and their works and actions are their fruit. The heart is good which has good affections, and the affections are good which produce good and holy actions.