

The Sense of Taste, Smell and Touch in St. Bernard of Clairvaux¹

Introduction

We're all familiar with how we make contact with the outside world or that which is outside our bodies. Automatically we think the best way of effecting this are the faculties of seeing and of hearing. It seems that both filter 99.99% of reality to our brains whereas the senses of taste, smell and touch are secondary, even relegated to the back burner except when it comes to things sensual or sexual. In other words, we tend to think of them as means to obtain pleasure. Yet should we take a closer look, these three senses provide information that sight and hearing can't come close to offering. They provide immediate contact with reality that's less susceptible to mis-interpretation compared with what we've seen or have heard. What's special about them is their non-mental one-on-one contact between our bodies and the outside world. With the exception of touch (for the most part), smell and taste bring the outside world into very ourselves. Generally their impressions last longer than what we've processed through sight or hearing. For example, the smell of burning leaves in autumn bring us right back to childhood. Also we can draw an immediate comparison with the taste of Italian tomato sauce we're enjoying right now with the one grandma used to make, this no matter how long ago she had passed on.

This document has the intent of examining instances in Bernard's **Commentary on the Song of Songs** by St. Bernard of Clairvaux where he compares the senses of taste, smell and touch with a reality devoid of them. A paradox, to be sure, but one which other spiritual writers were quick to develop. After all, we as humans use all our senses to get around in the world. In a certain sense, Bernard's works don't find too much favor nowadays, many people considering him rather gooey (a good sensory word) or flowery compared with more abstract or "spiritual" authors. They are right. However, that impression comes largely from translation compared with the original Latin. Actually when you read him in that language, you're transported into a wholly-other reality. Even after a brief exposure you come away with the impression, how could a human being write like that? Some may disagree with this...no problem there...but that's not an uncommon perception. On top of it, Bernard quotes scripture like crazy. He strings together direct quotes or parts of them one after another. In translation that makes for boring, an almost list-like reading experience. Yet again, the Latin text is a completely different matter.

So putting these normal objections aside as well as the fact that Bernard's style doesn't fit in with the sentiments of our modern age, we can proceed with going through all eighty-six

¹This article is a follow-up to a short one entitled *Seasons and Seasonings* also posted on the Lectio site. Originally it was intended to be a supplement to that article

sermons of his **Song Commentary**. The excerpts here, by no means exhaustive, are with regard to references where he uses the senses of taste, smell and touch to describe spiritual experience. Given what was said about Bernard's Latin style, would that the entire **Commentary** be singled out! A note as to the text...First comes the Latin in **blue** followed by the English translation in **green**, this in turn followed by some observations about them in **red**.

The Latin text is in two volumes entitled **Sermones super Cantica Canticorum** (Rome 1957 and 1958) whereas the English translation is in four volumes published by Cistercian Publications. Postings will be done on a regular basis until the document is completed.

Sermon One

1-1: Itaque parate fauces, non lacti, sed pani. Est panis apud Salomonem, isque admodum splendidus sapidusque; librum dico, qui Cantica canticorum inscribitur: proferatur, si placet, et frangatur.

Be ready then to feed on bread rather than milk. Solomon has bread to give that is splendid and delicious, the bread of that book called "The Song of Songs." Let us bring it forth then if you please, and break it.

We are to prepare our throat or *fauces*, the means by which we ingest bread instead of milk or more specifically, the bread of Solomon (Song of Songs) which is *splendidus* and *sapidus*. The latter is an important word in Bernard meaning savory and well-tasting which often is applied to being wise or prudent. Such bread is to be broken, *frango* implying dashed into pieces by a rather violent action.

1-4: Sed quis franget? Adest paterfamilias; cognoscite Dominum in fractione panis. Quis enim alter idoneus? Non equidem ego mihi istud temere arrogaverim. Sic spectetis ad me, ut ex me non exspectetis

But who is going to divide this loaf? The Master of the house is present, it is the Lord you must see in the breaking of the bread. For who else could more fittingly do it? It is a task that I would not dare to arrogate to myself. So look upon me as one from whom you look for nothing.

A second use of *frango*, here as to divide, in reference to the Song of Songs as a loaf of bread to be ingested. The *paterfamilias* or head of a household or family estate (Jesus

Christ) is present, *idoneus* as capable or qualified to *frango* the bread. Compared to this *paterfamilias* Bernard is nothing, a fact which is to be expected (*expecto*).

1-9: At si cui forte vestrum clausum vel obscurum aliquid de Scripturis interdum eluxerit, tunc prorsus necesse est pro percepta coelestis panis alimonia divinas mulceat aures in voce exsultationis et confessionis sonus epulantis

And when, as happens, texts of Scripture hitherto dark and impenetrable at last become bright with meaning for you, then, in gratitude for this nurturing bread of heaven you must charm the ears of God with a voice of exultation and praise, a festal song.

Clausus and *obscurus*: shut closed and covered and hence invisible vs. *eluceo* or to shine out, to be apparent. Once the first two are transformed into the second there follows for such bread which is nourishing (*alimonia* or food, sustenance) the need (*necesse*) to charm God's ears, the verb being *mulceo* as to be sweet, to soften or to stroke. This is done by *exultatio*, *confessio* and a festal song or *sonus* (connotes a resounding, a kind of echoing) of *epulo*, often a sacrificial banquet.

1-11: Sed est canticum, quod sui singulari dignitate et suavitate cunctis merito quae memoravimus, et si qua sunt alia, antecellit: et jure hoc appellaverim Canticum canticorum, quia caeterorum omnium ipsum est fructus.

But there is that other song which, by its unique dignity and sweetness, excels all those I have mentioned and any others there might be; hence by every right do I acclaim it as the Song of Songs. It stands at a point where all the others culminate.

The *canticum* (originally with singing and dancing) has a *dignitas* and *suavitas*, the latter meaning an agreeableness or pleasantness which is *singularus*, one of its kind. I.e., this *canticum* (Song of Songs) excels all else remembered (*memoro* in the sense of bringing to mind) as well as those that might be (*antecello*: to be prominent, to be distinguished). The Song occupies a place which is the fruit (*fructus*) of all other songs.

Sermon Two

2-1: Senserat nimirum in spiritu, quisquis tunc spiritualis esse poterat, quanta foret gratia diffusa in labiis illis. Propterea loquens in desiderio animae aiebat, Osculetur me osculo oris sui; nimirum omnimodis cupiens tantae suavitatis participio non fraudari.

Many an upright man in those far off times sensed within himself how profuse the graciousness that would be poured upon those lips. And intense desire springing from that perception impelled him to utter: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth," hoping with every fiber of his being that he might not be deprived of a share in a pleasure so great.

Any discussion with regard to a kiss pertains to the sense of touch. Ancient prophets, etc., had a sense within their spirits about the divine kiss. *Sentio* means to discern by the senses...not just one...but all along with *spiritus* or spirit which fundamentally applies to breathing. Also the adjective *spiritualis* is used (belonging to breathing). The collective *spiritus* of these precursors to Christ had the grace (*gratia*: also favor as well as friendship) that would be poured out on the bride's lips of the Song, *difundo* also meaning to scatter. For this reason the Song's opening words contained a hope that the divine bride wouldn't deprive (*fraudo*: to cheat) them of participating (*participio*) in such a pleasure or *suavitas* (cf. 1-11) so desired (*cupio*: to long for).

2-2: Cujus utique sermo vivus et efficax osculum mihi est, non quidem conjunctio labiorum, quae interdum pacem mentitur animorum; sed plane infusio gaudiorum, revelatio secretorum, mira quaedam et quodam modo indiscreta commixtio superni luminis et illuminatae mentis. Adhaerens quippe Deo, unus spiritus est (I Cor. V, 17).

For his living, active word is to me a kiss, not indeed an adhering of the lips that can sometimes belie a union of hearts, but an unreserved infusion of joys, a revealing of mysteries, a marvelous and indistinguishable mingling of the divine light with the enlightened mind, which, joined in truth to God, is one spirit with him.

Sermo or word also applies to speaking or any type of discourse and is not unlike the Greek *logos*, word as expression. It is both *vivus* and *efficax* as a kiss, living and effective (also as powerful). This *sermo*/kiss isn't a *conjunctio* or a joining together, agreement or affinity which can give the appearance (*mentior*: to lie, cheat or deceive) of a *conjunctio* of spirits (*animus*: rational soul). Instead, it's the following three: 1) plainly or clearly (*plane*) *infusio* of *gaudium*, a pouring in of joys or delights, the plural being used. 2) A *revelatio* or laying bare of mysteries, *secretum* (also applies to solitude) and 3) a *commixtio* or mixing-with a light which is *supernus* or literally above as well as *indiscretus*, not distinguished or closely connected. Such *commixtio* is with a mind that is enlightened, *illuminatus* (set in a clear light). Such a *mens* (also as a disposition of the heart) is one *spiritus* (cf. 2-1) with God by clinging to him, *adhaereo* (also as to stick).

2-3: Verbum assumens; osculatum, caro quae assumitur: osculum vero, quod pariter ab osculante et osculato conficitur, persona ipsa scilicet ex utroque compacta, mediator Dei et hominum homo Christus Jesus.

The mouth that kisses signifies the Word who assumes human nature; the nature assumed receives the kiss; the kiss however, that takes its being both from the giver and the receiver, is a person that is formed by both, none other than "the one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus."

Verbum or word as expression or discourse assumes (*assumo* also as to adopt, accept) *caro* (literally flesh) which in turn *assumo* with regard to the kiss. However, the kiss or *osculum* (also as little or pretty mouth) has its existence (*conficio*: to make a thing completely ready) from both giver and receiver (*utroque* with *compingo*: to unite several parts into one whole). Christ is the one who does this as *mediator*.

2-3: Et ibi quidem contactus labiorum complexum significat animorum: hic autem confoederatio naturarum divinis humana componit, quae in terra sunt, et quae in coelis pacificans. Ipse est enim pax nostra, qui fecit utraque unum (Ephes. II, 14).

Normally the touch of lip on lip is the sign of the loving embrace of hearts, but this conjoining of natures brings together the human and divine, shows God reconciling "to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." "For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one."

Contactus or touch signifies a *complexus* of *animus* (cf. 2-2) or souls. Not only this, but it effects (*compono*:) a *confoederatio* of both human and divine natures, this being the fourth word prefaced with *con-*, with. All four work together to effect a reconciliation of all things, *pacifico* or literally to make peaceful. After all, Christ is *pax* itself.

2-9: Patet hoc sanctum osculum duabus ex causis necessarie indultum mundo, ut et infirmis faceret fidem, et desiderio satisfaceret perfectorum: porro ipsum osculum esse non aliud quam mediatorem Dei et hominum, hominem Jesum Christum.

It would seem that this holy kiss was of necessity bestowed on the world for two reasons. Without it the faith of those who wavered would not have been strengthened, nor the desires of the fervent appeased. Moreover, this kiss is no other than the Mediator between God and man, himself a man, Christ Jesus.

Indulgeo is the word for bestowed or to be kind, indulgent to with regard to the divine kiss. It serves two purposes: 1) to both strengthen the faith (literally 'make faith') for those who are *infirmus* or not strong, weak because they had wavered (*causa*, generally as cause) and 2) not to appease (*satisfacio*: to make satisfaction) the *desiderium* or ardent wish of

those who are fervent, *perficio* (to accomplish, to complete or reach an end). The kiss belongs to Christ as *mediator* (cf. 2-3).