

Gregory the Great's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*

A Brief Introduction

Gregory the Great's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* most likely originates from the conferences he gave to a small group of monks and clerics in the mid-590's during his papacy. The text that comes down to us—which ends abruptly at Song 1:8—is probably a fragment of the unrevised notes taken as he spoke.

The text translated here is substantially the critical text established by P. Verbraken for *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (Vol. CXLIV) in 1963. I have adopted several variant readings suggested by the Gregorian scholars P. Meyvaert, J.H. Waszink and R. Bélanger. The paragraph divisions are those of Verbraken. I have tried to avoid traditional, Latin-based religious language as much as possible since the modern English descendants of medieval Latin words have often become weak, abstract, narrowed in meaning and sometimes negatively connoted. By such a strategy I hope to restore, as much as it can be, the original vigor, concreteness and impact of Gregory's language.

The commentary may be broadly outlined as follows:

Paragraphs 1-10 Introduction

11-20 The exposition of Song 1:1-2a

21-23 Song 1:2b

24-31 Song 1:3

32-40 Song 1:4-5

41-43 Song 1:6

44 Song 1:7

45-46 Song 1:8

The Introduction begins with a discussion of allegory: what it is, how it works and its function. Gregory next discusses how the Song of Songs relates to our spiritual journey. After clarifying whom the characters in the Song of Songs represent, he begins the commentary proper. His method of interpretation is mainly allegorical. Like many commentators upon the Song, Gregory interprets the bride as both the Church and the individual soul; the bridegroom is of course Christ. In his commentary, he discusses topics such as desire for God, love, the presence of God in the Incarnation, contemplation, humility (translated throughout as 'lowliness'), compunction (translated throughout as 'deep piercing'), knowledge of God, true beauty, judgment, vigilance, the importance of correct teaching, self-knowledge and predestination.

Perhaps a word on Gregory's understanding of preaching is appropriate: it refers to an activity that is far more encompassing than preaching understood as the delivering of a sermon. To preach is to proclaim and teach the Christian gospel by one's words, actions and example. God preached the knowledge of himself through the entirety of his incarnate existence in Christ Jesus; a priest preaches the gospel by his words, by his deeds and by the moral character of his life. This understanding of preaching may help one understand the unusual use of 'preaching' in the commentary.

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**IN THE NAME OF THE LORD
HERE BEGINS**

**AN EXPOSITION
ON THE SONGS OF SONGS**

**TAKEN FROM
THE BEGINNING OF THE NOTARY'S TRANSCRIPTION OF**

LORD GREGORY

POPE OF THE CITY OF ROME

1. When the human race was banished from the joys of paradise, it embarked upon the pilgrimage of this present life with a heart blind to spiritual understanding. If the divine voice were to proclaim to this blind heart, "Follow God!" or "Love God!"—as it was proclaimed to it in the Law—once it was uttered, the frigid sluggishness of spiritual insensitivity would have prevented it from grasping what it heard. And so, a divine discourse is communicated to the frigid, sluggish soul by means of enigmas and secretly teaches such a soul the love that it does not know by means of what it knows.

2. Allegory functions as a device to lift the soul that is far from God to God. This is possible because allegories employ enigmas. When the soul recognizes something familiar to itself in the words of an enigma, it comes to understand in the deeper meaning of the enigma's words what is not familiar

to itself and is thereby separated from the earth by means of earthly terminology. By approaching what it already knows, the soul comes to understand what is unknown to it. To create allegories, the divine thoughts are cloaked with what we know; by examining exterior language, we attain an interior understanding.

3. For this reason the Song of Songs employs language characteristic of sensual love to reheat the soul using familiar expressions to revive it from sluggishness and to spur it onto the love that is above using language typical of the love here below. This book mentions kisses and breasts and cheeks and thighs. We must not ridicule the sacred description of these terms but reflect upon the mercy of God. For this book goes so far as to extend the meaning of the language characteristic of our shameful love in such a way that our heart is set on fire with yearning for that sacred love. By discussing the parts of the body, this book summons us to love. Therefore we ought to note how wonderfully and mercifully this book is working within us. However, from where God lowers himself by speaking, he lifts us up there by understanding. We are instructed by the conversations proper to sensual love when their power causes us to enthusiastically burn with love for the Divinity.

4. Moreover, we ought to consider this book shrewdly lest we become stuck on exterior perceptions when we hear the language of exterior love and the very device employed to lift us up instead weighs us down and fails to lift us up. In this exterior, sensual language we must seek whatever is interior and discuss the body as if we were apart from the body.

We ought to come to this sacred wedding of the bride and bridegroom clothed in wedding garments, that is, able to understand profound charity. Such attire is necessary lest, not dressed in wedding garments, that is, not having an understanding that is worthy of comprehending charity, we are banished from this wedding banquet into the exterior darkness, that is, into the blindness of ignorance.

We must transcend this language that is typical of the passions so as to realize that virtuous state in which we are unable to be influenced by the passions. As the sacred writings employ words and meanings, so a picture employs colors and subject matter; it is excessively foolish to cling to the colors of the picture in such a way that the subject painted is ignored. Now if we embrace the words that are expressed in exterior terms and ignore their deeper meanings, it is like ignoring the subject depicted while focusing upon the colors alone.

It is written that the letter kills but that the spirit gives life. As the letter cloaks the spirit, so a husk veils corn. But feeding on the husk is the lot of beasts of burden; human beings feed on corn. The one who uses his human reason shucks a spiritual ear of corn, casting away the husks of the beasts of burden and hastening to eat the corn. For the sake of this endeavor it is surely useful to veil the mysteries with the wrapping of letters, for long-sought wisdom tastes better. For this reason it is written, "The wise conceal understanding," (Prov 10:14) for spiritual understanding is without a doubt cloaked under the veil of the letter.

For this reason again, it is said in the same book, "It is the glory of God to hide the word." (Prov 25:2) Since the glorious God reveals himself to the mind seeking God, he ought all the more be craftily

searched for interiorly that he may reveal himself. But should we be demanding what God hides in his mysteries? Of course we should, for it follows, “And the glory of kings is to search into the word.” (Prov 25:2) They are kings who already know how to rule their bodies and how to search into the stirrings of their flesh. And so, the glory of kings is to search into the word; praise [is given to] those who live a good life because they thoroughly scrutinize the secrets of God’s commandments.

When we listen to language belonging to the human way of life, we must distance ourselves from ordinary men lest by listening to what is said in a human way, we perceive nothing about the divinity that we ought to be hearing. Paul did not desire his disciples to be ordinary men when he said to them, “For when envy and contention are among you, are you not ordinary men?” (1 Cor 3:3-4) The Lord as well did not consider his disciples to be ordinary men when he said, “Who do men say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt 16:13) When they told him what ordinary men had said, he immediately added, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mt 16:15) Now by saying “men” first and then adding “you,” he distinguished between ordinary men and his disciples; to be sure, by teaching them divine things he was making them superior to ordinary men. The apostle states, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away.” (2 Cor 5:17) We are aware that in our resurrection the body is joined to the spirit in such a way that everything which was controlled by the passions is taken up into the power of the spirit. And so it is fitting for someone who follows God to imitate his own resurrection every day. At the time of anyone’s resurrection there will be nothing that is able to be influenced by the passions in his body. And so, let such a one at the present time have nothing that is able to be influenced by the passions in his heart. Let such a one also be a new creation according to the interior man and trample whatever is uttered from the past, examining the language of former times solely for the fuel of his renewal.

5. It is written that there is a sacred mountain from which the Lord comes into our hearts so that we might gain understanding. The prophet said about this mountain, “God shall come from Lebanon and the Holy One from a shady and densely-wooded mountain.” (Hab 3:3) This mountain is densely-wooded due to its thoughts and shady due to its allegories. Furthermore we ought to be aware that when the Lord’s voice echoes on the mountain—assuming that we are already hastening to approach the mountain—we are commanded to wash our clothes and to be scrubbed clean from every defilement of the flesh. Indeed it is written that if a beast should touch the mountain, it is to be stoned. A beast touches the mountain when those who are under the power of irrational stirrings draw near the eminence of Sacred Scripture and do not understand it as it ought to be understood but irrationally gravitate toward an understanding that merely gives them pleasure. If anyone deaf or slothful in perception should be spotted around this mountain, he would be killed by his most dreadful ideas, as if by stones.

This mountain burns with passion since the one whom sacred scripture spiritually fills is kindled with the fire of love. This is why it is written, “Your utterances are fiery,” (Ps 118:140) and why some men who heard the words of God while walking on the road exclaimed, “Did not our heart burn with passion within us as he opened the scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32) This is why Moses said, “The fiery law is in his right hand.” (Dt 33:2) The wicked are taken to God’s left hand and cannot cross over to his right side; the chosen are at God’s right hand and are separated from the left side. The fiery law is in the right hand of God because the divine precepts are aflame and kindled with the burning passion of charity in the hearts of the chosen who will someday be placed at his right hand. This fire, therefore, consumes any exterior corruption within us as well as our former mode of life so as

to offer our mind as a holocaust in the contemplation of God.

6. And we must not pay attention in vain to the fact that this book is not called a song but the Song of Songs. In the Old Testament there are some things called holy (cf. e.g. Lev 12:4; 22:10, 14, etc.) and others called the holiest of the holy (cf. e.g. Lev 7:1; 10:17; 14:13, etc.); there are also some days called sabbaths and others called the sabbaths of sabbaths. In the sacred scriptures there are also some writings called songs and others called the Songs of Songs. There were holy things in the tent and holy things kept outside of it; there were also sabbaths celebrated each week. But the holiest of the holy things were approached with a more secret veneration and the sabbaths of the sabbaths were observed only on their own feasts. Therefore, the Songs of Songs is a secret and an interior solemnity. Only an understanding of hidden things can penetrate this secret, for if the exterior language is focused upon, there is no [access to the] secret.

7. We ought also to be aware that in the sacred scriptures there are songs of victory, songs of encouragement and affirmation, songs of rejoicing, songs for help and songs about union with God. The song that Miriam sang after the Red Sea was crossed is a song of victory: "Let us sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously triumphant: horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." (Ex 15:21) The song that Moses sang to the Israelites as they drew near the promised land is a song of encouragement and affirmation: "Give heed, heaven, and let me speak: let the land hearken to the words of my mouth." (Dt 32:1) The song that Hanna sang when she foresaw the fecundity of the church in herself is a song of rejoicing: "My heart exults in the Lord." (1 Sam 2:1) She also expressed the fecundity of the church's future generations in a figurative way when she said, "The barren woman gives birth to many and she who has many sons is weak." (1 Sam 2:5) The song that David sang after battle is a song for help: "I shall choose to love you, Lord, my strength." (Ps 17:2) The song sung at the marriage of the bride and bridegroom, that is, the Song of Songs, is a song about union with God. Because it is loftier than all other songs, it is sung at a marriage of loftier solemnity. Now by means of those other songs, vices are shunned—in fact, everyone is enriched with virtues—and the enemy is thwarted; but by means of this song, the Lord is tightly embraced with intimate love.

8. We must take note that in the sacred scriptures the Lord sometimes calls himself "Lord," sometimes "Father" and sometimes "Bridegroom." For when he wishes to be feared, he calls himself "Lord;" when he wishes to be honored, "Father;" when he wishes to be loved, "Bridegroom." The Lord said through the prophet: "If I am a lord, where is my fear? If I am a father, where is my honor?" (Mal 1:6) And he says again: "I have betrothed you to myself in holiness and faith." (Hos 2:19-20) And again: "I have remembered the day of your betrothing in the desert." (Jer 2:2) However, these aforementioned "whens" do not represent different moments of time with God. Because he wishes himself to be feared before being honored and to be honored before we attain his love, he calls himself "Lord" on account of fear, "Father" on account of honor and "Bridegroom" on account of love; thus, through fear we may reach honor, and through honor for him we may truly attain love [for him].

As honor is more worthy than fear, God rejoices much more to be called "Father" than "Lord;" as love is dearer than honor, God rejoices much more to be called "Bridegroom" than "Father." The Lord and the church are therefore not called "Lord" and "Handmaiden" in this book but "Bridegroom" and "Bride" so that he may be eagerly served not only in fear and in reverence but also in love and so that a deep interior attachment to God may be aroused by this exterior language.

When he calls himself “Lord,” he indicates that we have been created by him; when he calls himself “Father,” he indicates that we have been adopted by him; when he calls himself “Bridegroom,” he indicates that we have been united to him. Moreover, it is far more significant to be united to God than to be created or adopted by him. Therefore, when “Bridegroom” is written in this book, something quite lofty is conveyed since it reveals the bond of union.

The New Testament, which celebrates the already-accomplished union of Word and flesh, that is, of Christ and the church, frequently mentions these names. This is why John the Baptist said at the Lord’s coming, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom.” (Jn 3:29) This is why the same Lord said, “The sons of the bridegroom will not fast while the bridegroom is with them.” (Mt 9:15) This is why it is said to the church, “I have betrothed you to one man, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” (2 Cor 11:2) And again, “So that he might produce a glorious church without stain or wrinkle.” (Eph 5:27) And again in the Revelation of John, “How happy are they who have been invited to the wedding-banquet of the Lamb!” (Rev. 19:9) And again in the same place, “And I saw the bride as if a newlywed coming down from heaven.” (Rev. 21:2)

9. This book of Solomon, which is third among his works, approaches a great mystery. The men of old maintain that there are three stages of life: that which is concerned with behavior, that which is concerned with the nature of things and that which is concerned with contemplation. The Greeks referred to these as ethics, physics and theotics. The life concerned with behavior is described in Proverbs, where it is said, “My son, hear my wisdom and bend your ear to my prudence.” (Prov 5:1) The life concerned with the nature of things is described in Ecclesiastes because its author reflects upon what all things tend to in the end, saying, “Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity.” (Eccl 1:2) The life concerned with contemplation is described in the Song of Songs since its characters desire the coming and the appearance of the Lord himself, as is expressed by the bridegroom’s voice: “Come from Lebanon, come!” (Sg 4:8)

The lives of the three patriarchs—namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—also signify these stages. Abraham adhered to a life concerned with behavior by his obedience (cf. Gen 12:4). Isaac symbolizes a life concerned with the nature of things because he dug wells (cf. Gen 26:14-22). The digging of wells all the way to the bottom represents the probing of all things below by thoroughly scrutinizing them while one reflects upon their nature. Jacob, who saw angels ascending and descending, adhered to the contemplative life.

Because reflection upon the nature of things does not reach its ideal state unless the life concerned with behavior precedes it, Ecclesiastes is rightly placed after Proverbs. And since we do not gaze upon the object of our heavenly contemplation unless we first disdainfully look away from those things slipping away below, the Song of Songs is rightly placed after Ecclesiastes. To be sure, one first reforms his behavior; after a while he reflects upon all things present as if they were not present; third, he gazes upon pure things with heavenly and interior keenness of heart. And so it is as though a kind of ladder leading to the contemplation of God is constructed with these books as its rungs. Thus, after someone has suitably discharged honorable things in the world and then disdainfully looked away from them, he may behold the profound depths of God to the utmost.

Moreover, in this work, as the church, in the collective sense, is awaiting the Lord's coming, so is every soul, in the particular sense, watching for the entry of God into its heart as though it were the bridegroom climbing into his marriage-bed.

10. We ought to be aware that this book introduces four speaking characters: the bridegroom and the bride, the youths with the bride and the flocks of the companions with the bridegroom. Now the bride is the entire church and the bridegroom is the Lord. The youths with the bride are beginners advancing due to their novice zeal. The companions of the bridegroom are either the angels who, coming from their own realm, have often appeared to people or what is more likely, all the spiritually mature men in the church who know how to relate the truth to others.

But when those who are individually youths or companions are grouped together, they are the bride because when considered together, they are the church. However, we must also consider these three names grouped together separately. He who whole-heartedly loves God is the bride; he who preaches the bridegroom is a companion; he who while still young follows the way of good works is a youth. And so we are invited to be the bride. But if we are still unable to do this, let us be companions; if we even lack the competence for this, let us at least be youths and gather together at the marriage-bed. Because we said that the bridegroom and the bride are the Lord and the church, let us as youths or as companions listen to the words of the bridegroom and the bride and let us learn the burning enthusiasm of love from their conversations.

11. And so, let the holy church—for a long time awaiting the Lord's coming and thirsting for the font of life—proclaim how it wishes to see its bridegroom's presence and how it desires this: **12.** "LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH." (Sg 1:1) The Lord had sent angels, patriarchs and prophets to the bride, all of whom bore spiritual gifts. However, the bride was not seeking to receive gifts through the servants of the bridegroom but the bridegroom himself. Let us set this before our eyes: the whole human race, from the world's beginning to its end—namely, the whole church—is the one bride who had received pledges for a spiritual gift through the Law.

But she who said, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," was seeking the presence of her spouse. The holy church, sighing for the coming of the Mediator between God and man, for the coming of its Redeemer, beseeches the Father in prayer to send his Son straight to it and to enlighten it by his presence in order that he may address this same church not through the mouths of the prophets but with his own mouth. And this is why it is written in the Gospel that this same bridegroom was sitting on the mountain, speaking lofty precepts, "Opening his mouth, however, Jesus said..." (Mt 5:2) It is as though the text read: "Then he who had previously opened the mouths of the prophets for the encouragement of the church opened his own mouth."

13. Note that when the church sighs—when the church, as it were, seeks its absent spouse—it suddenly beholds him as present. We consider that when we who are seeking him speak about him, we thoroughly enjoy his presence through the grace of our Creator. This is why it is written in the Gospel that when Cleopas and the other man were speaking about him on the road, they were deemed worthy to suddenly see him as present. (cf. Lk 24:13-35) Therefore, when the holy church desires its still absent spouse who is soon to be made flesh, it suddenly beholds him as present and adds, "FOR YOUR

BREASTS ARE BETTER THAN WINE, AND THE ODOR OF YOUR OINTMENTS SURPASSES ALL PERFUMES.” (Sg 1:1-2)

Wine is the knowledge [of the Lord that was possible] through the Law and the prophets. When the Lord came, he wished to preach his own wisdom through the flesh. He therefore presented it as milk in breasts of flesh so that we who had been incapable of grasping the wisdom of the Lord in his divinity might be able to perceive it in his Incarnation. This is why it is worthwhile to praise his breasts, for the lowering of his preaching to our level has driven into our hearts what the teaching of the Law was unable to do. Yes, the preaching of the Incarnation has nourished us more than the teaching of the Law. Therefore let the church say, “Your breasts are much better than wine.”

14. While still asserting this, the church repeats it in another way and says, “And the odor of your ointments surpasses all perfumes.” The Lord’s ointments are his mighty deeds and the ointment for the Lord was the Holy Spirit. Concerning this ointment, the prophet declared to the Lord, “God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above all others.” (Ps 44:8) When the Lord was made flesh, he was anointed with this oil, for he did not first exist as a man and then afterward receive the Holy Spirit; rather, since the Lord was made flesh through the Holy Spirit’s mediation, he was anointed with this same oil at the very moment he was created as a man. Therefore, the odor of his ointment is the aroma of the Holy Spirit who, while proceeding from the Lord, remains upon him. The odor of his ointments is the aroma of the mighty deeds that he performed.

However, let the church deeply imbibe those aforementioned perfumes, for there were in the house of God, that is, in the gathering of the holy ones, many gifts of the Spirit that gave off an odor indicating their good reputation and announced the delight of a future mediator. Yet “the odor of your ointments surpasses all perfumes” since the aroma of the bridegroom’s mighty deeds that were accomplished throughout his Incarnation excel the predictions of the Law that the bridegroom proposed beforehand in the pledges [of the Law and the prophets]. As the church came into existence for greater understanding, how much more is it deemed worthy to be enlightened through the grace of better vision! The Law’s perfumes were administered through the angels but the ointment was bestowed through the bridegroom’s presence. Because the Law’s blessings that were believed to be lofty have been surpassed by the brightness of his presence, let it be rightly said, “The odor of your ointments surpasses all perfumes.”

15. Let us now come to understand what we have said about the whole church in the collective sense as it pertains to every soul in the particular sense. Let us set this before our eyes: a certain soul is utterly absorbed in pursuing the gifts of God and in acquiring understanding through the preaching of another. This soul also desires to be enlightened through divine grace so that it may at some time understand through its own efforts. This soul reflects upon that fact that it understands nothing unless it is through the words of preachers. Let this soul say, “LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISS OF HIS MOUTH,” (Sg 1:1), as if to say, “Let the Lord himself touch me within so that I may experientially know with understanding and may thoroughly enjoy, not the voices of preachers as I do now, but the touch of his interior grace.” When the Lord promised understanding to Moses with a guarantee of an intimate grace, it is as if he kissed him with the kiss of his mouth (cf. Ex 33:11, 17-23). This is why it was written, “If he were a prophet, I would speak to him in his sleep and not as with my servant Moses, for I spoke to Moses mouth to mouth.” (Num 12:6-8) This is because speaking mouth to mouth

resembles kissing and it is also touching the mind with interior understanding.

16. It follows, “FOR YOUR BREASTS ARE BETTER THAN WINE.” (Sg 1:1) As we said earlier, the breasts of God are the preachings of his most lowly Incarnation. The world’s wisdom is a kind of wine, for it makes the mind very drunk and renders it unfit to understand with lowliness. Philosophers are made very drunk by a kind of wine, as it were, by going beyond the normal behavior of the common people through their worldly wisdom. Let the holy church disdainfully look away from this worldly wisdom; let the church strive for the most lowly Incarnation of the Lord’s preaching. Let the church prefer to savor the wisdom that nourishes by the weakness of the Lord’s flesh rather than the wisdom that raises up the world in pride through the haughtiness of misleading practices. Let the church say, “For your breasts are better than wine,” that is, “The most lowly preaching of your Incarnation surpasses the haughty wisdom of the world.” This is why it is written, “The weakness of God is stronger than men and the foolishness of God is wiser than men.” (1 Cor 1:25)

17. Although it sometimes seems that those who savor world’s wisdom pursue certain virtues—for you notice that many are charitable, mild and exteriorly honorable in all things—they exhibit these virtues not to please God but people. But these are not virtues at all because they do not strive to please God. However, there are odors wafted into human noses when those who savor the world’s wisdom give off odors that indicate a good reputation in accord with human judgment. But should we compare these to the odor of our Redeemer, we would compare them to the truest of true virtues. And let it be said, “The odor of your ointments surpasses all perfumes,” that is, “The aroma of your virtues surpasses all the pretentious virtues of those who savor the world’s wisdom, precisely because this aroma transcends the feigned likenesses of their virtues as befits the truth of the matter.”

18. Since we have said that whatever is said is to be understood in a second way, namely, as concerning every soul, we ought to still explain this same spiritual meaning in a more subtle way if we are able to do so with the Lord’s help. Every soul that fears God is under his yoke but is still distant from God because it fears him; however, insofar as any soul becomes close to God, it dismisses its burden of fear and receives from God the grace of charity. Let us set this before our eyes: due to its unceasing desire, a soul of any of the chosen ones is set on fire in love for the sight of the bridegroom. Since such a soul lacks the power to perfectly perceive such a sight in this life, it contemplates his eminence and is deeply pierced because of this love. Now a deep piercing—which is born of charity and set on fire by desire—resembles a kiss, for as often as the soul kisses God, it is deeply pierced with love for him. At the present time there are many who really fear the Lord and have received [the grace of] good works but they still do not kiss God because they are not deeply pierced by a love for him at all.

This is well demonstrated at the Pharisee’s banquet. After the Pharisee had received the Lord into his home and in his heart cursed the woman kissing the Lord’s feet, he heard: “I entered into your home and you did not give me a kiss. But this woman, from the moment she came in, has not ceased kissing my feet.” (Lk 7:44-45) Everyone who already gives alms and applies himself to good works receives, as it were, Christ at the banquet, for someone who does not cease supporting Christ in his members provides for Christ himself. But if someone is still not deeply pierced by love, he does not kiss Christ’s feet. Therefore the woman who kisses Christ’s feet is preferred to the pastor since someone who is deeply pierced with desire for the Lord and whose mind is burning with interior

passion is preferred to the provider of exterior goods.

Moreover, “She has not ceased kissing my feet,” (Lk 7:45) is fittingly said, for in the love of God it does not suffice to be deeply pierced once and then to do nothing; rather, deep piercing ought to become frequent. The woman is praised because she did not cease kissing, that is, she did not cease being deeply pierced. And this is why it is said through the prophet, “Establish a solemn day with great festal processions, even unto the horn of the altar.” (Ps 117:27) A solemn day is a deep piercing of our heart by the Lord. But it is established with a festal procession when the mind is continually moved to tears out of love for the Lord. It is just as if we were saying to the Lord, “For how long will we be doing these things? For how long will tribulations affect us?” He immediately tells us when it will end, saying, “even unto the horn of the altar.” (Ps 117:27) The horn of the altar is the lifting up of an interior sacrifice, for when we have arrived at the altar, there is no longer need to make a solemn day for the Lord with our lamentation. Therefore, let the soul who already desires to be deeply pierced through love and strives to contemplate the sight of its bridegroom say, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.”

19. And of course the kiss of his mouth is the very fullness of interior peace; when we have attained it, there will no longer be anything to seek. This is why it is fittingly added, “FOR YOUR BREASTS ARE BETTER THAN WINE.” (Sg 1:1) Wine is the knowledge of God received by those of us who reside in this life. But we embrace the breasts of the bridegroom when we contemplate him in the eternal fatherland by an embrace of his presence. Therefore let the soul say, “Your breasts are better than wine.” It is as if the soul says, “Great indeed is the knowledge about yourself that you have bestowed on me in this life; great is the wine of your intimate knowledge by which you make me very drunk; but your breasts are better than wine since whatever is presently known about you through faith is transcended by the beauty and loftiness of contemplation.”

20. “AND THE ODOR OF YOUR OINTMENTS SURPASSES ALL PERFUMES.” (Sg 1:2) While exiled from our heavenly homeland, the holy church possesses these perfumes by adorning itself with the virtues of knowledge, chastity, mercy, lowliness and charity. If the life of the saints did not have an odor—a perfume coming from the virtues—Paul would not have declared, “We are the good odor of Christ in every place.” (2 Cor 2:15) But that more excellent anointing—the contemplation of God—to which at one time or another we will be led, remains distant; the odor of God’s ointments, more excellent than the perfumes of our virtues, remains distant. But if what we have now received is great, what we will receive from the contemplation of our Creator is exceedingly greater. This is why the soul ought to pant and say, “The odor of your ointments surpasses all perfumes,” that is, “Those blessings that you grant through the contemplation of yourself far exceed all the gifts of the virtues that you have bestowed in this life.”

21. Let us tell this church, let us tell this soul—a lover so ardent in its love for the bridegroom—from where it will take hold of such a desire and from where it will grasp the intimate knowledge of his divinity. But bride tells where herself when she says, “YOUR NAME IS OINTMENT POURED-OUT.” (Sg 1:2) Poured-out ointment is the divinity made flesh. Now if ointment is stored in a small vessel, it does not render its odor outside of it; if, in fact, it is poured out, the odor of the poured-out ointment becomes pervasive. The name of God is ointment poured-out because God exteriorly poured himself out of the immensity of his divinity into our nature and rendered the invisible visible. If he had

not poured himself out, he would not have become known to us at all. He poured himself out as ointment when he preserved himself as God and presented himself as man. Paul spoke of this pouring-out: “Although he was in the form of God, he did not consider it robbery that he was equal to God; but he emptied himself, taking to himself the form of a slave.” (Phil 2:6-7) What Paul calls “emptying,” Solomon calls “pouring-out.” Because the Lord has become known to the human race through the lowliness of the Incarnation, let it be said to him, “Your name is ointment poured-out.”

22. It follows, “THEREFORE THE YOUTHS HAVE CHOSEN TO LOVE YOU.” (Sg 1:2) How are we to take the youths in this passage if not as the souls of the chosen ones renewed through baptism? For the life of sin pertains to the old man but the life of holiness to the new. Because the Lord has poured himself forth as ointment, he has made the youths passionately burn with love for him, for he caused the renewed souls to burn with desire for him. Childhood is the time of life still unsuited for the experience of love and old age is the time of life when one stops loving [in an active way]. Someone is a child who has yet to begin the pursuit of an impassioned life; someone is old who once began such a life but has now retired from it. Because neither those who have yet to begin nor those who once began but have now cooled off burn in the Lord, childhood and old age are relegated to an inferior position, whereas the youths, that is, those souls who possess a love that burns with enthusiasm, are said to run.

23. We are able to understand this passage in another way, for “youthfulness” can be defined by comparing it to weakness. Those who have achieved the age of maturity correspond to that rank of angels who are neither conquered by feebleness nor overcome by weakness. Therefore let it be said, “Your name is ointment poured-out; therefore the youths have chosen to love you,” that is, “Since you have exteriorly poured out an intimate knowledge of yourself through your Incarnation, weak souls can choose to love you in your human nature. For those highest powers, like those who have achieved the age of maturity, choose to love you in that place where you are not poured out, because they see you in that place where you continue in your divine state. Therefore, you who may be seen as not poured-out by those highest orders of angels, which correspond to those who have achieved the age of maturity, poured yourself out exteriorly on account of human beings so that the youths, that is, weak minds, may also choose to love you.”

24. It follows, “DRAW ME.” (Sg 1:3) Everyone who is drawn is led, whether such a one is lacking power or is resisting an invitation. But she who said, “Draw me,” has something [within herself] that wills, but also has something [within herself] that lacks the power [to do what she wills]. Human nature wants to follow God but is overcome by a habit of weakness as if bound by some law of nature and it lacks the power to follow him. It notices something in itself by which it stretches toward a goal and something in itself which makes it lack the power to do so; rightly it says, “Draw me.” For example, Paul noticed that he was willing but lacking power when he said, “With my mind I serve the law of God but with my flesh I serve the law of sin,” (Rom 7:25) and “I see another law in my members fighting against the law of my mind.” (Rom 7:23) Because there is something in us which arouses us and something which weighs us down, let us say, “Draw me.”

25. “AFTER YOU WE SHALL RUN IN THE ODOR OF YOUR OINTMENTS.” (Sg 1:3) We run in the odor of God’s ointments when, filled with love because of his spiritual gifts, we long to see him. But we ought to be aware that when people follow God, they sometimes walk, sometimes run and

sometimes resolutely run. He walks after God who follows God lukewarmly; he runs after God who follows with burning enthusiasm; he runs whole-heartedly after God who follows steadfastly. Now our heart was not moved to follow God—and did not want to walk after him—until the coming of the Lord was manifest in the world and moved human minds from their state of spiritual insensitivity. This is why it is written, “His feet stood, and the earth was moved.” (Hab 3:5-6 LXX) The Song, however, reads “run” not “move” because moving is not sufficient for following God unless we also run by desiring. In fact, because it is not even sufficient to run unless one also runs whole-heartedly, Paul said, “So run that you may obtain.” (1 Cor 9:24)

However, by running excessively, some people will over-extend themselves in indiscretion. When they choose their own virtuous deeds and treat as secondary the judgments of him whom they are following, they have a taste for more than is necessary and give precedence to themselves rather than to him whom they are following. This is why it is fitting that “after you” is placed before “we run.” They run after God who reflect upon his judgments, give precedence to his will rather than to their own and struggle to reach him under the worthy labor of discretion. For this reason, when the prophet was reflecting upon and following God’s will, he said, “My soul has clung to you.” (Ps 62:9) Similarly, Jesus said to Peter after he offered his advice, “Get behind me, Satan! For you do not have a taste for the wisdom that is of God but for that which is of men!” (Mk 8:33; cf. Mt 16:23) Because spiritually mature souls intently behold God’s judgments with extreme care and neither through sluggishness nor through indiscrete enthusiasm presume to forestall them, it is fittingly said, “After you we run in the odor of your ointments.” For “after you we run” when by loving [God] we follow his divine judgments and by fearing [God] do not forestall them.

26. “THE KING HAS LED ME INTO HIS BEDROOM. WE SHALL REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN YOU.” (Sg 1:3) The church of God is like the house of a king. And this house has a main door, a staircase, a dining-room and bedrooms. Everyone who has faith within the church has already stepped through the main door of this house; as a main door opens to the rest of the house, so faith possesses the gateway to the rest of the virtues. Everyone who has hope within the church has already come to the staircase of this house, for hope lifts up the heart in order to strive for lofty realities and to forsake base ones. Everyone residing in this house who has charity walks about, as it were, in the dining-rooms, for vast is the charity extended in the decision to love one’s enemies. Everyone residing in the church who already probes God’s lofty secrets and reflects upon his hidden judgments has entered, as it were, into the bedroom.

Someone spoke of the door of this house, “Open to me the doors of holiness and after I have stepped through them, I will confess the Lord.” (Ps 117:19) The psalmist alluded to the staircase of hope: “[The blessed man whose help is from God] has arranged staircases in his heart.” (Ps 83:6) It is said about the vast dining-rooms of this house, “Your command is exceedingly vast.” (Ps 118:96) This vast command refers particularly to charity. He who said, “My secret is my own” (Is. 24:16) was speaking about the bedroom of the king. And another verse, “I have heard mysterious words which it is not permitted for men to utter.” (2 Cor 12:4)

The first approach to the house is the door of faith, the second is the staircase of hope, the third is the vastness of charity and finally the fourth is the fullness of charity which is ordered to experiential knowledge of God’s secrets. Because the holy church—in her spiritually mature members, in her holy

teachers and in those who are already suffused with and rooted in the mysteries of God—reaches the lofty secrets and while still residing in this life penetrates them, it states, “The king has led me into his bedroom.” For through the prophets, apostles and teachers residing in this life who have already penetrated the lofty secrets of that other life, the church has stepped into the bedroom of the king.

27. We must consider this verse carefully since it does not say “into the bedroom of the bridegroom” but “into the bedroom of the king.” The king is mentioned because the text wished to highlight the reverence for the secrets; since the bedroom abounds with possibility, much greater reverence is to be shown to those realities for the sake of which it is entered. Lest anyone who knows the secrets of God by experience or who probes God’s hidden judgments or who is raised up to the lofty realities of contemplation should also raise himself up in pride—and thus slip down—it is mentioned that such a one enters the bedroom of the king. In other words, the greater the reverence that is shown, the more the soul is led to know the secrets by experience. Thus, anyone who is making progress, who is already raised high through grace and who has reached the lofty secrets, ought to direct his attention to himself and all the more lower himself on account of his very progress. And this is why whenever Ezekiel was led to the contemplation of lofty realities, he was called “son of man;” it is as if it might have been said to him, “Pay attention to what you are, and do not raise yourself up [in pride] as a result of these things to which you have been raised up [in contemplation].”

28. But it is the lot of only a few in the church to probe and fully grasp God’s lofty realities and hidden judgments. Nonetheless, by seeing that the strong can reach such wisdom as they contemplate the secrets of God in their hearts, we little ones have confidence that at some time we may attain God’s forgiveness and favor. And this is why the words of the youths are added, “We shall rejoice and be glad in you.” Although the church in the person of those who are spiritually mature steps into the bedroom of the king, the youths count upon and hope for rejoicing; while the strong attain the contemplation of lofty realities, the weak hope for the forgiveness of their sins.

29. “The king has led me into his bedroom. We shall rejoice and be glad in you, MINDFUL OF YOUR BREASTS THAT SURPASS WINE. THE UPRIGHT CHOOSE TO LOVE YOU.” (Sg 1:3) The bridegroom, who is also called king for reverence’s sake, has breasts. Yes, he has breasts: holy men clinging to him with their heart. Breasts are situated on the chest; they draw nourishment from one’s insides to nourish those outside. And so, holy men are the bridegroom’s breasts because they draw from their innermost depths to nourish exteriorly. His breasts are the apostles and all the church’s preachers. As we said above, there was wine in the prophets and in the Law. But since the commandments given through the apostles are better than those given through the prophets, they are “mindful of your breasts which surpass wine” because those who are able to fulfill what was commanded in the New Testament without a doubt pass beyond the knowledge of [the Lord possible through the] Law.

30. Nonetheless, we can understand this passage in another way: “Mindful of your breasts that surpass wine.” There are many who certainly possess the wine of wisdom but lack experiential knowledge of lowliness. Knowledge puffs them up since charity does not build them up (1 Cor 8:1). Indeed, there are many who possess the wine of knowledge to such an extent that they know how to reflect upon the gifts of teaching and of spiritual grace. (The gifts of spiritual grace resemble nipples on a chest that subtly serve and nourish through hidden spiritual passageways.) The people who are

“mindful of your breasts that surpass wine” are those who know how to steadfastly pursue the gifts of your grace in such a way that they do not attribute to themselves the wisdom that they savor and do not raise themselves up in pride on account of this same wisdom that they have received. These people surpass those who have exalted and raised themselves up in pride on account of their own wisdom. Now it is better to savor wisdom with lowliness than to merely savor it, for not to savor wisdom with lowliness is really not to savor it at all. They are “mindful of your breasts that surpass wine,” for knowing how to reflect upon the gifts of spiritual grace, they transcend those who certainly possess knowledge but lack experiential knowledge of the gifts in their memory. And so, the clearer way of saying that they are “mindful of your breasts that surpass wine” is that lowliness is more effective than knowledge. Wine is the knowledge which causes drunkenness but it is the memory of the breasts that make one very drunk which recalls one’s experiential knowledge of the gifts. They are “mindful of your breasts which surpass wine” since lowliness surpasses an abundance of knowledge.

31. “The upright choose to love you.” It is as though it says, “Those who are not upright still fear [you].” Yes, “The upright choose to love you.” Everyone who does good works because of fear—even if he is upright in his work—he is not upright in his desire, for he wishes that there were nothing to fear and that he did not have to perform good works. In fact, the one who performs good works because of love is upright both in deed and in desire. But the sweetness of love is hidden from those who fear [God]. This is why it is written, “How great is the abundance of your sweetness, Lord, which you have hidden from those who fear you and have brought to fruition for those who hope in you!” (Ps 30:20) Now the sweetness of God is not experientially known to those who fear God but becomes intimately known to those who love him.

Therefore, anyone who has striven to be upright through love has chosen to love maturely; as a result, such a one does not fear the coming Judge and does not shudder at the hearsay concerning eternal punishments. And this is why Paul, when he was speculating about the coming of the Judge and seeking the rewards of eternal life, said, “God has prepared these things, not only for me but also for all who have chosen to love his coming.” (2 Tim 4:8) The Judge prepares eternal rewards for those who choose to love his coming because everyone who knows that he does evil works fears the coming Judge; in fact, anyone who dares to be confident about his good works seeks the Judge’s coming. Therefore, rewards are intended for those who watch for God’s coming and for those who choose to love his coming since people do not choose to love the Judge’s coming unless they dare to be confident about their situation. Moreover, all the certainty of uprightness lies in what one chooses to love and therefore it is rightly said, “The upright choose to love you.”

32. “I AM BLACK BUT BEAUTIFUL, DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM, LIKE THE TENTS OF KEDAR, LIKE THE SKIN OF SOLOMON. DO NOT STARE AT ME BECAUSE I AM DARK, FOR THE SUN HAS ALTERED MY COLOR.” (Sg 1:4-5) We are aware that at the time of the church’s origins some Judeans believed as a result of the preaching of our Redeemer’s kindness to humanity, whereas others did not believe; however, the believers were disdainfully looked down upon by those without faith and suffered persecution because they were judged to have learned to walk in the way of the heathens (cf. Mt 10:5 Vulg). This is why the church cries out over these events against those who were not converted, “I am black but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem.” In other words, “I am indeed black in your judgment but beautiful through the enlightenment of grace.” How black? As black “as the tents of Kedar.” Kedar is interpreted as darkness, for Kedar was the second son of Ishmael (cf. Gen 25:13), and the tents of Kedar were Esau’s. Therefore, how black? As black “as the

tents of Kedar” since I have been judged in your sight as someone conforming herself to the likeness of the heathens, that is, as someone conforming herself to the likeness of sinners. How beautiful? As beautiful “as the skin of Solomon.” When Solomon built the temple, it is told that he draped all its accoutrements in treated skins. Without a doubt, Solomon’s skins, the kind of skins appropriate for a tent, were also suitably elegant. If these skins were on his tent, it was only because they were suitably elegant in the service of a king as well. Because Solomon is interpreted as “peaceful one,” we may understand him as the true Solomon, for all souls clinging to God who chastise and subdue themselves in the service of the King of Peace are the skins of Solomon. It is as if the church of Judean converts says, “In your judgment I am indeed like the tents of Kedar, since I am judged to have learned, as it were, to walk in the way of the heathens; but according to the truth of the matter I am like the skins of Solomon since I cling to God in the service of the King.”

33. “Do not stare at me because I am dark, for the sun has altered my color.” The unbelievers glared at those who did believe in Christ as though they were sinners. But let the believers say, “Do not stare at me because I am dark, for the sun has altered my color.” It is as though they say, “The sun, the Lord himself, altered my color when he came.” The Lord reveals through his precepts that the Jews were not beautiful by the precepts of the Law. Now, the sun alters the color of someone whom it intensely beats down upon. Thus, when the Lord came, he altered the color of whomever he intensely beat down upon with his grace, for the more we draw near to his grace, the more we recognize ourselves as sinners. Let us look at Paul, someone who came from Judea and had his color altered in the sun: “But if we wished to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were also found to be sinners.” (Gal 2:17) He who has found himself a sinner in Christ has found that he has had his color altered in the sun.

34. But note that the believers from Judea suffered persecution from the Jews without faith and were afflicted and beset by many troubles. That is why it follows, “THE SONS OF MY MOTHER FOUGHT AGAINST ME” (Sg 1:5), for the sons of the synagogue who persisted in their lack of faith waged a war of persecution against those with faith from the synagogue.

35. Because of the persecution they suffered, the Jewish converts to the faith departed from Judea in order to preach to the heathens; they forsook Judea and went to a foreign land to preach to the heathens. And this is why it follows: “THEY PLACED ME AS A GUARDIAN IN THE VINEYARDS, BUT I HAVE NOT GUARDED MY VINEYARD.” (Sg 1:5) In other words, “Because of the persecutions of the unbelieving Judeans, I was made a guardian in other churches. ‘I have not guarded my vineyard’ since I forsook Judea.” And this is why Paul and the apostles said, “The word of God was sent to us; but since you have been judged unworthy of it, let it be known that we are going to the heathens.” (cf. Acts 13:26,46) It is as though they were saying, “We wished to guard our vineyard; but since you yourselves have rejected us, you are forcing us to go to another place as a guardian of foreign vineyards.”

36. Let us now apply the verse that we applied to the synagogue, which was converted to the faith, to the church, which was called to the faith: “I AM BLACK BUT BEAUTIFUL, DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM.” (Sg 1:4) The church coming from the heathens reflects upon the souls of the faithful which it has found and calls them the daughters of Jerusalem. (Jerusalem is said to mean “vision of peace.”) The church of heathen converts reflects upon what it was and what it has become

and it acknowledges its past faults lest it be proud. It also acknowledges its present manner of life lest it be ungrateful. And it says, "I am black but beautiful." The church of heathen converts is black through what it deserves but beautiful through grace; black through its former manner of life but beautiful through its subsequent way of life. How black? As black "AS THE TENTS OF KEDAR" (Sg 1:4). (The tents of Kedar were the heathens'; they were tents of darkness.) It was also said to the heathens, "You were once darkness; but now you are light in the Lord." (Eph 5:8) How beautiful? As beautiful "AS THE SKIN OF SOLOMON." (Sg 1:4) We have been chastised through repentance. Flesh deadened through repentance resembles a skin brought in for the service of a king. All afflicting themselves through repentance are making themselves members of Christ. Members of Christ afflicted through repentance are the skin of Solomon because they become deadened flesh.

37. But note that there were some faithful in Judea who scorned the heathens coming to the faith. And this is why they criticized Peter when he received Cornelius. (cf. Acts 11:1-3) For the same reason the bride adds in [the name of] the church of the heathens, "DO NOT STARE AT ME BECAUSE I AM DARK." (Sg 1:5) In other words, "Do not disdainfully look down upon the heathen lack of faith in my past; do not disdainfully look down upon my former sins; do not focus on what I was." Why? "BECAUSE THE SUN HAS ALTERED MY COLOR." (Sg 1:5) The sun alters the color of the one on whom it imposes itself vigorously and rather severely. When God holds fast to a severe judgment, it is as though he is making his severity more fully known. He alters color when he shines more intensely, for when he subtly puts his severity into effect, he is passing judgment with severity. When God mercifully reflects upon our works it is as though the sun stops beaming down its rays. When God ponders our works with severity, it is as though God is displaying his strength with severity. Therefore let the church say, "From then on I was dark, from then on I was a sinner because the sun altered my color; for when my Creator forsook me, I slid into error."

38. But O! you who are so afflicted and so deprived of solace, why did you deserve this? What have you obtained from the gift [that you have been given]? "THE SONS OF MY MOTHER FOUGHT AGAINST ME." (Sg 1:5) The sons of my mother are the apostles, for the mother of all is the heavenly Jerusalem. (cf. Gal 4:26) The apostles fought against the church [of the heathen converts] by stabbing it with their preachings, as if with lances, at the very place where there was a lack of faith in the faith. And this is why Paul talked like a fighter, "We are destroying the schemes of the thoughts and every height raising itself up in pride against the knowledge of God." (2 Cor 10:4-5) Since he destroyed the height, he is surely a fighter. Those fighters, those sons of mother Jerusalem, waged war against the church [of the heathen converts] at the very place where there was error so as to firmly establish it in holiness. "The sons of my mother fought against me." And what did the fighters do? "THEY PLACED ME AS A GUARDIAN IN THE VINEYARDS." (Sg 1:5) The vineyards of the church are the virtues that bear fruit, for "while [the sons of my mother] spar with the vices that are in me, they, as it were, rescue me from my evils. They bequeath me a fruitful yield and eagerness for the virtues. They made me a guardian in the vineyards to bring forth a fruitful yield."

Let the church [of heathen converts] speak of the single vineyard after this rescue: "I HAVE NOT GUARDED MY VINEYARD." (Sg 1:5) The church [of the heathen converts]'s vineyard is the ancient habit of error. By placing this church as a guardian [in other vineyards] for the sake of virtues, it forsook its own vineyard, its ancient habit of error.

39. We have already spoken about the synagogue coming to the faith and about the heathens converted to the faith. Let us now speak about the whole church together in the collective sense and about what ought to be understood for each soul in the particular sense.

The crooked who are listening to their own teachers are not accustomed to reflect upon what they are but what they were, but sound teachers acknowledge what they were and disclose what they are lest sinners conceal that they are sinners or at some other time, like those who are ungrateful, deny the gifts [that they have been given]. Therefore let the church say in [the name of] these sound teachers: "I AM BLACK BUT BEAUTIFUL." (Sg 1:4) "I am black through myself but beautiful through the gift [that I have been given]; black on account of my past but beautiful by reason of what I have now become." How black? How beautiful? Black "AS THE TENTS OF KEDAR," beautiful "AS THE SKIN OF SOLOMON." (Sg 1:4) It is not right to form an opinion about someone based solely upon his former manner of living and to pay more attention to what he was rather than to what he is now.

This is why the bride adds, "DO NOT STARE AT ME BECAUSE I AM DARK, FOR THE SUN HAS ALTERED MY COLOR." (Sg 1:5) Sometimes the sacred scriptures represent the excessive heat of earthly desires with the sun. And so, why is she dark? "'Because the sun has altered my color' and my color has been altered by the burning passion of earthly love that I experience before the bridegroom, that is, I have become unsightly before the king."

40. "THE SONS OF MY MOTHER FOUGHT AGAINST ME." (Sg 1:5) There are two creatures fashioned as rational in the whole of creation, the human and the angelic. An angel fell and made a similar fall seem very sweet to man. Now the mother of every creature is the kindness and power of God. We and the angels, therefore, possess a kind of brotherly association due to the fact that we have both been fashioned as rational. Because the fallen angels, who have been fashioned as rational by the same power as we have been, wage war against us every day, let the soul say, "The sons of my mother fought against me." Note that when those rational spirits, those spirits who are the sons of my mother, fight against my soul, they involve it in earthly affairs, free it for worldly activities and entice it to seek transitory things. This is why she adds, "THEY PLACED ME AS A GUARDIAN IN THE VINEYARDS; MY VINEYARD I HAVE NOT GUARDED." (Sg 1:5) The vineyards represent earthly activities. It is as though the soul were saying, "They placed me as a guardian in earthly activities." And why? "I have neglected to guard my vineyard, that is, my soul, my life, my mind, for while I was exteriorly wrapped up in the activity of earthly things, I slackened from my interior guarding." Many reflect upon themselves according to what they do, not according to what they are. They fulfill high-ranking positions and engage in exterior ministries; by guarding what they do, they neglect to guard themselves. So let the soul say, "They placed me as a guardian in the vineyards; my vineyard I have not guarded." In other words, "By being enslaved to exterior guarding in the activities of the world, I lost that watchful concern for interior guarding."

41. But take note! Let the soul which has returned to the favor of its Creator love him and seek where it may find its Redeemer. This is why it follows, "SHOW ME, YOU WHOM MY SOUL CHOOSES TO LOVE, WHERE YOU PASTURE, WHERE YOU LIE DOWN AT MIDDAY." (Sg 1:6) At midday the sun burns hotter. Everyone who enthusiastically burns with faith enthusiastically burns with a desirous love. The bridegroom, who is called a young hart below (cf. Sg 2:19), pastures on the green grass of the virtues in the heart of such people and lies down at midday in the burning enthusiasm of charity in the heart of such people. "Show me, you whom my soul chooses to love, where you pasture, where you lie down at midday."

42. "Why do you seek where he pastures and where he lies down?" She replies with the reason for her inquiry: "LEST I BEGIN TO WANDER AFTER THE FLOCKS OF YOUR COMPANIONS." (Sg 1:6) God's companions are his friends and intimates, as are all who lead a good life. But many present themselves as companions of God although they are not his companions. There are many

teachers who, while they were making misguided teaching seem sweet, appeared to be his companions but were later discovered to be his enemies. When Arius, Sabellius and Montanus were still teachers, they were viewed as companions of God; but when they were examined according to a strict standard, they were discovered to be God's enemies. Although faithful souls commonly cling to the word of God and place their love in the teachers from whom they may make progress, they do not realize that they must be wary of the words of misguided teachers; and so they falter due to what spews out of their mouths. How many people believed such companions and went astray by following the flocks of these companions! Therefore the bride says, "Show me where you pasture, where you lie down at midday, lest I begin to wander after the flocks of your companions." It is as though the soul says, "Show me in whose hearts you truly repose lest I begin to wander after the flocks of those who appear to be your companions, that is, those who are believed to be your intimates but are not." All priests and teachers are companions of God as far as their outward appearance is concerned; but as far as their manner of life is concerned, many are not really companions of God but, in fact, are his adversaries.

43. However, what we have said about heretical teachers can also be applied to Catholics who do not live a good life. Many little ones among the believers within the church strive to lead a good life and want to adhere to a life of uprightness. They reflect upon the life of the priests who are placed over them. And when the priests themselves do not lead a good life and the priests who are placed over souls do not live uprightly, those who follow them will tumble into error. This is why the church in the person of these same faithful little ones says, "Show me, you whom my soul chooses to love, where you pasture, where you lie down at midday." That is to say, "Show me the manner of life of those who truly serve you so that I may know where you pasture on the green grass of the virtues and where you lie down at midday. In other words, show me where you repose in the burning enthusiasm of charity lest I begin to wander about by watching the flocks of your companions, not knowing to whom I should commit myself for words and teachings." Now every listener and weak person must carefully reflect upon whose words he ought to believe, whose teaching he ought to put into practice and whose examples he ought to follow.

44. Note that the bridegroom replies to the bride, "IF YOU DO NOT KNOW YOURSELF, O BEAUTIFUL AMONG WOMEN, SET OUT AND FOLLOW THE TRACKS OF THE FLOCKS AND PASTURE YOUR YOUNG GOATS NEAR THE TENTS OF THE SHEPHERDS." (Sg 1:7) Every soul is obliged to care for nothing except to know itself, for the soul who knows itself recognizes that it has been made in the image of God. If someone is made in the image of God, such a one ought not behave like beasts of burden, squandering himself in either wantonness or the striving for present things. Regarding this ignorance, it is noted in another place, "When man was in honor, he did not understand; he was compared to foolish beasts of burden and became like them." (Ps 48:13)

The tracks of the flocks represent the activities of people: the more activities there are, the more they hamper and the more they misguide. Therefore, let it be said to the church, "If you do not know yourself, O beautiful among women, set out and follow the tracks of the flocks and pasture your young goats near the tents of the shepherds." That is to say, "O you who were filthy through ignorance have become beautiful among the souls of others through faith!" This is clearly said to the church of the chosen ones.

[But God says to the ignorant soul:] "If you do not know yourself, that is, if you do not know that self which has been made in my image, set out, that is, exit. If you do not recognize in whose [image] you have been made, set out and follow, that is, hasten after the tracks of the flocks. Do not follow my examples but those of the masses. Pasture your young goats near the tents of the shepherds." Our young goats are carnal stirrings and unlawful temptations. [God continues:] "Follow

the tracks of the flocks, that is, leave, follow the examples of the masses. Pasture your young goats, that is, nourish your carnal stirrings; at this time do not nourish your spiritual perceptions but rather your carnal stirrings. Go near the tents of the shepherds. If you were pasturing lambs, you would pasture them in the tents of shepherds, that is, in the teachings of the masters, apostles and prophets. Because you are pasturing young goats, pasture near the tents of the shepherds. Thus, you will be called a Christian on account of your faith although you will not be called such on account of your works, for you are viewed as a Christian within on account of your faith but you are not viewed as such because of your works. Note that you have loudly protested and have been contradictory—but why did you not say, [O God,] that you were kindly working in her?—speak plainly!”

45. For it follows, “I HAVE LIKENED YOU, MY SWEETHEART, TO MY CAVALRY WHILE YOU WERE STILL IN THE CHARIOTS OF PHARAOH.” (Sg 1:8) All who are enslaved to wantonness, pride, greed, envy and falsehood are still under the control of the Pharaoh’s chariot, like the horses under the control of his chariot, that is, under the guidance of the devil. However, everyone who burns with enthusiasm for lowliness, chastity, teaching and charity has already become a horse of our Creator, is hitched to the chariot of God and has God as his charioteer. That is why it is said to someone over whom the Lord presides, “It is hard for you to kick against the goad,” (Acts 9:5; 26:14) as if to say, “You are my horse; you are now unable to kick against me, for I preside over you.” These horses are mentioned in another place: “You have sent your horses into the sea who have thrown the many waters into confusion.” (Hab 3:15) God has chariots because he presides over holy souls and runs all around by means of holy souls. This is why it is written, “The chariots of God are ten-thousand, many thousands of those rejoicing.” (Ps 67:18) Pharaoh has chariots but they were submerged in the Red Sea because many misguided people have been transformed in baptism.

Therefore let the bridegroom say, “I have likened you, my sweetheart, to my cavalry while you were still in the chariots of Pharaoh.” In other words, “While you were still in the chariots of Pharaoh and still enslaved to demonic works, I likened you to my cavalry, for I have chosen to focus upon what I accomplished in you through predestination; thus I have compared you to my horses.” God notices that many are still servants of wantonness and greed. But, in accordance with his secret judgment, he focuses upon what he has already worked in them. God has his horses but notices that many are still Pharaoh’s.

46. Since God, in accordance with his hidden judgment and hidden predestination, is reflecting upon those who will be radically transformed to what is good and since he notices that he will lead to his own chariot those who were formerly slaves in Pharaoh’s, he now chooses to focus upon those who already resemble his horses.

At this point we ought to reflect upon his hidden judgments, for many appear to be horses of God through their preaching, wisdom, chastity, generosity and longsuffering; however, they are likened to the horses of Pharaoh by a hidden judgment of God. Many appear to be horses of Pharaoh through their greed, pride, envy and wantonness; however, they are likened to the horses of God by his hidden judgment. God sees both those who will be turned from good to evil and those who will be led back from evil to good. Therefore, because of God’s strictness, those who appear to be God’s horses are Pharaoh’s on account of the lifestyle worthy of rejection that they will later follow. Similarly, because of God’s pity, many who seem to be Pharaoh’s horses are likened to God’s, for they are chosen by him on account of the holy lives that they will someday keep to the end.

This is why the bridegroom flatters the bride and declares, “I have likened you, my sweetheart, to my cavalry while you were still in the chariots of Pharaoh.” That is to say, “You were still an

enslaved subject in the chariots of Pharaoh, running under the control of your vices; however, I chose to regard what I accomplished in you through predestination. I have likened you to my cavalry, that is, I have chosen to regard you as someone who resembles my chosen ones.”

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