

COMMENTARY ON THE SONG OF SONGS

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In loving memory of
Alfred Grimes, ocsa (1892-1982)
Monk of St Joseph's Abbey
Spencer, Massachusetts

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PREFACE

Gregory of Nyssa belongs to that special group of Cappadocian theologians who during the fourth century pioneered the effort to formulate Orthodox Christian doctrine and to nurture the development of the Church's institutions. Although the three main members of the group were closely associated through family ties and friendship, they differed from one another in character. But despite this, their influence on theology was one and the same.

A former teacher of rhetoric, Gregory of Nyssa had a rich knowledge of ancient philosophical literature. This, coupled with his profound understanding of biblical texts, his unrivaled ability to grasp philosophical and theological concepts, and his deep spirituality, proved him to be one of the most impressive thinkers Christianity has ever known.

Gregory is an exponent of spiritual theology in its empirical form, although he never directly discloses any one of his own personal spiritual experiences. He is not a contemplator who confesses his own state, as Augustine is in the West or as, in part, Gregory the Theologian is in the East--to limit ourselves to two of the most eminent representatives of this same time period. He describes and interprets various spiritual states either as others have experienced them, or as the sacred biblical authors have presented them. Gregory is an interpreter par excellence. He interprets divine revelation as he sees it within worldly symbols, natural phenomena and physical movements. And he mainly interprets biblical texts by drawing out the spiritual truth hidden in the letter and the type. According to Gregory, interpreters are teeth which chew spiritual food for the sake of those who are weaker--they are "the Church's teeth which chew the unwrought grass of divine sayings into fine pieces and then digest them for us." This is precisely what Gregory's own work does.

Brother Casimir's fine translation offers the reader one of Gregory's last works. We owe its composition to a dynamic woman named Olympias, who lived in Constantinople around the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century. She is known mostly for her philanthropic work during the time when Constantinople was developing into the capital of the Byzantine world. She could, however, also claim a wreath of honor for her spiritual work. It is true that today we do not even have a sample of her writing, not even from the letters which she unquestionably wrote. Nevertheless, some of the finest spiritual products of this period are related to this woman: the poem which Gregory the Theologian composed on the occasion of her marriage to Nevridios, the eparch of Constantinople, which refers to her as a mirror of the Christian woman--a collection of seventeen letters, permeated with Christian love, which John Chrysostom sent her from his place of exile; and lastly, Gregory of Nyssa's present work, The Commentary on the Song of Songs.

This work is characteristic of all of Gregory's interpretative work both because in it he lays down the lines which he follows in his interpretative method, and because of the interpretation's importance in and of itself. The biblical text serves as a basis and incentive for him to express his own thoughts concerning man's spiritual state. As always, his thoughts are profound and dynamic.

Gregory undoubtedly profits from Origen in his exegetical method, although he differs from the latter in his intense Christocentrism. His interpretative structure is based on the conviction firstly, that the interpreter must acknowledge that the spiritual life is veiled in a mystery; secondly, that Christ is both the center and the revealer of this mystery; thirdly, that the Church, being the body of Christ, is the assistant of this revelation; and fourthly, that man is the partaker of the revelation's benefits.

The text of The Song of Songs, with its description of the young shepherd lass' erotic love towards youth, offers Gregory the opportunity to describe the spiritual journey of eternally loving man towards the supreme good, God. God is not an object to be known, but rather the sublime person who provokes wonder. "His name is not known in all the earth but is wondered at." As well as wondered at, he is loved and sought after to be met and united with.

Along this journey, though, one observes the phenomenon of eternal seeking and eternal progress. As she seeks God, the soul is taught that she loves the unattainable and desires the incomprehensible. She is disappointed, but is further taught that progress is found in perpetual seeking and that true delight of the good desired is never to cease ascending. Then each satisfied desire becomes the starting point of the good which lies even further above it. "That which is perpetually laid hold of beauty perceives that which appears each time as an image of the desired one. He is then overcome by a longing to be flooded with the sublime good, to perceive the archetypal form.

This relishing is tantamount to contemplation of the divine, which again is set upon an endless process. When the soul sees the divine, she receives a new drive to see it more fully. Thus, even though during contemplation one sees God, seeing is tantamount to not seeing.

Gregory's theology, as expressed in this work, as well as in all his other works, is dynamic and progressive; it is set on an endless journey. We will always be travelling towards the infinite, towards the vision both sought after. However, this vision is not found only at the end of the journey. It is faintly present from the very beginning, whereas during its fulfillment it is changed into a communion and theosis. The soul's love of divine beauty is an eternally perfective and creative power in man.

Panagiotes Chrestou
Director, Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies
Thessalonike, Greece

INTRODUCTION

Of all the books in the Old Testament, perhaps none is more difficult to interpret than the Song of Songs. Throughout the centuries since its composition, this song of love has caused vast amounts of literature to be written in both Jewish and Christian circles.¹ The subject of the Song of Solomon is as old as humanity itself, namely love. In the early second century Rabbi Akiba exclaimed, "No day outweighed in glory the one on which Israel received the Song of Songs." Since its theme of love arouses deep emotion, any commentary or interpretation of this sublime canticle evokes a passionate response among both saints and scholars. Whoever comments upon its pages cannot help but be powerfully gripped by its spell. Since we are dealing with passionate love, the interpretation of the Song of Songs requires imagination, insight and deep spiritual sensitivity. It was such qualities as these which the Fathers of the early Church brought to their commentaries in attempting to express the bride and bridegroom's various moods of love--the joy of union and the pain of separation. Their enthusiasm enabled them to penetrate the spontaneous and various imagery of such images as gazelles, fruit, geographical locations, and bodily members. Their lives were lived in a profound union with Christ, a fact enabling them to see a fuller sense of the text and to exploit the theme of love with justification. To paraphrase Saint Paul, "The Song of Songs is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the Church" (Eph 5.32).

Saint Hippolytus of Rome [b.170-75] is generally recognized as the first to have composed a commentary on the Song of Songs making use of allegorical exegesis. Without a doubt it was Origen, the great third-century Father, who composed a commentary on the Song that has set the tone for subsequent commentaries ever since. In Christian circles, the Song was related to the mutual love of Christ and the Church as his bride, and Origen the exegete picked up and passed on this theme to posterity.

Because the Song's theme is basically one of love, it represents the zenith of the spiritual life. It is no small

1A chronological sketch of the Song of Songs in literature may be found in Marvin Pope's **Song of Songs** (Garden City, N.Y., 1977), pp. 263-88.

wonder that Jean Leclercq speaks of the Song's predominant place in medieval monastic literature in light of the great patristic tradition of which these monks were direct inheritors².

In Origen's work a theory of the three stages of the spiritual life is developed³ based upon Philo and earlier Greek philosophers. This theory is essentially a threefold account of the spiritual life--purgative, illuminative and unitive. These three divisions were assigned to the three books of the Old Testament-Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Gregory of Nyssa's Commentary on the Song passes on Origen's theology of the spiritual life. In fact, Gregory himself mentions his dependence upon the great Alexandrian master: "If Origen laboriously applied himself to the Song of Songs, we too have been industrious by our writing" (Prologue, J.13).

Gregory of Nyssa was born about the year 335 in Cappadocia into an extraordinary Christian family which included among his relations Saint Makrina (his sister) and Saint Basil the Great (his brother). Biographical details of Gregory's life⁴ are few. Practically every scholar points out that the shy contemplative from Cappadocia was overshadowed by his more outgoing elder brother Basil. His was the fate of being a younger brother. Nevertheless, Gregory developed his own thought, and he became one of the greatest theologians of the early Church. Around the age of forty, Gregory accepted being appointed bishop (372) of a small Cappadocian town called Nyssa located in what is now south central Turkey. This appointment went against his contemplative frame of mind, yet he was urged to assume this position at his brother Basil's urging.

By nature, Gregory was a philosopher of the profoundest kind. His background as a rhetorician and theologian rested on a solid basis of classical training at Athens which was shared by his good friend, Saint Gregory the Theologian. It was from such a solid training and exposure to contemporary culture that Gregory was able to build up a system of Christian thought which justified the monastic life so well propagated by his elder brother Basil.⁵

Gregory inherited the mysticism of Origen which, in turn, was based upon the Alexandrian Jewish-Christian tradition of Philo, Clement and Plotinos. The city of Alexandria, famous for its library, philosophic inheritance and schools, was also the cradle of Arianism, the greatest heresy of Christian antiquity which attempted to substitute philosophical ideas for revealed truth. The spiritual life as expounded by the Alexandrians is solidly founded upon an imitation of Christ and is nourished by continual meditation on the Bible and its great models, particularly Saint Paul. The summit of the spiritual life is not a simple self-fulfillment, but participation in the divine charity which impels a person to go out to his brothers and sisters. Such is the case with Gregory's depiction of Moses and the bride of the Canticle.

2"The Canticle of Canticles is a contemplative text: *theoricus sermo*, as Saint Bernard would say. It is not pastoral in nature; it does not teach morality, prescribe good works to perform or precepts to observe; nor even purvey exhortations to wisdom. But with its ardent language and its dialogue of praise, it was more attuned than any other book in Sacred Scripture to loving, disinterested contemplation. One can understand why Origen commented on it twice, why Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Bernard and so many others preferred it over other parts of the Old and New Testaments," Jean Leclercq, **The Love of Learning and the Desire for God** (New York, 1962) p. 92.

3For a discussion on this threefold division, cf. Jean Daniélou, **Platonisme et Théologie Mystique** (Paris, 1944) pp. 17-26. Louis Bouyer comments on this division--"We cannot, without distorting the texts, make the succession of light, cloud, and darkness with Gregory coincide with the three divisions of Origen," **The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers** (New York and Tournai, 1963) pp. 355-56. For Gregory's words--"The purpose of the book of Proverbs is to teach, while that of Ecclesiastes is to preach. The philosophy of the Song of Songs transcends both by its loftier doctrine" (J.18).

4Hans von Campenhausen gives a series of brief historical sketches of twelve major Fathers of the Greek Church starting with Justin and ending with Cyril of Alexandria. See his **The Fathers of the Greek Church** (New York, 1959).

5For the relationship between Gregory of Nyssa and the other two Cappadocian Fathers (Gregory the Theologian and Basil), cf. F. Cayré, **Manual of Patrology** (Tournai, 1927) pp. 406-47.

It was here at Alexandria that the allegorical method was developed and received impetus from Origen⁶. Due to Völker's seminal work on Origen in 1930, this master of the early Church was established as a true Christian mystic, a fact either overlooked or denied outright by generations of scholars. Quite often such misunderstandings resulted from those who sought to interpret Origen's teachings in light of his cultural and intellectual milieu, thereby denying him his proper status as a father of mysticism. Völker later wrote a book on Gregory of Nyssa (1955) which gives a systematic presentation of the Cappadocian's thought.⁷

The work of Gregory of Nyssa has for a long time been misunderstood and neglected due to the philosophical tone of his writings.⁸ Gregory is not even ranked among the four "ecumenical" doctors--Basil, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, and Athanasios--due to his speculative nature, strong interest in Greek philosophy and Origenist influence. Nevertheless, the Second Synod of Nikaia (787) bestowed upon him the title, "Father of Fathers." Jean Daniélou has shown how Gregory translated the object of his faith into terms accessible to the thought of his times, dominated as it was by such thinkers as Plato, Plotinos and the Stoics.⁹

The fourth century was a period of syncretism where diverse currents of thought were combined, presenting a bewildering mosaic of teachings. Naturally, Gregory was affected by this. But what complicates matters further is Gregory's rhetorical training: the literal meaning of scripture is given back seat to an allegorical preference¹⁰ to which modern readers find difficult to appreciate. In his style Gregory indicates a debt to the devices of the Second Sophistic with its preferred methods of linguistic gymnastics and oxymorons.¹¹

The Platonic tone of Gregory's works, however, is what strikes the reader most.¹² Gregory was thoroughly immersed in it, and examples of this influence are far too numerous to recount. From Plato's **Phaedros** is borrowed the myth of the horses (cf. Homily 3) and the wings of a human soul (cf. Homily 15) to cite just two examples. Most likely, Gregory did not have in his hands the actual texts of Platonic writings when composing his own treatises, but his training at Athens, the cultural milieu of the time, and his acquaintance with contemporary literature was strong enough to affect all his writings.

A superficial glance at Gregory's works gives rise to the impression that he simply transferred to Christianity Platonic dualism, for example, the soul versus the body. Nevertheless, he is firmly rooted in the biblical doctrine of creation where God is seen as completely transcendent yet has a living relationship with his creatures. A strong case against such a dualism is Gregory's luxuriant use in the Song of Songs of symbols which are not inferior but, on the

6Gregory's dependence upon the Christian tradition of the Alexandrian school furnished him with such basic insights as God's transcendence, which in time was handed over to Makarios (cf. Werner Jaeger, **Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius** (Leiden, 1954). With his Origenist influence, Gregory affected Evagrius Pontikos and therefore monasticism in Egypt. Later on the writings of Dionysios the Aeropagite show a third and final stage of Gregory's posterity to the patristic era; cf. Bouyer's **Spirituality**, chapters 15 and 16.

7**Das Vollkommenheitsideal des Origenes und Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker.**

8When reading Gregory's writings, one must understand the interrelationship between Scripture, philosophy and mysticism. All three elements create a picture of human perfection and beatitude.

9**Platonisme et Theologie Mystique.**

10Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar's Introduction to his **Der Versiegelte Quelle** (Salzburg, Leipzig) 1939.

11Gregory attempts to resolve by means of paradox the inner tension between stretching out and renunciation, and between longing and sorrow. This preference for paradoxes found throughout Gregory's writings is influenced by the Second Sophistic and its rhetorical devices. Cf. Völker, **Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker**, p. 189.

12For some examples, cf. J.104--soul as mirror; J.212--"The cave of this life"; J.251--a leopard, where spots refer to "defilements of this life."

contrary, act as sacramental signs for manifesting the divine reality. We get a glimpse of this in the First Homily where "the remaining words of the Song reveal a kind of ecclesiastical concern (*ekklesiastike oikonomia*) for other members of the Church" (J 40). This *oikonomia* is born out by references to such sacraments as baptism (J.328 ff) and the Eucharist (J.308-11). It shows that Gregory's reflections upon Scripture are primarily liturgical, yet are backed up and reinforced by Platonic terminology.

We encounter a second powerful force in Plotinos, especially with regard to the dependence of all creatures upon God (**Enneads** 4.7, 9; 5.4.1), *katharsis* or purification (**Enneads** 1.6.5), and flight from the created realm, this latter concept being related to *katharsis*. Perhaps the most notable influence of Plotinos¹³ upon Gregory of Nyssa is to be found in the Ninth and Tenth Homilies regarding the doctrine of ecstasy. Such an exit from oneself presupposes an earlier purification and unification of the soul, for God is one, and it is necessary for the soul to resemble this oneness. The principal driving force behind such an exit from oneself is love, which impels the soul towards the Beautiful or the Good.

Gregory depends upon Aristotle to give a scientific basis to his theology, especially for his logic in dealing with the Eunomian heresy¹⁴. We do not encounter this Aristotelianism so much in the **Commentary on the Song of Songs** as in his other treatises, especially **Against Eunomios**. However, the technical term *akolouthia*, an important word with Gregory, is based upon Aristotle's influence. *Akolouthia* serves to show the scientific method which is opposite to Plato's mythic view of the soul's relationship to the Good. With its scientific (*technikos*) overtones, *akolouthia*¹⁵ points out the necessary bond or link between phenomena; it is a question here of demonstrating those bonds which unite propositions or realities, Perhaps one can also see in Gregory's conception of man's freedom, with regard to good and evil, the Aristotelian notion of being versus non-being.

We also find traces of Aristotelianism in Gregory's stress upon the virtues and their interdependence. The importance of *akolouthia* is seen in the restoration of human nature in Christ:

We say that the bride's praises are lessons which teach about more refined matters. They state that beings are created and renewed not in accord with the same order or system (*akolouthia*). Because the nature of creation exists from its very beginning by the divine power, the end of each created being is simultaneously linked with its beginning [J.457].

Another passage is as follows:

Human nature takes up its perfection not at once, as in the beginning, but progresses towards the good by an order (*akolouthia*) which gradually gets rid of our inclination towards evil. [J.458].

With Gregory, *akolouthia* designates not only the necessary bond between two propositions, but the consequence by which a proposition is connected to its first principles (*archai*). It is only when this sequence is established and lacks no connection that one is in possession of a scientific certitude.

13Refer to J.257-59 where praise is attributed to one of the bride's eyes by which she sees God alone. Also, cf. J.64-65 where the bride is exhorted to separate herself from what is material. This theme constantly recurs in the **Commentary on the Song of Songs**.

14Gregory wrote four treatises against the Eunomian heresy, a form of Arianism which carried to the extreme Origen's intellectualism. The followers of Eunomios claimed that one can have knowledge of the divine *ousia* or essence.

15Jean Daniélou, *L' Être et le Temps chez Gregory de Nysse* (Leiden, 1970) pp. 42-46. Cf. **Concerning the Soul and the Resurrection**, PG 46.52--"Since Plato philosophizes on the soul in a mythic way, Aristotle looks for the necessary link between phenomena."

Just as influential upon Gregory as Platonism is Stoicism, especially regarding cosmological conceptions.¹⁶ It should be kept in mind that Gregory was using Stoic terminology to make spiritual and immaterial realities accessible to his contemporaries.¹⁷ What lies beneath the unity of both the material and immaterial worlds is a principle (Christ) which unifies the cosmos while transcending it; in other words, this principle is not imminent as it is in Stoicism. It is from the Stoic school that Gregory borrows the idea of cyclic movement of matter and his affirmation of the constant activity of the Spirit.¹⁸ Gregory's thought here is important, for it is related to his explanation of creation--all things exist virtually at the moment of creation, but their emergence is successive and temporal. If Gregory admits, like the Stoics, a certain transformation of natural elements, he depends, on the other hand, upon the eternity of the world willed by God who maintains its elements in a fixed quantity.

Christ is the "seed" or "germ" of redeemed humanity by virtue of his incarnation. Stoic morality is tied into Gregory's mentality by his frequent description of evil as a movement of desire towards sensible pleasure (*hedone*), a movement which destroys the soul's natural equilibrium. Finally, Gregory is very much influenced by the Stoic idea of impassibility (*apatheia*), or a state free from passion, a theme developed intensively in his commentary on Song of Songs.

Everything which Gregory has to say regarding theology and spirituality is affirmative. It has a special appeal to modern readers, despite the sometimes heavy allegory, by virtue of his stress on the goodness of movement. The ancient world was gripped by a philosophy and theology which feared change; any kind of movement was viewed mostly as negative and existing for evil purposes. Gregory takes this almost primeval fear and transforms it into a higher kind of movement. Such a movement has its roots in Saint Paul--"And we . . . are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2Cor 3.18).¹⁹ Movement is, of course, rooted in Gregory's basic intuition that God is not totally incomprehensible and inaccessible to mankind, but remains boundless despite any attempt to limit him. Our ignorance of God is simply due to the fact that he is infinite and the creature is finite--we can never conceive of his essence or *ousia*. Gregory's First Homily makes this point clear at the outset and sets the tone for the remaining homilies. Such separation is not Platonic--intelligible versus sensible--but that of Creator to creature. Being created, and therefore limited, the human soul can never be satiated in its search for God. The world and all its goodness allows us to speak of God's goodness,²⁰ but not as he is in himself. Once the bride of the Song recognizes her capacity for change, she is overjoyed at this realization (J 159-62, to cite one of several references), and moves . . . changes . . . from one degree of perception and love of her bridegroom into another. As one reads the Commentary on the Song, this notion of change is presented in terms of growth. Since love (*agape*) is at the root of this movement, the bride never

16Reinhard Hübner, **Die Einheit des Liebes Christi bei Gregor von Nyssa** (Leiden, 1974); see chapter 2, "**Der Menschheitsleib Christi**," section 4.

17*Sumphonia*, *sumpatheia*, *sumpnoia* and *to suneches* are Stoic terms and concepts used by Gregory in relation to the body of the cosmos or universe. He applies them to the all embracing unity of Christ's body, a community (the Church) which re-establishes the whole created universe. Cf. p. 153.

18Cf. **The Life of Moses**, PG 44.328.

19*Apo doxes eis doxan*--"from glory into glory." Note the dynamic thrust of this phrase so dear to Gregory. The image that comes to mind is a person walking through a beautiful mansion. As he passes from one lovely room to another, a composite picture of the entire house is gradually impressed upon him. Perhaps this notion can be kept in mind when reading Christ's words: "In my Father's house there are many mansions" [Jn 14.2]; i.e., we will never weary of moving from one mansion into another!

20Cf. above regarding sacraments as material representations of immaterial reality.

becomes weary, but is continually "winged" in her ascent [cf. J.447]; that is to say, she becomes like the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity who is never at rest, but constantly in motion.

To describe this ascent or perpetual growth of the soul, Gregory uses the term *epektasis*.²¹ It literally means tension, extension, stretching out towards (*pros*) the Immovable and is a kind of process of unification or concentration of the soul's capacities. The soul, once having been winged or spirited, moves out of desire towards God the bridegroom.²² This all-important desire does not cease with the attainment of beatitude, but is intimately connected with the divine transcendence itself.

Right at the beginning of his **Commentary on the Song**, Gregory presents us with a synthesis of the diverse steps of the spiritual life (cf. J.18-19) culminating with the Song of Songs, "the innermost sanctuary"²³ whose object is union (*anakrasis*) with God. The "law of desire,"²⁴ so to speak, is found in the First Homily: "The present enjoyment of God is the starting point for a greater share of his goodness, and it increases our desire for him."²⁵ Instead of satiety being produced, we have, on the contrary, an even greater desire as a result of our initial participation in God. For our edification Gregory offers us three chief examples of such men of desire: Moses, David and Paul.²⁶ Since God presents himself to us in a perpetual revelation, how then is participation in him the source of an ever greater desire? For Gregory's response to this question, refer to the important text of the Fifth Homily:

We now see the bride being led by the Word up a rising staircase by the steps of virtue to the heights of perfection. First the Word sends her a ray of light through the windows of the prophets and the lattices of the Law. The bride at this point partakes in the good as much as she can. Then he starts again from the beginning to draw her to participation in a higher beauty, as if she were still wholly without a taste of beauty [J.159].

Here we find ourselves at the heart of Gregory's mysticism where the spiritual life is perceived as an ascension, a classical description used throughout the history of spirituality. The bride-soul begins with an arousal of desire, is transformed into a dove (cf. J.160), and runs on an upward course which never ends. At each stage of ascent the Word communicates himself to the spouse, always causing her to be satisfied while ever presenting a further desire for him: "The bride has reached in her lofty ascent the summit of her desires . . . But this limit of her attainment is the beginning of further hope" (cf. J.178). Such then is the twofold disposition of "interiority" and of "exteriority," of "instancy" and of "ecstasy," a characteristic trait of the mystic life.²⁷

21*Epektasis*. Cf. J.174. Gregory develops this theme found in Saint Paul, Philippians 3.13: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead."

22Cf. Charles Dumontier's fine treatment of "desire," **Saint Bernard et la Bible** (Paris) 1953.

23Gregory compares the Song of Songs with the Holy of Holies.

24This "law of desire" dear to Saint Bernard may be first found in [Gen 2.24]: "Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves (*proskollethesetai*) to (*pros*) his wife, and they become one flesh." The bride's desire for her spouse is this basic attraction between male and female, the Song's theme. Note that the Genesis text uses two prepositions--*proskollethesetai* and *pros*--in succession to emphasize this force of attraction. The attraction represented by *pros* is resolved when both man and woman "become one flesh"--*eis sarka mian*, literally, "into one flesh."

25"Increase our desire"--cf. J.31. The verse used here is a refinement of *teino--sunepiteino*, "to extend or increase alone with." Compare it with *epektasis* above.

26"Man of desires"--cf. Daniel 9.23 where the angel Gabriel calls Daniel as being "greatly beloved"- '*atah chamudoth*. The Vulgate (Latin) translation of this reads, *ille vir desiderorum*"; the Septuagint has *aner epithumion*.

27Cf. Danielou, **Platonisme**, p. 313.

The **Commentary on the Song** presents us with a number of examples of spiritual progress (*prokope*) based upon Philippians 3.14 mentioned above. One such text (J.246) relates the bride's *epektasis* with another favorite quote of Gregory's: "They go from strength to strength"²⁸ (Ps 83.7). Because "the unbounded and incomprehensible divinity remains beyond all comprehension" (J.246), that is, God's essence (*ousia*) can never be grasped, the bride--a finite, created being--is confronted with a frontier lacking bounds. To counter the tendency claiming knowledge of God's *ousia*, Gregory relies heavily upon apophatic terminology.²⁹ However, the use of such terminology can often be emphasized at the expense of Gregory's presentation to us of God as a God of desire.³⁰ One only has to read his **Commentary on the Song** to discover this.

Another image connected with advancement (*prokope*) towards God is that of a fountain which always gushes forth:

A person who approaches that fountain marvels at the endless stream of water always gushing forth and bubbling out; never could he say that he has seen all the water. In the same way, the person looking at the divine, invisible beauty will always discover it anew, since it will be seen as something newer and more wondrous in comparison to what he had already comprehended. [J.321].

This text offers us further insight into the twofold nature of Gregory's mystical experience--God's *ousia* as transcendent and participation in his *dunamis*³¹ represented by water. It is to Gregory's credit that he does not compromise one of these elements to the other which has sometimes been the case with other mystics. We should note that *epektasis* is actually 'progress' or *prokope*, implied by the very composition of the words: *epektasis* has the preposition *epi*, "on," 'upon,' signifying progression; *prokope* has the preposition *pro* or *pros*, "towards."

God is completely unknowable to human understanding, yet through love (*agape*) he is always present to us. Such a subtle notion leads us to the paradox of motion instability and stability in motion. Movement in and by itself is proper to the material world and is characterized by dispersion. Spiritual movement, however, is a process of unification where continuity presides over its changing nature. God is always acquired, like the fountain's water, by the soul:

This is indeed paradoxical. All wells contain still water; only the bride has running water with both depth and a continuous flow of water. Who can worthily comprehend the wonders shown here which are applied to the likeness of the bride? It seems that she has no further to reach, once she has been compared to beauty's archetype. She closely imitates her bridegroom's fountain by one of her own; his life by hers, and his water by

28*Ek dunameos eis dunamian*. Compare with 2 Corinthians 3.18. "from glory to glory," *apo doxes eis doxan*.

29"[Apophaticism] is an expression of that fundamental attitude which transforms the whole of theology into a contemplation of the mysteries of revelation. It is not a branch of theology, a chapter, or an inevitable introduction on the incomprehensibility of God...it forbids us to follow natural ways of thought and to form concepts which would usurp the place of spiritual realities," from Vladimir Lossky, **The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church**, (Cambridge, 1957) p 42.

30Cf. the Second Homily, J.63.

31*Dunamis*, a Stoic term, was used with reference to Christ as *Logos* who holds together all creation. For the distinction between *he eneryetike autou dunamis*, cf. J.334-36.

hers [J.293].

Another important theme in Gregory's thought can be integrated along with what we have seen so far--the doctrine of the spiritual senses. God's presence, as we have shown, can never be grasped intellectually. Because our sense faculties grasp physical reality immediately (that is, there is no mediator between what is grasped and the person grasping it), they provide excellent imagery for the soul's apprehension of spiritual reality. Prior to this apprehension, however, the soul must undergo a purification (*katharsis*) of God's image (*eikon*) spoken of frequently in the **Commentary on the Song**. Gregory connects this purification to the restoration of the soul in its original paradisaic existence. Once sensible joys have been purified, man is free to taste God's goodness in paradise. As Jean Daniélou points out,³² the doctrine of the spiritual senses is not simply an expression of a psychological experience but is closely connected with man's true nature, that of the first man in paradise. The death of corporeal senses does not signify death of all pleasure, nor the cessation of intellectual joy. When Gregory explains the watchful sleep of the bride, he shows that sleep of bodily senses is a condition for another kind of enjoyment or *hedone*:

There is a two-fold nature of pleasure in man: one is effected in the soul by freedom from passion, and another by passion in the body; of these two, the one which free will chooses has power over the other. If a person pays attention to his senses and is drawn by pleasure in the body, he will live his life without tasting divine joy, since the good can be overshadowed by what is inferior. For those who desire God, a good not shadowed over by anything awaits them; they realize that what enters the senses must be avoided. Therefore, when the soul enjoys only contemplation of Being, it will not arise for those things which effect sensual pleasure. It puts to rest all bodily movement, and by naked, pure insight, the soul will see God in a divine watchfulness [J.313-14].

The first systematic expression of the doctrine of the spiritual senses is found in Origen's **Against Kelsios**:

If you examine the question more closely, you will see that there is, as Scripture says, a common sense for perceiving the divine. Only the blessed will be able to discover it: "You will discover a sense (*aisthesis*) that can perceive the divine," the Bible says [cf. Prov 2.5].³³ It is a sense of hearing capable of catching voices that make no sound in the air; a sense of taste with which to taste the living bread that came down from heaven to give life to the world; a delicate sense of smell-which is what led Paul to say that he was the "good odor of Christ."³⁴

This passage with its quote from Proverbs 2.5 merits special attention, for Gregory takes up the word *aisthesis*, a term implying the capacity of an object to make contact with what it desires. Refer to the following from the Fourth Homily:

Because the apple tree hears fruit which sweetens the soul's senses (*ta aistheteria tes psuches*), it differs more from other trees as the lily does from thorns. A lily is delightful in both sight and scent. On the other hand, the apple delights three of the senses: it is a

³²Platonisme, p. 235.

³³The Septuagint has *epignosisin theou heuresis*. Origen seems to have translated *epignosis* as *aisthesis*.

³⁴From J. Daniélou, **Origen** (New York, 1955) p.307.

pleasant sight to the eyes by its beautiful appearance, a sweet and lovely fragrance, and a food which is sweet to the sense of taste. The bride correctly sees a difference between herself and her master because as light he is joy to our eyes, perfume to our scent, and life to those who eat of him [J. 117] .

Note here the phrase *ta aistheteria tes psuches*, which is opposite to *ta aistheteria* of the body from which one must be cleansed and restored to paradise. This state of perfection in which the soul's senses are activated belongs to the spiritually mature, as the Fourteenth Homily points out:

The person who nourishes a newly born infant with pure milk during its early spiritual life cares for those newly born in the church, as the Apostle says:³⁵ He dispenses the bread of wisdom to the perfect according to the inner man [J.399].

It is interesting to compare these two passages with another quote from Proverbs: "The wise hide sense perception" (10.14). Gregory uses it in the Fifth Homily regarding those who have both mortified themselves,³⁶ adorn the bride's head, and by whom the Church is glorified. Having put each of their sense perceptions to death, they press forward towards the good (cf. J.451-52). Implied here is a kind of ecstasy or "going-out" of oneself into God. While the doctrine of the spiritual senses is related to the Word or bridegroom dwelling within the soul, that of ecstasy deals with the soul entering a realm outside itself.³⁷ It is this second aspect of the mystery of God which may be tied in with *prokope* that has a special mark of transcendence. To connote it, Gregory uses such terms as "inebriation," "sleep," "wounding," and *eros*. All hint at a kind of irrational state, the other side of *ta aistheteria tes psuches*. Gregory uses such imagery repeatedly in his Commentary because the spiritual life is one of continual ascents; we can never tire of this apparent repetition of imagery, since the soul is going from one stage of glory to another, and every advancement discovered becomes the starting point of another step forward.

Ecstasy has important roots in Philo³⁸ upon whom, in turn, Origen depends.³⁹ Gregory likes to use ecstasy in relation to three main historical figures: Moses, David and Paul. The Eighth Homily begins with the example of Paul, Gregory's supreme guide in the mystical life:

When the great Apostle Paul gave a full account to the Corinthians of his lofty visions, he doubted his own human nature, that is, whether at the time of his initiation into paradise he was in the body or in the spirit. He identifies, " I consider myself not to have reached the goal, but I stretch forward to what lies in front of me, forgetting what went before me" [Phil 3.13]. It is clear that Paul alone knew what laid beyond that third heaven....After hearing the unutterable mysteries of paradise, Paul still continued to move higher and did not cease to ascend; he never allowed the good already attained to limit his desire. Here, I believe, Paul teaches us that the blessed nature of the good is eternally much better than what we have received, while what lies beyond our comprehension is

35Heb 5.14--". . . those who have their faculties (*ta aistheteria*) trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." Compare this with Gregory's senses (*ta aistheteria*) of the soul.

36Cf. J. 404-05 where the symbol of myrrh is used for mortification of bodily senses.

37Gregory's mysticism encountered difficulty with Messalianism (second half of fourth century), a movement animated by a desire for pure, uninterrupted contemplation. Gregory speaks of it in his treatise **On Virginity**.

38Cf. Bouyer's **Spirituality**, pp. 28-34.

39Refer again to Völker's classical work **Das Vohkommenheitsideal des Origenes**, especially pp. 134-44 where Origen, as a mystic, is successfully defended.

always boundless [J.245].

The Fifth and Sixth Homilies develop the theme of ecstasy in relation to sober inebriation where sacramental associations have their origins in Philo:

This is also the meaning of the flourishing vine whose wine gladdens the heart and will one day fill the cup of wisdom. It will be freely offered to those who drink from the exalted preaching to enjoy a good and sober inebriation. I mean that inebriation through which men pass ecstatically from the material to the divine realm. [J.156].

Ecstasy is first described as a passage from the material to the divine reality and points to a divinization of the human spirit. Such an invitation from on high is a free, gratuitous gift initiated by God. One cannot help but see the roots of this passage in the words of wisdom: "She has mixed her wine in her bowl, she has set her table, she has sent out her maids to call from the highest places in the town. 'Come, eat of my bread and drink the wine I have mixed' " (Prov 9.2-5). Wisdom first mixed wine in her bowl and then called out from above or, in Gregory's terminology, from the "divine realm."

Later in the Tenth Homily [J.307-10] Gregory develops the theme of eating with regard to ecstasy. Here the eucharistic overtones are unmistakable. But before this eucharist/ecstasy occurs, Saint Paul is pointed out as a myrrh-bearing tree, that is, mortification of our merely human life is necessary before experiencing ecstasy. Since the Eucharist is the common meal of the Church, we can see from the text that Gregory implies ecstasy as something readily available for those partaking of the banquet of Christ's body and blood. His entire **Commentary on the Song of Songs** stresses more the union of each individual soul with Christ as opposed to Origen who prefers to regard the bride of the Song as the Church. However, the last two homilies of Gregory (14 and 15) emphasize the union between Christ and his Church as his body.

Without a doubt, Gregory's entire mystical doctrine is founded upon the theme of the image of God as first expressed in Genesis 1.26: "Let us make man in our image and likeness" (*kat' eikona hemetera kai kath' hoiosin*). This is not a revolutionary doctrine as Merki shows,⁴⁰ but it takes on a relief stamped by Gregory's own thought. After being made in God's image and likeness, man is placed over creation⁴¹ in imitation of God's sovereignty. Being so constituted, man has within himself all the divine attributes, especially participation in God's purity and remoteness from evil. Since God is unfathomable, so is man; after all, he is the Creator's image or *eikon*. For Gregory the natural man⁴² (*nous-pneuma*), as created by God with all his endowments--purity, love, detachment- is what later theology called the supernatural order. Opposed to this natural life is the animal life (*psuche*) which is added upon the image; hence man is good by nature, an insight dear to many Greek Fathers of the Church. Restoration of this image forms the central theme of all Gregory's writings, and it tends to dominate much of his **Commentary on the Song**.

Incorruptibility (*aphtharsia*) is opposed to the animal life or "garments of skin" (cf. Gen 3.21) which composes the animal life or psyche. "Because I have not kept my own vineyard," that is, the natural state of her soul, the bride has lost by impurity (cf. Second Homily) this "state free from passion

40For Christian and pre-Christian roots of this doctrine of image, refer to **Homoiosis Theou** by Hubert Merki (Freiburg, 1952).

41Cf. **On the Making of Man**, PG 44.136.

42*Empsuchos eikon*, **On the Making of Man**, PG 44.41.

(*apatheia*), likeness (*homoiosis*) to God, and estrangement (*allotriosis*) from evil" [J.60]. Note how well all three terms denote *eikon*.

An interesting consequence of such a teaching is the absence of sexuality. Gregory follows the literal reading of Genesis 1.27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." We find this literal reading of the Genesis text spoken of in the Seventh Homily:

No one can adequately grasp the terms pertaining to God. For example, "mother" is mentioned in the Song in place of father." Both terms mean the same. There is neither male nor, female in God (for how can anything transitory like this be attributed to God? But when we are one in Christ, we are divested of the signs of this difference along with the old man). Therefore, every name equally indicates God's ineffable nature; neither can "male" or "female" defile God's pure nature [J.212-13].⁴³

The "man" first created by God is not an historical figure but that of Christ to come: "There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.28). It is relatively easy to see how such a doctrine can be applied to virginity, and Gregory, in fact, devotes an entire treatise to this state of life. Refer to the Fifteenth Homily which again brings out the notion of *eikon* as based upon the above mentioned absence of sexual distinctions:

Human nature is also created but does not, like other created beings, advance towards its perfection. "Let us make man according to our image and likeness." What can be more exalted than similarity to God? Thus, the end of the first creation is simultaneous with its beginning, for human nature originated in perfection [J.458].

Gregory continues this passage by clearly saying that man progresses towards the good by "an order (*akolouthia*) and arrangement" which purges us of the evil added upon our image; that is, when we look to our "garment of skin" given us as a kind of medicine, we experience disgust with it, along with material things, and turn towards our natural state, our *eikon*. Note in the Fifteenth Homily (J.459) that Gregory further speaks of our mind (*dianoia*)⁴⁴ which is held in bondage by these material inclinations of the garment of skin, and which is purified only in accord with our free choice.

Gregory's conception of *askesis*, which helps restore our *eikon*, is commanded by *apatheia* or detachment, from passion. Basically, *apatheia* is a stripping-off of our garment of skin, our mortality. We defined *eikon* above as the natural state of the soul, as well as equating it with *apatheia* (cf. J.60). For Gregory, *apatheia* is a habitual state of grace, that is to say, participation of the soul in the divine life. It has a supremely positive character and does not consist of the elimination of passions as such; rather, *apatheia* coincides with the disappearance of vicious passions, or a mortification which accompanies the resurrection:

The son in Proverbs is named a bride, and Wisdom is changed into the role of a bridegroom, so that a person might be espoused to God by becoming a pure virgin instead of a bridegroom. By clinging to the Lord he might become one spirit through a union

43For roots of this doctrine, refer to Philo's **De Mundi Opificio**.

44*Dianoia* (mind) corresponds to the biblical doctrine of Gen 1.26-27. See Völker, **Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker**, pp.61-65.

with what is pure and free from passion (*apathes*) [J.23].

Note that *apatheia* in this passage is connected with the reality of being espoused--married--to God as a virgin, the two apparently contradictory elements of marriage and virginity being united. Such paradoxes, as in this case, are frequently employed to express a higher synthesis.

Apatheia is especially important as a condition for a life on the same plane as the angels (*isaggelos*). We are exhorted in the Fourth Homily to partake of the angelic nature (*eis phuseos ton aggelon*, J.134). Since *apatheia* is an emanation (*aporroia*) of the divine life which makes the soul an *eikon* of God, it allows us to know God, rather, to know that his *ousia* transcends every act of our knowing. We obtain such knowledge in our souls which act like living mirrors:

A person can look at the sun in himself as in a mirror. For the rays of that true and divine virtue shine forth in a pure life by the outflow of detachment (*apatheia*) and make the invisible to us, and the inaccessible comprehensible by depicting itself in the mirror of our souls [J.90].

Of course, a mirror must be clean to reflect what is presented before it. This purity, or *katharsis*, is the image reflected in our souls as mirrors:

We become like the food we have eaten. Let us take the example of a hollow vessel of crystal; anything put in it is clearly visible. Similarly, by placing the lilies' splendor in our souls, they become radiant and show from outside the forms within . . . The person formed with these by a good life makes himself radiant by showing in his life each form of virtue [J.441-42].

Apatheia, an emanation of the divine life, diffuses itself as deifying light into every aspect of a person's being, so in this way it is identified with the virtues. Because virtue is a participation in the very life of God, it permits us to know him in our own selves. We may then say that such a doctrine, as taught by Gregory of Nyssa, equals mystical knowledge or a reflection of God:

Instead of the Word we have in us this compounded fragrance from the perfection of the virtues. It imitates by its own purity that which by nature is incorruptible; by its goodness it imitates his goodness; by its incorruptibility, his incorruptibility; by its immutability, his immutability; and by everything in us effected through virtue, his true virtue which contains all the heavens according to the prophet Habakkuk [Hab 3.3; J.89].

Gregory sums up all that has been said above regarding virtue, *apatheia*, and man as image of God in an important passage from the Ninth Homily. Virtues are seen here as a garment woven from many threads to form a whole. Keep in mind the "garment of skin" by way of contrast while reading this passage:

The end of a virtuous life is likeness to God. Because of this, purity of soul and freedom from the disturbance of passion is exercised by attention to the virtues so that a certain form of the transcendent nature might become present in them due to their more refined way of life. Since the life of virtue is neither uniform nor the same, it is like the art of skillfully making a garment by weaving various threads: some threads are pulled straight and others drawn crossways against them. Therefore, it is necessary to have many

elements concur to create a virtuous life [J.271].

Thus, for Gregory, the divine life of God is none other than the life of Christ present within a person prolongation and working out of the sacrament of baptism. By combining the Platonic elements of *apatheia* and *katharsis*, Gregory has given them a specifically Christian stamp and shows us that a person so animated by Christ enjoys the liberty⁴⁵ of a son of God.

Gregory's entire mysticism centers around the transcendence of God's *ousia*. We encounter this theme time and again throughout the Commentary on the Song. We do not weary of hearing it because if our reading is coupled with faith, we discover that we are continuously led from one degree of knowledge (glory) to another without ever experiencing fatigue. The transition from one stage to another, if you will, is an on-going process of stripping the tunics of skin, as well as a progressive entrance into the depths of one's own soul.⁴⁶ That subtle phrase used by Gregory, "perception of his presence" (*aisthesis tes parousias*, J.324),⁴⁷ binds together the closeness of God and his remoteness--God's uncreated grace is perceived more by its effects (in addition to transforming the soul and increasing its desire for him) than an outright vision of his being. God is both interior and exterior to the soul, and it is in such a tension that the structure of the *eikon* is found.

To express this innate tension, Gregory wrote an important treatise, **The Life of Moses**, in which that man of God, Moses, is a figure of a soul returning to God. As the biblical account relates in Exodus, Moses' relationship with God is not seen in isolation, rather, he is foremost a leader of the chosen people in their desert wanderings. It is this social role or "ecclesiastical concern" (J.40) that must be kept in mind when we consider Gregory's writings. The same may also be applied to King David and Saint Paul, two other exemplars Gregory employs as models of the spiritual life.

The theme of darkness, representing God's incomprehensibility, plays an important role in **The Life of Moses** and is brought out more fully in the **Commentary on the Song**, Gregory's last work:

God's manifestation to the great Moses began with light, after which he spoke to him through a cloud. Then having risen higher and having become more perfect, Moses saw God in darkness [J.322].

Thus, the spiritual life is seen as a movement from light to darkness where the emphasis upon vision is downplayed. We often speak of "seeing God" in the beatific vision. In modern times, and especially in Western society, the faculty of sight predominates over the other senses. This is where the above-mentioned "perception of presence" may give us some assistance--the faculty of sight is subtly de-emphasized, Yielding to something akin to the faculty of touch or feeling. Perhaps this is the reason that scent, touch and taste are so predominant in the Commentary on the Song, even though Gregory speaks of the soul as *eikon*/mirror where the notion of vision is implied.

The darkness Gregory presents to us is absolute. No amount of human effort or intelligence is able to comprehend (see) God, for he is completely outside (*exo*) all manifestations. Saint John the

⁴⁵Gregory frequently employs the term *parresia* for liberty, which connotes a freedom of speech by a citizen. It is based upon the divine paternity and is the crown or full flower of *apatheia*. Cf. Daniélou's remarks, **Platonisme**. pp. 110-23.

⁴⁶Refer to the Second Homily, exterior versus interior in relation to the Old Testament tent of witness.

⁴⁷Refer to an article by Mariette Canévet, **La Perception de la Présence de Dieu a propos d'une Expression de la xi e Homélie sur le Cantique** in **Epektasis: Mélange Patristiques** offerts au Jean Daniélou (Beauchesne, 1972).

Apostle is presented as a "sponge," an example of perceiving God in the darkness, although in the following text darkness is not specifically mentioned :

John loved the breasts of the Word as he reclined upon the Lord's chest. John's heart became a kind of sponge beside the fountain of life. It became filled with the mysteries of Christ by a kind of secret transmission [J.41].

We may compare this passive role of a sponge with its ability to absorb the drops of night running down from the bridegroom' s locks with a quote from the eleventh Homily:

The "drops of the night" have a meaning which we have examined earlier. It is impossible for a person entering the inner part of the sanctuary of the invisible to meet a drenching torrent of knowledge. Rather, one must be content, if by a few obscure insights, truth bedews our knowledge: these spiritual drops flow from the saints and bearers of the divine [J.325-26].

Gregory says that such locks suspended from the bridegroom' s head are prophets, evangelists and apostles (one of whom is Saint John the Sponge). The emphasis in the above passage from the Eleventh Homily rests upon the drops of the night entering our souls; thus, darkness is not a thing exterior to us. The notion of interiority here hearkens back to man created in God's image, our natural state where God makes his dwelling place. The role of darkness, therefore, serves to cause a rupture with the ordinary domain of knowledge; faith then establishes itself as the proper relationship between us and God in a realm transcending our intelligence. Refer to the Sixth Homily:

Having passed by every intelligible being in creation and having forsaken every way of comprehension, I found my beloved by faith. No longer will I let him go once he was found by faith's grasp until he comes within my chamber. The chamber indeed signifies the heart which becomes an acceptable dwelling of God when it returns to that state which it had from the beginning [J.183].

No mere seizure by the intelligence is depicted here but a true indwelling or relationship with a living person in mystery. The divine presence, little by little, despoils us of any other kind of knowledge (cf. J.182-84) except that which is obtainable by pure faith. Here again is the importance of that phrase "perception of presence." Even Saint Paul's ecstasy into the third heaven (cf. J.138 and 2Cor 12.2) did not obtain what he perceived lying there; he only heard a voice calling him further onward.

In the Third Homily Saint Gregory describes the growth of Christ in a soul by saying, "The child Jesus born within us advances by different ways in those who receive him in wisdom, in age and in grace" (J.96). Here Christ's birth is not perceived as a simple inhabitation of which we are merely receptacles--a true union is effected between the Word (*Logos*) and the soul. The basis for this movement/growth rests upon God's love, *agape*, for mankind. Numerous texts from Gregory's Commentary on the Song show us this *agape* as related to the divine darkness. I cite one such example from the First Homily:

Having thus cleansed the heart of its condition with respect to external matters, Solomon then initiates the soul through the Song of Songs into the divine sanctuary. What is described there is a marriage; but what is understood is the union of the human soul with God. Because of this, the son in Proverbs is named a bride, and Wisdom is changed into the role of the bridegroom, so that a person might be espoused to God by becoming a

pure virgin instead of a bridegroom. . . . Since it is Wisdom who is speaking, love as much as you can with your whole heart and strength; desire as much as you can. I boldly add to these words, "Be passionate about it" [J.22-23].

We find the word *agape* used to denote human love in Gregory's **Commentary on the Song**. It is a term foreign to classical Greek which the New Testament took up to designate a new meaning for the essence of the evangelical message--love of God for creatures and love between persons. The essence of *agape* is a free initiative which carries that which is superior towards that which is inferior; it is thereby related to Christ's incarnation, his *katabasis*. *Agape* is opposite to the movement of Platonic *eros*--ascension of what is inferior towards that which is superior. The soul thus introduced into the divine sanctuary eternally without end in the divine goodness.

An interesting point regarding this increase in charity is that the communication of new grace to the soul is purely gratuitous. It appeals to that most natural of human impulses, the desire for marriage. Saint Bernard takes up this theme in a remarkable passage pertaining to marriage which may be tied in here with Gregory of Nyssa's teaching:

Love is sufficient for itself; when love is present it absorbs and conquers all other affections. Therefore, it loves what it loves, and it knows nothing else. He [God] who is justly honored, held in awe and admired, prefers be loved. He and the soul are Bridegroom and Bride. What other bond or compulsion do you look for between those who are betrothed, except to love and be loved? This bond is stronger even than nature's firm bond between parents and children. . . . You see how strong this feeling is between bride and bridegroom--it is stronger not only than other affections, but even than itself.⁴⁸

The soul which has transformed its carnal inclinations tends towards God by a kind of natural inclination, the attraction of like towards like. Such connaturality is not exactly in line with Christian *agape* described earlier, but Gregory uses it in a slightly different sense--*agape* describes for him a union with nuptial imagery lying outside the normal sphere of intelligence:

Anyone who entertains such shameful illusions should be cast out from the company of those who share the nuptial joys. . . the soul is escorted to an incorporeal, spiritual and pure union with God. For God, who wishes all to be saved and come to the recognition of the truth, shows the most perfect and blessed way of salvation here--love (*agape*) (J.15).

A chief characteristic of *agape* is irrationality. It creates its own logic, its own way of being, resulting from a kind of affectionate clinging. We must be careful not to separate *agape* and *eros*, for Gregory joins them together at the beginning of his **Commentary on the Song** by quoting from Prov 4.6: "Ardently long after (*erustheti*) wisdom" (J.25). This text quoted above gives us the proper nuance of *eros*; it is a passion which moves the soul. Because *eros* is a passion, it is therefore outside the realm of the nods, man's most noble faculty⁴⁹. *Eros* is best viewed as an intensification of *agape*; "The bride is wounded by a spiritual fiery shaft of desire (*eros*). For *agape* which is aroused is called *eros*" (J.383).

Gregory describes *eros* here as an excess of *agape*, a more intense and fervent manifestation. The

48On the Song of Songs (Kalamazoo, 1980) 4, pp. 182-83; Homily 83.

49For the suspension of the activity of the nods in ecstasy, cf. Völker's **Gregor von Nysser**, pp. 204-5.

bridegroom, the "noble lover (*erastes*)⁵⁰ of our souls" (J.378), initiates his *agape*, which the bride passively receives and reflects like a mirror:

Therefore, the noble lover of our souls shows his love by which Christ dies for us sinners. The bride, in turn, is enflamed with love and shows the shaft of love deeply placed in her heart, for this is fellowship with God [J.378].

The soul which has attained spiritual maturity participates with a certain plenitude in the divine life. Such terms denoting connaturality are *suggenes*, *sunaphes* and *oikeios*.

Despite the rather complicated terminology, rich allegory and subtle language, Gregory of Nyssa's spiritual doctrine has great simplicity; it is nothing more than a prolongation and development of the grace received at baptism, the heritage of every Christian. In the course of this development Gregory points out the necessary purification in order to make Christ's presence shine in us; hence Gregory's mysticism centers around the second person of the Trinity.

Perhaps it has not been sufficiently appreciated, but his account briefly spoken of above. She interacts with her maidens throughout the **Commentary**, and the chief examples of Gregory's doctrine of ascent were great leaders of the people: Moses, Abraham, David and especially Saint Paul. Thus, mystic graces are intimately bound up with the apostolate. The two main Song characters are the bride and the bridegroom, female and male figures who play out their love relationship in terms of marital imagery and who serve as models for the union between Christ and his Church. It is to be noted that the contemplative life, as depicted in Gregory's **Commentary on the Song**, precedes the active life; being contemplative by nature, Gregory stresses this side which helped form the basis for the monastic legislation of his more active brother Basil.

In the communion of saints we see this interplay between those who have attained spiritual maturity and those for whom this maturity exists:

[The saints] became the Church's common mouth and filled their listeners with myrrh which mortified their passions and bore fruit with the lilies of the Word. They became great champions of faith; by a good confession at their time of witness, they were drenched with myrrh in their struggle on behalf of their religion. [J .405-6].

In other words, there is a perfect correspondence between what the saints (represented by the bride) experienced and what they transmit to those under their care.

Perhaps the best way such love of a bride for her spouse, Christ, can be transmitted is by teaching others (the young maidens of the Song) how to read sacred Scripture:

Persons reducing the divine mysteries into small fragments for a clearer interpretation of the text make spiritual food more easily acceptable for the body of the Church. They perform the function of teeth by receiving the thick, dense bread of the text into their mouths; by a more subtle contemplation, they make the food delectable [J.225-26].

Gregory finds himself here in the tradition of Origen. This Alexandrian considered himself

50Cf. PG 44.401. Moses is described as a "passionate lover," *sphodros erastes*.

primarily as an instructor for others in the Christian faith and clarified the deeper meaning of Scripture to those under his charge. Once a fuller understanding of the hidden presence of Christ lying within the pages of the Bible has been transmitted to the soul⁵¹, this person is then capable of instructing others in the faith. Having reached spiritual maturity after a time, he can then become a martyr who continues what Christ achieved when he mastered death.

Once a person has been initiated " into the hidden mysteries of this book"⁵², it transforms the docile reader, by the Holy Spirit's grace, into "something more than men," that is, one's human nature is transformed by Christ's teaching into "what is divine." Only when a person has been purified can the mystic ascent begin which leads the soul back into heaven, its true and natural dwelling place.

51 William of Saint Thierry, a twelfth-century Cistercian, expresses the relationship between the sense of taste dear to Gregory of Nyssa and spiritual reading of the Bible:

'There is a sense of taste created in and for us in Christ by the Holy Spirit who teaches us how to read; in this given case, how to read the Holy Scriptures, by enabling us to penetrate deeper than the written page, down to those depths where the secrets of God reside.

"It was this same spirit of love which presided at the composition of the Scriptures and at their interpretation. He now creates for us and in us (*facit nobis*) a sense adapted both to this intimate perusal of the Holy Books, as well as to the contact with the God of one's desires. All of that, besides, is brought about in Christ.

"It is the creation of this taste which, in the account of the apparition of the Lord to the disciples after his resurrection, introduces the remark of the Evangelist: At that moment he opened for (in) them the meaning of the penetrating reading of the Scriptures.

"When the deep meaning of the Scriptures and the power of the divine mysteries and secrets begin not only to come clear to us between the lines, so to speak, but even more when we begin to 'palpitate' them, to manipulate them with a hand that has, as it were, become shaped to do this by a kind of experience--which can only be done with the help of a certain sense organ grafted upon the very heart of one's faculty of knowing, and by a certain training derived from experience in reading between the lines and even, to push this further, to read in one's own depths, to feel the goodness of God and the divine effect, which by the same all-powerful goodness the work of grace operates with efficacious energy in the sons of grace--then, and only then, wisdom completes the work which is its own proper one; then by placing upon them the seal of the goodness of God, this wisdom puts its mark upon and makes firm all our quieted faculties rendered malleable by this unction; all hardness . . . is dispelled until in the gladness newly found in the salvation of God, in the strength received from the sovereign spirit of wisdom, the holy soul joyfully directs this cry to God: 'the light of your countenance, Lord, is imprinted upon me; you have made your joyful gladness come to birth in our hearts.'

"And the Lord replies: Eternal life is that they should know you by experience, you, the only true God,

The picture of the spiritual life in union with the Church, Christ's body, should be attractive to modern readers despite the fact that at times Gregory's allegory becomes difficult and tedious to follow. His doctrine of *epektasis* or continual progress is especially meaningful today and should give courage to all attempting to live a Christian life regardless of one's station in life. *Epektasis* may be equated with growth in the Christian life whose roots lie in baptism. With his rhetorical skill Gregory fills his readers, both ancient and modern, with a wonderful appreciation of the world as sacramental and therefore divine. We are not to stop at the outward signs or revelations of God, but to continually press on to a deeper love and knowledge of the blessed Trinity:

Everyone is drawn to desire what they bless and praise...Everyone will look to the same goal, and every evil will be destroyed. God will be all in all, and all persons will be united together in fellowship of the Good, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

These are the concluding words of the Fifteenth--and final--Homily.

This is the first complete translation of the **Commentary on the Song of Songs** by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, from Greek into English⁵³. The Greek text used for this translation was arranged by Hermann Langerbeck under the general editorship of Werner Jaeger. Effort has been made to remain as close as possible to the Greek text while retaining a readable English style. Gregory of Nyssa's difficult prose style, delicate nuances of Greek words, both philosophical and theological, have indeed been challenging.

In the left margin of the translation are the letters 'J' and 'M.' 'J' refers to the critical edition of the Greek text, while 'M' refers to J.P. Migne's edition, PG 44.

Scriptural citations are given according to the Septuagint, the text with which Gregory was familiar. It was important to retain citations from this version because he based his scriptural exegesis upon the Septuagint.

The **Commentary on the Song of Songs** consists of fifteen homilies. Saint Gregory of Nyssa comments to chapter six, verse nine of the Song of Songs.

EDITIONS AND STUDIES

Editions

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you and the one whom you have sent, Christ Jesus. O blessed science, which contains eternal life! This life derives from the sense of taste, for tasting means to perceive and to understand in depth."--**De Natura Amoris**, PL 84.399 [author's translation].

52That is, the Song of Songs, cf. J.29.

53Herbert Musurillo and Jean Daniélou have translated segments of Gregory's **Song Commentary** in **From Glory to Glory** (New York, 1961). Hans Urs von Balthasar translated parts of his **Commentary** in **Der Versiegelte Quelle: Auslegung des Hohen Liedes** (Salzburg, 1939). A Syriac version (unedited) exists.

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PROLOGUE

Greetings in the Lord, to the most worthy
Olympias, from Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa.

J.3 & M.756 I have learned as befitting your noble life and pure soul your concern for the Song of Songs which you have expressed to me both in person and by your letters. By an appropriate contemplation of the text, the philosophy hidden in its words **J.4** becomes manifest, once the literal meaning has been purified by a correct understanding. Therefore, I have eagerly accepted your solicitude regarding this task. I do not offer you anything that would benefit your conduct, for I am persuaded that your soul's eye is pure from every passionate, unclean thought, and that it looks without hindrance at God's grace by means of these divine words of the Song. However, I hope that my commentary will be a guide for the more fleshly-minded, since the wisdom hidden [in the Song of Songs] leads to a spiritual state of the soul.

Because some members of the Church always think it right to follow the letter of holy scripture and do not take into account the symbolic and allegorical meanings, we must answer those who accuse us of doing so [that is, of using allegory]: there is nothing unusual in searching the divinely inspired scriptures with every means at our disposal. Thus if the literal **J.5** sense, as it is called, should be of any use, we will readily **M.757** have the object of our search. But if anything in the hidden, symbolic sense cannot be of use with regard to the literal sense, we will, as the Word teaches and as Proverbs says [1.6], understand the passage either as a parable, a dark saying, an utterance of wise men, or as a riddle. With regards to anagogy, it makes no difference what we call it--tropology or allegory--as long as we grasp the meaning of [scripture's] words.

The great Apostle [Paul] says that the Law is spiritual [Rom 7.14]. He includes under the name of Law the historical narratives, since all the inspired scriptures is Law for those who read them. They teach not only through precepts but through the historical narratives: both lead to knowledge of the mysteries and to a pure way of life for those who have diligent minds. Paul uses exegesis with an eye to what is useful and best for him; he is not concerned about the word necessary to designate the form of his exposition. However, Paul says that the name changes when he is about to transfer the **J.6** meaning of the historical sense for showing the dispensation of the two Testaments. After mentioning the two children of Abraham--one born of a slave woman and the other from a free woman--Paul calls his consideration of them allegory [Gal 4.24]. In another place, after having related certain details of a story, he says, "These things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction" [1Cor 10.11]. And again, after using the expression "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain" [1Cor 9.9-10], he added, "God does not care about oxen," but "clearly it has been written for our benefit." Paul calls a mirror and a riddle [1Cor 13.12] that which is understood obscurely.

Yet Paul somewhere calls the shift from the corporeal to the spiritual "a turning to the Lord and the removal of a veil" [2 Cor 3.16]. In all these different expressions and names of contemplation Paul is teaching us an important lesson: we must pass to a spiritual and intelligent investigation of scripture so that considerations of the merely human element might be changed into something perceived by the mind once the more fleshly sense of the words has been shaken off like dust. **J.7** For this reason Paul says, "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" [2Cor 3.6]. If we stay only with the mere facts of the text, the historical narratives [of scripture] do not offer us examples of a good life. For what benefit to virtuous

living can we obtain from the prophet Osee [Os 1.2.], or from Isaiah having intercourse with a prophetess [Is 8.3], unless something **M.760** else lies beyond the mere letter? Or how do the stories regarding David, his terrible act of adultery and murder, pertain to virtuous living. If anyone argues that these stories are reprehensible, then the saying of the Apostle will certainly be true:--"the letter kills"--for its examples of evil conduct, and "the spirit gives life." For the apparent, reprehensible sense is changed into something having a divine meaning.

We know that even the Word himself, who is adored by **J.8** all creation, passed on the divine mysteries when he had assumed the likeness of a man. He reveals to us the meaning of the Law, saying that the two persons whose testimony is true consists of himself and of his Father [Jn 8.14]. The bronze serpent elevated on high which protected the people from the serpent's deadly stings was transformed for us into the dispensation of the Cross [Num 21.8; Jn 3.14]. Christ trained his disciples' minds through sayings veiled and hidden in parables, images, obscure words, and terse sayings in riddles. Sometimes he gave an explanation which removed their obscurity [Mt 13.13]. But if the disciples occasionally did not grasp the intent of his words, Christ rebuked their slowness and lack of understanding. For example, he ordered the disciples to stay away from the leaven of the Pharisees Mt 16.6], yet they were unhappy because their purses had no bread. Christ then upbraided them for failing to **J.9** understand that leaven had symbolized their teaching. Again, when his disciples were preparing a table, Christ responded, " I have food to eat of which you do not know" [Jn 4.32]. When they supposed he was speaking of bodily food which had been brought to him from elsewhere, Christ explained his own words, that the food proper to him is the fulfillment of the Father's salvific will.

We can present many examples from the Gospel where the literal meaning differs from the text's intention. For example, the water he promised to the thirsty by which those who believe became springs of rivers; the bread that comes down from heaven; the temple which is destroyed and rebuilt after three days; the way; the gate; the stone rejected by the builders and fit as the capstone; the two people in one bed; the mill stone; the woman grinding with one taken and the one left behind; the body; the eagles; and the fig tree which becomes tender and puts forth buds. All these and similar examples should serve to remind us of the necessity of searching the **J.10 & M.761** divine words, of reading them, and of tracing in every way possible how something more sublime might be found which leads us to that which is divine and incorporeal instead of the literal sense. Because of this, we believe that the tree from which it was prohibited to eat was not the fig tree as some have maintained, nor any other fruit trees. If the fig was then deadly, neither would it be edible now. At the same time, we have learned from our Lord, "It is not what goes into the mouth which can defile a man" [Mt 15.11]. But we seek another meaning in this statement which is worthy of the lawgiver' s majesty. If we hear that paradise was planted by God and that the tree of life is in the center of paradise, we seek to learn from the One who reveals the hidden mysteries of which plants is the Father both the husbandman and the vine dresser, and how it is possible that there are two trees in the middle of paradise, one of salvation and the other of destruction. For the exact center as in the drawing of a circle has only one point. However, if another center is somehow placed beside or added to that first one, it is necessary that another circle be added for that center so that the former one is no longer in the middle.

J.11 There was only one paradise. How, then, does the text say that each tree is to be considered separately while both are in the middle? And the text, which reveals that all of God's works are exceedingly beautiful, implies that the deadly tree is different from God's [Gen 1.31]. How is this so? Unless a person contemplates the truth through philosophy, what the text says here will be either inconsistent or a fable.

It would take a long time to recount what each of the prophets have uttered. With regard to the last days, Micah says that a mountain will become visible on the peaks of other mountains [Mic 4.1]. He is referring to the mystery of piety which is being revealed for the destruction of the opposing powers. Other examples are as follows: The sublime Isaiah says that a rod will rise up [from Jesse] and a flower from the root, thus revealing the Lord's manifestation in the flesh [Is 11.1]; the mountain swollen with pride of which David speaks, whose meaning becomes clear in the letter of the text [Ps 67 .16]; the ten thousand chariots; the gathering of bulls with the heifers of the nations; the foot washed in blood; **J.12** dogs' tongues and Lebanon of the cedars jumping like a calf. Many such examples could be gathered from other prophecies to teach us the necessity of contemplating the words according to their deeper meaning. If this contemplation is rejected as some would like to do, it seems to me that it would be like offering wheat for human consumption without having ground the corn; or having divided the seeds from the chaff by winnowing; or having cleaned the grain of husks for flour; or having prepared the bread in the proper way. Therefore, just as food not worked over is fit for beasts and not for man, so one could say that the inspired words, when not worked **M.764** over by a more subtle contemplation, are food for irrational beasts rather than for rational men. And not only does this apply to the Old Testament, but also to many of the Gospel's teachings: the winnowing fan which cleanses the threshing floor; the chaff which is removed; the grain which remains on the feet of those winnowing it; the unquenchable fire; the good granary; the tree bearing bad fruit; the threat of the axe which shows its terrible edge to the tree; and stones used as metaphors for men.

J.13 Let what I have just mentioned stand as my defense against those who advise is to look for nothing more in the divine words than their literal meaning. Although Origen laboriously applied himself to the Song of Songs, we too have desired to publish our efforts. Let no one accuse us by referring to the Apostle's words, "Each one shall receive his wages according to his labor" [1Cor 3.8]. To me, however, this treatise on the Song of Songs is not written for display, because out of love for knowledge, some of our associates have reported to us many of the things said in the church. I have taken some and have added others where necessary. I have composed my commentary in the form of homilies following the text of the Song of Songs, insofar as the season and my occupation have allowed me leisure for this due to the days of the fast. We have zealously exerted ourselves so that the people might hear this treatise. If God, who dispenses us life, should grant enough life and a time of peace, perhaps we will pursue the rest of our task, for our investigation has proceeded up to the half-way point of the Song of Songs. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you forever and ever. Amen.

THE FIRST HOMILY

The Song of Songs, 1.1-4

1. The Song of Songs which is Solomon's.
2. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,
for your breasts are better than wine.
3. And the scent of your ointments is better than all spices.
Your name is ointment poured forth.
Therefore have the young maidens loved you.
4. They have drawn you.

We will run after you toward the scent of your ointments.
The king has brought me into his chamber.
Let us rejoice and be glad in you.
Let us love your breasts more than wine.
Righteousness has loved you.

* * *

J.14 Those of you who, according to the advice of St. Paul, **M.764** have stripped off the old man with his deeds and desires as you would a filthy garment and have wrapped yourselves by the purity of your lives in the bright garments of the Lord which he displayed upon the mount of transfiguration; you who have put on the Lord Jesus Christ with his holy robe **J.15** and have been transformed with him into a state which is free **M.765** from passion and more divine, listen to the mysteries of the Song of Songs. Enter the inner chamber of the chaste bridegroom and clothe yourselves with the white garments of pure, chaste thoughts. Let no one bring passionate, fleshly thoughts or a garment of conscience unsuitable for the divine nuptials. Let no one be bound up in his own thoughts or drag the pure words of the bridegroom and the bride down into earthly, irrational passions. Anyone who entertains such shameful illusions should be cast out from the company of those who share the nuptial joys to the place of weeping [Mt 22.10-13]. I issue this warning before entering upon the mystical contemplation of the Song of Songs. Through the words of the Song the soul is escorted to an incorporeal, spiritual, and pure union with God. For God, who “wishes all to be saved and to come to the recognition of the truth” [1Tim 2.4], shows the most perfect and blessed way of salvation here—I mean the way of love. For some there is salvation by fear: we contemplate **J.16** the threat of punishment in hell and so avoid evil. Further, there are those who, because of the hope of the reward held out for a life piously lived, conduct themselves virtuously. They do not possess the good out of love but by the expectation of a recompense. On the other hand, the person who is hastening to spiritual perfection rejects fear. (Such a disposition is servile, and the person with this disposition does not remain with the master out of love. He does not run away out of fear of being scourged.) Rather, the person seeking perfection disdains even rewards: he does not want to give the impression that he prefers the gift to the one who bestows it. He loves “with his whole heart and soul and strength” [Dt 6.5] not any of the things that come from God, but him who is the source of all good things. This, then, is the attitude which he commands to the souls of all who listen to him, for he summons to us to share his own life.

The one who establishes this law is Solomon [3Kg or 1Kg 3.12; 5.9-14]. According to the divine testimony, his wisdom has no measure. It has no comparison with respect to both all who preceded him and all who are to come after him. Nothing escapes his notice. Do not suppose that I mean the same Solomon from Bersabee who offered upon the mountains the sacrifice of a thousand victims 3Kg or 1Kg; 11.6-8], who sinned by following the counsel of a Sidonian woman **J.17** [3Kg or 1Kg 11.1-2]. No, another Solomon [Christ] is signified here: one who is also descended from the seed of David according to the flesh, one whose name means peace, the true king of Israel and builder of God’s temple. This other Solomon comprehends the knowledge of all things. His wisdom is infinite and his very essence is wisdom, truth, as well as every exalted, divine name and thought. [Christ] used Solomon as an instrument and speaks to us through his voice first in Proverbs and then in Ecclesiastes. After these two books he speaks in the philosophy set forth in the Song of Songs and shows us the ascent to perfection in an orderly fashion.

M.768 Not all periods of life according to the flesh are capable of every natural operation nor do our lives advance in the **J.18** same way at different periods. (The infant has no share of adult activities,

nor is an adult taken up in its nurse's arms, but each time of life has its own proper activity.) So too one can see in the soul an analogy to the body's growth where there is a certain order and sequence leading to a life in accord with virtue.

For this reason, Proverbs teaches in one way and Ecclesiastes in another; the philosophy of the Song of Songs transcends both by its loftier teaching. The instruction in Proverbs provides words fit for the person who is still young, adapting its words of admonition to that period of life. "Hear, my son, your father's instruction and reject not your mother's teaching" [Pr 1.8]. You see here that the soul is at a stage of life where it is tender and easily formed. Moreover, it still needs maternal instruction and paternal admonition. In order that the infant may listen more willingly to his parents and be more careful in his lessons, he is promised childish trinkets. Such trinkets are the gold chain shining around **J.19** his neck and the crown entwined with pretty flowers. It is necessary to understand these things fully if the symbol's intent is to point to something better. Thus Proverbs begins the description of wisdom to the child in several different ways and expounds the ineffable beauty so as not to inspire any fear or constraint; rather, it draws the child by yearning and desire to participate in the good. The description of beauty somehow attracts the desire of the young to what is shown, fanning their desire for a participation in beauty.

In order that our affections may be further intensified after having changed our material inclinations to an immaterial state, Solomon adorns the beauty of wisdom with praise. Not only does he present its loveliness with words, but he also states the wealth contained in wisdom, whose Lord will surely dwell with us. The wealth is then seen in the showy adornments of wisdom. The adornment of her right hand is all the ages, since the Word says: "Length of existence and **J.20** years of life are in her right hand" [Pr 3.16] And on her left hand she wears the precious wealth of the virtues together with the splendor of glory; "And on her left hand are wealth and glory" [3.16]. Then Solomon speaks of the fragrance from the bride's mouth which breathes the good odor of righteousness: "From her mouth comes forth righteousness" [3.16].

In place of the natural redness of the bride's lips, he says, law and mercy blossom. In order that beauty might be fully attributed to such a bride, her gait is also praised: "In the **M.769** paths of righteousness she walks" [8.20]. In praising her beauty, Solomon also praises her great size which equals that of a flourishing plant shooting up into full bloom. This plant to which her height is compared, he says, is the tree of life which nourishes those who lay hold of her, a firm and stable column to those who lean upon her. I think that both examples refer to the Lord: He is our life and support. Thus the text reads: "She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her" and for those who lean upon her as upon the Lord she is firm. Strength is included along with the remaining praises, that the praise of wisdom's beauty might be completely filled with all good things. "For God founded the earth by wisdom and prepared the heavens by prudence" [Pr 3.19]. **J.21** All the elements in creation Solomon attributes to the power of wisdom and adorns her with many names, for he means the same thing by wisdom, prudence, sense perception, knowledge, apprehension, and the like.

Solomon next escorts the youth to a special dwelling and exhorts him to gaze at the divine bridal chamber. "Do not let her go, and she will cleave to you. Love her and she will guard you. Secure her and she will exult you. Honor her in order that she may embrace you, that she may give to your head a crown of graces, and may cover you with a crown of delight" [Pr 4.6-9]. The youth now adorned with these nuptial crowns as a bridegroom is exhorted not to depart from wisdom: "Whenever you walk, bring her and let her be with you. Whenever you sleep, let her guard you in order that when you wake she may converse with you" [6.22]. With these and other such exhortations Solomon has inflamed the desire of the one still young according to the inner man, and has shown Wisdom describing herself. In this way

Solomon elicits the love of those listening to him. Besides this, Wisdom says: “I **J.22** love those who love me” [8.17]—for the hope of being loved in return disposes the lover to a more intense desire. Along with these words Solomon added other counsels by clear and easily grasped utterances. He leads the youth to a more perfect state in the final verses of Proverbs where he calls “blessed” the union of love in that section pertaining to the praises of the brave woman. Then Solomon adds the philosophy contained in Ecclesiastes for the person who has been sufficiently introduced by proverbial training to desire virtue. After having reproached in that book men’s attitudes towards external appearances, and after having said that everything unstable is vain and passing (“everything which passes is vanity” [Eccl 11.8]). Solomon elevates above everything grasped by sense the loving movement of our soul towards invisible beauty. Having thus cleansed the heart with respect to external matters, Solomon then initiates the soul into the divine sanctuary **M.772** by means of the Song of Songs. What is described there is a marriage; but what is understood is the union of the human a marriage; but what is the union of the human soul with God.

J.23 Because of this, the son in Proverbs is named a bride, and Wisdom is changed into the role of a bridegroom so that a person might be espoused to God by becoming a pure virgin instead of a bridegroom. By clinging to the Lord he might become one spirit [1Cor 6.17] through a union with what is pure and free from passion and have a pure mind instead of burdened with the flesh’s weight. Since it is Wisdom speaking, love as much as you can with your whole heart and strength [Dt 6.5]; desire as much as you can. I boldly add to these words: “Be passionate about it.” This affection for incorporeal things is beyond reproach and free from lust as wisdom states in Proverbs when she prescribes passionate love wisdom states in Proverbs when she prescribes passionate love (*eros*) for the divine beauty.

But the text now before us gives the same exhortation. It does not merely offer advice regarding love, but through ineffable mysteries it philosophizes and offers an image of the pleasures of life as a preparation for its instruction. The image is one of marriage where the desire for beauty acts as intermediary. The bridegroom does not initiate the desire according to normal human custom, but the virgin anticipates the bridegroom without shame, openly makes her passion **J.24** known and prays that she may enjoy the bridegroom’s kiss.

Those attending the betrothed virgin are the patriarchs, prophets, and givers of the Law. They bring divine gifts to the bride, her wedding gifts, as it were. (Some examples of these gifts are forgiveness of trespasses, forgetfulness of evil deeds, the cleansing of sins, transformation of nature, the exchange of corruptibility for incorruptibility, enjoyment of paradise, the dignity of God’s kingdom, and joy without end.) When the virgin receives all these divine gifts from the noble bearers who bring them through their prophetic teaching, she both confesses her desire and hastens to enjoy the favor of the beauty of the One she so eagerly desires. The virgin’s attendants and associates hear her and spurn her on to an even greater desire. The bridegroom then arrives leading a chorus of his friends and well-wishers. These represent either the ministering spirits by whom men are saved or the holy prophets. Hearing the bride’s voice, they exult and rejoice [Jn 3.29] at the consummation of the pure union by which the soul **J.25** that clings to the Lord becomes one Spirit with Him, as the Apostle says [1Cor 6.17].

I will take up again what I said at the start of this homily (cf. J 14-15 above): let no one who is passionate, fleshly and still smelling of the foul odor of the old man [2Cor 2.16] drag down the significance of the divine thoughts and words to beastly, irrational thoughts. Rather, let each person go out of himself and out of the material world. Let him ascend **M.773** into paradise through detachment, having become like God through purity. Then let him enter into the inner sanctuary of the mysteries revealed in this book (the Song of Songs). If the soul is unprepared to hear this, let it listen to Moses who forbids us to ascend the spiritual mountain before washing the garments of our hearts and before purifying our souls

with the fitting aspersions of our thoughts. As we apply ourselves to this contemplation, we must put aside thoughts of marriage as Moses commanded [Ex 19.15] when he ordered those being initiated to cleanse themselves from **J.26** marriage. We must follow his prescriptions when we are about to approach the spiritual mountain of the knowledge of God: thoughts about women, along with material goods, are left with the life below. If any irrational notion should be seen around this mountain, it is destroyed with firmer thoughts as by stones. Otherwise, we would hardly be able to hear the sound of that trumpet reverberating with a great and awesome sound which is beyond the capacity of those who hear it. This sound comes from the dark obscurity where God is and who burns with fire every material thing upon this mountain.

Now let us enter the Holy of Holies, Song of Songs. In the expression “Holy of Holies” we are taught a certain super-abundance and exaggeration of holiness. Through the title Song of Songs the noble text also promises to teach us the mystery of mysteries. To be sure, there are many songs in the divinely inspired teaching by which we acquire great knowledge about God from David, Isaiah, Moses and many **J.27** others. However, we learn from the title Song of Songs that just as the songs of the saints surpass the wisdom of profane songs, so does the mystery contained here surpass the songs of the saints. Indeed, human understanding left to its own resources could neither discover nor absorb the Song’s mystery. The most acute physical pleasure (I mean erotic passion) is used as a symbol in the exposition of this doctrine on love. It teaches us of the need for the soul to reach out to the divine nature’s invisible beauty and to love it as much as the body is inclined to love what is akin to itself. The soul must transform passion into passionlessness so that when every corporeal affection has been quenched, our mind may seethe with passion for the spirit alone and be warmed by that fire which the Lord came to cast upon the earth [Lk 12.49].

I have said enough about how those who hear these mystical words should have their souls disposed. Now the time has come to begin our interpretation of the divine words of the Song of Songs. First let us consider the significance of the title. **M.776** It is not accidental, I think, that the book is ascribed to **J.28** Solomon. This serves as an indication to readers to expect something great and divine. Solomon’s reputation for wisdom is unexcelled, and everyone is impressed by it. Therefore, the mention of his name at the outset raises the reader’s expectation to find something great and worthy of such a reputation.

In the art of painting different colors combine to represent the subject portrayed. However, the person looking at the image created by the skillful use of colors does not linger over the colors painted on the tablet; he beholds instead only the form which the artist has shown. Thus it is with the present scripture: we should not look at the material of the colors [i.e. the words]; rather, we should consider the image of the king expressed by them in the chaste concepts. For white, yellow, black, red, blue or any other color, are these words in their obvious meanings—mouth, kiss, myrrh, wine, bodily limbs, bed, maidens and so forth. The form constituted by these terms is blessedness, detachment, union with God, alienation from evil and likeness to what is truly beautiful and **J.29** good. These concepts testify that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the boundaries of human wisdom. What could be more paradoxical than to make nature purify itself of its own passions and teach detachment (*apatheia*) in words normally suggesting passion (*pathos*)? Solomon does not speak of the necessity of being outside the flesh’s impulses or of mortifying our bodily limbs on earth, or of cleansing our mouths of talk of passion; rather, he disposes the soul to be attentive to purity through words which seem to indicate the complete opposite, and he indicates a pure meaning through the use of sensuous language.

The text should teach us one thing by its introductory words: those introduced into the hidden

mysteries of this book are no longer men, but they have been transformed in their nature through the Lord's teaching into something more divine. The Word testified to his disciples that they were more than men. He differentiated them from other men when he said to them: "Who do men say that I am" [Mk 8.27]? The **J.30** Song's text readily employs words whose obvious meaning indicates the enjoyment of carnal passion, yet it does not fall into any improper meaning; instead, the Song leads us to the philosophy of divine things by means of chaste concepts. It shows that we are no longer to be men with a nature of flesh and blood; rather, it points to the life we hope for at the resurrection **M.777** of the saints, an angelic life free from all passion.

After the resurrection, the body which has been transformed into incorruptibility will again be joined to the soul. The passions now disturbing us because of the flesh will not be restored with those bodies; rather, we shall become tranquil. No longer will the flesh's prudence dispute with the soul. No longer will there be civil war with the passions set against the mind's law, where the soul is overcome and taken captive by sin. Nature will then be cleansed from all such things, and one spirit will be in both. (I mean both in the flesh and in the spirit), and every corporeal disposition will be banished from human nature. Thus the text of the Song exhorts us, **J.31** even if we now live in the flesh, not to turn to it in our thoughts; rather we should only regard the soul and attribute all manifestations of affection in the text to the surpassing goodness of God as pure, undefiled offerings. For God alone is truly sweet, desirable and worthy of love. The present enjoyment of God is the starting point for a greater share of his goodness, and it increases our desire for him. Thus, in Moses [Ex 33.11] the bride loved the bridegroom. As the virgin says in the Song: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." Moses conversed with God face to face, as scripture testifies Moses conversed with God face to face, as scripture testifies [Dt 34.10], and he thereby acquired a still greater desire **J.32** for these kisses after the theophanies. He sought God as if he had never seen him. So it is with all others in whom the desire for God is deeply embedded: they never cease to desire, but every enjoyment of God they turn into the kindling of a still more intense desire.

Even now the soul united to God never has its fill of enjoyment. The more it enjoys his beauty, the more its desire for him increases. The words of the bridegroom are spirit and life [Jn 5.24], and everyone who clings to the Spirit becomes spirit. He who attaches himself to life passes from death into life as the Lord has said. Thus the virginal soul desires to draw **M.780** near to the fountain of spiritual life. The fountain is the bridegroom's mouth from which the words of eternal life well forth. It fills the mouth drawn to it, just as with the prophet when he drew in the spirit through his mouth [Ps 118.131]. Since it is necessary for the person drawing water from a fountain to apply his mouth to his mouth, and since the Lord himself is a fountain as he says: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink" [Jn 7.37], so the thirsting soul wishes **J.33** to bring its mouth to the mouth that springs up with life and says: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" [1.2]. He who wells up with life for all and wishes all to be saved desires every person to share this kiss, for this kiss purges away all filth.

It seems to me that the Lord was reproaching Simon the Leper when he said: "You gave me no kiss" [Lk 7.45]. He meant by these words that you would have been cleansed of disease if you had drawn purity with your mouth. But in all likelihood Simon was unworthy of love since he had an excess growth of flesh through his illness and remained unmoved in desire for God by reason of his disease. But once the soul has been cleansed and is no longer hindered by the leprosy of the flesh, it looks to the treasure house of all good things. A name for this treasure house is the heart. From it there comes to the breasts the wealth of divine milk by which the soul is nourished and draws grace in proportion to its faith. Therefore the soul exclaims: "Your breasts are better than vine," signifying by the breasts the heart. Nobody will err if he understands by the heart the hidden, secret power of God. One would rightly suppose that the breasts are the activities of God's power for us by which he nourishes each one's life and bestows appropriate

nourishment.

J.34 We are indirectly taught another lesson through the philosophy of this book, namely that perception within us is two-fold—bodily and divine. As the Word says in Proverbs, “You will find perception of God” [Pr 2.5]. A certain analogy exists between the activities of the soul and the sense organs of the body. This we learn from the present text. Wine and milk are distinguished by taste, while the intellectual and apprehending capacity of the soul grasps spiritual realities. A kiss is effected through the sense of touch; the lips of two persons make contact in a kiss. On the other hand, there is a certain sense of touch in the soul which takes hold of the Word and works in an incorporeal, spiritual way. As John says: “Our hands have handled the word of life” [1Jn 1.1]. Similarly, the scent of the divine perfumes is not perceived (by the nose, but by a certain spiritual and immaterial power drawing all the good odor of Christ by an inhalation of the Spirit. Thus, the next part of the virgin’s prayer in the Song’s **J.35** first words says: “Your breasts are better than wine, and the scent of your perfumes is beyond all ointments” [1.1-2].

M.781 What is signified by these words is, in our opinion, neither trivial nor unimportant. Through the comparison of milk from the divine breasts with the enjoyment obtained from wine we learn, I think, that all human wisdom, science, power of observation and comprehension of imagination cannot match the simple nourishment of the divine teaching. Milk, the food of infants, comes from the breasts. On the other hand, wine, with its strength and warming capacity, is enjoyment for the more perfect. However, the perfection of the wisdom of the world is less than the childlike teaching of the divine world. Hence the divine breasts are better than human wine, and the scent of divine perfumes is lovelier than any fragrance.

The meaning seems to me to be as follows: We understand the perfumes as virtues—wisdom, justice, temperance, fortitude, and so forth. If we anoint ourselves with these aromas, each of us, according to our own capacity and choice, has a good odor. Each of us has his respective odor—one has **J.36** wisdom or temperance, another has fortitude or justice, or anything else pertaining to virtue. Another person may have a good odor within himself compounded from all these perfumes. However, all of them together could not compare with that perfect virtue which the heavens contain. As the prophet Habakkuk says: “His virtue covered the heavens” [3.3]. This is God’s absolute wisdom, justice, truth, and all the rest. Therefore, the odor of the heavenly ointments, he says, holds a delight which is incomparable to any aroma known by us.

In what immediately follows the soul-spouse again touches on a more sublime philosophy and shows that the divine power is both utterly transcendent and unable to be contained by human conceptions. The text says: “Your name is ointment poured forth” [1.3]. To me something like the following is poured forth” [1.3]. To me something like the following is signified through this verse: the unlimited [divine] nature cannot be accurately contained by a name; rather, every capacity seem to contain something great and befitting God’s glory, are unable to grasp his reality. But starting from certain traces and sparks, as it were, **J.37** our words aim at the unknown, and from what we can grasp we make conjectures by a kind of analogy about the ungraspable. Whatever name we may adopt to signify the perfume of divinity, it is not the perfume itself which we signify by our expressions; rather, we reveal just the slightest trace of the divine odor by means of our theological terms. As in the case of jars from which perfume has been poured out, the perfume’s own nature is not **M.784** known. But from the slight traces left from the vapors in the jar we get some idea about the perfume that has been emptied out. Hence we learn that the perfume of divinity, whatever it is in its essence, transcends every name and thought. However, the wonders visible in the universe give material for the theological terms by which we call

God wise, powerful, good, holy, blessed, eternal, judge, savior and so forth. All these give some small indication of the divine perfume's **J.38** quality. Creation retains the traces of this divine perfume through its visible wonders as in the example of a perfume jar. "Therefore, the young maidens have loved you and have drawn you" [1.3]. The bridegroom states here the cause of their noble yearning and loving disposition. Who can help but love such a beauty provided that he has an eye capable of reaching out to its loveliness? The beauty grasped is great; but infinitely greater is the beauty of which we get a glimpse from the appearances.

Passion does not touch those who are still infants, for an infant is incapable of passion; neither is it a problem for those in extreme old age. So too with regard to the divine beauty: both the person who is still an infant tossed about by every wind of doctrine and the aged person approaching death are incapable of desire. The invisible beauty does not touch such people, but only the soul which has passed the state of infancy and has attained the flower of spiritual maturity. Such a soul the text calls young [1.3]; it has no spot or wrinkle or the like; it is neither lacking in perception because of infancy nor enfeebled by old age. This soul obeys the greatest and first commandment of the Law-to love that divine beauty with all its heart and strength [Dt 6.5]. The human mind is unable to find any description, example or adequate expression of that beauty.

J.39 Therefore, such maidens have grown through their virtues and at the proper time have entered the bridal chamber of the divine mysteries. Now they love the bridegroom's beauty, and through love they draw him to themselves. For he is a bridegroom who repays the desire of those who love and says in the person of Wisdom "I love those who love me," and "I will give substance to those who love me." (The bridegroom himself is this substance.) "And I will fill their treasuries with good things" [Pr 8.17, 21]. The souls, therefore, draw to themselves a desire for their immortal bridegroom and follow the Lord God, as it is written [Hos 11.10]. The cause of their love is the scent of the perfume to which they eternally run; they stretch out to what is in front, forgetting what is behind. "We shall run after you toward the scent of your perfumes" [1.4].

Those who are not yet perfect in virtue and who are still young promise to run towards the goal which the scent of **M.785** perfumes represents, for they say, "We shall run toward the scent of your perfumes." But the more perfect soul, having stretched forward more earnestly, has already obtained the goal for which the course is undertaken, and it is worthy of **J.40** the treasures in the storehouse, for she says, "The king has brought me into his chamber" [1.4]. She desired to touch the good with the very tip of her lips and touched the beauty only as much as the power of her prayer could reach. (She prayed [1.2] to become worthy of a kiss through the illumination of the Word.) Now, through what she has already achieved, she has passed to a more interior part of the mysteries with her mind, and she cries out that her passage has brought her only to the vestibule of goodness. By the first fruits of the Spirit of which she was made worthy by the kiss of her spouse she says that she searches the depths of God within the innermost says that she searches the depths of God within the innermost unseen and hears words not to be spoken [2Cor 12.4].

The discourse now reveals an ecclesiastical concern, for those who were first instructed by grace and who became eye witnesses of the Word did not keep the good just for themselves. They passed on the same grace to those who came after them. Because of this the maidens say to the bride who was the first to be filled with good things by coming face to face with the Word and who was made worthy of the hidden **J.41** mysteries: "Let us rejoice and be glad in you" [1.4], for your joy is our common rejoicing. Because you love the Word's breasts more than wine, we shall imitate you and love your breasts more than human wine, for through them you feed those who are infants in Christ.

To make the intention of the passage even clearer, consider the following: John, who reclined upon the Lord's chest, loved the Word's breasts [Jn 13.25]; and having placed his heart like a sponge, as it were, beside the fountain of life, he was filled by an ineffable transmission of the mysteries hidden in the heart of the Lord. John offers us the teat filled by the Word and fills us with the good things he got from the fountain of goodness, loudly proclaiming the Word who exists eternally. Thus we may now rightly say, "We will love your breasts more than wine," if we have become like the maidens and are no longer infants in mind, yoked to an infantile kind of vanity, and if we are not soiled through sin in **J.42** an old age unto death. Therefore, let us love the flow of your teaching, for "righteousness has loved you" [1.4]. This is the disciple whom Jesus loved, and Jesus is righteousness. The text applies a more beautiful and fitting name to the Lord than the prophet David did, for David says that "The Lord is **M.788** righteous" [Ps 91.15]. This text, however, calls him righteousness. Whatever is crooked he makes straight. May all our crookedness he made straight and all our roughness, smooth [Is 40.4] by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

THE SECOND HOMILY

The Song of Songs, 1.5-8

I am black and beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains (skins) of Solomon.

Do not look at me because I have become blackened,
because the sun has looked unfavorably at me.
The sons of my mother have fought in me, they have
placed me as a guard in the vineyards;
I have not guarded my own vineyard.

Tell me, you whom my soul has loved,
where do you pasture, where do you cause
your flocks to lie down at midday,
lest I become as one who is veiled by the
flocks of your companions?

If you do not know yourself, beautiful among women,
go in the footsteps of the flocks,
and feed the kids by the shepherds' tents.

* * *

J.43 & M.788 The visible exterior of the sacred tent of witness was not equal in honor to the beauty hidden within. The outer curtains were made from woven linen and the hair of goatskins [Ex 26.7], and wrappings of a reddish hue completed the tent's external decoration. Beyond this there was nothing precious to be seen on the tent's exterior. Inside, however, the entire tent of witness shone with gold, silver, and precious stones [Heb 9.2-5]. There were pillars, pedestals, capitals, a censer, **J.44** an altar, a lamp, all ark, lampstands, the mercy seat, basins and curtains at the entrance. The beautiful curtains were made from every color of richly colored dye: a golden thread elegantly woven together by skilled

craftsmanship with hyacinth, purple, flax, and scarlet, and mixed with every else--meant to make the fabric gleam like a rainbow's bands.

Why I start from this point (the tent of testimony) will become fully clear to you from what follows. Once again the Song of Songs is presented to us as a guide for every type of philosophy and knowledge of God. The Song of Songs is the true tent of witness whose veils, skins, and coverings of the outer court are terms and expressions of love. They manifest the attitude with regard to the desired object in both the description of beauty and mention of bodily members of those things which appear on the outside and of those things which lie hidden by a garment's covering.

However, the elements inside form a kind of brilliant lampstand and are full of mysteries. There is the censer's good odor, expiation from sins, that solid gold altar of piety, the beauty of veils elegantly woven from the good colors of virtues, the firm pillars of reason, the unshakable pedestals of doctrine, the gracefulness of capitals which refer to the grace **J.45** in the directing part of the soul, the basins of the soul, and whatever else that looks to the heavenly, incorporeal way of **M.789** life. Such things the Law holds out as an example through mysterious symbols. All these things can be found in the literal meaning if we only prepare ourselves through diligence to enter the Holy of Holies after having been purified from the filth of shameful thoughts by the bath of the Word. Otherwise, we will be excluded from seeing the marvels within the tent because we have touched corrupt thoughts contrary to the Law's command, or have entertained unclean thoughts [1Pet 3.21]. For the law of the Spirit forbids the entry of such things unless the person who has entertained some dead, abominable thought washes the garment of his conscience according to Moses' prescription [Num 19.11].

The consequence of what was just examined leads us to contemplate the bride's words to her maidens: "I am black and beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of skins] of Solomon" [1.5]. A teacher should **J.46** correctly begin his presentation of the good with an explanation for his pupils. Such souls who readily understand these symbols figuratively speak of wine. They prefer to see it as grace flowing from the bridegroom's spiritual breasts. Thus they say, "We will love your breasts more than wine, because righteousness has loved you." The bride further speaks to her pupils of an amazing fact about herself in order that we might learn of the bridegroom's immense love for mankind who added beauty to the beloved bride] through such love. "Do not marvel," she says, "that righteousness has loved me." Although I have become dark through sin and have dwelt in gloom by my deeds, the bridegroom made me beautiful through his love, having exchanged his very own beauty for my disgrace [Is 53.2-3; Phil 2.7]. After taking the filth of my sins upon himself, he allowed me to share his own purity, and filled me with his beauty. He who first made me lovely from my own repulsiveness, has showed his love for me.

After these words, the bride exhorts the maidens to be beautiful. She shows her own beauty in the same way as Paul who says "Be as I am, and I as you" [1Cor 7.7]. Also, "Be **J.47** imitators of me as I am of Christ" [1Cor 4.16]. Because of this the bride does not let the souls entrusted to her charge despair of becoming beautiful when they look back to their former way of life; rather they learn by following the bride's example that the present, if it is blameless, is a veil of their former way of life [Is 65.17; 2Cor 5.17]. The bride says, although the beauty given to me by being loved by righteousness now shines forth, I still realize that in the beginning I was not radiant but black. My former life has created this dark, shadowy appearance. Although I am black, I am now this beautiful form, for the image of darkness has been transformed into beauty. And you, daughters of Jerusalem, look to your mother, the Jerusalem above. If you had once been the "tents of Kedar" because the ruler of the powers of **M.792** darkness dwelt in you (the word 'Kedar' signifies darkness), you will become the "curtains of Solomon," that is, you will

become the king' temple [1Cor 3.16] with King Solomon dwelling in you.

J.48 Solomon, who is named after peace, is peaceful. The tent [skins] of Solomon partly signifies the entire covering of the royal tent. I think that the great Paul [5.8] is fond of such interpretations in his letter to the Romans where he recommends to us the love of God. Although we were darkened through sin, God made us bright and loving through his resplendent grace. When everything is enshrouded by the prevailing gloom of night, even if things happen to be light by nature, with the coming of light, the comparison to darkness does not apply to things previously obscured by gloom. The soul is thus led over from error to the truth, and the dark form of its life is changed to resplendent grace. Paul, the bride of Christ, had become radiant from darkness. He says to Timothy [1Tm 1.13], as the bride to her maidens, that he was made worthy to become beautiful, for he was formerly a blasphemer, **J.49** persecutor, insolent and black in color. Paul also says that Christ entered the world to enlighten those who were dark. He did not call the just to himself but summoned sinners to repentance whom he made to shine as luminaries [Phil 2.15] by the bath of regeneration which washed away their dark form. David looked to the city above and wondrously beheld the spectacle [Ps 86.5ff.] of Babylon dwelling in the city of God, of which glorious things are said; Raab the prostitute is mentioned; the foreign tribes, Tyre, and Ethiopia are also in (the heavenly Jerusalem). No longer can anyone reproach the desolation of this city' s inhabitants, saying "Never shall anyone say to Zion, 'Was a man born in her'" [Ps 86.5]. Babylonians become inhabitants of Jerusalem, the prostitute becomes a virgin, the Ethiopians become light in color, and Tyre becomes the city above. Thus the bride eagerly encourages the daughters of Jerusalem, recommending to them the bridegroom's goodness because if he receives a blackened soul, he restores its beauty by fellowship with **J.50** himself. If anyone is a "tent of Kedar," he becomes a dwelling of light for the true Solomon, that is, the king of peace dwelling in him. Therefore, the text says, "I am black and beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem". All of you who look at me may become "skins of Solomon," even if you were "tents of Kedar."

Then the text adds further words for strengthening the minds of its pupils. The cause of darkness is not ascribed to the Creator, but its origin is attributed to the free will of each person. "Do not look at me because I am black: I have not **M.793** been such from the beginning," for neither was it likely that the bride fashioned by God's hands has been covered by a shadowy, dark form. "Therefore I was not dark," says the bride, " but I became this way. I have become dark not by nature, but shame was brought upon me because the sun changed my appearance from radiance to darkness: 'for the sun has looked upon me.' "

What can we learn from this ? The Lord says to the crowds **J.51** in the parable [Mt 13.3-7] that he who sows the word not only sows in a good heart but in one which is stony and overgrown with thorns; even if such a heart lies beside the road and is trampled upon, the Lord casts the seeds of the word to all out of love to mankind. In explaining the property of each soul, Christ says that the same thing occurs in a stony soul, namely, the seed is not deeply rooted; however, by a quick blossoming, it immediately promises the corn, but the more intense heat of the sun warms the seed in the ground and dries it up because no moisture is in its roots. The sun represents temptation. Therefore we learn the following from the Master: human nature was an image of the true light, far removed from any darkness; it gleamed by imitation of the archetype's beauty [Gen 1.27]. Temptation, however, which cast down flaming heat through deception, struck down the first tender shoot lacking roots. Before any good state is achieved, and before a place is given to the roots in the depths of the earth by the farmer's care, disobedience immediately dries up the green shoot. Temptation has made it black by **J.52** the burning it. If, however, the attack of temptation is called the sun, let no one hearing this be dismayed, since the divinely inspired scriptures teach this in many places.

The second song of ascents [Ps 120.2] contains a blessing for the person whose help is from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and Earth: he will not be burned by the sun during the day (vs. 6). And the prophet Isaiah, predicting the establishment of the Church, describes it as a certain procession [Is 60.4; 66.12]. He brightens the story by saying that daughters are borne upon shoulders, children are carried in covered chariots and burning heat is warded off by parasols. Through these symbols Isaiah describes a life lived in virtue. He demonstrates by a youthful age the newly born and guileless; by umbrellas, however, Isaiah scribes relief from the heat which is appropriate to souls due to their self-control and purity. We learn by these examples that the soul betrothed to God must be borne upon shoulders- not trodden upon by the flesh, it is seated upon the body's mass. When hearing the term "covered chariot" (*lampine*), we learn of **J.53** the illuminating (*eklamptiken*) grace of enlightenment by which we become children. No longer setting foot upon the earth, we are carried away to the life of heaven. Once the heat has been extinguished by the umbrellas of virtues, our **M.796** life becomes shaded and dew-like. When the blazing heat of the sun is not shut off by the Spirit's cloud, the Lord spreads out a shadow for a shelter (Is. 4.5-6). The sun hums the bright surface of the body by the assault of temptations and blackens its form in ugliness.

The Song of Songs then speaks about our transformation from a good color to blackness: "The sons of my mother have fought in me; they have placed me as a guard in the vineyards. I have not guarded my own vineyard" (1.6). Let me caution the reader at this point not to take these words very precisely, but he should try to understand the symbolism. If there is something not completely transmitted from the train of thought in this verse, let it be imputed to the weakness of those who have translated the Hebrew tongue into Greek [cf. the Prologue of Sirach]. Persons who carefully study the Hebrew language **J.54** do not have this difficulty. The grammatical construction of our [Greek] tongue does not compare with Hebrew's elegance, but it causes problems for those who follow the superficial value of the literal sense. This is the sense of the words before us insofar as we have understood their meaning: man did not lack at the beginning anything of the divine bounty; his task was only to protect the good things received from God, not to acquire them. However, the plotting of dangerous enemies has made man naked, for he did not guard the portion given him in his nature by God.

The transmission of these words is expressed obscurely as follows: "The sons of my mother have fought in me; they have placed me as a guard in the vineyards. I have not kept my own vineyard." In these few words the text teaches us much. The first thing which St. Paul declares is that all beings come from God, and one God is the Father from whom **J.55** all things are [1Cor 8.6]. Nothing that exists has being except through and from him. ("All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made" [1Jn 1.3]. Since God made all things, they are "very good" [Gen 1.31], for he made all things in wisdom.) God gave to rational nature the grace of free will and bestowed on man the power to find what he wants that the good might be present in our lives, not coerced and involuntary but the result of free choice. The movement of our will freely leads us to apparent realities. In the nature of things is found someone who misused this free will, and according to the Apostle's words, it has become an inventor of wicked deeds [Rom 1.30]. He who is from God is our brother, but he who freely rejects participation in the good introduces evil. Having become a "father of lies" [Jn 8.44], he arranged himself in battle order against everyone who chooses the good. Therefore, since this fall from good was the beginning of evil for the rest of men (it already **M.797** happened to the nature of man), the one who was once black **J.56** but is now beautiful rightly attributes the cause of this dark appearance to the 'sons of their mother.'" We are taught here that all things have, as it were, one mother, the cause of their existence. Thus whatever is perceived in existence is related to everything else. Free choice divides human nature into friendship and hostility, for those who have abandoned a good attitude give substance to evil by departing from the good (evil has

no substance: it is separate from the good). These persons hasten to associate with others in a partnership of evil by using the plural form, "sons," the bride shows the many ways of evil). The "sons of my mother" have made war in me not by outward attacks, but by making the soul **J.57** herself a battleground of the war within. This war is in each person as the divine Apostle says: "I see in my members another law at war with the Law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members" [Rom 7 .23]. "Furthermore," says the bride, "this civil war was made by my brothers, and I have been darkened by the enemies of my salvation; I have been overcome by enemies and have not guarded my own vineyard."

The vineyard must be understood as paradise, which man was ordered to guard. Negligence in guarding it cast him out of paradise and made him a dweller at the sun's setting rather than at its rising. Because of this, the sun's rising appears in its setting. "Sing to the Lord who has ridden upon the sun's setting" [Ps 67.4]," in order that when light shines in the darkness, it may be transformed into rays of light, and the darkened bride may become beautiful again. The incoherence of the literal text may be thus reconciled with the true meaning: "They have placed me as a guard in the vineyards," which is the same as saying "They have placed Jerusalem as a **J.58** storehouse for fruits" [Ps 78.1]. From the obvious sense of this text, God, not the sons, made the bride a guardian of the divine vineyard. The sons only fought in the bride, placed her as a tent in the vineyards, and made her a storehouse for fruit in a cucumber bed [Is 1.8]. Deprived of the guarded fruit through disobedience, she became a pitiful sight since the thing guarded in her lacked existence. Because God put man to work and to guard paradise [Gen 2.15], the bride said, "When God brought my soul into life (for life was enjoyed in paradise where God placed man to guard and protect it), enemies changed me from guarding paradise into caring for their vineyard whose clusters yield bitterness and whose bunches yield wrath."

M.800 Such was the vineyard of Sodom. Such a shoot was Gomorrah which was also condemned; through them the deadly wrath of serpents was poured forth in Sodom's evil winepresses [Jol 3.14]. Even to the present day there are many guardians, that is, persons who zealously watch over their own **J.59** passions, fearing, as it were, that they do not lose them. Observe the evil guard of idolatry exercised in impiety and greediness: persons keep guard over such evils, thinking it a loss to be deprived of iniquity. In other cases one can likewise observe those who have taken pleasure in passion or vanity or anything similar. They were surrounded with all kinds of guards for these evils and saw an advantage in their souls never being clean from passions. Therefore, the bride expresses her lament: "I have become blackened, since in guarding and caring for the darnel of the enemy [Mt 13.25] and their evil shoots, 'I have not guarded my own vineyard.' "

Oh, what sorrow the bride excites in those who listen with feeling: "I have not kept my own vineyard!" The voice is rightly a lament, making the prophets groan in sympathy. How has the faithful city of Zion, full of judgment, become a harlot? How was daughter Zion left as a tent in the vineyard? How was the city, once filled with people been abandoned? How was the city which held sway in its surrounding areas become subject to tribute? How has gold **J.60** grown dim and fine silver changed [Lam 4.1]? How has she become black, she who had first shone with true light? "All these things have happened to me," the bride says, "because I have not kept my own vineyard."

Immortality is the vineyard, a state free from passion, likeness to God, and estrangement from evil. The fruit of this vineyard is purity. This is the radiant, ripe cluster of grapes which warms its form and sweetens the soul's senses in chastity. The vine's tendril is union and kinship with eternal life. The growing shoots are the heavenly virtues rising up to the height of the angels. The leaves blossoming and softly moving on the branches by the gentle breeze form the many-faceted ornament of divine virtues

blossoming together with the Spirit. The bride says that "although I possessed all these and radiated in their fruition, I became black: 'I did not keep my vineyard;' having driven out purity, I put on a gloomy form. This skin is a tunic or dark appearance [Gen 3.21]. But righteousness has loved me. I take up my good fortune and have become beautiful and luminous. I will not lose my beauty again, having failed through ignorance to keep my guard steadfastly."

J.61 Because of her failure to keep her vineyard, the bride has ceased speaking with the young maidens. She calls upon her spouse through prayer and makes known to her beloved her heart's thoughts. What does she say? "Tell me, you whom **M.801** my soul has loved, where do you pasture, where do you cause your flocks to rest at noon, lest I become as one who is veiled by the flocks of your companions" [1.7]? "Where do you feed, good Shepherd, you who take the entire flock upon your shoulders? For there is one sheep which you have taken upon your shoulders, our human nature. Show me the verdant place. Make known to me the waters of rest [Ps 22.2]. Lead me to the nourishing grass. Call me by name [Jn 10.16] that I may hear your voice, I who am your sheep. Give me eternal life through your voice. "Tell me, you whom my soul has loved ."

"I call you like this since your name is above every other name [Phil 2.9]. It is ineffable and not contained by any intelligent nature. Therefore, your name reveals your goodness, the relationship of my soul towards you. How can I not love you who have loved me so much? Even though I am black, you laid down your life for your sheep [Jn 15.13], you their shepherd. No greater love than this can be comprehended, for **J.62** you exchanged your life for my salvation. Teach me then where you feed. By finding the pasture of your salvation, I will be filled with the food of heaven; he who does not eat it cannot enter eternal life. And running to you, the fountain, I will drink from the divine stream which you cause to spring up for those thirsting after you. Water pours out from your side and the spear has opened that veil [Jn 19.34]. The person tasting it will become a spring welling up into eternal life [Jn 4.14]. For if you shepherd me, you will make me lie down at midday when I will rest peacefully in the shadowless light, for midday has no shadow when the sun shines directly overhead. In this midday light you will cause to lie down all those fed by you when you will take your children with you into your bed [Lk 11.7]."

No one can be worthy of the midday rest unless he has become a son of the light and of the day [1Th 5.5]. He who has separated himself from the darkness of evening and from the dawn, that is, where evil both begins and ends, will lie down at midday by the sun of righteousness [Mal 4.2]. "Make known to me," the bride says, "where I must lie down; show me the place of midday's rest, lest when straying from your benign **J.63** guiding hand through ignorance, I be herded with other flocks of your sheep." The bride speaks these words out of solicitousness over her God-given beauty. She struggles to learn and to think how her loveliness can remain forever. But she is still not yet deemed worthy of the bridegroom's voice because God foresees something even better in store for her, namely that the prelude of her enjoyment might flare up her desire into something stronger. Thus her desire may intensify her gladness.

But the bridegroom's friends speak to his bride, advising her about the eternity of her future good. Their advice is veiled in obscurity and expressed as follows: "If you do not know yourself, beautiful among women, go in the footsteps of the **M.804** flocks, and feed the kids by the shepherds' tents" [1.8]. The intention of these words is clear from what we have closely examined above. However, the text's order is unclear. What, then, is the tent's meaning? The best safeguard for knowledge is not to be ignorant of oneself. Each person must know himself as he is and distinguish himself from all not belonging to him so that he may not be unconsciously protecting something foreign to himself. This happens to persons heedless of watching over themselves. They see strength, beauty, glory, power, the advantage of wealth,

conceit, massiveness, a large body, elegance of form, or anything that may pertain to themselves. **J.64** Such persons are careless guards because they are attracted by the wrong things; they leave unguarded what is proper to themselves. How can anyone watch over what he does not know? Therefore, the safest guard for the good in us is not to be ignorant of ourselves; each person should know who he is and should accurately distinguish himself from that which is accidental that he may not be attracted to something else instead. He who esteems life in this world and judges its values as worth protecting does not know how to discern what is his own from what is alien to himself. Nothing transitory belongs to us. How can anyone seize what is passing and impermanent? Since only one thing has an intelligible, immaterial nature, the material world continuously passes away by a kind of flux and movement. The person who separates himself from what endures will be borne away by instability; He who separates himself from stability is necessarily caught in instability, and he who from stability is necessarily caught in instability, and he who **J.65** being frustrated: he leaves stability behind, yet he cannot hold onto instability.

Therefore, the bridegroom's friends give this advice: "If you do not know yourself, beautiful one among women, go in the footsteps of the flocks, and feed your kids by the in the footsteps of the flocks, and feed your kids by the shepherds' tents." What does this mean? The person ignorant whom Christ has rejected at His left hand [Mt 25.33]. Thus the good shepherd places the sheep at his right: He separates the goats from the better herd and places them on the left. We thus learn from the bridegroom's friends that we must be attentive to the very nature of things and not miss the truth by erring steps.

This point needs closer examination. Many people do not judge themselves from the nature of reality; rather, they consider the way men lived who preceded them and lack sound judgment about reality; they do not have prudent reason but irrational habits while they like to pass judgment on the good. The result is that they force themselves into power, lordship, and notoriety in this world. They make a lot about material self-pretensions while it is unclear where these things will get **J.66** them after this life. Human custom is not safe assurance for the future, for its end often leads us to the goats, not to the flocks of sheep.

M.805 The Gospel gives clear insight on this matter of sheep. The person considering what belongs to human nature (that is, reason) will disdain human custom as irrational nor choose as good that which is disadvantageous for his soul. Therefore, it is not helpful to consider the footprints of cattle whose traces in this earthly existence signify the lives of those who have preceded us. For our choice made from visible things is unclear until we depart from this life: there we shall know whom we have followed. The person who follows in the steps of those who preceded him and takes the passing customs of this world as his guide and does not distinguish good from evil on the basis of actual reality, often errs. In the day of judgment he becomes a goat instead of a sheep. Therefore, we must listen to the bride's friends: "You, O fair soul, although you were once black, if you wish that your beautiful **J.67** form abides forever, do not wander in the footsteps of those who have preceded you in this life. For you do not know if the path seen belongs to the goats whom you follow. You cannot see those who have worn down the path with their footprints. Once you have passed out of this life and have slipped into the folds of death, you must be careful lest you are placed in the flocks whose footsteps you have ignorantly followed through life."

"If you know not yourself, beautiful one among women, go in the footsteps of the flocks, and feed the kids by the shepherds' tents." Another version of this text will be easier to understand where the words' order is not unrelated: "If you know not yourself, fair one among women, you have gone forth and followed after the footsteps of the flocks, and you feed your kids before the shepherds' tents." Here the meaning exactly agrees with the interpretation of the text previously explained. In order that you do not

suffer **J.68** misfortune, watch over yourself as the text says. For this is the surest way to protect your own good; realize how much more than the rest of creation you are honored by the Creator. He did not make the heavens in his image, nor the moon, sun, the stars' beauty nor anything else you see in creation. You alone are made in the likeness of that nature which surpasses all understanding, the image of incorruptible beauty, the impression of true divinity, receptacle of blessed life, seal of true light. You wilt become what he is by looking at him. By imitating him who shines within you [2Cor 4.6], his gleam is reflected by your purity.

Nothing in creation can compare to your greatness. All of heaven is contained in the grasp of God's hand, and the earth and sea fit in the palm of his hand. Although he holds all creation in his palm, you can wholly contain him. God dwells in you, penetrates you, and is not confined in you. He **M.808** says "I will dwell in them, and walk with them" [2Cor 6.16]. If you consider this, you will not let your eye rest on any earthly thing, nor will you consider heaven as marvelous. How can **J.69** you admire the heavens, O man, seeing that you are more enduring? They pass away [Mt 24.35], but you remain for eternity with him who always exists.

Marvel not at the earth's breadth nor the ocean stretching out to infinity. You have been appointed over them as a driver of a pair of horses with these elements obedient and subject to your will. The earth tends to your needs, and the sea as to your will. The earth tends to your needs, and the sea as not yourself, beautiful one among women," you will look with disdain on the entire universe. Constantly looking to the spiritual good, you will disregard the wandering footprints of this life. Therefore, always watch over yourself, and do not be deceived by the flock of goats. Then you will not be singled out as a goat instead of a sheep in the time of judgment or excluded from the right hand of the throne. Instead, you will hear that sweet voice which says to the wool-bearing and meek sheep, "Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the meek sheep, " Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the [Mt 25.34]. May we be worthy of this kingdom in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

THE THIRD HOMILY

The Song of Songs, 1.9-14

9. I have compared you, my love,
to my cavalry facing the chariots of Pharaoh.
10. Why are you cheeks beautiful
as those of a turtledove,
your neck as small necklaces?
11. We will make for you figures of gold
with studs of silver.
12. While the king was on his couch,
my nard gave forth its scent.
13. My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh;
he shall lie between my breasts.

14. My beloved is to me a cluster of cypress
in the vineyards of En-Gadi.

* * *

J.70 & M.808 What we have considered in the opening verses of the Song of Songs may be compared to the sun's beams at dawn just after night has passed. They are not the pure light but a prelude to the light. These beams signify for us the rising of the true light, but they are not the sun's rays which clearly shine forth. In the Song's opening words the bride, the bridegroom's friends, and the maidens speak. But now the voice of the bridegroom himself rises like the sun, and by the **J.71** brilliance of its beams it renders invisible the light of the stars and the breaking dawn. This signifies cleansing and purification by which souls are purified and prepared to receive God. The present text of the Song, however, is a participation in the divinity itself since God's own Word and great power enables a reader to share this Word. This is similar to Israel **M.809** at Mt. Sinai which was prepared during two days of purgation [Ex 19.10] and became worthy of a theophany at the dawn of a third day. No longer occupied with washing garments, Israel received God himself for whose sake the people washed off their own filth by ablutions. Thus the interpretation of the Song's prologue according to the two preceding days had the benefit of washing and purifying from preceding days had the benefit of washing and purifying from the flesh's mire our understanding of its words.

God the Word will appear to the purified (soul) today, the third day, which follows the first and second day. He makes his presence known not in darkness, the whirlwind, the sound of the trumpet **J.72** or in terrible fire which burns all around the mountain from the base to its peak, but he changed that earlier fearful appearance to one of conjugal joy which is both sweet and accessible. When the bride asked to learn the place of rest where the Good Shepherd passes his time so that she might no longer suffer anything unwillingly through ignorance, the bridegroom's friends then explained the sure norm of truth: the soul must watch over herself and know herself (It is said that ignorance of oneself is the beginning and consequence of never having known anything of the things which one ought to know. How could anyone obtain knowledge while he is ignorant of himself?). Once the governing part of the soul has been cleansed, the Word rises like the sun for her who desires him and exhorts her to greater perfection by receiving what is already present, for praise of **J.73** deeds rightly done instills a keener desire for the Good.

What, therefore, does the true Word say to the virgin? He says: "I have compared you, my beloved, to my cavalry facing the chariots of Pharaoh" [1.9]. Since it is not possible to interpret these words according to the literal sense, we must carefully examine the text before us. From the Exodus narrative [Ex 14.16-29] we learn of another power set in opposition to Pharaoh's cavalry: the cloud, staff, violent wind, the sea divided into two, the depths turned into land dry as the dust, the waves forming a wall, the abyss changed into dry land in the midst of the walls of water. By all these, salvation came for the entire host of Israelites while Pharaoh's cavalry with its horses and chariots was covered by the waves. Since no cavalry force was set in opposition to the Egyptian army, it is not easy to know to what cavalry against the Egyptian chariots the bride is now compared. For "to my cavalry" he says, "who won victory against the chariots of Pharaoh, cannot be defeated in a naval battle unless a naval power sinks its force; neither would there be defeat in a cavalry **J.74** engagement unless some kind of equestrian force was set up in opposition to the Egyptians. Since, then, the cavalry was the **M.812** strongest unit of the Egyptian army, the text calls "cavalry" the force invisibly led against it by which the Egyptians were defeated. For they too perceived the Lord fighting against them and cried out to one another, "The Lord makes war on

the Egyptians," and "Let us flee from before the face of the Lord." It is clear that the true commander armed his own forces in a way appropriate to the enemy force. Therefore an invisible power destroyed the Egyptian through the miracles in the sea, and this power is named "cavalry" by the text. We assume this cavalry was the angelic host of which the prophet says "You mounted your horses, and your cavalry is salvation" [Hab 3.8]. David also mentions a chariot of God saying "The chariots of God are ten thousand fold" [Ps 67.17] to which are yoked the ten thousands of the upright. Further, the power which took up Elijah and removed him from the earth to the ethereal region is named a horse by Scripture [2Kg 2.11]. The text calls the prophet the chariot of Israel **J.75** and its horseman. Also, Zachariah the prophet called "horsemen" those who went around the whole world and saw that it is at peace. They spoke to the man standing in the "midst of the two mountains" [Zach 1.10-11]. Thus the one who possesses the universe has a "cavalry" which at one time lifts up the prophet, and at another time it establishes the inhabited world while at another time it is yoked to a chariot. At another time the cavalry receives God mounted upon it for man's salvation, and at another it destroys the Egyptian army. Therefore there are a great number of different ways in which the divine cavalry works. The cavalry which drew the soul to God through the "course of virtue" is compared to the one which destroyed the Egyptian power. For thus the Word says to his bride, "I have compared you, my love, to my cavalry facing the chariots of Pharaoh."

The Song contains many praises, and the comparison to that cavalry is, as it were, a catalogue of praises. The following elements are recalled of Israel during its sojourn among the Egyptians: servitude, chaff, clay, bricks, every occupation related to the soil, those who demanded a daily quota of bricks, the changing of water into blood, light becoming **J.76** dark, frogs which crept into houses, the burning dust which caused swelling blisters, every type of misfortune such as the locust, fleas, rain, hail and the calamity which befell the first born. All these and similar examples of the way in which salvation comes for the Israelites are the basis of praise for the soul joined to God. The soul would not have been compared to that power which destroyed the wicked Egyptians and freed Israel from evil tyranny unless all these events had succeeded, both those which destroyed Egypt and those which prepared the journey to God for the people led to the land of promise from the slimy mud of Egypt.

M.813 Since, as the divine apostle says [1Cor 10.11], everything was written for our instruction, the Word gives us counsel through his words addressed to the bride, namely, that we must also receive the Word mounted upon us as upon a horse to conquer the Egyptian cavalry with their chariots and mounts, to drown their whole evil power in the water and to become like that power leaving behind in the water the opposing army much like a stain.

J.77 In order that we may better comprehend the Song's words, consider this. A person cannot be compared to the cavalry through which the Egyptian chariots were sunk in the deep unless he has been liberated from servitude to the enemy through the mystical waters. He must leave behind every thought of Egypt, every evil and sin in the water. He must emerge cleansed, bringing to his new life no trace of the Egyptian conscience. For the person who has been thoroughly cleansed of all Egyptian plagues--blood, frogs, boils, darkness, locusts, fleas, hail, fire from the sky, and the other afflictions which the narrative relates--is worthy of being compared to that power on which the Word is mounted. We are not entirely ignorant of what is signified by the plagues such as the blood, the odor of frogs, the changing of light into darkness and so forth. Who is not ignorant of that life which turns into blood? It was previously water fit for drinking and has now been polluted. Also who does not know the means by which the foul stench of frogs is propagated in one's own house, or how a luminous life is changed into one fond of night and its shadows? Because of such a wicked life, Gehenna's furnace makes the wicked boils of damnation seethe. Each one of the evils which befell the Egyptians can easily be transformed into something instructive and a means of restraint formed into something instructive and a means of restraint **J.78** long time on matters

on which we all agree. Once we have overcome such things as these and have drawn near to God, we too will surely hear the words "To my cavalry facing the we too will surely hear the words "To my cavalry facing the chariots of Pharaoh I have compared you, my beloved."

Perhaps this comparison to cavalry-horses distresses persons who have led a temperate and disciplined life. Many prophets forbid us to compare ourselves to horses as when Jeremiah uses horses for a symbol of adulterous frenzy: "They became as adulterous horses: each one neighed after his neighbor's wife" [Jer 5.8]. Likewise, the great David said it was a terrible thing to be like a horse and mule [Ps 31.9], and he exhorts us to restrain the jaws of such animals with bridle and bit. For this reason the author of the Song takes a mitigating tone in the next verse, saying in effect, "Even if you are a horse, your jaws do not need bridle and hit for constraint. Your cheeks are made beautiful by the purity of **M.816** turtledoves. For he says: "Why are your cheeks beautiful, **J.79** like those of a beautiful turtledove?" Persons endowed with keen observation claim that this bird remains alone if it is separated from its mate and never takes another as if chastity were naturally exercised in its life. For this reason the turtledove was included by the Word in his enigmatic praise. In place of a bridle for the jaw of the divine horse, we have cheeks compared to a dove. They signify that a life of purity befits such a horse. The Word admiringly says to his spouse: "Why are your cheeks beautiful, like those of a dove?"

He also adds another praise by making a comparison. "Your neck is as small necklaces." After using figurative language pertaining to horses, the bridegroom intends these words as praise for his bride. He praises her neck which is curved as praise for his bride. He praises her neck which is curved horses. The mention of small necklace indicates a circle whose form upon the neck makes the young horses more beautiful to behold. The word "chain" (*hormos*), on the other hand, properly refers to places near the seashore where the shore is bent inward in a crescent shape. It receives the sea into its bosom and affords a resting place for those who sail in from the open sea. Because of its shape, the neck adornment is metaphorically **J.80** called a *hormos*. When the diminutive form *hormiskos* is used in place of *hormos*, we are shown the similarity of shape in miniature. Therefore, the comparison of the bride's neck to small chains constitutes high praise for the bride. First of all, a young horse, by bending its neck into the form of a circle, pays attention to its own footsteps so that it runs safely. It does not strike its hoof against a stone nor falls into a hole. (This is no small praise for a soul which is attentive and hastens without falling on the divine course, leaping over and transcending every impediment of temptation in its way.) The original sense of the word *hormos*, due to its similar form as a decoration for the neck, is called *hormiskos* and implies truly great praise when the neck is compared to necklaces. And what are the praises which scripture reveals to us by this term? A harbor is a welcome safe refuge for sailors and a calm haven after their sufferings at sea. Here they forget the sea's evils while they recuperate and find relief from their long labors. **J.81** There is no fear of shipwreck, nor anxiety about the ocean's deep, nor danger of pirates, nor tumults of the wind, nor the sea swelling up from the deep because of the wind. Those who were tempest-tossed are now far from all such dangers in the haven of calm water. If anyone should dispose his soul so as to keep it quiet and undisturbed in a waveless calm not **M.817** tossed about by the winds of vice, or swelled up through haughtiness, or foaming with waves of anger, or tossed about by any waves of passion, or borne about by every wind which raises the many waves of passion--if the soul is thus disposed, and if he calms those who are storm-tossed on the sea of life with all its huge waves of evil and spreads out for them the smooth, calm life of virtue so that they may enter it and escape the dangers of shipwreck, then he is aptly compared by the Word to "small necklaces" since the plural signifies perfection of virtue in every form. If the bride were compared to only **J.82** one necklace, her praise would not be complete since it would not include the other virtues. As it is, the comparison to a number of necklaces bears witness to the fact that she is being praised for all the virtues. And this is a counsel prescribed by the text for the entire Church. We are not to regard just one of the virtues while

neglecting other right actions. If you have the necklace of temperance adorning your neck with a pure life as with pearls, then you should also have another necklace: eagerness for virtue contains stones of the divine precepts and multiplies the beauty of your neck. You should also have another adornment for your neck: piety and sound faith. This is the golden collar made from the pure gold of the knowledge of God which shines all around your neck. The Book of Proverbs says, "You would receive for your head a crown of graces, and a chain of gold around your neck" [Prov 1.9].

Thus the bride's small necklaces yield us abundant fruit for thought. It is time now to contemplate the words which **J.83** the bridegroom's friends say to the virgin: "We will make for you figures of gold with studs of silver while the king was at table" [1.11-12]. If one looks at these words in the context of the interpretation given above, the intention seems to be in harmony with it. However, the literal meaning is deeply embedded in symbols and is difficult to interpret. Since the soul's beauty was compared to the cavalry (that is, the angelic army) which destroyed the Egyptian chariots, and the noble rider calls his horse's reins "purity" by the comparison to a dove's cheeks, and the ornament about the bride's neck is composed of various chains resplendent with the virtues, the bridegroom's friends wish to add to the horse's beauty. They do this by decorating its cheek-pieces with golden bosses engraved with the purity of silver. In this way the ornament's beauty will shine all the more, since the brightness of silver will be combined with the glitter of gold.

J.84 We must leave behind these figurative meanings yet not **M.820** omit any meaning which may be helpful. The soul purified through the virtues was compared to cavalry. However, it has not yet become subject to the Word; neither does it bear upon itself him who is borne upon horses for the purpose of bringing salvation [Hab 3.8; Zach 9.9]. It is first necessary for the horse to be fully adorned and then to receive the king. Whether the king conforms the horse to himself--he who, according to the prophet, ascends upon us horses and rides upon us for the purpose of achieving our salvation [Hab 3.8]--or whether he is the one dwelling in us and walking about with us and penetrating our soul's depths, it makes no difference for the meaning. For however unity is achieved from both elements, any defect is brought to perfection. Whoever has God on himself indeed has him within himself, and he who has received him in himself transcends what he had formerly been. The king, therefore, is about to rest upon this horse. In the divine power, as was said, a seat and couch for reclining have the same meaning. Whichever of the two is **J.85** present in us, God's grace is the same. The king's attendants prepare the horse for his mounting by adorning it, since in God's eyes, being in someone and on someone are the same. Leaving aside the order of the figurative sense, we see that those who prepare and attend to the horse have now made it a couch. We must, as the text says, make likenesses of gold with studs of silver to beautify the horse's form in order that the king might not rest on a seat but on a couch.

As scripture shows, the text has this meaning just described. We should not proceed without considering why the king does not use gold as his ornament but images of gold; and not silver, but studs impressed from this material in the likeness of silver. We understand this as follows: every teaching concerning the ineffable nature of God, even if it seems to reveal the best and highest possible understanding, is the likeness of gold, not gold itself, for the good transcending the human mind cannot be accurately presented. Even **J.86** if someone like St. Paul was initiated into the ineffable mysteries of paradise and heard words not to be spoken [2Cor 12.4], any understanding of God remains unutterable. Paul himself says that such conceptions are ineffable. Those persons, therefore, who offer us any good thoughts about these mysteries, are unable to state anything regarding the divine nature. Rather, they speak of the splendor of God's glory, the stamp of his nature [Heb. 1.3], the form of God, the Word in the beginning, the Word being God [1Jn 1.1]. All these expressions seem to us who have not seen the divine nature as gold from that treasure. But for those capable looking on the truth, they are likenesses of gold

and not gold shining in the delicate studs of silver. Silver is the meaning of these words as scripture says: "The tongue of the just is fire-tried silver" [Prov 10.20].

The revelation presented here says that the divine nature **M.821** transcends every conception which tries to grasp it. Our understanding of the divine nature resembles what we seek. It does not show its form which no one has seen or can see, but through a mirror and a riddle [1Cor 13.12] it provides a reflection of the thing sought, that is, a reflection present in **J.87** the soul by a certain likeness. Every word signifying these conceptions is like a point lacking extension (*stigma*) since it cannot how what is present in the mind. Thus every thought of ours falls short of the comprehension of God. Every word which tries to explain God seems to be a little dot (*stigma*) incapable of being coextensive with the breadth of the conception. Thus the soul led through such conceptions to comprehend what cannot be laid hold of except by faith must establish in itself a nature transcending every intelligence. This is what the bridegroom's friends say: "Let us make for you, oh soul, who are compared to a horse, certain images and likenesses of truth (for this is why they mention silver: their words are like sparks that glisten and cannot accurately show the deeper meaning)." Once you have received these words, you will become submissive and be a dwelling place through faith for the one about to recline and dwell in you. You will be both his throne and dwelling place. Perhaps St. Paul himself or someone like him could be worthy of such words. For **J.88** once Paul became a "vessel of election" [Acts 9.15], he no longer lived his own life, but showed Christ living in him and gave proof of Christ speaking in himself [2Cor 13.3]. Thus he was a house containing that nature which cannot be contained.

These graces the bridegroom's friends bestow upon the pure, virginal soul (such friends are ministering spirits in service of those about to inherit salvation). The bride is made more perfect by the addition of these graces. As she draws nearer to the object of her desire, before her spouse's beauty appears, with the sense of smell she touches the one she seeks. She recognizes his color by the faculty of scent and says that she has perceived his odor by the fragrance of her perfume which is called "nard." She uses this term when speaking to her friends: "My nard gave forth its scent" [1.12]. You, she **J.89** says, do not give the pure gold of divinity but gold's likeness through concepts accessible to us and do not reveal anything of him except by a sign. However, you provide some reflection of the one I seek through your allusion to " studs of rational silver." So too I have received his good odor through **M.824** the fragrance of my nard by means of sense perception. To me these words seem to have the following meaning: there are many diverse perfumes and their fragrances differ from one another, but a careful mixture creates a special perfume. One fragrant herb called nard gives its name to the whole mixture. Many aromatic properties contribute to one, good odor of the bridegroom which the purified sense receives.

We think that the Word teaches us here about his essence underlying the order and structure of creation: it is inaccessible, intangible and incomprehensible. Instead of the Word we have in us this compounded fragrance from the perfection of the virtues. It imitates by its own purity that which by nature is incorruptible; by its goodness it imitates his goodness; by its incorruptibility, his incorruptibility; by its immutability, his immutability; and by everything in us effected **J.90** through virtue, his true virtue which contains all the heavens according to the prophet Habakkuk [Hab 3.3]. Therefore, when the bride says to her spouse's friends "My nard gave forth its scent," she is clearly teaching us a lesson. If a person should gather the aroma of every sweet flower from the various meadows of virtue and make his life fragrant through the good odor of his conduct and thus become perfect in every way, such a person would not have it in his nature to look steadily upon the Word of God as upon the sun; rather he sees it within himself as in a mirror. For the rays of that true, divine virtue shine forth in a pure life by the out-flow of detachment (*apatheia*) and make the invisible visible to us and the inaccessible comprehensible by depicting the sun in the mirror of our souls. It makes no difference for our understanding of the text

whether we speak of the sun's rays, the outpouring of virtue or the good scent of fragrances. Whichever **J.91** expression we take, one idea is common to all, namely, that from the virtues we obtain knowledge of the good which transcends all understanding just as the beauty of an archetype can be inferred from its image. Thus Paul the bride imitated the bridegroom by his virtues and depicted by his fragrance the unapproachable beauty. From the fruits of the spirit, love, joy, peace and the like, he made his perfume and claimed to be the "good odor of Christ" [2Cor 2.15]. Paul inhaled that inaccessible, transcendent grace and gave himself to others as incense to take according to their ability; according to each person's disposition, Paul became a fragrance bringing either life or death.

If the same perfume is put before a beetle and a dove, it will not have the same effect on both: the dove becomes **M.825** stronger by inhaling it while the beetle dies. Thus it was with that divine incense, the great Paul, who resembled the dove. Titus, Silvanus and Timothy all partook of the fragrance of **J.92** Paul's perfume and progressed in every deed with Paul as their example. On the other hand, if a person was like Demas [2Tim 4.10], or Alexander [2Tim 4.14], or Hermogenes [2Tim 1.15] and did not bear the incense of temperance, he was banished like the beetle by the perfume's good fragrance. Because of this, Paul, being fragrant with such perfumes, said that "We are the good odor of Christ in those who are saved, and in those who perish; the scent of death to those who are to die, and the scent of life to those who are to live" [2Cor 2.15].

If the nard of the Gospel has any relationship to the bride's perfume, we may consider that precious, "genuine nard" poured on the Lord's head [Jn 12.3] which filled the entire house with its good odor. In all likelihood this perfume did not differ from the perfume which gave the bride the scent of her spouse. In the Gospel, the pouring of the ointment on our Lord's head fills the house with a good odor in which the banquet was held. The woman with her perfume seems to prophetically foretell the mystery of Christ's death. The Lord testifies to her action by saying, "She has come beforehand to bury me" [Mt 26.12]. And the house filled with the fragrance, represents the entire universe, the whole world: **J.93** "Wherever this gospel will be preached in the entire world," the fragrance of her deed will be diffused with the preaching of the gospel, and the Gospel will be a "remembrance of her." Since in the context of the Song of Songs, nard brings the odor of the bridegroom to his bride, and in Gospel the good odor of Christ which fills the house becomes the anointing of the whole body of the Church in all the universe and the whole world, perhaps one may find a connection between the two passages.

So much for this point. What now follows seems appropriate for the nuptial theme, that is, a bride preparing herself in her bridal chamber. However, the text contains a better teaching available only for those who are already perfect. What, therefore, does the text say? "My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh; he shall lie between my breasts" [1.13]. It is said that women fuss over their ornaments to be recognized as lovely by their companions, but they also take care that **J.94** their bodies appear attractive with sweet smelling perfumes for their husbands. Thus they hide perfume in the folds of their dresses so that while it gives forth its own scent, the **M.828** body also shares in the perfume's fragrance. Keeping in mind such customs used by women, what does the noble virgin dare to say? I have a "sachet of myrrh" suspended from my neck upon my breast giving my body a lovely fragrance. But it is not any perfume. Rather, the Lord himself has become the myrrh lying in the "sachet of my conscience" and dwelling in my heart.

Experts say that the location of the heart lies between the two breasts. Here is where the bride says that she has the sachet in which her treasure is kept. Also, the heart is said to be a source of warmth from which the body's heat is distributed through the arteries. The body's members are thereby heated, animated and nourished by the heart's fire. Therefore the bride has received the good odor of Christ in the governing part of the soul and has made her own heart a kind **J.95** of sachet for such incense. And so she

makes all her actions, like parts of the body, seethe with the breath from her heart so that no iniquity can cool her love for God in any member of her body.

Let us now examine the next verse. Let us hear what the flourishing vine says about its fruits, the vine located at the sides of God's house which, as the prophet says [Ps 127.3] is stretched out. A divine, pure life entwines it by the tendrils of love. "My love is to me a cluster of cypress in the vineyard of En-Gadi." Who, then, is so blessed? Rather, who is so superior to all blessedness, that when looking at his own fruit, he sees in the cluster of his own soul the Lord of the vineyard? Observe how much the bride has grown when in her own nard she recognizes the good fragrance of her spouse. She has made of him sweet myrrh and received this perfume in the sachel of her heart, that its goodness may always remain with her and never escape. Thus the bride has become the mother of the divine cluster of grapes which blossomed, that is, which flourished before the Lord's passion while during his passion it poured out wine. The wine that gladdens the heart **J.96** [Ps 103.15] is called the blood of the grape after the Passion. We may enjoy a cluster of grapes in two ways: by its blossom, which gladdens our senses, by its good odor, and by the ripeness of its fruit when enjoyed by eating or by enlivening banquets with wine. In the context of the Song, the bride gathers the still flowering cluster and calls the vine's first shoots a cypress.

The child Jesus born within us advances by different ways in those who receive him in wisdom, in age and in grace [cf. Lk 2.52]. He is not the same in every person but is present according to the measure of the person receiving him. He shows himself according to each one's capacity. He comes either as an infant, or a child advancing in age or as one fully grown after the example of the cluster. Christ is never seen **M.829** with the same form upon the vine, but he changes his form with time-now budding, now blossoming, now mature, now ripe and finally as wine. Thus the vine holds out a promise with its fruit. It is not yet ripe for wine, but it awaits maturity. **J.97** Meanwhile it does not lack any delight, for it gladdens our sense of smell instead of our taste with its expectation of the future; by its fragrance of hope it sweetens the soul's senses. A faith firm in a grace we hope for becomes a delight for us who wait in patience.

Thus the "cluster of cypress" promises wine. It is not yet wine, but by its blossom-the blossom is hope-it waits for a grace yet to come. The additional mention of En-Gadi signifies a green spot where the vine takes root and produces healthy, sweet fruit. Those familiar with geography say that the land of Gadi is well suited for tending grapes. The person who has his will in harmony with God's law and cares for it day and night [Ps 1.2] becomes a flourishing tree fed by streams of water [Ps 1.3], yielding its fruit in due season **J.98** [Mt 21.41]. Thus, too, the bridegroom's vine is rooted in Gadi, a fertile place, that is, in the depths of a mind watered by the divine teaching, and it bears that blossoming, fruitful cluster in which one can observe its vinedresser and husbandman.

How happy is that orchard whose fruit resembles the bridegroom's beauty! For he is the true light, true life, and true righteousness and all the rest, as Wisdom says [Prov 1.3]. When a person becomes these qualities by good works, he looks into the cluster of his own conscience and sees the bridegroom there and mirrors the light of truth by his own pure life. Therefore the flourishing vine says, my cluster blossoms with flowers. It is the true cluster who manifested himself raised upon a cross of wood and whose blood is drink **J.99** and salvation for persons who are saved and rejoice in him. To him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

THE FOURTH HOMILY

The Song of Songs, 1.15-2.7

- 1.15. Behold, you are fair, my companion,
 behold, you are fair; your eyes are doves.
16. Behold, you are fair, my beloved and beautiful,
 overshadowing our bed.
17. The beams of our house are cedars,
 our paneling is of cypress.
- 2.1. I am a flower of the field,
 a lily of the valleys.
2. As a lily among thorns, so is my
 sister among the daughters.
3. As the apple among the trees of the wood,
 so is my beloved among the sons.
 Under his shadow I desired and sat down,
 and his fruit was sweet in my throat.
4. Bring me into the house of wine,
 set love before me.
5. Strengthen me with perfumes,
 stay me with apples, for I am wounded with love.
6. His left hand is under my head,
 and his right hand shall embrace me.
7. I have charged you, daughters of Jerusalem,
 by the powers and strengths of the field,
 that you do not rouse or waken my love
 until he pleases.

* * *

J.100 If any foreign matter becomes mixed with gold and **M.832** adulterates it, expert goldsmiths remedy the situation by refining the gold in fire. They repeat this process several times, and at each repetition they observe how the color of the gold has improved. This cleansing by fire does not end until the appearance of the gold is pure and unadulterated. The reason for mentioning this in the present context will become clear to you from a consideration of the text. Human nature was golden at the beginning and shone by reason of resemblance to the undefiled good. However, it became discolored and blackened by the admixture of vice as we have heard the bride say at the beginning of the Song of Songs: her neglect **J.101** to tend the vineyard made her black [1.5]. God, who fashions all things in his wisdom, cares for his bride's deformity. He does not contrive for her any new beauty which was not formerly there; rather, he leads her back to her first grace by removing what was blackened through evil, changing her color to one which is not defiled. After the first casting, expert goldsmiths observe how much the gold's

beauty has been enhanced by the process of purification. At the second casting, if the gold has not been sufficiently cleansed in comparison with the first, they observe the added beauty and often repeat the same process, carefully noting the progress at each step. So, too, the attendant of the blackened gold [i.e. the bridegroom] has brightened the soul by a kind of refining process through the application of his remedies. In what preceded [Homily 3] he testified that his spouse's beauty resembled a horse. But now, he says, her loveliness has become that of a virgin: "Behold, you are fair, my companion: behold you are fair; your eyes are doves [1.15].

The Song teaches us by these words about the restoration of beauty which the bride gained **J.102** by approaching the true beauty from which she has departed. For the bridegroom says, "Behold, you are fair, my companion," which is to say: "Formerly you were not fair. Having strayed from the archetypal beauty by association with vice, you became ugly." This means that to wherever the inclination of free will moves, it is changed accordingly. For if free will is seized by anger, it becomes irascible; seized by lust, it dissolves into pleasure. When the inclination is to cowardice, **J.103** fear or any other passion, human nature takes on the forms of each of them. On the other hand, if human nature assumes patience, purity, peace, freedom from anger, lack of grief, courage, fearlessness and the like, it displays the character **M.833** of each of these virtues in the soul's constitution and becomes calm and free from passion. Therefore, virtue and vice are diametrically opposed to each other, and they can never be present together at one time in the same person. For he who has rejected temperance turns to a licentious way of life. He who regards a life of impurity as abominable, by the very fact of having turned from evil, lives a good and chaste life. So it is with all the other virtues. The humble person has separated himself from haughtiness, and he who puffs himself up with vanity has rejected humility. What need is there to point out that in contradictory elements the absence of one implies the establishment and existence of the other? Since our free choice has the capacity to become whatever it desires, the Word rightly says to the bride who has been made beautiful. **J.104**: "You have rejected fellowship with evil and have drawn near to me. By approaching my archetypal beauty, you have become beautiful. Just like a mirror you have taken on my appearance." Human nature is in fact like a mirror, and it takes on different appearances according to the impressions of free will. If gold is held up to the mirror, the mirror assumes the appearance of gold and reflects the splendor of gold's substance. If anything abominable is held up, its ugliness is impressed on the mirror, for example, a frog, toad, centipede or anything unpleasant to behold. Thus the mirror represents in its own being whatever is placed before it. So, too, the soul, when cleansed by the Word from vice, it receives within itself the sun's orb and shines with this reflected light. Therefore the Word says to his bride: "You have become beautiful by approaching my light; by drawing near to me, you have attained communion with my beauty. "Behold, you are fair, my companion" [1.15].

Then the bridegroom stops and seeing his spouse's **J.105** enhanced beauty, repeats the words, "Behold, you are fair." Before he had called her "companion." Now recognizing her by the beauty of her eyes, he says, "Your eyes are doves." When the bride was compared to a horse, her cheeks and neck were praised [1.10]. Now when her own beauty is manifest, the loveliness of her eyes is extolled. The bridegroom says that her eyes are those of a dove which seem to convey this meaning: when the pupils of the eye are clear, the faces of those gazing at them are clearly reflected. Persons skilled in studying natural phenomena say that the eye sees by receiving the impression of images emanating from visible objects. For this reason the beauty of the bride's eyes is praised since the image of a dove appears in her pupils. Whenever a person gazes upon an object, he receives in himself the image of that object. He who no longer attends to flesh and blood looks toward the life of the Spirit. As the Apostle says [Gal 5.25], such a person lives in the Spirit, conforms to the Spirit, and by the Spirit puts to death the deeds of the body. This person has become wholly spiritual; he is neither natural nor carnal.

J.106 For this reason the soul freed of bodily attractions is said **M.836** to have the image of a dove in its eyes, meaning that the stamp of the spiritual life shines from within. When the purified eye of the soul has received the impression of a dove, it becomes capable of contemplating the bridegroom's loveliness. First the virgin gazes at her bridegroom's beauty when she has the dove in her eyes. "For no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is in the Holy Spirit" [1Cor 12.3]. And the bride says, "Behold, you are fair, my beloved, and beautiful" [1.16]. "Since nothing seems beautiful to me now that I have turned away from everything which I had first estimated as good, no longer is my judgment of beauty in error. I do not hold anything else as beautiful in comparison with you--neither human acclamation, glory, nor worldly power." For those who look to the senses, these things appear beautiful, but they are not what they seem to be. How can anything be beautiful which lacks substance? Things held honorable in this world have existence only in the minds of those who think **J.107** they exist. But you are truly beautiful; not only are you beautiful, you are the very substance of beauty. You always remain what you are. You do not blossom for a season and then lose your flower. Throughout the eternity of your life your beauty lasts. Your name is "love of mankind" (*philanthropia*). You are sprung from Judah, and the Jewish people are brothers of the one who comes to you from the Gentiles. Therefore you are rightly called "beloved", of the one who desired you because of the manifestation of your divinity in the flesh.

Next the bride describes her spouse as "overshadowing our bed" [1.16]. That is, human nature recognizes or will recognize that you overshadow it with your care. "You have come," she says, "the beautiful one, the lovely one, to **J.108** overshadow our bed." For unless you "shaded yourself over" with the form of a servant [Phil 2.7] while unveiling the pure rays of your divinity, who could bear your manifestation "For no one can see God's face and live" [Ex 33.20]. You have now come as one who is lovely but as one we are capable of receiving. You came with the covering of your body which shadowed over the rays of your divinity. How could a mortal, perishable nature be joined with an imperishable, inaccessible nature unless the shadow of his body acted as a mediator of the light for us who live in the darkness? The bride uses the term "bed" to interpret in a figurative sense the blending of human nature with the divine. In the same way, the great Apostle Paul joins us as virgins to Christ and acts as an escort for the bride. He says that the clinging together of two persons in the union of one body is a great mystery of Christ's union with the Church. For he said, "The two shall be one flesh," and then he added, "This is a great mystery with reference to Christ and the Church" [Eph 5.31-31].

M.837 Because of this mystery, the virgin soul names the union **J.109** with God a "bed." This could not have happened unless the Lord had appeared to us "overshadowed" with a human body. He is not only bridegroom but builder of the house. He is not only bridegroom but builder of the house; he is also in us as the house's architect and building material. He places a roof on the house and adorns this work with material which does not rot. Such material is cedar and cypress which resist rotting. Neither does it yield to time, beget moths nor is subject to corruption. The long cedar beams are used for the roof proper, while the cypress wood is used in the coffered work adorning the inner part of the house. The Song says, "The beams of our house are cedars, our paneling is of cypress" [1.17]. The hidden meanings signified by these words are clear to those following the sequence of the text. The Lord calls "rain" the various assaults of temptations in the Gospel. He says of a person who builds his house upon rock, "The rains came and the winds blew, and the floods came, and the house remained unshaken by such things" [Mt 7.25].

Because of this evil downpour we must have such beams **J.110** of cedar. They are the virtues which do not allow in the influx of temptations; they are firm and steadfast and do not yield to the evil of temptation. We can see the lesson here if we compare a parallel text in Ecclesiastes where it says, "By slothful neglect a building will be brought low, and by idleness of the hands the house will fall to pieces"

[Eccl 10.18]. If the timbers of the roof are not firm but weak due to their thinness, and if the master of the house is careless about the building, the roof is useless to prevent rain from streaming in. For the roof necessarily sags, yielding to the weight of the rain water on it, and the fragile wood gives way since it cannot resist the added weight. Therefore, the water gathers in the sag of the roof and penetrates into the house's interior. And so the rain, like that mentioned in Proverbs [27.15], drives a man from his house when the downpour comes. Thus by the symbolism contained in the parable [of Eccl 10.18], we are exhorted through the strength of our virtues to be firm against the onslaught of temptation. Never should we allow ourselves to become soft under the storms of the passions, to sag under their weight, and so to let into our hearts the rush of these waters which destroy the treasures stored there.

J.111 The cedars of Lebanon planted by the Lord, in which the sparrows build their nests and the heron makes her home, are the virtues. They fortify the house of the bridal chamber. In them the souls which have become like sparrows and have escaped the snares build their nests and the herons have their **M.840** home, as Scripture says [Ps 123.7]. People familiar with observing birds say that this bird [heron] has a certain aversion to intercourse and only couples with another out of necessity. It becomes depressed, cries and displays sadness at the prospect. It seems to me then that the text symbolically signifies purity by this example. The bride of the Song looks up at the beams of the chaste bridal chamber and sees the decorative **J.112** work in cypress which graces the beautiful sight with its highly polished and well fitted construction. For the text said that the paneling of the roof was cypress. "Paneling" (*phatnomata*) is the name for a graceful and closely fitted style of woodwork used to adorn a ceiling. What then can we learn from this? Cypress naturally has a pleasant scent. It is immune to decay and useful in many kinds of skillful art work because of its lightness and adaptability for construction and decoration in notch-work. The lesson we can learn here is that we should not only cultivate virtue in an interior fashion, but we should not neglect our exterior good appearance. It is necessary to care for what is honorable before God and men [2Cor 5.11]; to let our good deeds be manifest to God and to persuade men and maintain a good reputation among "those outside" [1Tim 2.7]; to shine with works of light before men; and to conduct oneself becomingly towards "those outside". This is the "paneling" that comes from the good odor of Christ of which cypress is a symbol. It is skillfully wrought by a decent life. The wise architect Paul knew how to express such things in a becoming, harmonious manner: "Let all things among you be done decently and in order" [1Cor 14.40].

J.113 By properly carrying out what we just mentioned, beauty will grow in us, and the breadth and length of our nature will yield a fragrant and pure blossom. The name of this flower is the lily whose visible radiance suggests the gleam of chastity. The bride explains this when she says to her companions, "After the bridegroom came to our bed 'shadowed over' by his body--he who built me as a house for himself and roofed me over with the cedars of the virtues and adorned the ceiling with the good scent of cypress--I became a flower from the plain of nature which differs in its color and scent from the other flowers. For I grew up, a lily from the valleys. As the text reads 'I am a flower of the field, a lily of the valleys.'" [2.1]

According to what we previously had seen, the soul was cultivated upon the breadth of human nature. (Upon hearing the word "field" we understand the breadth of human nature because of its capacity for grasping an unlimited multitude of concepts, words and teachings.) Thus the soul cultivated by the husbandman of our nature blossoms as a fragrant, shining, pure flower from the field of our nature. This **J.114** field, even if it is called a valley in comparison to the life of heaven, is in no way less a field, and the soul that is well **M.841** tended in it is not prevented from being a flower. From this hollow valley the shoot rises up to the heights just as in the case of a lily. Quite often a lily's green shoot runs up to the heights from its root like a reed; then the flower spreads out on the top. There is also quite a distance

between the flower and the ground. The reason for this, in my opinion, is that its loveliness might remain pure while raised on high and not be defiled by contact with the earth below.

Therefore the just eye of the bridegroom looks upon the bride who has either become the lily or has desired to become one. (Both interpretations are possible: either the bride is boasting as if she has already become what she desired or she asks the cultivator that she may become a flower by springing up through his wisdom from the valleys of human existence into the beauty of a lily.) Whether or not the bride has reached what she desired, her bridegroom's righteous eye sees her. Looking upon her good desire, he consents to make her a lily not suffocated by life's thorns which he calls "daughters." I believe this implies the powers hostile to human life, and their father is named the inventor of evil.

J.115 "As a lily among thorns, thus is my sister among the daughters" [2.2]. What great progress we see in the ascent of the soul! The first step in the ascent was the comparison of the bride to the horses which destroyed the Egyptian forces; the second was the bride's becoming a "companion" to the bridegroom and the comparison of her eyes to doves. The present step, the third, consists in no longer being called "companion" but "sister" of the Lord. "Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father, this one is my brother, my sister, and my mother" [Mt 12.50]. Having thus become a flower, the soul is not injured by thorny temptations in her transformation into lily; she forgets the people and house of her father and looks to her true Father. Therefore she is named sister of the son, having been introduced by the Spirit of adoption into this relationship and released from fellowship with the **J.116** daughters of that false father. And so she becomes still more sublime and gazes at the mystery through dove's eyes. I mean she does this by the spirit of prophecy. What she sees is the following: "As the apple among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons" [2.3]. What is it that the bride has seen? Holy Scripture usually names "wood" the material side of human life overgrown with a multitude of passions, Here the destructive beasts dwell and hide in their dens. They lack power in sunlight and their strength lies in darkness. After the sun sets and night comes on, the beasts emerge from their holes, as the prophet says [Ps 103.20]. Then the solitary animal feeding in the thickets has destroyed the beauty of human nature. As the prophet says, "The boar from the thicket bus laid it waste, and the wild beast has devoured it," [Ps 79.13]. Because of this, the apple tree grows in the **M.844** thickets; being made of wood, it has material similar to human nature and has been tempted in every way while being without **J.117** sin [Heb 4.15]. Because the apple tree bears fruit which sweetens the soul's sense, it differs more from other trees than the lily does from the thorns. A lily is delightful in both sight and scent. On the other hand, the apple delights three of the senses: it is a pleasant sight to the eyes by its beautiful appearance, a sweet and lovely fragrance and food sweet to the sense of taste. The bride correctly sees a difference between herself and her master because as light he is joy to our eyes, perfume to our scent, and life to those who eat of him. The Gospel says, "He who eats him shall live" [Jn 6.58]. Human nature perfected through virtue becomes a flower; it does not give nourishment to the husbandman but provides adornment for itself. He has no need of our goodness, but we of his. As the prophet says, "You do not need any of my good deeds" [Ps 15.2].

Therefore the purified soul looks to its bridegroom who is an apple tree among the trees of the thicket. It seeks to graft **J.118** onto itself all the wild branches of the forest and to prepare them to blossom with similar fruit. We have understood the daughters (thorns) to be children of the false father who grow up together with the flower and who pass over to the grace of a lily. Likewise, when we hear men being compared to trees of the wood, we understand that they refer not to the bridegroom's friends, but to his enemies. They are sons of darkness and children of wrath [1 Th 5.5]; but by fellowship with the fruit, he (God) transforms them into sons of light and the day. Therefore, the soul whose senses are trained says, "His fruit is sweet in my throat" [2.3]. The fruit is clearly his teaching. "How sweet are your

words to my mouth," says the prophet, "more than the honey of the comb" [Ps 118.103].

"As the apple among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. Under his shadow I desired and sat **J.119** down, and his fruit was sweet in my throat" [2.3]. Truly the soul's senses are sweetened at the bridegroom's word when the shadow of the apple tree protects us from the flame of temptation and prevents us from being burned by the sun's heat blazing over our unprotected heads. However, the soul cannot be refreshed under the shadow of the tree of life unless she has an eager desire for it. You see that desire is placed in you to create a longing for the apple tree whose enjoyment is manifold for those who have approached it. For the eye is refreshed at seeing the apple's beauty; the nose inhales its good odor; the body is nourished; the mouth is sweetened; burning heat is warded off and the shadow becomes a chair on which the soul sits once it has rejected the seat of pestilence.

M.845 The bride then says, "Bring me into the house of wine; set love before me. Strengthen me with perfumes; stay me with apples, for I am wounded with love" [2.4-5]. Oh, how the soul likened to a horse runs on the divine course! How she leaps and bounds toward what lies before her and does not turn back! And still she thirsts. The intensity of her thirst has become so great that she is not satisfied with the cup of **J.120** wisdom. The entire cup is not enough to quench her thirst. She seeks to be brought into the very house of wine; to put her mouth right at the vats which bubble over with sweet wine; to see the cluster of grapes pressed in the vats and the vine which nourished the cluster and at last, to see the husbandman of the true vine who tended the cluster and made it sweet. To explain in detail each of these elements would be unnecessary here; the symbolic meaning of each detail is clear enough. The bride obviously wants to see that mystery concerning the bridegroom's garments which are reddened by treading the winepress. Of this mystery the prophet says, "Why are your garments red, and your apparel as those from treading the winepress" [Is 63.2]? Because of this and other mysteries like it the bride desires to be within the house containing the mystery of wine. Having entered it, she again leaps up to what is greater, for she seeks to be subjected to love. According to St. John, God is love [1Jn 4.8]. The subjection of the soul **J.121** to God is salvation as David reveals [Ps 61.2]. "Since I have come," she says, "into the house of wine, subject me to love; set love over me." No matter how you put it, we get the same meaning from each of the two statements--whether she is subject to love or love is enjoined upon her.

The bride is teaching us here a familiar doctrine, namely, our love offered to God and our treatment of men. It is necessary that everything be well ordered, especially with regard to love. Cain would not have been condemned for wrongly dividing his offerings if he had not only performed the correct sacrifice, but if he had kept the correct order, that is, retaining what he needed for himself and consecrating the rest to God [Gen 4.7]. Cain should have offered in sacrifice the first born of his flocks, but he took for himself the better part and offered the rest to God.

J.122 It is important to realize the order of love for which the Law is a guide--how one should love God, neighbor, wife and enemy, lest the practice of love be disordered and perverted. It is necessary to love God with one's whole heart, soul, strength and feeling and our neighbor as ourselves [Dt 6.5]. If we have purer souls, we ought to love our wives as Christ loved his Church. On the other hand, if we are more prone to passion, we ought to love our wives as our own body **M.848** as Paul the authority in such matters [Eph 5.25], exhorts us. We are not to repay our enemies evil with evil but are to repay injustice with good deeds.

Now we observe in many people a confused and disordered love, a love which is unbalanced and lacking direction. They love money, honors and women (sometimes with a passion) with their whole soul and strength. They give the impression that they would gladly lay down their lives for them. But they

love God only for appearance's sake. They scarcely show their neighbor the love owed to enemies and towards **J.123** persons who hate them, their attitude is to return a greater evil than they themselves had first received. Thus the bride says "Order love within me, that I may attribute to God his due, that I may not miss the proper measure with regard to everything else." Perhaps we could also understand the text as follows: "Although I was loved first, I was reckoned with the enemy because of my disobedience; now, however, I am restored to the bridegroom's favor and joined with him through love." "Establish in me this ordered and unchangeable grace, you who are the bridegroom's friends. By your care and concern keep firm my inclination towards what is better."

Having said these words, the bride passes on to loftier matters, that is, she seeks to be supported by perfumes in order to secure the good things she already has. "Strengthen me with perfumes" [12.5]. What an extraordinary new support! How can perfume ever be pillars for a house? How can a roof's heavy construction be supported by a good fragrance? Is it not clear that the virtues, once ordered in us in all their variety, are **J.124** named according to their different operations? For virtue is not only looking to the good and participating in it, but also persevering unfailingly in it. Therefore, the one who wishes to be supported by the perfumes seeks perseverance in virtue. Perfume is virtue because it is separated from every unpleasant odor of sin.

What comes next in the text is also extraordinary, namely, the support the bride desires for her house. She asks not for brambles, thorns, straw or hay (or as the Apostle says, not wood, hay or straw [1Cor 3.12]) with which material houses are built. Rather, apples are to be the firm support of the roof of this house. She says, "Stay me with apples" [2.5] in order that this fruit may be all in all for her [cf. 1Cor 3.12]--loveliness, fragrance, sweetness, nourishment, refreshment in its shade, a seat of rest, a firm pillar and a sheltering roof. Beauty is lovely to behold; perfume is sweet to the smell; nourishment enriches the body and sweetens the palate; shade refreshes from the burning heat; a seat gives **J.125 & M.849** rest for toil; the roof of a house is a shelter for its inhabitants; pillar provides stability; the fair apple tree adorns the roof. For what could be a more beautiful sight than an arrangement of apples when the fruit, attractively and uniformly laid out, yields a many-colored spectacle to the eyes by the blend of ruddiness with white? If it were possible for this arrangement of apples to be seen lifted up on high, what could be a more lovely sight? It is not impossible to accomplish this in the realm of desire for spiritual goods, for that kind of fruit is not heavy, nor does its weight pull it toward the ground, but its natural inclination is upward. Virtue grows upward and looks to what lies above. Therefore the bride desires the roof of her own house to be adorned with the beauty of such apples. What is the text driving at here? Certainly not just the spectacle of a cluster of apples on a roof. What path to virtue can there be in such words unless we can extract a useful interpretation?

What, then, do I suggest? Because of his love for man, the one who has sprung up in the forest of our human nature became an apple by participation in our flesh and blood. Each of these (flesh and blood) has a parallel in the colors **J.126** of an apple. Its whiteness imitates the color of flesh, and its red exterior is related in appearance to the color of blood. When the soul delights in divine things, desires to see apples on the roof; by looking to what is above and concentrating on the apples, it is guided to the heavenly way of life by means of the Gospel's teaching. He who comes from above and is above all showed us the way by his appearance in the flesh, having manifested in himself examples of every good, fitting behavior. As the Lord says, "Learn from me because I am meek and humble of heart" [Mt 11.29]. The Apostle makes the same point when he explains humility. Let me cite that text to illustrate the general truth. Paul says to those who are looking upward, "Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus. He who was in the form of God did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" [Phil 2.5]. He dwelt in our existence through flesh and blood, and in

place of the joy set before him, he voluntarily partook of our humility even to the point of experiencing death. Because of this the **J.127** bride says, "Stay me with apples" in order that by always looking upward, I may continually see examples of goodness manifested in my bridegroom. In him there is meekness, freedom from anger, reconciliation with enemies, love for those who cause distress, the exchange of good for evil, strength **M.852** purity, patience and no trace of vain glory or deception."

Having said this, the bride praises the bowman for his good marksmanship because he hits her with his arrow. The bride says, "I am wounded with love" [2.5]. These words indicate that the bridegroom's arrows have penetrated the depths of her heart. The archer of these arrows is love [1Jn 4.8] who sends his own "chosen arrow" [Is 49.2], the only- begotten Son, to those who are saved, dipping the triple-pointed tip of the arrow in the Spirit of life. The tip of the arrow is faith, and by it God introduces the archer into the heart along with the arrow. As the Lord says, "I and the Father (are one); we will come and make our home with him" [Jn 14.23].

Therefore the soul raised up by these divine ascents sees **J.128** within itself the sweet arrow of love by which she was wounded; she boasts of her wound saying, "I am wounded with love." O beautiful wound and sweet blow by which life penetrates within! The arrow's penetration opens up, as it receives the arrow of love, the imagery shifts from archery to nuptial delight. It is well known how a bow is handled, with each hand performing its proper function: the left hand holds the bow while the right hand draws the string back, pulling the arrow back by the notched end. Then the left hand directs the arrow to the target. Earlier we said that the bride was the target; she now sees herself as the arrow in the bowman's hands. She is held in one way by his right hand and in another by his left. However, the significance of these words is evoked through marital imagery. Thus the text does not say that the arrow's tip was held by the left hand or the rest of the arrow by the right hand, as if the soul were an arrow in the hands of the powerful archer aiming at a target above him. Instead, the Song has the bridegroom's left **J.129** hand supporting his bride's head, not the arrow tip, while his right hand receives the rest of her body. These two images teach us about the nature of the divine ascent. God is both the bridegroom and the archer. He treats the purified soul as a bride and as an arrow aimed at a good target. He allows his bride to participate in his eternal incorruptibility, gracing her with length of years and a long life with his right hand. With his left hand he gives her the wealth of his eternal bounty and the glory of God of which those who seek the world's glory are not partakers. Because of this the bride says, "His left hand is under my head" [2.6], for this is the means by which the arrow is directed to its target. "His right hand receives me and draws me back, easing my journey upward where I am directed without being separated from the archer. Simultaneously I am carried away by his act **M.853** of shooting and am at rest in the hands of the bowman". Regarding the properties of these hands, Proverbs says that length of years and of life is in the right hand of wisdom In its left hand are wealth and glory [Prov 3.16].

Now the bride addresses the daughters of the heavenly Jerusalem. An exhortation is expressed in the form of an oath **J.130** that love may multiply and always increase until he who wishes all to be saved and to come to recognition of the truth [1 Tim 2.4] makes his will effective. The words read: "I have charged you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the powers a strengths of the field, that you do not rouse or wake my love until he pleases" [2.7]. An oath is an utterance which guarantees its own truth. It works in two ways: either it confirms the truth for those who hear it, or it compels the one under oath not to lie. As the Psalm says, "The Lord has sworn the truth to David, and he will not go back on his word" [Ps 131.1 1]. In this case the trustworthiness of the promise is confirmed by the oath.

When Abraham was concerned that his son should contract a noble marriage [Gen 24.2-9], he commanded his own servant not to take a Canaanite woman condemned to slavery as a wife of Isaac so

that the nobility of his descendants would not be defiled by admixture with a slave race. Abraham wanted his son to be united in marriage with a woman from his native land, and so he compelled the slave not to neglect **J.131** his command by having him swear on oath to do what he has determined for his son. The slave, therefore, was bound by Abraham to arrange a suitable marriage for Isaac.

As I have said, an oath works in two ways. In the present text, the soul is progressing towards great heights, as we have seen. At the same time she is instructing less advanced soul in the way of perfection. She uses the oath not to assure them of the progress she herself has made but to lead them through their oath to a life of virtue. She adjures them to keep their love alert and watchful until his good will comes to fulfillment, that is, until all are saved and come to a knowledge of the truth [cf. 1 Tim 2.4].

The oath of Abraham was on his thigh [Gen 24. 2,9]; here it is by the "powers and strengths of the field." And so the **J.132** text says, "I have charged you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the powers and strengths of the field, that you do not rouse or wake my love until he pleases" [2.7]. We must first consider what is meant by "field," then by "powers and strengths," and then whether or not they differ from each other or have the same meaning. Next to be considered is the arousing and awakening of love. The phrase "until he pleases" has been explained by what was said earlier.

M.856 It is clear that the Master means the world when he speaks of a "field" [Mt 13.38]. This world's form will pass away due to its unstable nature. This is clear from Ecclesiastes' loud proclamation which calls every visible and passing thing "vanity" [Eccl 1.2]. What, therefore, is the power of this field, the world? What is this strength, which does not allow the precept enjoined by oath on the daughters of Jerusalem to be violated? If we look to visible reality for this power, **J.133** Ecclesiastes rejects such an assumption. He calls "vanity" everything we see and strive after in visible reality. What is vain lacks substance, and what lacks substance does not have power. Perhaps we can get a hint of the text's meaning from the plural use of the term "power." In sacred scripture we find a distinction in words of this kind: whenever "power" is used in the singular it refers to God; whenever we find the plural form, it refers to angels. For example: "Christ, the power and wisdom of God" [1Cor 1.24]. This usage reveals the divinity by using the singular form. On the other hand, in the verse, "Bless the Lord, all his powers" [Ps 103.21], the plural form signifies the spiritual nature of the angels. the plural form signifies the spiritual nature of the angels. The term "strength" used along with "power" serves to intensify its meaning. Scripture frequently makes its meaning more emphatic by the use of synonymous terms. Take, for example, the phrase: "Lord, my strength and my firmament" [Ps 17.2-3]. Each word expresses the same thing, but the use of **J.134** both together lends emphasis to the statement. Therefore the plural use of "powers" and the synonymous term "strengths" suggests an angelic nature; the oath is imposed upon souls who are still disciples to confirm them in what they have learned. They are not to swear by the passing world but by the angelic nature which always exists. They are exhorted to be attentive to the angels who ratify the stable, constant life of virtue.

After the resurrection we have been promised a life similar to the angels, and he who has promised it does not lie. follows, therefore, the life in this world should be a preparation for the one we hope for later. Though living in the flesh and passing through the field of this world, we should not live according to the flesh nor be conformed to this world; rather, we ought to meditate on the life to come while we are still in this present one. Therefore by imposing an oath, the bride confirms those souls under instruction: while spending **J.135 & M.857** their lives in this "field," they will look to the "powers" and imitate their angelic purity by detachment. Love is aroused and awakened; that is to say, it is elevated and continually spurred on to greater growth. God's good will is done "on earth as it is in heaven" [Mt 6.10] when the detachment of the angels is effected in us. This is our understanding of "I have charged you,

daughters of Jerusalem, by the powers and strengths of the field, that you do not rouse or awake my love until he pleases" [2.7]. If any other text should be found which brings us closer to the truth we seek, let us receive it as a grace and give thanks to him who reveals through the Holy Spirit the mysteries hidden in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

THE FIFTH HOMILY

The Song of Songs, 2.8-17

8. The voice of my beloved!
Behold, he comes leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
9. My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag on the mountains of Bethel.
Behold, he stands behind our wall,
looking through the windows,
peeping through the lattices.
10. My beloved answers and says to me,
"Arise, come, my companion, my fair one, my dove.
11. For behold, winter is past,
the rain is gone; it has departed.
12. The flowers are seen in the land;
the time of pruning has arrived;
the voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land.
13. The fig tree has put forth its young figs,
the vines put forth the tender grape,
they give forth their scent.
Arise, come, my companion, my fair one,
my dove; yes, come.
14. Come, by yourself, my dove, in the shelter of the rock,
near the wall.
Show me your face, and let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your countenance is beautiful.
15. Catch the little foxes that spoil the vines,
for our vines put forth tender grapes."
16. "My beloved is mine, and I am his.
He feeds his flock among the lilies.

17. Until the day dawns and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle
or a young stag on the mountains of the ravines."

* * *

J.137 & M.857 The Song of Songs now leads to desire a contemplation of the transcendent good. At the same time it causes pain in our souls when we recognize that we cannot grasp this good. For how could anyone not be sorrowful considering that in such ascents (to the good) the purified soul is exalted through love to participate in this goodness, and yet, as the Apostle says, it does not yet seem to have grasped what it seeks [Phil 3.13]? Earlier, when I described the bride's ascents, I said that she was blessed. She recognized the sweet apple and distinguished it from the barren forest. She desired her bridegroom's shadow, enjoyed his sweet fruit and entered the inner **J.138 & M.860** chambers of his joy. (She called this joy "wine" which gladdens the hearts of those who drink it [Ps 103.15].) Established in love, the bride was strengthened by the support of perfumes after having been embraced by the cover of apples; she received the arrow of love in her heart and then, once again in the archer's hands, she herself became an arrow directed at the target of truth by the hands of the powerful Bowman [Ps 126.4].

I thought that the bride who had been raised up in so many ways had reached the ultimate peak of happiness. It seems, however, the things accomplished earlier were but an introduction to the bride's ascent. The bride does not name all those earlier ascents contemplation and clear recognition of truth, but she calls them the "voice" of the bridegroom whom she desires. That is to say, she can hear and recognize his voice, but she does not enjoy him and know him. If, then, the bride has been raised to such heights-- (for Paul was caught up to the third heaven [2Cor 12.2-4])--and has not fully obtained what she was seeking, what about us? How should we regard our own situation, for we have not even approached the outer doors of the sanctuary of contemplation?

It is possible to see through the bride's own words the **J.139** difficulty she has in contemplating her sought-after spouse? "The voice of my beloved," she says--not his form or face or figure indicating the nature of what is sought after but his voice which allows inference rather than certainty about who the speaker is. That the bride's words are conjecture rather than full and ambiguous comprehension is clear from the fact that the text does not use a single image but several. The bride thinks that she perceives her spouse in different ways at different times and never has the same image of what she has comprehended. She says, "Behold, he comes" [2.8]. The bridegroom is neither standing still nor remaining nearby that she can get a good look at him and see who he is. Instead, he removes himself from the bride's view before she comes to perfect knowledge: "Leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills." At one time he is thought to be a gazelle; at another he is likened to a young stag; "My beloved is like a **J.140** gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of Bethel" [2.9]. Thus what is always comprehended now has one shape and then another.

These are the things which taken in their literal sense cause me pain and make me doubt that I shall ever attain a true understanding of divine things. But we must put our hope in the God who strengthens those who preach the Good News, and we must see how our consideration of the present text can be adapted to our earlier reflections. The text says, "The voice of my beloved" and immediately adds: "Behold, he comes." What can we understand this to mean? Perhaps these words foresee the dispensation of God's Word which is made known to us through the Gospel. It was announced in advance by the prophets and then made manifest **M.861** through the appearance of God in the flesh. The divine voice bears witness to these works, and their accomplishment is joined to the word of promise as the prophet

says: "As we have heard, so we have seen" [Ps 47.9]. "The voice of my beloved": this is what we have heard. "Behold, he comes": this is what our eyes have beheld. "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets" [Heb 1.1]: this is the voice we hear. "But in these last days he has spoken **J.141** to us by his Son" [Heb 1.2]. This is what was spoken: "Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills." He is in one sense fittingly compared to a gazelle, and in another sense he is likened to a young stag. "Gazelle" (*dorkas*) signifies keenness of vision, for it is said that this animal has marvelous vision (*derkesthai*) and gets its name from that fact (i.e. *dorkas*, gazelle, is derived from *derkesthai*, to see). Furthermore *derkesthai* means the same as *theasthai*. And so the one who surveys and sees all things is named the God (*theos*) of all creation from the fact that he sees (*theasthai*) all. Since God has appeared in the flesh to destroy the hostile powers by his life, he who looked down from heaven upon the earth, is likened to a gazelle. On the other hand, God is also compared to a young stag since he crosses the mountains and hills with his leaping. That is, he tramples and destroys the haughty, evil deeds of demons. The Bible speaks of mountains which were shaken by God's power. As David puts it, they were removed into the "heart of the sea" [Ps 45.2] and submerged in the abyss of the deep. Our Lord spoke of these mountains in the context **J.142** of epilepsy: "If you have faith as a grain of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain [i.e. epilepsy], 'Be uprooted and cast into the sea' " [Mt 17.20]. Since it is the young stag who is able to destroy wild beasts and to put to flight serpents by its breathing and coloration, the bridegroom who watches over all things is compared to a gazelle; but he is also like a young stag in that he leaps over and destroys every opposing force, which the Song symbolically calls mountains and hills.

The voice of the bridegroom was heard when God spoke through the prophets. After the voice the Word came leaping over the mountains that stood in his way, and by bounding over the hills, he made every rebellious power subject to himself, both the inferior powers and those that are greater. The distinction between mountains and hills signifies that both the superior adversary and the inferior one are trampled and destroyed by the same power and authority. The lion and the dragon, superior beasts, are trampled; so too are the serpent **J.143** and the scorpion which are inferior. Let me give an example. **M.864** In the crowds which followed Christ were "mountains," in other words, demons. They were in the synagogues, in the land of Gerasenes and in many other places where they exalted and raised themselves up against human nature. Among them there were both "hills" and "mountains," in other words, inferior and superior demons. But the young stag who destroys serpents and who fashions the disciples into the nature of stags says to them, "I have given you power to tread upon serpents and scorpions" [Lk 10.19]. He treads equally on them all and chases them away in order that the greatness of those who are raised on high by virtue might appear and no longer be obscured by the hillocks of evil. The "mountains of Bethel" seem to refer to the exalted heavenly life if we interpret the name correctly. Hebrew scholars translate Bethel as "house of God." Therefore the Song reads "on the mountains of Bethel" [2.9].

The purified, perceptive eye of the soul perceives these J.144 things, jumping as it does with those divine leapings across the opposing hills. And it speaks of what is to happen in the future as if it were already present. It regards its hope as accomplished fact because it believes so firmly in the promised grace. For she says that he leaps over mountains with speed and grace and jumps from hill to hill. He shows us himself standing behind the wall, speaking to his spouse through the lattices of the windows. The text says, "Behold, he stands behind our wall, looking through the windows, peeping through the lattices" [2.9]. What is described in a literal sense is as follows: the lover speaks through the windows to the bride dwelling within, and the wall between them does not prevent them from conversing since the bridegroom's head peeps through the windows while his eye gazes through the lattices into the house's interior. The anagogical interpretation, however, is close to the understanding which we **J.145** developed earlier. The Song's text draws human nature to God by a certain method and order, first

illuminating it through the prophets and the precepts of the Law. (We understand the windows to be the prophets who let in the light while the lattices are the "woven work" of the precepts of the Law. Through both of these the splendor of true light enters in.) Afterwards, there comes the full brilliance of the light when the true light appears to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death and this light blends itself with our human nature. First the rays of the prophetic writings and the Law illumine our soul through their intelligible windows and lattices; then they create in us a desire to see the sun in the open air. Finally, what we desire becomes a reality.

Let us listen to what he who is not yet within the wall says **M.865** to the Church as he speaks to her through the lattices and the windows. "My beloved answers and says to me, 'Arise, come, my companion, my fair one, my dove. For behold, winter is past, the rain is gone; it has departed. The flowers **J.146** are seen in the land; the time of pruning has arrived. The voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land. The fig tree has put forth its young figs. The vines out forth the tender grape, they give forth their scent'" [2.10-13].

How beautifully the Creator of spring describes the loveliness of the season! David says to him, "You made spring and summer" [Ps 73.17]. He dispels winter's gloom and declares that its sullenness and unpleasant rains have passed. He shows the fields flourishing and adorned with flowers. He says that the flowers are blooming and ready for plucking; flower gatherers can take them either to weave into garlands or to be prepared for perfume. The sound of a voice makes the season enjoyable, and the birds' songs resound all through the groves while the pleasant sound of the dove echoes in our ears. The bridegroom also speaks of the fig tree and the vines present appearance foretells the delight they have in store. The fig tree is putting forth its fruit and the vine is blossoming; both delight our nostrils with their sweet odor. And so the Scripture delights in this rich picture of spring. It puts aside all gloom and takes pleasure in the **J.147** beauty of the description. Still, I believe it is necessary for us not to stop with the description of these pleasant things. Rather, we should be led to the mysteries which are being revealed through these words so as to disclose the treasure of meaning hidden in them.

What then are we saying? At one time human nature was frozen stiff in the cold of idolatry when man's changeable nature had been transformed into the nature of the lifeless objects which he worshipped. Scripture says: "Let them become like them, all those who make them and confide in them" [Ps 115.8]. And this was only inevitable, for those who gaze at the true God receive in themselves the properties of the divine nature, while those who attend to the vanity of idols are changed into what they behold and become stone instead of men. Since our nature had turned to stone by idol worship and had become frozen in the cold of idolatry, unable to advance, the Sun of Righteousness [Mal 4.2] rose in this harsh winter and created spring. The south wind scattered the cold and with the rising of the sun's rays, it warmed the whole earth. Thus mankind, which had been turned into stone by the cold, might be warmed by the Spirit and by the **J.148** rays of the Word and so became once again like "water leaping up into eternal life" [Jn 4.14]. "His wind will blow, and the waters will flow when the rock is changed into pools of water and the stone into springs of water" [Ps 114.8].

The Baptist announced this clearly to the Jews when he **M.868** said that the stones were being raised up to become children of the patriarch [Abraham] like him in virtue [Mt 3.9]. The Church, therefore, hears this message from the Word by receiving the splendor of truth through the windows of the prophets and the lattices of the Law. Meanwhile the symbolic wall of teaching-I mean the Law-remained in place, forming a shadow of the good things to come. It did not show the actual image of these realities. The Truth stood behind it concealed in symbols. The Word's brightness first came to the Church through the prophets; afterwards, with the revelation of the Gospel, every shadowy appearance of symbol was

destroyed and the wall in between was torn down. The air within the house was joined with the heavenly light; it was no longer necessary to have light through the windows because the true light fully illumined the interior by the beams of the Gospel. The Word cries out to his Church through the windows, exhorting it to raise up what has been **J.149** thrown down, saying, "Arise, now from your fall, you who have slipped and fallen into sin. You were tripped by the serpent and fell to the ground in disobedience. Rise up!"

"It is not enough for you," the bridegroom says, "to arise from your fall, but you must advance through progress in the good to finish the course in virtue." We learn this from the Gospel example of the paralytic [Mt 9.6]. Not only does the Word bid the paralytic to take up his pallet; he also orders him to walk. I think that this text signifies advancement and progress towards greater perfection. Christ thus says, "Arise and come." What power lies in this command! Truly the voice of God is this voice of power. The psalmist says, "Behold, he will give you his voice, the voice of power" [Ps 67.34]. Again, "He spoke and they were made. He commanded and they were created" [Ps 32.9]. See, too, how the bridegroom now says to his reclining bride, "Arise," then "come," and immediately his command becomes a reality. Simultaneously **J.150** she receives the Word's power, stands, approaches him and draws near to the Light, as the Word testifies when he summons her and says, "Arise, come, my companion, my fair one, my dove" [2.10].

What is the order of the words here? How does each word relate to the other? How is the sequence of thought preserved unbroken in a kind of a chain? The bride hears the command, is strengthened by the Word, arises, comes forward, approaches, becomes beautiful and is called a dove. How can one behold a beautiful sight in a mirror unless the mirror has reflected the image of a beautiful form? Human nature is also mirror, and it was not beautiful until it drew near to Beauty and was transformed by the image of the divine loveliness. Human nature had the image of the serpent as long as it lay upon the earth and beheld its image. But now that human nature rose up, turned to face the good, and turned its back on evil, it was conformed to what it beheld [i.e., the archetypal beauty]. **M.869** By drawing near to the light, human **J.151** nature becomes light. In this light it takes on the beautiful form of a dove, I mean the dove which indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Word has spoken to the bride and called her "beautiful" due to her proximity to him and "dove" because of her beauty. The text now goes on to say that winter's sadness no longer reigns in our souls because the cold cannot withstand the sun's rays. "For behold, winter is past, the rain is gone; it has departed" [2.11]. The text attributes many names to evil according to its different effects: it is called winter, rain, drops of rain; each signifies a different kind of temptation. The word "winter" symbolizes a variety of evils. In winter what once has flourished now wastes away. The beautiful foliage which naturally adorns the trees falls off the branches and is mixed with the soil. The melody of the birds' music is silenced; the nightingale flees; the swallow sleeps and the turtledove forsakes its nest. Everything imitates death's sadness. The blossom dies and the grass perishes. Like bones stripped of their flesh, the branches are bare, a sorry sight when compared **J.152** to their glorious flowering.

Think too of the awful things which happen to the sea in winter. Rising up from the depths, and swelling into peaks, it resembles mountains with the water mounting up into the form of steep precipices. The sea breaks out of its own domain and makes war on the land, lashing it with wave after wave as if with engines of war.

Now it seems to me that the effects of winter and everything like them have a figurative meaning. What is it that withers and wastes away at this season? What is it that falls from the branches and is absorbed into the earth? What is the silence of the birds? What are the swelling waves? What is the rain?

The dripping of rain? How does the rain pass away? These elements show the symbolic meaning of winter as if it were animate and possessed freedom of choice.

Although I cannot now explain each of these points one by one, I think that their meaning is clear enough. Human nature initially flourished while it was in Paradise and was nourished by the water of the fountains there. Instead of **J.153** leaves man had the blossom of immortality adorning his human nature, but when the winter of disobedience dried up the root, the flower was shaken off and fell to the ground. Man was stripped of the beauty of immortality, the grass of the virtues withered and the love of God grew cold through the multiplication of iniquity. Hence the various passions were raised to a crest by adverse winds, resulting in shipwreck for the soul.

But later there came one who brought spring to our souls. **M.872** When an evil wind roused the sea, he rebuked the winds and said to the sea, "Be quiet, be still" [Mk 4.39]. Everything became still and calm, and once again our nature began to bud and was adorned with its own flowers. The virtues are the flowers in our life, now blossoming and bearing fruit in their own season. Therefore the Word says, ". . . winter is past, the rain is gone; it has departed. The flowers are seen in the land; the time of pruning has arrived" [2.11-12].

J.154 "Do you see," the bridegroom says, "the meadow blossoming with the virtues? Do you see chastity, that splendid, fragrant lily? Do you see the rose of modesty and the violet which is the good fragrance of Christ? Why, then, do you not fashion a crown from these? This is the season in which to pluck these flowers and plait them into crowns and to adorn yourself with them. 'The time of pruning has arrived.' " The turtledove's voice testifies to this, that is, the "voice of one crying in the wilderness" [Mt 3.3]. John is the turtledove. He is the forerunner of this radiant spring who points out to mankind the lovely flowers of virtue and offers them to whomever wishes to gather them. It was he who showed us the "flower from Jesse's root" [Is 11.1], the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" [Jn 1.29] and showed us repentance of sin and life according to virtue. The text says, "The voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land." It calls "land" those condemned in their vice, those whom the Gospel calls tax collectors and harlots, the ones who have heard John's voice while the rest did not accept his preaching. As for the fig, the Song says "the fig tree has put forth its young figs" [2.13]. We should understand the **J.155** text as follows. The fig draws moisture from deep within the earth during hot weather. When a certain amount of liquid has collected within the tree, it rejects by a natural process through the ends of its branches what is superfluous and impure. This process is repeated over and over until the tree puts forth pure, nourishing fruit at the proper time, having been cleansed of every undesirable quality. Before producing sweet and perfect fruit, the fig tree puts forth a kind of forerunner called a "young fig" which is sometimes edible for those who wish to take it. However, it is not the fruit itself, but its prelude. Still, it gives some idea of what the fully grown fruit will be like, for the early figs, which the text says the tree has put forth, are a sign of the edible ones.

The Song describes the spiritual spring to the bride, a season between the gloom of winter and the joyful fruits of summer. For this reason it proclaims in great detail the passing of the evils (of winter), but does not yet openly reveal the perfect fruits of virtue. These it will dispense at the proper time when summer arrives. Surely you know what is meant **M.873** by summer from the Lord's saying, "The harvest is the **J.156** completion of the age" [Mt 13.39]. Now the text shows the hopes that bloom by means of virtue whose fruit, as the prophet says, comes forth in due season [Ps 1.3]. Human nature is like the fig tree mentioned above, and it gathers evil moisture during the "winter" of the spirit. And so, he who brings the spiritual "spring" to us and tends to our growth, first casts out of our nature whatever is impure and superfluous--not through branches but through our confession. Then he adds to our life certain distinctive

marks of the blessedness hoped for by proper living, just as he proclaims the sweet figs to come by the young figs. And this is what is meant by: "The fig tree has put forth its young figs."

This is the meaning of the flourishing vine [2.13], whose wine gladdens the heart [Ps 103.15] and will one day fill the cup of wisdom. It will be freely offered to those who drink from the exalted reaching to enjoy a good and sober inebriation. I mean that inebriation through which men pass ecstatically from the material to the divine realm. Now the **J.157** vine blossoms through its buds and emits a fragrant odor, sweet and delicate, which is combined to make an all-encompassing aroma. You are well acquainted with this fragrance from St. Paul [2Cor 2.16], and you know how it applies to those who are saved.

The Word shows these things to the bride as tokens of the beautiful springtime of the soul. Then he urges her to enjoy what is before her, and he spurs her on by saying, "Arise, come, my companion, my fair one, my dove" [2.13]. What great teaching the Word reveals in these few words! The inspired writer does not repeat this verse word for word for no reason at all. The very repetition indicates that there is a very important teaching here. What the Song says is this: The blessed, eternal nature surpassing all understanding contains all things in itself and is limited by nothing. For no name or concept can impose limits to it: not time, place, color, form, image, bulk, quantity, dimension or anything else. Every good conceived as belonging to God's nature is present in infinite and unbounded measure. For evil has no place and the good is boundless.

J.158 In changeable human nature, good and evil exist by turns because we have the capacity to choose either one of two contraries. As a result, the good in us alternates with the evil, and the evil becomes a limit on the good. All the activities of our souls, insofar as they are opposed, define and limit one another. On the other hand, the divine nature is simple, pure, of one kind, unmoved, unchangeable, always the same and always self-contained. Because it is incapable of **M.876** fellowship with evil, it remains unlimited in the good. It recognizes no limits because it contains no opposites in itself. So, then, when God draws a human soul to participate in himself, he always remains in equal measure superior to the participating soul because of his superabundant goodness. On the one hand, the soul continually grows through participation in what is beyond it and never stops growing so that the more the soul participates in it, the more she recognizes that it transcends her as much as before.

We now see the bride being led by the Word up a rising staircase by the steps of virtue to the heights of perfection. **J.159** First the Word sends her a ray of light through the windows of the prophets and the lattices of the Law. He exhorts her to draw near to the light and to become beautiful by being transformed into a dove's image in the light. The bride at this point partakes in the good as much as she can. Then he starts again to draw her to participate in a higher beauty as if she had never tasted it. As she progresses, her desire grows with each step; because there is always an unlimited good beyond what the bride has attained, she always seems to be just beginning her ascent.

Therefore the Word says once again to the bride whom he has awakened, "Arise." And when she has come to him he says, "Come." For one who has been called to rise in this way can always rise further, and one who runs to the Lord will always have wide open spaces before him. And so we must constantly rise and never cease drawing closer. As often as the bridegroom says "Arise" and "Come," he gives the power to ascend to what is better. Thus you must understand **J.160** what follows in the text. When the bridegroom exhorts the bride who is already beautiful to become beautiful, he clearly recalls the words of the Apostle who bids the same image to be transformed "from glory to glory" [2Cor 3.18]. By glory he means what we have grasped and found at any given moment. No matter how great and exalted that glory may be, we believe that it is less than that for which we still hope. Although she is a dove by what she had

achieved, the bride is bidden to become a dove once again by being transformed into something better. If this happens, the text will show us something better by this name (dove).

"Come by yourself, my dove, in the shelter of the rock, near the wall" [2.14]. What is the ascent to perfection which these words indicate? No longer must we look to things that attract and excite us. We must take as our guide our own longing for what is better. He says, "Come by yourself"--not out **M.877** of sadness or necessity, but by yourself, confirming your **J.161** desire for the good by your own reason and not led by necessity. Virtue must be uncoerced, voluntary and free of all necessity. This was the case with David who realized that of all his deeds only what he did freely was pleasing to God, and he promised to offer sacrifice voluntarily. So it is with all the saints who offer themselves freely to God and who are not led by necessity.

Now you too must show a perfect disposition for desiring to rise to what is better. Once this is accomplished, the bridegroom says that you will come into "the shelter of the rock near the wall." If we try to clarify what is expressed in the symbols, the meaning is as follows: there is one shelter for the human soul, the sublime Gospel. The person who is in this shelter does not need to be taught by types and symbols, for the truth clarifies the obscure message of the Law. No one understanding our faith would deny that the Gospel can be called a rock because in many places Scripture teaches that the Gospel is a rock.

Now this means, "If you, oh soul, have been practiced in the Law and have looked with your mind through the **J.162** prophetic windows at the bright rays, no longer abide in the shadow of the wall. The wall casts a shadow of the future good; it does not provide a true image of reality. You must pass from the wall to the rock which is next to it. The rock is near the wall since the Law was a wall that protected the faith of the Gospel, and the teachings of the Law are closely related to those of the Gospel. What could be closer to "Do not commit adultery" than "Do not lust?" Also, what could be closer to being undefiled by murder than not to defile the heart by anger? Since the shelter of the rock lies close to the wall, your passage from the wall to the rock is short. There is circumcision in both the wall and the rock; there is a lamb in both, and blood, and a Pasch. So, too, for almost everything else, for they are all related to one another. However, the rock is spiritual while the wall is earthly, for it has been fashioned of our earthly clay. The rock of the Gospel, on the other hand, has no fleshly clay in its teaching. A man is "circumcised," but he remains whole and suffers no mutilation in his physical nature. He keeps the Sabbath by not committing sin and does **J.163** not rest from doing good because he has learned that "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" [Mt 12.12]. Such a man takes food without discrimination, yet he touches nothing unclean. He is taught by the rock that "nothing entering through the mouth is impure" [Mt 15.17]. The rock rejects all the corporeal observances of the Law and elevates the meaning of the words to the spiritual and intellectual realm. As Paul says: "The Law is spiritual" [Rom 7.14]. For he who truly rejects the Law comes under the "shelter of the rock" of the Gospel which is near the material wall.

M.880 The Word cried out these words through the windows to his bride, and she, a dove, responds beautifully, having been illumined by a ray of comprehension and having recognized the rock that is Christ. She says, "Show me, your face, and let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your countenance is beautiful" [2.14]. The meaning of this verse is as follows: "No longer converse with me through the symbols of the prophets and the Law. That I may see, show yourself openly that I may come within the rock of the Gospel and leave behind the wall of Law. That I may hear let your voice resound in my ears. If your voice is so sweet through **J.164** the prophetic windows, how much more lovable will be the sight of you face to face!

The bride comprehended the mystery in the rock of the Gospel to which the Word led her by many and various ways [Heb 1.1] while he was at the windows. Now she desires his appearance in the flesh that the Word may become flesh and God may be seen in the flesh and speak about the divine promises of eternal happiness for those who are worthy. Notice how the words of Simeon agree with the bride's wish: "Now you may dismiss your servant, Lord, in peace according to your word. Because my eyes have seen your salvation" [Lk 2.29-30]. Simeon saw just as the bride desired to see. Those who have received Christ's sweet voice recognize the grace of the Gospel and exclaim: "You have the words of eternal life" [Jn 6.68].

The pure bridegroom receives the just petition of his bride and is about to show himself openly. First he exhorts the hunters to catch the foxes to prevent them from spoiling the vines. "Catch the little foxes that spoil the vines" [2.15], **J.165** The vines will flourish if what destroys them is removed. "Catch the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines put forth tender grapes." It is possible then, to do justice to the nobility of these thoughts? What marvel of divine greatness does the text contain? What effect of divine power underlies the meaning of the text? These words of the Song are spoken of that murderer, powerful in evil, whose tongue is a sharpened razor, of which the prophet says, "The sharpened arrows of the Mighty, with coals that devastate" [Ps 119.4]; and "He lies in secret as a lion in his den" [Ps 10.9]. He is the great serpent, the apostate, hell with his mouth wide open, the ruler of the powers of darkness who has power over death. He is this and all the other things which the prophecies say about him. He destroyed the boundaries between nations which had been clearly established by the Most High [Dt 32.8] **M.881** according to the number of his angels. He seized the world as one would a bird's nest. He carried it off as eggs from its nest. He said that he would place his throne above the clouds and be **J.166** like the Most High. What the book of Job says of him is fearful and terrifying [Job 40.18, 41.7]: his sides are brass, his back is molten iron, his entrails are of emery stone--all that and more Scripture says of him. This is the great and mighty commander of the demonic legions. But what does the sole, true power call him? A little fox! And all those who the devil, his entire host, are ridiculed. God calls them by the same name and urges the hunters on against them. Perhaps these hunters could be the angelic powers who escort the Lord when he appears upon earth. They go with the King of Glory into the world and manifest him to those who do not know him. "Who is this king of glory? He who is mighty and strong in battle" [Ps 23.8]. These hunters might also be the "spirits who are sent to minister to those who are about to inherit salvation" [Heb 1.14]. Or perhaps they are the holy apostles **J.167** sent to hunt these beasts. The Lord said to them, "I will make you fishers of men" [Mt 4.19]. For they could not accomplish their task of fishing for men, capturing the souls of those who are being saved in the net of their words, unless they have first cast out these beasts from their lairs unless they had cast out those little foxes from men's hearts where they hid. Once the little foxes were no longer lurking in the dens of men's hearts, the apostles made a place for the Son of Man "where he might lay his hand" [Mt 8.20].

Whoever the hunters may be according to the text, from the commands given them we learn the ineffable greatness of the divine power. For God does not say, "Hunt the wild boar of the forest which devastates God's vine, nor the solitary wild boar, nor the raging lion, nor the great whale, nor the serpent of the deep." The Word would show his hunters what power our adversaries have by such names as these. Instead he says that all these earthly powers against which we fight--the principalities and powers, the cosmic forces of darkness, the evil spirits--are all "little foxes," wretched and miserable creatures in comparison with your power. If **J.168** you are victorious over such powers, you will win a grace that will be your own. The vine of our human nature will begin to hem clusters of grapes and the flowers of a life of virtue. "Catch the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines put forth tender grapes."

The vine has hearkened to the divine command like the woman of whom David says, "Your wife

is as a fruitful vine" [Ps 127.3]. She beheld herself cleansed from the destructive power of these beasts by the power of him who commanded her, and she immediately committed herself to the husbandman who has taken down the intervening wall. No longer can the wall of the Law separate her from union with the one she desires. She says, "My beloved is mine, and I am his. He feeds **M.884** his flock among the lilies. Until the day dawns, and the shadows flee" [2.16-17]. That is, "I knew him face to face, the one who exists from eternity, and for my sake he rose up in human form from my sister the synagogue. In him I rest and I am his dwelling." For he is the good shepherd who **J.169** pastures the flock not with grass, but nourishes his sheep with pure lilies. Truly they no longer feed on grass; grass is the proper nourishment for irrational beasts. Since man is rational, he is nourished by the true Word. But if man is satisfied with such grass, he will become grass: "All flesh is grass" [Is 40.6] as long as it is flesh. However, if a person becomes spirit being born from Spirit, no longer does he graze upon grass but his nourishment is the Spirit which the lily's purity and fragrance symbolize. He will be a pure and fragrant lily, having been changed into the substance of the good he eats. This is the day which has poured forth its rays, rather, it has "breathed forth," for the divine voice calls this diffusion of rays effected by the Spirit an "exaltation." By its light the shadows of life are removed. It is these shadows chased after **J.170** by those who have not had the eye of their soul enlightened by the light of truth. They regard shadow and vanity as real, and true being they regard as non-existent. But those who are nourished by the lilies, that is, persons whose souls are fattened by a pure and fragrant nourishment, have rid themselves of every deceitful and shadowy appearance which people strive for in this life. They have become sons of light and day and will see the true substance of things.

The bride beholds these things and urges the Word to hasten the realization of her hopes: "Turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of the ravines" [2.17]. "Look as a gazelle which sees the thoughts of men and reads their hearts. Blot out the offspring of vice as a young stag destroys a serpent. You see the hollow mountains of man's life which are valleys more than ridges." Therefore the Word runs quickly upon the mountains which have **J.171** become valleys, for whatever exalts itself against the truth is not a mountain but a pit, a ravine and not a height. If you run upon these, he says, "every valley will be filled and every mountain shall be brought low" [Is 40.4]. This is what the soul says whom the Word nourishes not on thorns or grass but on the good fragrance of the lilies of a pure life. May we too be filled and nourished on these same lilies by the Word, to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

THE SIXTH HOMILY

The Song of Songs, 3.1-8

1. By night on my bed I sought him
whom my soul loves.
I sought him, but found him not.
I called him, but he did not hear me.
2. I will rise now, and go about in the city,
in the marketplaces, and in the streets,
and I will seek him whom my soul loves.
I sought him, but I found him not.
The watchmen who go their round in the city found me.
3. "Have you seen him who my soul loves?"

It was a little while after I passed them,

4. that I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him, and did not let him go,
until I brought him into my mother's house,
and into the chamber of her who conceived me.
5. I have charged you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the powers and by the virtues of the field,
that you do not rouse nor awake love
until it pleases.
6. Who is this who comes up from the wilderness
as pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,
with all the powders of the perfumer?
7. Behold Solomon's bed; sixty mighty men
of the mighty ones of Israel are round about it.
8. They all hold a sword, being expert in war:
every man has his sword upon his thigh
because of fear by night.

* * *

J.172 & M.885 Once again we obtain some great, lofty teachings in the **J.173** us by examples taken from her own experience, namely, of the necessity to teach lovers of transcendent beauty about God. We now learn what she means (I believe we must first draw out the sense contained in the text and then accommodate the divinely inspired words to what we examined earlier). If I may put it in a few words, the teaching presented to us says that creation is divided into two distinct classes, one sensible and material, the other being intelligible and spiritual. The sensible is grasped by sense, while the intelligible transcends sensible comprehension. The intelligible is infinite and unbounded, while the material is limited, for everything material is determined by quantity and quality. Anything with mass, form, appearance and shape limits our understanding so that the person who examines material creation can perceive nothing beyond these bounds through his imagination.

The intelligible and spiritual is free from constraint; it **J.174** escapes limitation and is circumscribed by nothing. Furthermore, a spiritual nature has two aspects. First, the uncreated or Creator of beings always remains what it is, and always being itself, it does not admit an increase or diminution with respect to the good. The second aspect comes into existence through creation and always looks back to its first cause. By participation in the transcendent, it continually remains stable in the good; in a certain sense, it is always being created while ever changing for the better in its growth in perfection. Neither is it limited, nor can it be circumscribed in its growth towards the good; however, its present state of goodness, even if especially great and perfect, is only the beginning of a more transcendent, better stage. The Apostle's words are thus **M.888** verified: stretching out to what lies before is related to forgetfulness of earlier accomplishments [Phil 3.13]. The good which is superior to the one already attained holds the attention of those participating in it while not allowing them to look at the past; by enjoying what is more worthy, their memory of inferior things is blotted out.

J.175 This is the sense of the bride's words, but it is time to first recall the divinely inspired text and then adapt to it what we had previously examined: "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. I called him, but he did not hear me. I will rise now and go about in the city, in the marketplaces, and in the streets, and I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but I found him not. The watchmen who go their rounds in the city found me. 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?' It was a little white I held him, and did not let him go, until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her who conceived me" [3.1-4].

How, then, can we find here the text's spiritual sense as we had done with regard to other passages? We saw that each of the bride's earlier ascents had a meaning: she always made progress and never remained in the good attained as when she was compared to a horse which overthrew the Egyptian tyrant. The bride was compared to chains and a necklace, an **J.176** ornament round the neck. Not being satisfied with these, she presses on to what is still higher. Through sweet nard she recognizes the divine fragrance; she does not stop here but takes what she desires and suspends it between her spiritual breasts like a fragrant sachet. Placed in the space of her heart, it issues divine teachings.

Next the bride brings forth a piece of fruit, the husbandman himself, calling him a cluster of grapes while she gives forth a sweet, delicate scent through her blossoms. In her growth through these ascents, the bride is called beautiful; she becomes the bridegroom's companion, and the beauty of her eyes is compared to a dove's. The bride goes even further; her vision is clearer, and she carefully considers the Word's beauty; she marvels how he descended in a shadowy form upon the bed of this life here below, and has been shaded over by the material nature of a human body.

The bride then describes the house of virtue. Its roof is **J.177** made of cedar and cypress not susceptible to decay or corruption. By these terms she explains her stable, unswerving attitude for the good. Next she shows by a comparison her **M.889** change for the better, appearing as a lily among thorns. Once again she discerns a difference between her bridegroom and others, for she calls him an apple in the midst of unfruitful trees adorned with the fresh fruit of spring. She comes under her bridegroom's shadow, enters his house, is supported by fragrances, is propped up by apples, receives his chosen arrow in her heart through a sweet wound and becomes an arrow once again in an archer's hands. With his left hand he aims the arrow's tip to the target above while his right hand draws the arrow back to himself.

Then, as if the bride has already attained perfection, she tells the other companions of her ardent desire and excites their love by an oath. Who would not say that the soul exalted to such a height has reached the limit of perfection? But the end **J.178** of the bride's advancements becomes a beginning for further advancement. All these examples are like voices summoning the soul to contemplate the [heavenly] mysteries. The bride begins to see her desired bridegroom, but he appears to her eyes in another form, a roe and a young hart. Neither is the bridegroom within our vision, nor does he appear in the same place, but he leaps upon the mountains, bounding from the high summits to little hills.

Once again the bride is established in a better state when a second call comes to her urging her to forsake the wall's shadow and go into open sunlight, to take her rest upon the rock's shelter near the wall, to delight in the spring, to gather beautiful flowers ready to be cut at the time of full blossom and anything else this season yields for enjoyment with the melodious voices of the birds. Through all these things the bride becomes even more perfect saying that she is worthy to openly see her spouse's face and to listen to him directly instead of through intermediaries.

It is right for the soul to be glad since she has reached in her lofty ascent the summit of her desires. For what greater happiness can be conceived of than to see God? But this limit **J.179** of her attainment is the beginning of her hope for what lies beyond. Again she hears her spouse exhorting the hunters to save the spiritual vines and to pursue the beasts--those little foxes--laying waste their fruit. Once this is accomplished, the two spouses are united: God is in the soul, and the soul once again dwells in God. The bride says, "My beloved is mine, and I am his who feed among the lilies," the same one who has transformed human life from shadowy phantasms to the supreme truth. Observe the height to which the bride ascends, going from strength to strength, as the prophet says [Ps 83.8] and appearing to have obtained the summit of her hope. What can be higher **M.892** than being in the beloved and having him in oneself? The bride is perplexed and distressed because she does not have the object of her desire, and she makes known her soul's anxiety by describing how she found the object of her search.

By a contemplation of the words before us, we are clearly **J.180** taught not to limit the greatness of God's nature. Neither can any measure of knowledge limit the comprehension of our objective and prevent us from moving further on. But the mind running on high through its understanding of transcendent reality should realize that all perfection of knowledge attainable by human nature is only the beginning of a desire for more lofty things. Diligently consider what is offered for our examination and be mindful that the description of the bridal chamber and marital elements is material for contemplation. Their meaning is transferred to a pure and spiritual level by which the text presents us doctrines. Therefore the text says that the bride is the soul; God is called a bridegroom whom the soul loves with her whole heart, soul and strength. **J.181** Having reached, as she thought, the summit of her hope, and already thinking that she is united to her beloved, the bride calls "bed" this more perfect participation in the good and calls "night" the time of darkness. By "night" the bride shows us the contemplation of what is unseen and like Moses, she is in the darkness of God's presence [Ex 20.21]. Of him the prophet says, "He has placed darkness as a concealment round about him" [Ps 17.12].

Having attained this, the bride is taught that, far from attaining perfection, she has not even come near to it. "Now that I have become worthy of these realities, I am resting upon the bed of all I have thus understood. When I enter the invisible realm after having forsaken sensual perception, I am embraced by the divine night, and I seek him hidden in the cloud. Then did I love my desired one, even though He escaped my thoughts. For 'I sought him on my bed at night' that I might know his substance, beginning and end, and in what his being consists but I did not find him.' I called him by name as far as it was in my power to find him who lacks a name, yet the meaning of a name would not help me attain him whom I sought."

J.182 & M.893 How can he who transcends every name be discovered by a name? She says, "'I called him, and he did not answer me.' I knew then that the greatness of his glory and sanctity has no end." Therefore, the bride rises again and goes about in spirit through the spiritual, transcendent realm which she calls a "city" where there are principalities, dominations and thrones assigned to powers. She calls a "marketplace" the solemn assembly of the heavenly host and names "streets" a multitude beyond counting as if in these she can find her beloved. While the bride went about all these places, she scrutinized the entire angelic rank. Not having seen him whom she sought among these good things, she reasoned with herself, "Can my beloved be comprehended? And she says to them, 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?' " They kept silent, signifying that the one sought after is incomprehensible. After the bride passed throughout that transcendent **J.183** city and did not perceive her love among immaterial and spiritual beings, she forsakes everything she has found. She realizes that her sought-after love is known only in her impossibility to comprehend his essence and that every sign becomes a hindrance to those who seek him. Therefore the bride says, " 'When I passed them by a little,' I left every creature and

passed by every intelligible being in creation; having forsaken every manner of comprehension, I found my beloved by faith. No longer will I let him go once found by faith until he comes within my chamber." The "chamber" is indeed the heart which becomes an acceptable dwelling of God when it returns to that state which it had in the beginning made by "her who conceived me." We would be correct by understanding "mother" as the first cause of our being.

It is time to state once again the divine words so that they may agree with what is now under consideration: **J.184** "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. I called him, but he did not hear me. I will rise now and go about in the city, in the marketplaces, and in the streets, and I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but I did not find him. The watchmen who go their rounds in the city found me. 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?' It was a little while after I passed them that I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and did not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her who conceived me" [3.1-4].

After these words the bride speaks lovingly to the daughters of Jerusalem whom the text had earlier called "thorns" when comparing the bride to a lily. By an oath of **M.896** the "powers" in the world she makes the daughters rise to an equal measure of love so that the bridegroom's will might be fulfilled in them. What was stated above is the world in which are "virtues" and "powers" and the will of a person **J.185** loving with his whole heart and soul. We have no need to speak at length of these matters, for we have sufficiently examined the sense of these words. If we can somehow ascend with the perfect dove flying to the heights, we can hear the voice of the bridegroom's friends marveling at his ascent from the desert. He creates an especially great astonishment for those seeing him since the desert itself produced it as in imitation of beautiful trees cultivated in the desert by the smoke of incense. This incense was myrrh and frankincense. By their smoke something like a cloud rises from the ground-up particles of spices. It ascends, so that in place of dust mingled with air, we have a subtle diffusion of fragrances forming an upright, high cloud of dust.

The Song now reads, "Who is this who comes up from the wilderness as pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the powders of the perfumer" [3.6]? If anyone should carefully pay attention to these words, he will find the truth of what we have already set forth. In **J.186** theatrical displays those acting the designated plot are reckoned as other persons because they change their appearances by a variety of masks. The actor appearing now as a slave or a private citizen is seen a little later as a prince and a soldier; taking off the role of a commoner, he becomes a commander or is clothed with the garb of a king. Thus it is among persons advancing in virtue; being transformed from glory to glory [2Cor 3.18], they do not always remain in the same character but according to the degree of perfection established in each person, a different character will shine in their lives: a different one succeeds the other because of their increase in the good.

The bridegroom's friends are astonished at what they behold. At first they perceive the bride as beautiful but beautiful as a woman; later they glorify her loveliness by comparing it to gold with studs of silver. They no longer gaze at her previous characteristics but attribute to her a greater sublimity; not only do they marvel at her ascent but the depth from which she arose. This is what constitutes the intensity of their amazement: she alone is seen ascending and is **J.187** compared to grove of trees, for a pillar is though to be seen rising from the desert and becoming larger. The nourishment of this pillar is not fertile, irrigated land but a parched, arid wasteland. Where are these pillars rooted, and how do they grow? The roots are the perfumes' powders irrigated by **M.897** the smoke of incense bedewing this grove with its fragrance. The text abounds with such praise of the bride. The bride's companions ask each other about her as if she appeared in a form different from her first one. The praise with respect to her progress in

virtue in especially perfect, testifying to her great change and transformation for the better.

Those amazed at the unusual manner her form has blossomed say that this is her coming up from the desert whom we first saw as black. How has the bride washed off her dark form? How does her face now gleam as fallen snow? It seems that the desert caused these things and made her shoot rise **J.188** up and change into such beauty. For not by accident nor by chance did she run on high, but she obtained her beauty by her own efforts through continence and diligence. Thus did the prophet's soul thirst [Ps 63.2] for the divine spring: because his flesh was like an arid, unwatered desert, he has this divine thirst. The bride's ascent from the desert testifies that she rose to such a height through her diligence and continence to make her spouse's friends marvel. They tell of her beauty through many images because not even one of them can adequately express it. They first compare her beauty to pillars. She is compared not to just one tree but to a multitude of trees as if her varied, manifold virtues can be described by a grove.

Next the bride's beauty is compared to the smoke of incense; not simply this, but incense mixed with myrrh and frankincense as if her beauty can only be described by the combination of these two fragrances. Another praise comes **J.189** from the mixture of these fragrances: myrrh is used for burying the dead whereas frankincense in a certain sense is consecrated for God's honor. Whoever is about to dedicate himself to God's worship cannot wholly be frankincense consecrated to God unless he first becomes myrrh, that is, unless he mortifies his members on earth [Col. 3.5] by having been buried with him who experienced death for us, and by taking that myrrh used for the Lord in the tomb for mortifying his members in his own flesh. Once this has been accomplished, every perfume from virtue in life's course is ground into a fine material to produce that sweet powder. Whoever inhales it becomes fragrant and filled with the spirit of the perfume.

After bearing witness to the bride's loveliness, the bridegroom's friends who prepare a pure wedding chamber and **J.190** are escorts for the chaste bride, show her the beauty of the **M.900** royal bed because they want to excite in her a desire for the divine, immaculate marriage. This is the description of the royal wedding bed offered to the bride in the Song: "Behold, Solomon's bed; sixty mighty men of the mighty ones of Israel are round about it. They all hold a sword, being expert in war. Every man has his sword upon his thigh because of fear by night" [3.7-8]. Because history does not mention this bed, its meaning might become clear through the physical objects written about Solomon: his rule, table, and other things which the text [3 Kg or 1 Kg 7 .38-50] describes in detail. Nothing new or unusual is said regarding the bed. We do not have to stay with the text's literal meaning, but by more careful consideration we should shift our attention from the material appearances to a spiritual contemplation.

Who was adorned about the nuptial bed by sixty armed men trained in the fearful deeds of war? What are the swords fastened at their sides, **J.191** the terror they strike into our dark thoughts? (For the text tells of a frightful terror resulting from certain nocturnal fears, and this refers to the armed soldiers.) The sense of these words must be examined in consequence of what we said earlier. What then is their meaning? Perhaps the loveliness of the divine beauty has something fearful about it as characterized by elements contrary to corporeal beauty. Hence, what attracts our desire is pleasant to the sight, soft to the touch and not associated with anything fearful or terrifying. On the other hand, that incorruptible beauty is fearful, terrifying and not easily frightened. Since our desire for carnal things in the body's members is subject to desire for carnal things in the body's members is subject to the mind, captivates it and carries away the will. Therefore it becomes God's enemy; as the Apostle says, the wisdom of the flesh arises from what is inimical to God [Rom 8.7]. It **J.192** follows that the love of God arises from what is opposed to carnal desire. If carnal desire consists of weakness, laxity, and laziness, the love of God is made up of a fearful, terrifying fortitude. An unrelenting anger scares and puts to flight the ambush resulting from

pleasure, thus revealing the soul's beauty as pure and no longer sullied by a desire for carnal pleasure. The king's nuptial bed is therefore surrounded by armed men expert in battle. The sword at the thigh terrorizes and causes fear against dark, nocturnal thoughts and against those who lie in ambush to shoot arrows in the darkness at the upright of heart [Ps 10.2].

M.901 The weapons of those standing guard around the bed destroy impure desires which is clear from the text, "They are expert in war; every man has his sword upon his thigh" [3.8]. They truly know how to wage war against flesh and blood with swords fastened on their thighs. The person familiar with **J.193** scriptural concepts and mysteries understands this from the term "thigh" and knows that the sword signifies the Word. He who has girded himself with this fearful weapon--I mean the sword of temperance--is the beloved lying upon his incorruptible bed, one of "the mightily ones of Israel" worthy to be numbered among the sixty. We have no doubt that this number has a mystical significance, but it is clear to those alone whom the Spirit's grace reveals his hidden mysteries. We rightly say that the literal understanding of the text suffices as in the case of Moses who legislated for the Pasch. Visible flesh is eaten while the obscurity in the bones is left hidden [Ex 12.9]. If anyone desires the text's hidden marrow, let him seek it from the One who reveals the hidden mysteries to those who are worthy. Nevertheless, we should not give the impression of leaving the text unexamined nor of neglecting God's precept exhorting us to search the scriptures [Jn 5.39]. Let **J.194** us now consider what pertains to these sixty armed men. At God's bidding Moses received twelve rods in accord with the number of Israel's tribes, but one which blossomed was found more worthy than the rest [Num 17.2]. Again, Joshua, son of Nun, took stones from the Jordan River, the same number as the tribes of Israel [Jos 4.9]. Not one was rejected, but all equally bore witness to the mystery that occurred at the Jordan.

The significance of these words is great, for the text shows that the people made progress in perfection. In the beginning of their legislation, one rod was found living and blossoming while the rest were rejected as dry and barren. When time had passed and the people had become more diligent in understanding the Law's precepts, they understood and accepted the second circumcision instituted by Joshua [Jos 5.2-9], for the stone knife cut away everything unclean (The perceptive listener will certainly grasp the significance of the rock and knife). As the life of virtue according to the Law was strengthened in the people, not one of the stones with the name of the Israelite tribes was rejected. Since we expect **J.195** an increase of the good with time's progression, the virtue of Israel indeed became stronger. The Song of Songs now tells us that a stone or a rod is not taken from each of the tribes of Israel. Instead, we have five warriors expert in battle from **M.904** the "mighty ones of Israel" bearing swords standing around the divine bed. None, therefore, are rejected because the choice of each tribe is five: five multiplied by twelve, gives us the number sixty. It is necessary, then, to have five fearful men from each tribe armed as guards for the royal bed. If this were not possible, we would not have the number of sixty.

How can we dare to consider the rest of this text? Why are there five armed men from each tribe guarding the royal bed? How does each of these five armed warriors become a fearful adversary with his sword at his thigh? Is it not clear that one man is the same as these five armed warriors? They **J.196** symbolize each of the five senses, for each warrior exposes his sword to terrorize the enemy. The sword of the eye always looks upon the Lord to see correctly and is never defiled by the sight of anything unclean. Likewise, the sword of hearing listens to the divine precepts and never receives a vain word. Similarly, we can arm taste, touch and smell by the sword of temperance, sheathing each of the senses in armor. They defend us against the shock and panic of our dark enemies since night and darkness is the time when plots are hatched against our souls. The prophet says that at this time the beasts of the field are intent upon making their wicked food from God's flocks. "You have made darkness, and it was night; in it all the wild beasts of the forest go out; the young lions roar after their prey" [Ps 103.20].

Israel, therefore, represents all the saved (for “not all Israelites are from Israel” [Rom 9.6] but only those who look **J.197** towards God are rightly called this name by reason of their title). The person looking towards God does not pay attention to sin with his senses. (No one can regard two masters, but he must hate one if he is to love the other [Mt 6.24]). Therefore the one bed of the king is for all who are saved. If the pure of heart will see God, they are rightly called Israel. This name for the twelve tribes is, in a mystical sense, marvelously summed up by the number sixty. One warrior taken from each of the twelve is divided into five according to the number of the senses. Therefore all who have put on the divine armor surround the king's bed and are one Israel. Because the twelve **M.905** tribes are the most valiant, the full number of these valiant men comes to the sum of sixty. There is one battle-line, one army, one bed, that is, one Church and one people who will **J.198** become one bride united in harmony in the fellowship of one body under one commander, one leader, and one bridegroom.

On the other hand, the bed signifies rest for the saved. We learn from the Lord who says to the one shamelessly knocking on the door at night, "The door is already shut, and my children are with me in bed" [Lk 11.7]. Rightly does he call "children" those who have achieved a state free from passion through the weapons of justice. By this example we are instructed that the good attained by our own diligence is none other than the one implanted in our nature at the beginning. When a person has his sword girded upon his thigh by devoting his life to virtue, he has rejected passion and becomes a child undisturbed by passion; the state of infancy is not subject to passion. Therefore the lesson of these warriors about the royal bed and the children in bed have one meaning: both are free from passion, the children have not experienced it while the warriors have driven it away. The children have not known passion, while the warriors have returned to their first state by becoming children through **J.199** freedom from passion. Blessedness is found in all three: the child, warrior and Israelite. As an Israelite, he sees God with a pure heart; as a warrior, he guards the king's bed, that is, his own heart, in a state free from passion and in purity; as a child, he rests upon the couch of blessedness in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.