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LIGHT & LIFE

FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., *DIRECTOR*

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FROM FR. REGINALD

As this issue of *Light and Life* goes to press, the Western Dominicans have just finished their Provincial Chapter. This is an important event that takes place every four years, in which we elect the men who will lead us and direct our ministries. I am very grateful to my brothers for the trust that moved them to reappoint me director of the Rosary Center, which means that I shall continue to write the reflections for *Light and Life* for another four years.

During the Chapter someone suggested that I invite other Dominicans to share their preaching skills in these pages, and I am very proud to do so with this issue. When you read Fr. Thompson's comments on the *Song of Songs* I am certain that you, like me, will long to read more about this mysterious, haunting, and richly-rewarding spiritual text.

One of the loyal volunteers at the Rosary Center asked me to encourage our readers who may not be members of the Rosary Confraternity to join. Membership costs nothing except to pray fifteen decades of the Rosary each week. The rewards, on the other hand, are infinite. Among them is benefitting from the prayers offered by every other member of the Rosary Confraternity throughout the world. We always strive to make things simple at the Rosary Center, so we have added an on-line Confraternity sign-up link to our web site. Take a look, and enroll now. ■



PIETA
Silhouette by Sr. Jean Dorcy, O.P.

WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF LOVE? THE SONG OF SONGS FOR CATHOLICS

Fr. James Thompson, O.P.

A PUZZLING BOOK OF POETRY

Two books of the Bible are so enigmatic that each has as many interpretations as there are interpreters. You are probably not surprised that one of the books I have in mind is the book of *Revelation*. In the Old Testament, though, the *Song of Songs*, sometimes known as the *Book of Canticles*, poses similar difficulties for commentators. In fact, a glance at the history of the

commentary of this beautiful poem would tempt me to say that the *Song of Songs* is the most difficult of all the books in the Bible to interpret. On the other hand, its general message is simple to state. This is the theme of countless romances, from literary masterpieces to pulp fiction: love conquers all. But not just any old sort of love will do, contrary to many of those same romances.

THE CENTRAL CONCEPT

My purpose in these reflections is to provide Catholic readers of the Bible with a concise orientation to the *Song of Songs*. The central concept is quite simple: The
(continued on page 4)

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Marks of the Church, III: Holy

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

THE OLDEST SIGN OF THE CHURCH

Of the so-called “marks” of the Church, we are told that the oldest is the sign of holiness. The Apostles’ Creed, which was composed in the late 1st, or early 2nd Century, already professes belief in the “Holy Catholic Church.” Thus, our profession of faith not only expresses our personal belief in this significant aspect of the Church, it links us to a centuries-old acknowledgment of a special intervention of God’s grace in our lives.

We have already noted the Catechism’s teaching that “The word ‘Church...means a convocation or assembly... usually for a religious purpose” (CCC, 752). However, this assembly is not a random gathering. Although the Church has the potential to embrace all of humankind, it is, for the present, a very exclusive group. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul greets his listeners as “...God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7).

THE CALL TO HOLINESS

In the Letter to the Ephesians he amplifies the description of those whom God has called,

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are the fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22).

God’s call is the all-important beginning of the Church, as well as the obvious source of its holiness. In fact, when we speak of the Church’s sanctity, we understand a holiness that is altogether supernatural, and which corresponds to the holiness of the Church’s Founder. This holiness overflows in love, which enables the Church, its institutions, and us, its members, to be the practical means of her sanctifying presence in the world.

THE EFFECT OF THE CALL

To grasp the way in which God’s love sanctifies the Church, we must first grasp the theological understanding of love, which begins with God. When he writes of the love that unites us to God, St. John reminds us that love does not mean “...that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the expiation for our sin... We love because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 3:10, 19). This last sentence is vitally important. We may not often think of this, but our ability to love God is, itself, God’s gift. God’s love is the source of every good we

do, and without it, many of the good deeds we take for granted would never even occur to us. In the dynamic process of Christian love, God’s love for us extends a call that enables us to love Him in return.

THE FREEDOM OF THE CALL

St. Thomas Aquinas developed this notion of love and taught that the highest form of love is affection coupled with benevolence, which occurs when “...we love someone so as to wish good to him” (ST, II-II, 1). Our love for one another mirrors God’s love for us, which desires nothing less than our yielding to His call so that we may rest eternally in the peace and joy of His kingdom. Once again, we encounter the reality that God is the source of the holiness we hope for. St. Thomas observed that love depends “...on the sole gift of the Holy Spirit Who divides His gifts according as He will.” (ST, II-II, 30).

These words are a reminder that we can lay no claim on the quantity of love the Spirit bestows. Nevertheless, the obligation and desire to love as God loves – wishing our own good and the good of our neighbor – means that in our life as Christians, once we return God’s love, it becomes a force that enables us to love ourselves, our friends, sinners, and even our enemies. St. Thomas asks whether we are obliged to love the angels, and he replies that we are, because angels are a part of God’s creation. He adds, however, that we are not obliged to love demons – or the souls in hell. Nevertheless, he says, God loves them, for their punishment is less than their sins deserve.

THE RESULT OF THE CALL: THE CHURCH

This love for God, which is reflected in our love for others – and their love for us – calls us to the assembly that we call the Church.

The Church is holy precisely because it is that unique social body called into existence by God in order to manifest the divine holiness in an increasing manner in time through the gradual incorporation of all creation within its holy unity.
(New Catholic Encyclopedia, 7.55)

God’s union in loving friendship with His people makes the Church holy in three ways. The first is, or should be, quite obvious, namely, the presence of God within the Church and in the members who make it up. “God’s temple is holy,” St. Paul writes, “and you are that temple” (1 Cor. 3:17). The Church is holy, as an institution, because it is a society established by Christ and given life by His Spirit. God’s presence in Church doctrine is an additional manifestation of this sanctifying friendship.

THE CHURCH AND DOCTRINE

We commonly think of Church doctrine as the vast library composed over the centuries by the Church's greatest minds, but *The Catholic Encyclopedia* remarks that *"The doctrine of the Church is summed up in the imitation of Jesus Christ."* (III, 759). Each of us, therefore, regardless of our intellectual gifts, is a part of the Church's doctrine, and each of us adds a chapter to this doctrine by our willingness to follow Christ on the pilgrimage of His earthly life, and to embrace and share the pain of His cross, which leads to the glory of His – and our – Resurrection. Once again, we are confronted with the centrality of God's holiness to our belief in the holiness of the Church. *"The ideal which the Church proposes to us is a Divine ideal."* (*Ibid.*)

SHARING THE CHURCH'S HOLINESS

The second manifestation of the Church's holiness is its embracing God's call to sanctify the world. In St. Matthew's gospel, Jesus bids farewell to His disciples by ordering them to *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."* (Mt. 28:19-20). Common sense tells us that we cannot give what we do not possess, so Jesus' command that we make others holy presupposes that His loving union with us has at least begun the work that results in our – and the Church's – holiness.

THE CHURCH'S INSTITUTIONS

The third way in which God sanctifies the Church is through the structures that Christ instituted. These include the Church's sacred teaching, its sacramental life, and its hierarchy. We shall explore each of these in more detail in our reflections on the Church's "catholic" and "apostolic" nature, but for now we need only consider that the holiness of Jesus' life, ministry, and death provide the sanctity that is the essential and defining characteristic of the institution He established for our imitation and benefit. The Catechism summarizes the effects of our relations with Christ by observing, *"The Church, then, is 'the holy People of God,' and her members are called 'saints'"* (CCC, 823).

HOLINESS AND PRAYER

The prayers we offer – especially the Eucharist – reveal our belief that, as members of Christ's Church, we experience a certain tension in our lives of faith. On the one hand we rejoice in the many gifts we have received; on the other, we are continually aware that the holiness we celebrate now will only find its fulfillment in heaven. The Lord's Prayer, with its petitions to make us, on earth, signs of God's heavenly kingdom, are but one example of this tension. We express another in the Eucharistic Acclamation, in which we say, *"When we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory."*

These words are a profound acknowledgment that the sacramental signs we recognize in the Eucharist enable us – here and now – to open a window onto eternity, to touch the limitless merit of Christ's death, and to stand at the

foot of the cross with the Blessed Virgin and St. John. At the same time, however, these words express our longing for the day when the sacramental signs will give way to the reality, and we shall see Christ face to face.

HOLINESS AND THE SACRAMENTS

The Church's sacramental life is one of the means by which it initiates us into its holiness and shares that holiness with the world. Jesus commands His Church to wash its members in Baptism, and the sanctity of the Church's members is further promoted through the anointing we receive in Confirmation, and the daily benefits God offers us in the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, which celebrate God's healing Spirit in our midst. Our Catechism teaches

"The Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real though imperfect." In her members' perfect holiness is something yet to be acquired: "Strengthened by so many and such great means of salvation, all the faithful whatever their condition or state – though each in his own way – are called by He the Lord to that perfection of sanctity by which the Father Himself is perfect." (CCC, 825).

THE POWER OF SIN

The depressing fact of sin in our world and our lives limits not only our appreciation of the holiness of the Church, but also our ability to participate in it fully and to share it as broadly as Christ commands. Our faith tells us that only the Mother of God was exempt from the weakness of sin and the weakening effects of our sin on the world. *"All members of the Church, including her ministers, must acknowledge that they are sinners. In everyone, the weeds of sin will still be mixed with the good wheat of the Gospel until the end of time"* (CCC, 827).

A REMEDY

Even as we acknowledge our weaknesses, though, God's love and holiness are remedies for sin and gifts for our strength and consolation. *"The saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church's history. Indeed, 'holiness is the hidden source and infallible measure of her apostolic activity and missionary zeal'"* (CCC, 828).

The saints, and indeed every other member of the Church who has attained to any degree of piety have been ever ready to acknowledge that they owe whatever is good in them to the grace the Church bestows." (The Catholic Encyclopedia, III.759).

THE MODEL OF MARY

Our theology teaches that Mary is the sign and model for the Church, and we call her "holy," as we do the Church. Mary exemplifies all the forms of holiness we encounter in the Church. She allows herself to be surrounded by God's holiness, and she surrenders in silent awe to His holiness in her life. She is swift to proclaim the Good News of God's dramatic intervention into human history, and she obediently and humbly

follows the example of her son, sharing every step of His journey to Calvary. There she is faithful to the command of Jesus to find a child in John -- and in each of us. The example of the Blessed Virgin, and the lives of the saints, remind us what our redeemed human nature is capable of if we are willing to surrender to the sanctifying call of God's friendship. ■

FROM FR. REGINALD

(cont. from page 1)

Song of Songs is about the sacramentality of marriage. Now can you get more *Catholic* than that, I ask you? The problem is, if you sit down and do a cold reading straight through the *Song of Songs*, this would not be the first idea to pop into your mind. Even the most piously prudish reader cannot help but recognize the frankly sexual tenor of the *Song of Songs*. And yet, I will argue that the traditional allegorizing of the Song flows from the sacramentality of marriage. Yes, even the issue of celibate chastity proceeds from the divine purpose behind the human act of marital relations.

Maybe you have never read Solomon's superlative Song. Even so, you have heard quotations from it in the Catholic liturgy. The high point of the poem is often used as the first reading at weddings: "*Set me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm; for stern as death is love, relentless as the nether world is devotion; its flames are a blazing fire.*" (8:6) Otherwise, it comes up in the Liturgy of the Hours in the context of celebrations of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The worldly mind-set sees this latter liturgical usage as either puzzling or simply perverse. But in the larger context of the Church's inspired teaching on the divine purpose of human sexuality and the sacramentality of marriage, it all falls together into an integrated and satisfying view.

In this series I will approach the text with insights drawn from modern scholarship as well as lessons drawn from the commentaries of the Church Fathers. I also seek to provide hints on how to read the *Song of Songs* with a specific focus on the Catholic view of the sacramentality of marriage, and the truths of which it is a visible sign.

STRUCTURE AND SETTING

At first blush, the *Song of Songs* doesn't seem to have any narrative or thematic structure to it. For this reason, many biblical scholars in the past few generations concluded that it is not a single work, but an anthology of many short love poems by various anonymous folk singers from Israel's past. Others have maintained that the key to its structure was that it was a drama. Now there are elements of dialogue as well as commentary by the "daughters of Jerusalem" within it, but it certainly is not set up as a drama overall -- unlike the book of Job, which is overtly structured as a drama. Your Bible may give helpful suggestions as to who is speaking when taking cues from the wording... But what about its setting? Although the different sections of the Song imply different settings, the shifts of imagery are so sudden and without any overt plot, that it is clearly a lyrical poem, and not a narrative drama. Recent scholarship

identifies five separate poems in the body of the book. Contemporary critical scholarship has also come around to agree with the tradition that it is indeed, and a complete and unified literary work, and not a random collection. Funny how that happens. I think the third-century Church Father, Origen, who wrote the earliest extant Christian commentary on the *Song of Songs*, could have told them that, and explained why.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Some Catholics are afraid of the so-called historical-critical approach to the analysis of Scripture. That is understandable, considering how in the past people from all denominations lost faith during their seminary studies. But as Pope Benedict amply demonstrates in the first chapter of *Jesus of Nazareth*, historical and literary analyses are invaluable tools in Scripture study. These tools do, however, have limits, and cannot provide an adequate guide to the theological truths of the Bible. That said, it is interesting to note that nothing has been discovered in the literatures of the ancient near east that exactly parallels the features of *Song of Songs*. Egyptian love songs have been discovered which have similar characteristics, and comparisons have been made to Arabic songs and those of other nations, but nothing matches this composition in all respects.

On the other hand, even the literary characteristics that it holds in common with other ancient literature do not always transfer well into our culture. Probably the one aspect of the language of the *Song of Songs* that strikes our ears as the most odd are the sections where either the Lover or the Beloved go into long descriptions of the other's physical features in wildly flamboyant and improbable analogies. Take, for example, the Lover's description of his Beloved in 4:1-7; 6. This is a style characteristic of Arabic folk wedding songs, and generally follows the order of starting with the head or face and working downward to the feet. In any case, at its face-value, literal level, the language of the *Song of Songs* sometimes crosses over the line from affectionate to frankly erotic.

A WORD TO THE TIMID

People who stumble upon the *Song of Songs* in their Bible without any background of the Jewish and Christian traditional interpretations can be quite surprised to find such a "sexy" or "racy" book included in the canon of Sacred Scripture. If that question has ever crossed your mind, you will find the answer given by some of the Church Fathers in the next installment of this series.

NEW BOOK FROM FR. BRIAN MULLADY

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