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Who Wrote the Book of Love?

The Song of Songs for Catholics

Fr. James Thompson, O.P.

PART 12: CONCISE COMMENTARY

FIFTH POEM

Overview. The fifth and final poem of the Song of Songs begins at 6:4 and runs to 8:4. Like the first poem, Poem 5 is in the form of a dialogue, including the choral contributions of the attendant maidens. In this case, the first part (6:4-7:9) has two sets of descriptions of his beloved's attributes (6:4-7 and 7:2-6), each followed by praise (6:8-11 and 7:7-9). Thus, I would agree with the division given in the NJB (against the NAB's assignments) where 7:1 only presents the voice of the Daughters of Jerusalem, and the lover picks up again in 7:2-10. The Daughters of Jerusalem call her back and forth as she dances between two choral lines of revelers (7:1). As the Lover's second speech is delivered in this context, he reverses the usual order and starts with her feet and works upward. The language in this poem is even more luscious and sensuously suggestive than previous ones. It ends with a reprise of the Lover's request at the end of Poems 1 and 2 (2:7 and 3:5):

*I adjure you, Daughters of Jerusalem,
do not awaken or stir up love
until it is ready!*

MYSTICAL MEANING

What spiritual meaning might the Church Fathers have gleaned from such a paeon to the Lover's Beloved? Since in most patristic commentaries on the Song, the Bride is primarily interpreted as the Church. So, for example, take the phrase "as awe-inspiring as bannered troops" (6:4c). Theodoret of Cyrus amplifies this line in this way:

for all who see your order are amazed and astounded; for with you there is nothing out of order, nothing unclear or muddled, but everything is set in order and regulated. Moreover, you have an exact knowledge of the order in which things



come: you have learned to value the Bridegroom more than anything else, and, after him, to value those who have grown close to him.

Meditating on this line, other Church Fathers likewise see part of the beauty of the Church as its ordered unity. Littledale, in his 1869 narrative compilation of patristic commentaries, combines the thoughts of Philo of Carpasia and St. Gregory the Great:

For as Philo and S. Gregory aptly say, it is well known to the experienced that soldiers, when advancing in array against the enemy, if they march in close order and keep step together, are feared by the foes that come against them, because they see no gap in the ranks whereby they may pierce them. So too, in our war against evil spirits, the unity of faith, the cheerfulness of hope, the bond of charity, are what make us terrible, since, if there be discord and schism in the body, it is no hard task for the enemy to rout it (Littledale, 275).

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Men and Angels

Free Will: A Gift & Its Consequences, II

Reflection by Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

HELL: A SOLITARY FATE

We concluded our previous reflection by considering the fate of the damned. Part of that punishment is the awareness that the soul is eternally locked into its choice. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the will is a two-fold operation, natural and deliberate. The natural will is God's gift to us and, therefore, it must *be* good and *seek* good. The deliberate will is what we do with this gift. For an individual to turn his will to sin and find himself in Hell is sad enough. But once there, the natural will eternally reminds the individual he does not belong there.

Hell is an eternity of the soul's division against itself: not only aware it is forever separated from God, but realizing it fully deserves its punishment, yet aware this is not the fate it was created for. Hell is an inversion of everything we hold most dear. St. Thomas writes

Even as in the blessed in heaven there will be the most perfect charity, so in the damned there will be the most perfect hate. Wherefore as the saints will rejoice in all goods, so will the damned grieve for all goods. (ST, Supp. 98.4)

St. Thomas raises the question of the Rich Fool in the gospel, who begs Abraham to send someone to his brothers, lest they end up sharing his punishment. Does this not indicate the damned are capable of feeling some compassion? He replies that, on the contrary, the man begs mercy for his relatives simply because he would feel far worse were his family to witness his pain and humiliation.

AN EXAMPLE FROM LITERATURE

Here we may think, too, of Dante's journey through the Infernal Regions. Among the first of the souls he encounters are those of Paolo and Francesca, who were murdered by Francesca's husband when he found them committing adultery. "Love," Francesca says, "brought us to one death." This love also brought them to one punishment, and while the notion of sharing eternity with a loved one is something we reasonably long for, Paolo and Francesca find one another's company an eternal reminder of a shared sin.

Here we might mention that Paolo and Francesca were led to their fatal kiss by reading a book. Not by the act of reading, which, if we are *studying*, is a commendable enterprise. Study, after all, is the defining character of Dominican spirituality. What led

Paolo and Francesca astray was reading for the sexual pleasure it gave them. Dante remarks that Paolo and Francesca would never wander off into a bedroom; too many people could see them. But what harm could happen in the library? Here is a good example of sin: a good, intellectual act, turned awry by misuse.

WHAT DRAWS US TO SIN?

This provides a remarkable insight into sin, and what draws us to it. We imagine we are drawn to evil, because evil is what we confess in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But in fact, no one chooses evil. We choose one thing over another because it seems a *better* alternative, not a worse. We may make the wrong choice, or misuse something we've chosen, but the reason for our choice – the reason we've chosen *this* object or *this* course of action – is because it appears to be *good*.

Here might be a good place to consider how the devil tempts us. Scholars suggest we begin our study with the word "devil" itself, which comes from the Greek word "*diabolos*." It means "to accuse" or "calumniate," and this is the devil's chief occupation – to detract or lie about God. St. Paul employs the word quite carefully in his letters, in part to remind us whose company we find ourselves in if we lie, and especially if we defame another's character.

The Father of Lies began his career in the Garden, suggesting to Eve the reason God forbade her and Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge was jealousy. He tried the same tactic on Jesus in the desert, suggesting God failed to value Jesus at his true worth, while he – the Devil – would give him everything if only Jesus would bow down and worship him.

THE SOURCES OF TEMPTATION

Here we should say a word now about temptation, namely, that it comes in two forms – from within, and from without. Temptation from without comes from the devil; within is both the result of our own, personal past wrongdoing, and, as the *Catechism* reminds us, it is a disposition that is one of the consequences of Original Sin. (CCC, #405)

Often refusing to acknowledge God as his source, man has...upset the relationship which should link him to his last end; and at the same time he has broken the right order that should reign within himself as well as between himself and other men and all creatures (CCC, #401)

THE 'WHY' OF TEMPTATION:

A TEST OF VIRTUE

God can do anything, of course, so we might ask why he allows us to be tempted, when we consider the gravity of the consequences. Theologians reply there are five reasons. The first is to test the virtue of righteous individuals – which must make righteous individuals feel *very, very* grateful. “Oh good, I follow all the rules, and this is my reward!” And the reply to that is “yes”. God already knows the inner disposition of the righteous person; temptation teaches God nothing, but it teaches us a great deal about ourselves.

A REMINDER OF WEAKNESS

The second reason God allows us to be tempted is to remind us of our weakness. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that if we lacked bodies we would be faced with the same dangerous choice as the angels – aware of just how magnificent our minds are, and just how wonderful our existence might be were we subject to no one but ourselves.

A REMINDER OF GOD'S MERCY

Belief in Satan is ultimately connected to belief in God, so if we dismiss the world's ills as nothing more than manifestations of greed, anger, mental illness or psychic disorder, we reduce the role God plays in human history and deprive ourselves of the logical help we should turn to in times of spiritual trial and distress. Temptation is a reminder how very much we need God's mercy and love. And because temptation is a reminder of our need for God, the third reason God allows us to be tempted is to show demons their powerlessness against God's mercy.

A SOURCE OF STRENGTH

The fourth reason God allows us to be tempted is to harden and strengthen us. Left to our own devices, unless we are deeply committed athletes, most of us are apt to extend ourselves physically only so far as we must. Two Dominican writers have observed,

The same...is likely to happen in the soul when no demands are made of it; and for that reason, the absence of temptation can in some circumstances be a greater danger than temptation itself. (Gerald Vann, O.P. and Paul Meagher, O.P., *The Devil and How to Resist Him*)

A REMINDER OF OUR NOBILITY

The final reason for allowing temptation is to show the greatness of the grace God bestows on us. We have probably all heard the phrase, “God didn't make no junk.” By the same token, the devil shows little interest in trash. We may find little solace in this when we are being tempted to commit a sin, but the mere fact of the temptation is a sign of our worth.

THE BLESSED ANGELS

Many who read John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, are struck to realize the passages dealing with

Satan are more interesting than those that describe God. In the mid-1960s C.S. Lewis published an essay in which he remarked how easily we grasp and enjoy information about individuals who are worse than we, but grasp only with difficulty facts about individuals who are better. (This probably explains why supermarket tabloids feature so few front-page stories about the Pope.)

Scripture assures us the spiritual warfare that characterizes the moral life of Christians will result in God's triumph, a triumph we will share when our bodies and souls are united in heaven, at the end of time. In the resurrection of the body, the earth of human flesh will once again embrace the heaven of the human spirit. In the meantime, when we pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we beg that we may enjoy, here on earth, some taste of the righteousness, knowledge and life that characterizes the happiness of the blessed.

OUR ANGEL GUARDIANS

And this brings us to a very consoling point we may make about the good angels – they're looking out for us, so that our life on earth may bear some resemblance, however remote, to that life we look forward to in God's kingdom.

St. Thomas wrote:

It is moreover manifest that as regards things to be done human knowledge and affection can vary and fail from good in many ways; and so it was necessary that angels should be deputed for the guardianship of men, in order to regulate them and move them to good. (ST, I. 113. 1)

But St. Thomas was a late-comer when it came to embracing the comforting theology of Guardian Angels. St. Bernard preached about them two hundred years earlier, and St. Basil and St. Jerome six hundred years before him. They based their faith, of course, on the Scripture passage in which Jesus admonishes His listeners, “*See that you despise not one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father.*” (Mt. 18.10) St. Jerome's comment on this verse is, “*Great is the dignity of souls, for each one has an angel deputed to guard it from its birth.*”

GUARDIAN DEMONS?

Sadly, a number of ancient and later Church writers believed that each of us was plagued by a guardian devil, in addition to a guardian angel. However, a reliable source writes, “[*this opinion*]...lacks an adequate basis in the sources of Faith, and is also hardly compatible with the goodness and mercy of God” (Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*).

HOW MANY?

We might make one final observation about angels, and that is to quote St. Thomas Aquinas, who asked

whether the angels who sinned were as many as those who remained firm. He replied

More angels stood firm than sinned. Because sin is contrary to the natural inclination; while that which is against the natural order happens with less frequency; for nature procures its effects either always, or more often than not. (ST I. 63. 9)

The angels – the good angels, at least – no less than the Incarnation and the sacraments, are evidence of God's love for us. And love, God's love for us and our love for God, is the perfect image to draw these reflections to a close. ■

SONG OF SONGS

Continued from page 1

Amen! Part of the charm of reading the old commentaries is just such a metaphorical description of the Church Militant that could only come about through intense meditation. It is not the sort of thing that the literal minded would ever take away from this passage of scripture.

There are sixty queens, eighty concubines, and maidens without number – One alone is my dove, my perfect one. (6:8-9a). Many of the Church Fathers interpret the queens, concubines, and maidens as three levels or classes among those who believe. Origen saw the queens as perfect souls, the concubines as souls still in progress, and the maidens as beginners on the path of holiness. St. Gregory of Nyssa concluded that the queens represent those who serve God out of love for him, the concubines those who serve out of fear, and the maidens those imperfect in faith yet still seeking salvation. This is not the sort of thing most contemporary Scripture commentators would say, but given the idea that there are deep mystical meanings to be found in the details of this Song of Songs, there is a certain logic and beauty in such patristic exegesis.

Looking toward the latter end of the poem, what about a rather disturbing line from the Beloved's response to the Lover's praises? *Oh, that you were my brother...I would kiss you. (8:1)* This desire may take some people aback, since it literally starts to sound incestuous. Although the Song abounds in sexual innuendo, that is not the direct intent here. Rather it is an expression of the Beloved's desire to be able to make a public show of her affection for him. Littledale compiled the thoughts of several writers to give the following mystical interpretation:

I would kiss Thee, reaching up to Thy lips upon the Cross, to receive that parting kiss of peace and love which Thou didst offer when, bowing the head, Thou gavest up the ghost; kiss Thee, in intimate fellowship with Thy Humanity; kiss Thee, in bearing Thy reproach; kiss Thee, in loving reception of Thy Sacraments; kiss Thee, with the mystical kiss of everlasting peace in the heavenly Country (Littledale, 344).

For the Fathers, everything in Scripture is ultimately about Christ and his Beloved, the Church, one way or another.

LITERAL MEANING

In the previous song, the Beloved says that her lover "stands out among thousands" (5:10b), so superlative is his appeal and character. Our current poem begins with the Lover returning the favor by intensifying his descriptions and praises. Much of the imagery of the Lover's first oration (6:4-12) borrows from his outburst in the middle of the third poem, especially 6:5-7 which repeats 4:1-3, where he contemplates her head and face alone. And yet there are new elements here expressive of a deeper appreciation. Let's consider one odd phrase that we considered above.

There are sixty queens, eighty concubines, and maidens without number – One alone is my dove, my perfect one. (6:8-9a). As an example of interpreting this poem from the viewpoint of the sacramentality of holy matrimony, what might this mean?

The language of romantic love is effusive, audacious and exaggerated. It is today – just listen to popular romantic lyrics – and we can see that it was in antiquity as well. In this case, the Lover says, in effect, there are many women out there, regal matrons, many more who are overly sexually experienced, and, as any walk across a university campus between classes proves, there are lots of pretty young girls out there. And yet for him, there is only one who is "my dove, my perfect one". For the Beloved as well, the Lover is a man without peer. As a result, we often hear it said that "love is blind". Maybe so. But just maybe such an experience of falling in love so deeply that it leads to a lifelong marriage actually brings the lovers in touch with a deeper reality than simple human attraction. Instead of being blind, just maybe romantic love is one of the lights that opens our souls to reality. Maybe lovers' exaggerated attempts to express the experience are but feeble resonances with the Reality that our sin usually corrupts but that lovers can glimpse: the author of *The Book of Love, Love Himself, for God is Love. In the sight of God, every soul is as beautiful as Tirzah...as lovely as Jerusalem, as awe-inspiring as bannered troops (6:4).* ■

MAY THEY REST IN PEACE

This issue of "*Light and Life*" contains a sheet on which to list the names of deceased family and friends you would like us to remember in our Masses during November, the month of the Holy Souls. Our printing schedule does not allow us to mail these memorial sheets in November, so we ask you to use them now and to return them to the Rosary Center before November 1. Prayer for the dead is a hallowed tradition, and we can offer no greater tribute of our love than prayers for the happy repose of the souls of those who have died.

