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Who Wrote the Book of Love?

The Song of Songs for Catholics

PART 2: AS ALLEGORY

Fr. James Thompson, O.P.

SEXIEST BOOK IN THE BIBLE?

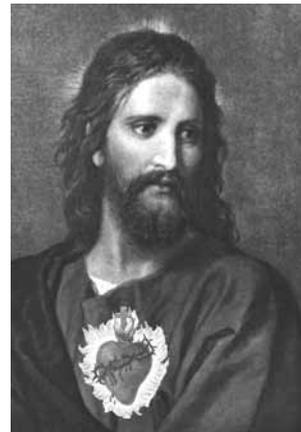
So what is such a sexy book as the Song of Songs doing in the Bible? From the times of the earliest commentaries until the present, both Jews and Christians alike have taken a non-literal, or symbolic, approach to interpreting this Song above all songs attributed to Solomon. They all, of course, admitted that in form it was obviously a love poem. In fact, it gets downright steamy in parts. But specifically taken as *Scripture*, a book inspired by God to provide his people knowledge of salvation, interpreters agreed that Solomon wrote it as an allegory of the love of God for his people. The Jewish approach saw it as symbolic of the Lord's care for Israel, while Christians viewed it in terms of the Church as the Bride of Christ longing for the coming of her Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. In both circles there were also interpreters that gave it an even more mystical meaning, the union of the believer's soul with the Lord.

MODERN REJECTION OF ALLEGORY

Scholars coming at analysis of Scripture primarily from a historical-critical perspective until recently rejected the validity of the traditional allegorical modes of interpretation as wishful thinking at best, or at worst a deliberate misreading of the text. In fact, even the "Introduction to the Song of Songs" in the *New Jerusalem Bible* tries to put a damper on this way of reading it in favor of a literal (*i.e.*, sexy) reading:

The inspired and canonical status of the Song leads these [allegorical] commentators to suppose that it must be celebrating something other than profane love. But the exegetic justifications advanced in favour of the allegorical meaning -- based on an accumulation of verbal parallels from other books of the Bible -- seem forced and artificial. (p. 1028)

Even though this introductory preface gives detailed arguments for abandoning "the allegorical interpretation," the editor relents at the end:



THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS



THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY

Over and above this literal meaning, it is perfectly permissible to apply the Song to the relationship between Christ and his Church (which, however, Paul was not doing in Eph. 5) or to the union of individuals with the God of Love, thus vindicating the way in which the Song has been used by such mystics as St. John of the Cross. (p. 1029)

The historical-critical commentator giveth what he hath taken away! We are allowed to "apply" the Scriptures in this way, but we are not allowed an allegorical interpretation. So be it. I could quibble with the parenthetic note about what St. Paul is supposedly *not* doing in Ephesians 5 (I think he *is*), but this article is about the Song of Songs not Ephesians.

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION NOT DEAD YET

Although excessive allegorizing is discouraged today, the Church has not rejected the patristic method of allegorical interpretation entirely. Consider the following Vatican instruction:

Recourse to allegory stems from the conviction that the Bible, as God's book, was given by God to His people, the Church. In principle, there is nothing in it which is to be set aside as out of date or completely lacking meaning. God

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Marks of the Church, IV: CATHOLIC

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

CATHOLIC: AN ANCIENT TERM

Our *Catechism* gives two meanings for the term “Catholic.” One is “*Universal...in the sense of ‘according to the totality’ or ‘in keeping with the whole’*” (CCC, 830). St. Ignatius of Antioch was probably the first of the Church’s theologians to use the term “Catholic.” He wrote, “*Wherever the bishop shall appear, let the multitudes also be; even as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.*”

A FIGURE FROM ANTIQUITY

St. Ignatius is an interesting figure in our Church’s history. One tradition maintains he is the child whom Christ set in the midst of his disciples when they wanted to know who was greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt. 18:1). Less romantic sources identify him as a disciple of St. Peter or St. Paul. Whatever the case, he was appointed leader of the influential Church in Antioch in Syria. In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke relates that Sts. Paul and Barnabas taught for a year in Antioch, and he adds this is where “*...the disciples were for the first time called Christians*” (Acts 11:26).

St. Ignatius was put to death in the year 107, so his writings are among the first, after those of the evangelists and St. Paul, to be included in the Church’s treasury. His acquaintance with the Church from its earliest days, and the likelihood of his association with the disciples, explains Ignatius’ emphasis on the role of the bishop in the Christian community. He is the anointed representative of Christ, and the appropriate guardian and interpreter of the Church’s teaching. The bishop’s task is to proclaim faithfully – and in its entirety – the gospel message Christ entrusted to the apostles.

THE CONTINUITY OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The leadership of Christ, and those to whom He entrusted this leadership, is absolutely fundamental to our understanding of the universality of the Catholic Church. The *Catechism* reminds us that Christ is the head, to which we, His Body, are united – and from whom we receive the “*fullness of the means of salvation which he has willed: correct and complete confession of faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession*” (CCC, 830).

These qualities may seem commonplace to 21st Century Catholics. After all, we have heard these words all our lives. But we must remember that the characteristics we take for granted have been proclaimed from the Church’s very beginning. The 2nd Century bishop and martyr, St. Irenaeus, wrote

...the Church, though scattered throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, having

received the faith from the apostles and their disciples...guards [it] with care, as dwelling in but a single house, and similarly believes as if having but one soul and a single heart, and preaches, teaches, and hands on this faith with a unanimous voice, as if possessing only one mouth.

The *Catechism* sums up this teaching when it observes, “*The Church was, in this fundamental sense, catholic on the day of Pentecost and will always be so until the day of [Christ’s coming]*” (Ibid.)

THE CHURCH’S UNIVERSAL MISSION

The second sense in which the Church is Catholic is the universality of its mission. The Vatican document *Lumen Gentium* is clear and eloquent in its description of the apostolic preaching that calls us all to be one in Christ.

All men are called to belong to the new People of God. This People, therefore, while remaining one and only one is to be spread throughout the whole world and to all ages in order that the design of God’s will may be fulfilled: He made human nature one in the beginning and has decreed that all should be finally gathered together as one....

THE TESTIMONY OF SCRIPTURE

These words echo St. Paul, who called the Body of Christ, “*...the immeasurable greatness of God’s power... accomplished... when he raised [Christ] from the dead [and] made him head of all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who is all in all*” (Eph. 1:18-23).

St. Matthew tells us that Jesus commanded His disciples to “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them [and] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...*” (Mt 28:19). The efficiency of the early Church’s missionary activity is a powerful illustration of this second understanding of the Church’s universality.

However, the universality of Christ’s Church is not simply a matter of geography. The Church is universally, *i.e.*, equally, present in each of its members, as St. Paul assures us “*...there is neither slave nor free*” among the members of Christ’s Body, “*neither male nor female*” (Gal 3:28). These individuals, gathered together, make up the “particular” or “local” church, which is most visible in the diocese, under the leadership of the bishop, and also in parishes, where members of Body of Christ gather to be nourished by Christ’s Body, and to be strengthened by the preaching of Christ’s word.

OUR PART IN THE PROMISE

Christ is manifest equally in each member of His Church. And the Church is present in every moment of

human history. Christ's promise to His disciples, "*Behold, I am with you all days, even to the end of the world*" (Mt 28:20) is a guarantee that the Church, prefigured in the Old Testament, will exist in visible form for all time, and enjoy a spiritual existence throughout eternity.

Roman Catholics have every reason to rejoice that they
...accept all the means of salvation given to the Church...and who – by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments and ecclesiastical governments and communion – are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops (CCC, 837).

THE CHALLENGES TO CATHOLICITY

However, the words by which *Lumen Gentium* express the hope that all will come to be full members of the Church are a reminder of the many divisions that prevent – or, at least, delay – the full vision, and the triumphant reality, of a truly Catholic Church.

Roman Catholics, themselves, may contribute to these divisions, either through refusing to embrace the truth revealed in Church teaching, or by failing to imitate the example of Christ. The Second Vatican Council is renowned for the gentle tone of its pronouncements. However, one can hardly imagine a judgment more severe than that of the Council on a Catholic who fails to represent Christ's love to the world. "*Even though incorporated into the Church, he who does not however persevere in charity is not saved*" (CCC, 837).

OUR ACCOUNTABILITY BEFORE GOD

Lest this judgment seem unnecessarily harsh, we must recall Jesus' words, "*Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required*" (Lk. 12:48). God does not invest His gifts in us so that we can ignore them, or hoard them for ourselves. The knowledge we have received, and the grace by which we have grown in the sacraments confer immense wealth, but God has every right to "get what He paid for," so the death of Christ, which confers such blessings on us, brings with it the challenge and responsibility to live up to the example we have received.

The Church's judgment is much less severe on those who have not enjoyed the benefits of a Roman Catholic education, or an upbringing in its tradition.

The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian, but do not profess the Catholic faith in its entirety, or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter. Those "*who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in a certain, although imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.*" (CCC, 838).

THE STANDARD OF CHARITY

The Church holds itself to the same standards of charity it demands of its members, and never forgets its responsibility to build on *Lumen Gentium's* belief that God "*...made human nature one in the beginning and has decreed that all should be finally gathered together*

as one...." If we examine the prayers we offer during our Good Friday liturgy, we will see the Church's effort to extend her hand to all people, build upon shared beliefs or – where these cannot be discerned – on common moral principles. The *Catechism* continues,

The Catholic Church recognizes in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near since he gives life and breath and all things and wants all men to be saved. Thus, the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as "a preparation or the gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life." (CCC, 843).

SALVATION OUTSIDE THE CHURCH?

Any Catholic who has reached a certain age will no doubt recall a lesson learned in childhood, "*Outside the Church there is no salvation*" (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). This doctrine has its basis in Scripture, for St. Mark records Jesus' departing words to His disciples, "*Go into all the world and preach the gospel...He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned*" (Mk. 16:15-16).

The Church Fathers preached the same message; St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, "*Be not deceived, my brethren; if anyone follows a maker of schisms, he does not inherit the kingdom of God*" (Ignatius to the Philadelphians, 3:3). The doctrine received magisterial approval when Pope Innocent III declared, at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), "*There is but one universal church of the faithful, outside of which no one at all can be saved.*" St. Thomas Aquinas, writing on the necessity of the Eucharist for salvation, taught,

...the reality of the sacrament is the unity of the mystical body, without which there can be no salvation; for there is no entering into salvation outside the Church, just as in the time of the deluge there was none outside the Ark, which denotes the Church... (ST III 73,3).

HOPE, FEAR & CONSOLATION

These words are quite serious, and quite frightening to anyone who has non-Catholic friends or relatives. Thus, we may reasonably ask how – and indeed, whether – such individuals have hope for salvation.

To answer this question, our *Catechism* teaches we must make a very important distinction between those who "*through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his church,*" and those who have ignored or abandoned the faith they have had the opportunity to embrace and practice.

Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition...the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation... He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism, and thereby at the same time the necessity of the Church...[However] Those who through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, but nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to

do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation. (CCC, 846-47, *Lumen Gentium*, 16).

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Lest these words seem to diminish an individual's responsibility to respond positively to the Church's call, the *Catechism* draws on the Letter to the Hebrews, which states, "Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). The text further states, and clearly, the Church's freedom to draw all peoples to itself by preaching the gospel.

Although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men (CCC, 848).

THE ROOTS OF OUR FAITH

This apostolic enterprise is based in the Holy Trinity, and its love for the world. "The ultimate purpose of mission is none other than to make men share in the communion between the Father and the Son in the Spirit of love." (CCC, 850). St. Paul, in his first letter to Timothy, assures us that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim, 2:4).

God is infinitely beyond our knowledge, and even our longing. If an unbeliever desires to know Him, that desire is itself His gift. To want to learn more about Christ and His message of love means that an individual is on the path to eternal life. This is reason to rejoice, but it is also reason to consider our vocation as apostles. "...the Church, to whom this truth has been entrusted, must go out to meet their desire, so as to bring them the truth. Because she believes in God's universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary" (CCC, 851), and the Church's missionary activity is a vocation none of us can deny.

THE DEMANDS OF FAITH

If we are serious about imitating Christ, we must offer our lives as signs that lead others to God's kingdom. This will, necessarily, demand our willingness to die to ourselves, as Christ died for us. This requires love, patience, and above all, the poverty of spirit that allows us humbly to acknowledge ourselves as nothing more than Christ's disciples, ready to answer our Master's call, yet always aware that "we are unworthy servants; we have done only done what was our duty" (Lk. 17:10). ■

WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF LOVE? (Page 1 Cont.)

is constantly speaking to His Christian people a message that is ever relevant for their time. In their explanations of the Bible, the Fathers mix and weave together typological and allegorical interpretations in a virtually inextricable way. But they do so always for a pastoral and pedagogical purpose, convinced that everything that has been written, has been written for our instruction (cf 1 Cor

10:11). . . . *The allegorical interpretation of Scripture so characteristic of patristic exegesis runs the risk of being something of an embarrassment to people today. But the experience of the Church expressed in this exegesis makes a contribution that is always useful. . . . The Fathers of the Church teach to read the Bible theologically, within the heart of a living Tradition, with an authentic Christian spirit* (The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, III.B.2).

And besides, the taste for allegory is certainly not dead, as the continuing popularity of such books as Hanna Hurnard's *Hind's Feet on High Places* demonstrates. Another indication is the fairly common use of allegorical applications by preachers in their Sunday homilies. From a strictly scholarly and historical perspective, which generally focuses on a text's "original" meaning, such symbolic reading may seem difficult to justify. As Scripture, however, the books of the Bible are not simply interesting antiquities, but are considered the *living Word of God*. For the Church, then, the Scripture:

is inspired by God and is useful for teaching for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Today, even in scholarly circles, something like the freedom of traditional interpretation is coming back into favor in certain circles influenced by post-modernist literary criticism. But how could such spiritualizing of the Word actually be legitimate? In the next installment we will look at the larger theological context for both literal and allegorical "applications" of the Song of Songs from a contemporary Catholic perspective. ■

ON THE LAST DAY - The Time of the Resurrection of the Dead according to Thomas Aquinas

When will the resurrection of the dead occur? In *On the Last Day* Fr. Bryan Kromholtz explains how St. Thomas's attention to Christ, cosmos, and community anticipates many current concerns and can contribute to a better understanding of resurrection for today, one that more fully accounts for the Christological, corporeal, cosmological, and ecclesiological aspects of eschatology.

Fr. Bryan Kromholtz, OP, is Assistant Professor of Theology at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, Berkeley, California. Collection: *Studia Friburgensia*, vol. 110, 548 pages, paperback, \$89.95, plus shipping and handling (see enclosed order form or order from our web page www.rosary-center.org).

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