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Who Wrote the Book of Love? *The Song of Songs for Catholics*

Fr. James Thompson, O.P.

PART 3: THE LARGER THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

THE INCARNATION AS CONTEXT

Before we can properly grasp the connection between the steamy aspects of the Song of Songs and church teaching, it might help to back off and take a look at the larger theological context of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Christian theology can be described as the working out of the implications of three deceptively simple passages from the Gospel according to John. The first two set up who in reality the person we call Jesus Christ is, and the third summarizes God's plan to take effect through this man.

The very Word which in the beginning was the creative cause whenever God spoke, is not just an event or thing, but is itself the personal power of creation itself:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. (John 1:1-3a)

The same Word of God became a flesh and blood human being:

And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

And this very Word of God was God's Son sent into the world to save it:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

THE ORTHODOX SOLUTION

The historic orthodox Creeds sought to clarify exactly what is meant by the Bible's seemingly contradictory assertions that somehow Jesus was both the one true



ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN MARY
Guido Reni

God and a human being. Among the affirmations concerning Christ in the ancient, so-called Creed of St. Athanasius we find the following:

Who although he be God and Man, yet he is not two, but one Christ;

One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God;

One altogether; not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of person.

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Marks of the Church, V: APOSTOLIC

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

APOSTOLIC: MISSIONARY

As the Nicene Creed draws to its close we profess our faith in a Church that is “apostolic” (CCC, 857). Our *Catechism* describes three meanings of this term. First, the Church is the result of the Apostles’ missionary activity. In St. Matthew’s gospel account, Jesus’ final words to His followers are the command, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them [and] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28.19).

APOSTOLIC: FAITHFUL

The second way in which the Church is apostolic is in its fidelity to the message it received from the apostles, a message it continues to hear, cherish, and obey. “Follow the pattern of the good words which you have heard from me,” St. Paul commands Timothy, “...guard the truth that has been entrusted to you...” (2 Tim. 1:13-14).

APOSTOLIC: GUIDED BY TRADITION

Finally, the Church is apostolic because it is guided by the bishops, who are the successors of the apostles, chiefly the Bishop of Rome, the Pope.

A maxim of our faith says that the Church believes as it prays. Thus, if we want to know what the Church teaches on a subject, we may begin our study by investigating our vast deposit of prayers. If we wish to know how today’s Church views itself in relation to its early leaders, we do not have to look far; one of the Prefaces for the Mass celebrated on the feasts of apostles, says,

You are the eternal Shepherd who never leaves his flock untended. Through the apostles you watch over us and protect us always. You made them shepherds of the flock to share in the work of your Son, and from their place in heaven they guide us still.

APOSTLES AND DISCIPLES

But what is an apostle? St. Luke tells us, “...when it was day he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles...” (Lk. 6:13). The word “disciple” comes from the Latin word that means “to learn.” The same root gives us the word “discipline.” A disciple is someone who submits to the authority of another, and who learns from his teacher. The word “apostle” comes from a Greek word that means “sent.” An apostle has learned enough from his teacher to act as the teacher’s emissary, so St. Matthew writes, “These twelve Jesus sent out” (Mt. 10:5).

THE APOSTOLIC MISSION

As St. Matthew continues, we learn that the apostles are to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleans lepers, cast out demons.” They are also to preach, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” As the gospel story unfolds, we see that these are the very tasks Jesus undertakes himself, so the apostles are not only sent, they are sent to do the same things Jesus did. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn. 5:19).

The word “as” is one of the shortest in the English language. However, it is extremely important. It means “in the same way” or “to the same extent,” so Jesus sends the apostles to perform the works Jesus Himself performs, and to preach the message Jesus Himself preaches. Moreover, they are to act and preach in precisely the same way Jesus does. In the early Church, when the apostles died, or entrusted ministry to their own disciples, the example of the apostles’ words and works became the all-important norms by which the Christian community governed its activity. Two thousand years after Christ, the example and teaching of the apostles still provides a guarantee of authenticity to Church teaching and practice.

APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION: CONTINUITY OF OFFICE

All Catholics are familiar with the term, “Apostolic Succession.” We usually understand this as a bishop’s claim that his consecration traces itself back to apostolic hands. St. Clement, the fourth bishop of Rome, wrote of the orderliness that characterized appointments to ecclesiastical office in the early Church.

Christ...was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ...And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first-fruits [of their labors], having first proved them by the Spirit...and afterward gave instruction that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. (Letter to the Corinthians, 42, 44)

CONTINUITY OF DOCTRINE

This historical link is important, but equally important is the “apostolic succession” that follows from it. This is the continuity in doctrine that unites present-day Church teaching to the truths expounded by the Church’s earliest teachers, some of whom, at least (e.g., St. Polycarp), had lived and worked with the apostles themselves, and, naturally, learned at their feet.

Early Christians, no less than their present-day counterparts, found themselves surrounded by a choir of voices, each claiming to possess the truth. Because

Scripture can be interpreted – or misinterpreted – in many ways, the most reliable test of a teaching’s authenticity was to compare it to the tradition that the local church had received from its apostolic founders. St. Irenaeus (d. 220 A.D.) incorporated both the historical and doctrinal meanings of “apostolic succession” when he wrote

It is possible, then, for everyone in every church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the apostles which has been made known to us throughout the world. And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted bishops by the apostles and their successors down to our own times... (Against Heresies)

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

Apostolic Succession is nothing more than the Church’s humbly imitating the humility of her Head, who taught, “...the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise” (Jn. 5.19). Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” and the corresponding warning “as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (Jn. 15.4-5), describe intimacy of the union between Jesus and His apostles.

Our *Catechism* observes that this union is “both the mandate for [the apostles’] mission and the power to carry it out” (CCC, 859). The Church’s union with Christ is meant to be fruitful. The tradition of Apostolic Succession allows us to hear Jesus’ words to His apostles and realize that He intends our union with Him, no less than His union with them, to “bear much fruit” (Jn. 15.5).

A MISSION FOR TODAY

The *Catechism* is unequivocal when it states that the apostolic mission of the Church continues in the present day. The whole Church is apostolic because she remains, through the successors of St. Peter and the other apostles, in communion of faith and life with her origin: and that she is “sent out” into the whole world. All members of the Church share in this mission, though in various ways. “The Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well.” Indeed, we call an apostolate “every activity of the Mystical Body” that aims “to spread the Kingdom of Christ over all the earth.” (CCC, 863, and quoting the Vatican document, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*)

The *Catechism*’s definition of “apostolate” as “every activity of the Mystical Body” challenges each member of the Church to examine her or his life, and to assume responsibility for extending Christ’s Kingdom in ways that are appropriate to the individual.

RICHNESS IN DIVERSITY

The very differences which the Lord has willed to put between the members of his body serve its unity and mission. For in the Church there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted

the office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing in his name and by his power. But the laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ; they have, therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission to the whole People of God. (CCC, 873, quoting *Apostolicam Actuositatem*)

THE LAY APOSTOLATE

The special apostolic vocation of the laity is to “illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are closely associated that these may always be effected and grow...to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer” (CCC, 898). To lay Catholics falls the immense responsibility of touching the political and economic systems that govern our civil lives, and transforming these systems to reflect the values of God’s Kingdom. Pope Pius XII said, “Lay believers are in the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society.” The Constitution on the Church echoes and amplifies these words when it acknowledges “Their activity in ecclesial communities is so necessary that, for the most part, the apostolate of pastors cannot be fully effective without it” (CCC, 900).

The lay apostolate exercises itself in many ways, and individuals are called to serve the Church in formal ways as liturgical ministers, catechists, and teachers. Those who have the proper qualifications – and the personal strength – should accept or seek positions in civil government. But each of these activities requires a certain freedom and leisure, which many faithful Catholics simply do not enjoy.

PRAYER: THE UNIVERSAL MINISTRY

Age, health, family responsibilities, and the demands of modern-day work may all limit the active ministry of the lay apostle. One ministry is always at hand, however, and that is the ministry of prayer. “Pray constantly,” St. Paul commands the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5.17), words we should take to heart, as well. And if we cannot find time for formal prayer, then we may lift up our activity as an offering to God who blesses honest labor. Above all, we must never forget the abiding presence of Christ. In Matthew’s account of the gospel, Jesus’ last words to His apostles are, “I, I am with you always” (Mt. 28:20), a promise with the potential to sanctify every moment of our day.

THE EXAMPLE OF MARY

One of the titles by which we honor Mary is “Queen of Apostles,” a name that may seem ill-suited to someone not known for her travels or her writings. Mary, however, is the only person in the Scripture present at every significant moment in the life of Jesus and the early Church. She is also the first to preach the Good News of the Incarnation. If the lay apostolate, as the Vatican Council reminds us, is to redeem civil life by preaching the presence of God’s mercy and justice in our midst, then we can find no better example of apostolic ministry.

Mary's declaration, "*My soul magnifies the Lord,*" is a powerful proclamation that God has taken on the dusty stuff of our mortality to "*cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly*" (Lk 1: 46-55). If we wonder how we, God's humble creation, can magnify our Creator, we need to recall that magnifying glasses not only make things larger; they are capable of focusing light powerfully enough to ignite a fire. We can find no better example of Christian apostleship than Mary, and we can have no better image of our apostolic vocation than to consider our lives the instruments by which we set the world aflame with the Light of Christ's love. ■

THE SONG OF SONGS

(Continued from page 1)

The consistent teaching of the Church through the ages has been that the *person* we know as Jesus Christ was a human being in every respect, except as Hebrews 4:15 tells us, in sin. Yet the very personhood of that man was identical to what we now refer to theologically as "*the second person of the Holy Trinity,*" or more simply, "*God the Son.*" He was "*God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father.*"

But what does all this have to do with sex? Everything.

Far from being just high-flown theologizing meant to occupy the time of fusty eggheads, these teachings have direct and practical application to the meaning of our lives, especially what we refer to as our "sex lives." This awesome teaching we refer to as the "incarnation" reveals the direction of how the true meaning of things is created. Many folks today think that meaning is simply a human phenomenon, something that we odd talking animals make up so that we feel better. But the truth is that every human person is utterly unique and irreducible. Catholic Christian teaching maintains that the "you" that is you is created by God, and created for a particular purpose, namely participation in the very life of God, eternal happiness with God.

FROM CREATION TO SACRAMENT

As Christians we assert that we can know this sort of thing, but that this knowledge does not come naturally. We could conceivably discover the existence of one almighty God through many years of intense and dedicated philosophy, or more simply even by contemplation of the creation. But to know more about God, we need to hear from God. God has to let us know what we need to know that we could not discover for ourselves. That is where revelation comes in.

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being, and who sustains all things by his mighty word. (Heb. 1:1-3)

As audacious as it sounds, Christians believe that God's divine motivation and intention for us is made known in,

with, and through Jesus Christ. Jesus' motivations, actions, and instructions show us God's very own motivations, actions, and instructions. In Catholic lingo, Jesus is the very sacrament of God. Jesus is the visible manifestation of invisible mystery, making known and putting into effect God's plan for human life. By his victory over death through his suffering, crucifixion, burial and resurrection, he has effected the means by which we can realize and accomplish in our own lives God's purpose for our existence: happiness and joy in knowing God.

If Jesus were limited to his earthly life-span, he might not accomplish very much. But he founded his Church, and continues his ministry through this same Church. Just as Christ, then, is the primary sacrament of God to humanity, the Church is the foundational sacrament of Christ's continuing ministry in the world. And through the Church, by Jesus' own institution and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Church imparts the life of Christ to his followers through the rituals known as the sacraments.

But you already knew most of that stuff, didn't you? What you may not have noticed, however, is how one line from the Athanasian Creed points to a highly important aspect of incarnational theology. Jesus not only "*came down from heaven*" (Nicean Creed), but rather than being some sort of amphibian mixture of human and divine, he became one "*not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God*" (Athanasian Creed). The direction, so to speak, of incarnation is from the natural to an elevation to the divine. What divine grace does is to build upon nature so that nature can be transcended. The meaning of human existence relates to the goal, who is God.

Our primary instruction from the Lord is the "new commandment" he gave us

Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34)

And the natural, as well as institutional, foundation for this loving community is the Christian family, and the Christian family comes about through conjugal union, and the sacrament of this living and loving bond is the sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

Ultimately, this revelation of Jesus as God among us, and the Church as the sacrament of Christ's continuing work in the world through the sacramental system is the context for what the Song of Songs is all about for Catholics. That is because one of the lenses we bring to viewing this book is the sacrament of marriage. In the next installment we will take a glancing look at the Church's teaching on marriage and chastity, and thereby revisit the question of whether the Songs of Songs is a dirty book.

