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

Fr. James Thompson, O.P.

PART 8: Concise Commentary 1:5

FIRST POEM

With this installment we take an overview of the first of the cycle of poems that make up the majority of this intriguing book of Scripture, the Song of Songs. This first poem runs from 1:5 to 2:7. The rest of this series will provide similarly concise synopses of the remaining poems in this book.

THE SETTING & SYMBOLISM

From longing for the chambers of her "king," the first extended poem presumes a pastoral, outdoor setting. It is a dialogue between the beloved and her lover, who is apparently a shepherd. She describes herself as black and beautiful from spending so much time in the sun tending the family vineyards. Yet she says my own vineyard I have not cared for (1:6), which carries a double entendre. Throughout the Song, 'vineyard,' 'garden,' 'park' are spatial metaphors for her body as the place of sensual delight, while various fruits are sometimes euphemisms for sexual relations. The vineyard motif is also found in 6:11; 7:13; and 8:11-12. Even when it is not pushing a euphemistic significance, the Song is a riot of sensual similes using scents, textures, plants, animals and geographic features.

RESONANCE WITH OTHER SCRIPTURES

In terms of inter-textual resonances with other books in the Bible, "vine" and "vineyard" are particularly rich, even without getting into the symbolism of wine, to which the beloved compared her lover's affections in 1:2. Isaiah gives a parable of Israel as the Lord's vineyard (5:1-7), an image which Hosea before him had also used (Hos. 10:1), and which was taken up by Jeremiah (Jer. 2:21, for example) and Ezekiel (such as Ezek. 19:10-14). Admittedly, these are about a vineyard going to seed from lack of connection with the living water, so to speak. Jesus also uses the same image in some of his more



The Assumption of Mary

Silhouette by Sr. Jean Dorcy, O.P.

pointed parables (e.g., Matt. 21:33-43). Of course, there is also the moving metaphor of Jesus as the true Vine in John 15:1-2.

THE DAUGHTERS

Daughters of Jerusalem. (1:5) The "daughters of Jerusalem" come on the scene for the first time in this verse. They serve as a present audience for the beloved to voice her concerns, and at times they ask her questions to move the poem forward. The beloved addresses them as the daughters of Jerusalem here and in 2:7; 3:5, 11; 5:8, 16; and 8:4. In 3:11 the Hebrew text actually reads "daughters of Zion," but apparently with the same meaning. The NAB and the NJB do not completely agree on when it is that the daughters of Jerusalem are speaking, but the places that are fairly clear are 3:6, 5:9, 6:1, 7:1, and 8:1.

Many of the Church Fathers interpret this chorus as the voice of other souls seeking God, but they have various ideas as to what their status is. Are they fellow seekers of the fruits of contemplation that the Bride is? Or are they weak souls who content themselves with the externals of religious observance or temporal works, rather than the deeper, internal works of the Beloved? Or does it refer to the Synagogue—the Church in dialogue

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit, VI KNOWLEDGE

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

AN AID TO JUDGMENT

The next of the Spirit's gifts we will consider is the gift of knowledge, which is a counterpart to the gift of understanding that was the subject of our most recent reflection. Both these gifts concern themselves with our relation to truth. Understanding, as we have seen, perfects our ability to perceive the truth of our faith; knowledge, St. Thomas Aquinas tells us, enhances our ability to make sound judgment upon it. (ST, II-II, 9.1) Together, these two gifts allow us to distinguish between what we should believe and what we should not, and to embrace what we must believe for our salvation.

A PRACTICAL GIFT

As we progress through our reflections on the Spirit's gifts, we will see that we are given assistance to make judgments about the truth of divine things. The gift of knowledge, which is the subject of the present reflection, will concern itself with what Augustine terms an understanding "...of human affairs," and St. Thomas echoes, saying, "...knowledge... is only about human or created things." (ST II-II, 9.2)

A Benedictine from the last century squarely situates the gifts of the Holy Spirit in relation to the theological virtues. He wrote,

...the supreme realities of the spiritual life are precisely...the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity...the Spirit is sent in order to give those three vitalities the fullest expansion possible...there is no phenomenon in orthodox Christian sanctity, in orthodox Christian mysticism, which is not directly a function of one of these three theological qualities under the breath of the Paraclete. (Vonier, *The Spirit and the Bride*, p. 177)

GIFT BUILDS ON GIFT

These words deepen our understanding of what we have said earlier: the gifts of the Spirit build on the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity we receive at our Baptism. These gifts "...complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations." (CCC, 1831)

Our Benedictine author suggests that if the theological virtues are the planets of our spiritual life, the Holy Spirit is the sun. What governs the virtues' intensity in our lives, he says, as with the earth, between the tropics and the glacial poles, is not a distance from the sun, but the angle of the planets' exposure. "In other words," he writes,

...it is the office of the sevenfold Spirit to throw His light and heat on the three virtues...not to create a new faith, but to give faith various degrees of luxuriance of life; not to produce a new hope, but to give hope a certainty which will make it heroic courage; not to bring about a new bond of friendship between God and man other than charity, but to give it a sweetness that will make it a foretaste of heaven...The planets could exist, have their motions, without all that vesture of beauty and grace, but what a difference there would be! (Ibid., pp. 179-80)

ASSESSING TRUE VALUE

We will undoubtedly be struck, if only – and let us let us pray the feeling lasts only – for a moment that if the gifts of the Spirit overflow in a new appreciation for the good things God has bestowed on us in the wonders of His creation, one of the first lessons the Spirit's gift of knowledge teaches us is the complete and utter uselessness of created things in themselves.

We are naturally drawn to things we can see and touch. The beauties of nature and the wonder of our relations with our families and loved ones are overwhelming. But they are also quite capable of distracting us from God, whom we cannot see and whom we can only know by faith and Revelation. The gift of knowledge is a liberating force that allows us to place creation in its proper sphere, so that created things assist us rather than obscure the faith we seek.

GROWING BEYOND THINGS

The first step along this path is pleasant, at least for a time; it is the period of experimentation with the things that delight us most. At some point, like St. Augustine, we "grow up," and decide that food, sex, money – the list is nearly endless – may be diverting, even addicting, but it doesn't quite satisfy us.

In his Confessions, St. Augustine describes the climactic day when he finally determined to lay aside his former beliefs.

The very toy of toys, and vanity of vanities, my ancient mistresses, still held me; they plucked my fleshly garment and whispered softly, "Dost thou cast us off?" (VIII. 26)

Augustine was speaking to a friend, but realized he had to be alone. He walked off by himself.

I cast myself down I know not how, under a certain fig-tree, giving full vent to my tears; and the floods

of mine eyes gushed out an acceptable sacrifice to Thee...So was I speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when lo! I heard from a neighboring house a voice, as of a boy or girl...chanting and oft repeating, "Take up and read; take up and read."

...So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose...I seized, opened, and in silence read that section [of the Scripture] on which my eyes first fell: "... put ye on Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh...."

FROM GRIEF TO GROWTH

Augustine's tears are reflections of the tears shed by Peter on Holy Thursday, when he realizes that his desire to preserve his own anonymity and safety have condemned his master to a time of brutal and solitary abuse. They echo the remorse of the sinful woman who disregards all the laws of decorum to bathe Jesus' feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair in the house of the Pharisee.

Augustine's tears may resemble our own as we mourn the death of someone we love or --- perhaps more poignantly -- when we look at our own lives and realize how short they are, and how little we may have done with them.

An early 20th Century Dominican, H.D. Gardeil, asked, *What am I? What is man, then? It is God who inspires these tears. Converts experience it: these tears have led them back to God. Fervent Christians experience it also. In this vision of nothingness and this melancholy which it inspires they find a motive for turning away from creatures and of soaring towards God. The tears of the bereaved, the tears of the unhappy; they are one more effect of the knowledge which the Holy Spirit inspires within us.* (*The Holy Spirit in Christian Life*, p. 103)

This is the first light of the gift of knowledge, the realization that the pleasure of created things does not last, and that true happiness must lie somewhere else. Freeing ourselves from the grip of our pleasures may prove to be a lifetime struggle, but the Spirit's gift of knowledge is God's assurance that something greater than a moment's pleasure will reward the effort.

THE SECOND STEP

At the same time, knowledge allows us to realize that when created things no longer control us, when we no longer need some *thing* to define who we are, the undeniable beauty of creation possesses a remarkable capacity to reflect its Creator. Then, Fr. Gardeil writes, instead of betraying us, creation acquires the capacity to "*betray*" (in the sense of revealing) "*God, the divine intelligence and goodness.*" (Gardeil, p.96)

And this can be another source of tears, the tears of longing that we encounter in many of the saints. The gift of knowledge enables us to see the face of God reflected in the faces of those we love. They draw us to God, but

we cannot see Him. "*God takes us captive,*" Fr. Gardeil says, "*but we cannot reach Him.*" He continues,

[these are] no longer tears of tears of repentance but tears of desire and anguish. We see him, but partially; we feel him but cannot overtake him. The blessed Virgin, when she finds our Lord in the Temple, reproaches him thus: "What hast thou done? Thy father and I have sought thee, weeping." The spouse seeks God as the mother seeks her son, weeping. (Gardeil, p. 105)

St. Thomas Aquinas makes a connection between the gift of knowledge and the third beatitude, which promises a blessing to those who mourn. His comment is less poetic than his Dominican successor, but it is no less to the point.

It is by forming a right judgment of creatures that man becomes aware of the loss (of which they [creatures] may be the occasion), which judgment he exercises through the gift of knowledge. Hence the beatitude of sorrow is said to correspond to the gift of knowledge. (ST II-II, 9.4)

THE MIRROR OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

This ought to lead us to a moment of self-discovery. We are no less a part of creation than anyone or anything else God has created. The Spirit's gift of knowledge should inspire in us a two-fold vision in which we see every creature as altogether dependent upon God, yet possessing the immense potential to reveal something of God's perfection.

We do ourselves (or God) no credit if we hide our face, shuffle our feet, and say, "Aw, shucks!" if someone mentions our accomplishments. Cities built on hills cannot be hidden, Jesus says, and lamps are lighted to give light to households. No created thing has any value in itself, yet every created thing is immensely valuable because it has the capacity to reveal something of God's perfection.

USING GIFTS FOR GOOD

We commit the gravest of sins, the sin of scandal, if we use our intelligence or charm to lead others into sin. On the other hand, what greater gift can we give others than to share with them the good things the gift of knowledge allows us to discern in ourselves, which will lead them to God? St. Thomas observes that our happiness "*consist[s] somewhat in the right use of creatures, and in well-ordered love of them: and I say this with regard to the beatitude of a wayfarer.*" (ST II-II, 9.4, ad. 3)

St. Thomas' use of the term "wayfarer" reminds us of our pilgrimage through life, and the lives of the saints demonstrate how powerfully the gift of knowledge can direct the prayer that accompanies and eases this journey.

St. Teresa of Avila writes that the first step of the soul toward contemplation occurs when the soul leaves its interior castle to wander among the beauties of the world. At some point the God calls the soul, telling it that these created splendors are not enough. The soul

then retreats into its castle again, where God's word can lift it to greater and greater heights.

The first step in this journey toward eternal happiness is the individual's responding to the Spirit's gift of knowledge, and acknowledging that created things, in themselves, cannot bring the satisfaction we seek.

The Holy Spirit, with whom we should have the most intimate relations, detaches us from creatures, makes us hear his call of invitation, and through recollection, places us in the first stage of the supernatural states of prayer. (Gardeil, p. 99)

ECHOING MARY

These words sound remarkably like those of Mary, as she proclaims her Magnificat.

My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, He looks on his servant in her nothingness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed. The Almighty works marvels for me. Holy his name!

Here is the voice of someone who harbors no illusions about the unique role she has been called to play in the history of salvation. All ages will call her blessed, so why deny the truth? At the same time, Mary understands that her greatness rests altogether upon her willingness to place herself at God's disposal – to allow herself to disappear, so that God's power, glory, and justice can be revealed through her. Here is the gift of knowledge at work, to a supreme degree, inviting us to follow and embrace her example. ■

THE SONG OF SONGS (Continued from page 1)

with the Jewish religion? All of these interpretations can be found in early Christian commentaries.

CLOSING REFRAIN

This poem ends with a refrain that is echoed in 3:5, 5:8 and 8:4:

*I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles and hinds of the field,
Do not arouse, do not stir up love
before its time.*

The Hebrew is ambiguous, perhaps purposely so, with respect to who is speaking. Although it might seem contradictory to have the lady tell her maiden companions not to stir up love right after she had requested the stimulants of raisin cakes and apples (2:5) because she is faint with love, I would agree with the NAB that this is best viewed as coming from the mouth of the beloved.

MYSTICAL MEANINGS OF THE REFRAIN

After reviewing Jewish and patristic interpretations of this verse, Richard Frederick Littledale suggests the following mystical meanings in his 1869 commentary:

The Bride urges all devout souls, in the name of those other souls which, though less perfect, and not yet as meek and docile as the sheep of CHRIST's fold, are yet dear to the Good Shepherd, not to hasten GOD's good time by impatience, but to let patience have her

perfect work....Again; as the word is not Beloved but Love, we may well see here counsel against hurrying on souls too fast in religious growth, lest undue forcing should make them weakly exotics, rather than hardy, vigorous, and fruitful plants.

Warnings of this danger of misplaced zeal for spiritual advancement are common in the works of writers of the spiritual life, and they clearly point to a real problem. And that problem is, of course, the sin of pride combined with a mistrust in the wisdom of divine Providence. If we trust in God, we will also trust his time-table.

Next time, a survey of the second poem in the Song of Songs, 2:8 to 3:5. ■

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