

**Who Wrote the Book of Love?
The Song of Songs for Catholics**
Fr. James Thompson, O.P.

PART 9: CONCISE COMMENTARY 2:8-3:5

SECOND POEM

The second poem of the Song of Songs goes from 2:8 to 3:5. We have a new section with a new setting: it has the lady in her home. This poem has two distinct parts. In the first part (2:8-17) she teases him when he complains that she is playing hard to catch. In the second (3:1-5) he is missing, and so she wanders to find him.

THEIR NEAR TRYST IN SPRING

Hark! My lover – here he comes springing across the mountains, leaping across the hills. (2:8) The first part of this poem uses the imagery of the life-giving season of spring to express their romantic passions. Her lover is a youth of boundless potency. He is a stag, she a cooing dove. Instead of a dialogue as in Poem 1, here she quotes the voice of the lover, bidding her to stop playing hard to get (2:10-14), and then she teases him about other suitors (the little foxes).

Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that damage the vineyards. (2:15) Traditional commentators have had a field day in seeking the appropriate allegorical identification of the foxes. Often they are taken to represent heretics, designated foxes because of their crafty deceitfulness and called "little" because of their external show of humility (St. Gregory the Great). The blossoms of the vineyard are taken to be the minds of immature believers (St. Bede), easily confused. The command is not to kill the foxes, but only to catch them, which St. Augustine interpreted to mean that they are to be convinced of their error and converted. Such interpretations make a degree of sense, since the foxes are a threat to the vineyard (the Church) in bloom if they are allowed to run amok.

MUTUAL AND EXCLUSIVE

My lover belongs to me and I to him. (2:16) Their love is mutual and exclusive; they belong to each other. What a beautiful, yet pithy, expression of the intent of the vows



Entrance to the Basilica at Lourdes

of the sacrament of Holy Matrimony! In Poem 3 at 4:12-16, we will see a further development of this theme, but in the language of an enclosed garden: she herself is that garden, and only he has access to its delights. In this poem though, quoting her lover, the lady uses more euphemistic language for their love-making. For example, her lover browses among the lilies (2:16) and roams like a gazelle or young stag upon the mountains of Bether (2:17). At the literal level the erotic overtones are hard to miss. But this represents the physical aspect of how "the two of them become one body" (Gen. 2:24). When a loving, marital union is open to the command to "be fertile and multiply" (Gen. 1:28), it can become a natural image of the divine "Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (*Dante, Paradiso* 33:145). St. Paul tells us that "this is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the Church" (Eph. 5:32).

THE NIGHT SEARCH

I sought him whom my heart loves. (3:1) In this second part of the poem (3:1-5) she relates a night search for her lover, who now returns the favor by playing hard to get himself. It is night and she goes out alone to find
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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

DOCUMENTS FOR A GOLDEN JUBILEE

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

October 11, 2012 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Bishops of the world gathered in a Synod, or General Assembly, to consider the challenges the Church faces in the 21st Century as it seeks effective ways to proclaim the Gospel.

The document for the Bishops' discussion was *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*. Before we turn to it, let us consider another document – this issued by the Bishops of the United States on October 10. Titled, "Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily," this was a challenge to preachers and a Bill of Rights to those who listen to them.

JESUS: THE MODEL FOR PREACHERS

The example for our preaching, of course is Jesus, and the document cited encourages preachers to follow Jesus in connecting the Sunday homily with people's daily lives.

...The ultimate goal of proclaiming the Gospel is to lead people into a loving and intimate relationship with the Lord, a relationship that forms the character of their persons and guides them in living out their faith...by highlighting his humanity, his poverty, his compassion, his forthrightness, and his suffering and Death, an effective homily would show the faithful just how much the Son of God loved them in taking our human flesh upon himself....

The document states, "The homily is intended to establish a 'dialogue' between the sacred biblical text and the Christian life of the hearer," and it adds, "apt stories that illustrate human experience or the realities of contemporary culture help enliven the homily and open avenues for understanding the meaning of the biblical text...."

THE HOMILY, TECHNOLOGY, & CULTURE

Homilists should be in touch with the contemporary culture, so the document advises,

Preachers should be aware, in an appropriate way, of what [the congregation is] watching on television, what kind of music they are listening to, which websites they find appealing, and which films they find compelling. References to the more popular cultural expressions – which at times can be surprisingly replete with religious motifs – can be an effective way to engage the interest of those on the edge of faith.

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

A homily that addresses the congregation, and finds ways to connect concerns with the readings, especially the Gospel, that have been chosen for the Mass, is no more than the congregation deserves. And directing the

homily toward the concerns of a parochial congregation is essential if the Church is going to claim – as it will – to the laity's support in the vast ministry of Evangelization we will hear so much about as we continue our Pilgrimage through this Year of Faith.

PREACHING OR TEACHING?

What is the difference between preaching and teaching? In both cases an individual addresses what amounts to a captive audience, so what sets the experiences apart? Teaching concerns itself with exchanging facts. The bishops' document, by contrast, states that the homily should lead to understanding what lies *beneath* the facts recorded in the Scripture.

How is this conveyed? Teachers can – should – use whatever devices and examples will hold their students' attention and enable them to grasp the material they are trying to present, but preachers should remember they have only one chance, and a limited time, to get their message across. Therefore, the message should be as simple and uncomplicated as possible.

Then we must ask why we teach, and why we preach? The purpose of teaching is to make individuals smarter or better informed. Preaching, on the other hand, should draw people in and make them consider – or re-consider – their lives with Christ.

Three decades ago Catholics were captivated by a book, *The Wounded Healer*. Its author remarked the comment a preacher should strive to hear after Mass on Sunday is not, "Isn't he smart?" but, "I never thought about that before!" In fact, the greatest compliment we can pay a preacher is probably, "Your homily not only made me think, it made me repent." *This* is what the congregation has a right to listen for on Sunday – a homily that aims not only at the head, but also at the heart.

Now let us turn to the Bishops' Synod on the New Evangelization, for each of us will be called to take part in this enterprise, and the Sunday homily is one of the means by which we are equipped for this essential role in the Church's ministry to the world.

THE SYNOD & EVANGELIZATION

The Bishops' document on the New Evangelization consists of four shorter reflections. The introduction describes the Church's response to the cultural changes of the past half-century.

The evangelizing mission received from the Apostles...is today facing social and cultural changes that are profoundly affecting a person's

perception of self and the world, and consequently, a person's way of believing in God.

All these changes are contributing to a widespread disorientation which leads to forms of distrust of all that has been passed down about the meaning of life and to an unwillingness to adhere in a total, unconditional, manner to what has been revealed as the profound truth of our being....

CHAPTER ONE: ENCOUNTER

The first chapter of the Synod's document, "Jesus Christ, The Good News of God to Humanity," reminds us that our faith is not – or not just – a series of "...teachings, wise sayings, a code of morality, or a tradition." Rather, it is "a true encounter with Jesus Christ." The task of evangelization is to lay the universal foundation for this encounter to take place. The meeting begins with the Scripture, especially the Gospel, which invites us to see Jesus as the fulfillment of everything that has gone before. In Luke's account, Jesus bids farewell to his disciples by saying, "These are the words which I spoke to you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." (#22)

The fruit of Jesus' evangelizing ministry is the Church, and we participate in this ministry by inviting others to share an experience "which transforms the human individual, his world and his personal story." (#31) We have the example of the saints from the past to guide us, but the Church must always challenge itself to find new ways to extend this invitation. (#32)

LOOKING OUT

We may be tempted to leave well enough alone when dealing with individuals of other faiths, but the Bishops' document says we may not simply encourage others on their faith journeys. "Often...it is maintained that any attempt to convince others on religious matters is a limitation of their freedom." The document challenges us to see life in Christ as an increase in freedom, not a limitation, and to remember that by proclaiming Jesus we imitate him. (#35)

LOOKING WITHIN

Of course, we cannot give what we do not have. To evangelize we must allow ourselves to be evangelized. We live in the same world as those to whom we are called to preach, and we share all their temptations. If we are to be effective witnesses to others, we must first embrace the ideals of charity, renewal and communal self-sacrifice the gospel holds out for our example. (#37)

CHAPTER TWO: NEW EVANGELIZATION?

The second chapter of the Bishops' document is called "Time for a New Evangelization," and reminds us that although the methods of evangelization have changed over time, the Church's mission has remained the same since the Day of Pentecost. "The Holy Spirit, who moved [the disciples] to throw open the doors of the Cenacle and sent them forth as evangelizers, is the same Spirit who guides the Church today and prompts a renewed proclamation of hope to the people of our time." (#41)

Like his predecessors, Pope Benedict sees a decline in Christian values in parts of the world that, for centuries, were proud to identify themselves Christian. He believes this one reason for a "new evangelization." This is not "re-evangelization," but, as Pope John Paul II said at an address in Haiti, in 1983, something "new in its ardour, methods and expression." What must be "new" in the New Evangelization is how the Church assesses cultural change, identifies what is good in the change, and takes stock of its resources in responding to the challenges posed by the changes it sees. (#45)

GLOBAL ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

The increased secularism we see in contemporary society is one result of our global economy, and the growing tendency throughout the world for individuals to leave their native homes to seek what they perceive to be a better life in increasingly-larger urban settings. The document observes

The influence of secularization in daily life makes it increasingly difficult to affirm the existence of truth, which, realistically speaking eliminates, the question of God from a person's examination of self. To respond to religious needs, persons revert to individualistic forms of spirituality or forms of neo-paganism to the point of forcibly spreading a general climate of relativism (#53)

AND OPPORTUNITIES

The word "secular" comes from the Latin word *saeculum*, which means "world." The world "...is where believers and non-believers interact and share a common humanity," (#54) so it becomes a privileged place for evangelization and for the Church to explore new ways to build the Christian community in a diverse cultural setting.

This *saeculum* is also the site for the Church to address economic issues that increasingly divide individuals and nations and pose serious threats to human and natural resources. And it is the place to challenge science and technology, warning these disciplines of the temptation they face to become new gnostic religions.

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA

Whether a fifth-rate video contributed to recent unrest in the Muslim world will continue to be debated, but the mere fact such a video could reach a multi-national audience shows the importance of modern means of communication, and the Church must continue to exploit modern communications media for her evangelization efforts.

At the same time, we must be aware that modern media pose two threats: one is sheer noise; the other is the repeated presentation of images that are emotional, personal, superficial and transitory. The Church must continue to proclaim "...the objective value of deeply human experience, such as meditation and silence...." (#62) and we must preserve "...the educational patrimony and the wisdom guarded by Christian tradition...."

THE ESSENTIAL PARISH COMMUNITY

Parish communities are the logical places to begin and sustain these evangelization efforts. By encouraging the vocation of the laity, the Second Vatican Council engaged an immense and (until then) largely-untapped resource. The New Evangelization is an example of charity beginning at home, and parishes are an essential element in its success, as they offer the resources to reach out to and welcome back individuals who have drifted away from the faith, as well as the resources to awaken the faith in those who have not yet heard the Good News. (#85)

CHAPTER THREE: RESPONSE

The third chapter of the Synod text is titled “Transmitting the Faith,” and reinforces what we have already heard, namely that our Catholic faith is under siege from a number of external cultural forces, with the result that we often end by living our faith in a private and isolated manner. The remedy is both private and communal – a renewal of common prayer in parish Eucharistic communities, and embracing private prayer and study.

FAMILY ROOTS

Even before individuals enroll in parish study programs, the family is the model for the nurturing and teaching Church. And the document clearly states that because families undertake so much on the Church’s behalf, the Church – particularly its local, parish incarnation – must be “...accepted and listened to...The commonly shared goal is to give the family an increasingly active role in the transmission of the faith.” (#111)

The Bishops’ document commends religious, both active and contemplative, for their evangelical witness, as well as those individuals who have discerned particular charisms that they have chosen to share with the Church. Each of us, the document stresses, must proclaim and hand on the faith; this is no more than our baptismal identity requires, and it must inform everything we do if our good works are to be true acts of charity and not merely philanthropy. (#123)

CHAPTER FOUR: PARISH LIFE

The document’s fourth chapter is titled “Revivifying Pastoral Activity,” and stresses the importance of the Sunday homily, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and events such as parish novenas or festivals that provide opportunities for the faithful to gather and learn. Pope Benedict XVI calls this the “ecology of the human person,” by which he means the bond between faith and education and faith and knowledge. (#153) This is not merely a matter of breadth, but one of depth. Pope Paul VI observed, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers...It is therefore primarily by her conduct...that the Church will evangelize the world.” (#158)

WE ARE THE EVANGELISTS

By now it should be clear that the “new” evangelization is no new message, because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever.” What must be new is our response to the needs we see around us.

David Ricken, bishop of Green Bay, Wisconsin, recently observed

In effect, the goals of the Year of Faith are accomplished when everyone in the church simply strives to do what he or she is called to do: husbands and wives, love each other; priests and religious, serve your people; children, be kind and share. All people can evangelize with their lives. This includes believing in the powerful witness of regular participation in the sacraments, especially Sunday Mass and the sacrament of reconciliation. (October 15, 2012)

The good news is that while we may have to embrace a great deal to be heralds of the New Evangelization, we do not have to embrace anything radical or unique. We begin by strengthening those bonds that unite us to Christ – principally the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and our lives of prayer. These yield the strength for the task of evangelization, which is sharing with others the good things we have received. And this yields the fruit of joy, which, our theology tells us, is the satisfaction of knowing we have accomplished some good deed. ■

THE SONG OF SONGS

(Continued from page 1)

him, asking the city watchmen, and finally finding him. A similar, less happy, search happens in Poem 3 at 5:1-5.

One thing to consider in interpreting this night search is its utter audacity. For a young woman to be wandering the streets at night in search for her lover breaks the social norms of her day in a big way. Her very audacity forms proof of the driving passion of her love. She will let nothing get in the way of returning to her lover’s presence.

SEARCH IN THE SPIRIT

In the spiritual life one must continue to search for the Lord. Repentance, conversion and baptism are the beginning, not the end, of the Christian’s journey. Richard of St. Victor had this take on the lady’s search:

The Bride sought her beloved through the streets and ways and found him not at her wish. She did not yet feel His presence, did not yet win the grace for which she longed. But I have no doubt that she gained much by her journey, and greatly increased her inner grace; since no slight longing after righteousness was kindled in her from her recognition of good men and their virtues.

REFRAIN

Do not arouse, do not stir up love, before its time. (3:5) This poem ends with the refrain we first encountered in the first poem at 2:7. From the viewpoint of the sacramentality of married love, this can be seen as a call for restraint, and that the fulfillment of the ardor of love is increased by the wait. As we saw last time, from the mystical perspective, applied to salvation, this is a call to restraint because of the danger of misplaced zeal for spiritual advancement. When people “get religion” they so often fall into the trap of self-righteousness and pride, both of which spoil true religious satisfaction.