

THE ROSARY

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LIGHT & LIFE

FATHER REGINALD E. MARTIN, O.P., *DIRECTOR*

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REFLECTIONS OF CHRIST'S LOVE

Fr. Reginald Martin, O.P.

As we prepare to celebrate the great feasts of our Savior's Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart of his mother, this is a splendid time to offer a prayer for our own Fr. Duffer, whose dedication to the Rosary Center is so magnificent and visible a reflection of God's love. On April 14 Fr. Duffer celebrated his ninety-eighth birthday, and although he no longer actively directs the affairs of the Rosary Center, he is still very active at the heart of its ministry. Please pray for this anchor in our lives!

And if you are looking for an inspirational website, let me suggest www.prayerbreaks.org. This is the on-line branch of a ministry directed by Mary and Michael John Poirier. Michael spent some years discerning his vocation as a Dominican. When he decided God was calling him to marry, he waited until his vows expired and put his considerable musical talents to work proclaiming the gospel as a layman, husband, and father. Michael John's outreach is directed particularly toward men, whom he never ceases to call to pray the Rosary. You will be deeply touched by his and his wife's ministry.



Who Wrote the Book of Love?

The Song of Songs for Catholics

Fr. James Thompson, O.P.

PART 11: CONCISE COMMENTARY 5:2-6:3

FOURTH POEM

The fourth poem runs from 5:2 to 6:3, and opens with another night scene as in Poem 2. It also takes up the search motif again (5:2-8). This time the atmosphere is more charged because her lover had arrived at night only to be locked out. The old adage, "He who hesitates is lost" applies here, if we change "he" to "she." In her excited hesitation she misses her chance, because he gave up, leaving her. This time in her night search the watchmen are not so gentle. When they come upon her, they beat her up.

MYSTICAL MEANING

In the book of Revelation, the risen Lord told the church of Laodicea,

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, then I will enter his house and dine with him and he with me" (Rev. 3:20).

So naturally the Church Fathers, on encountering the missed opportunity of the Beloved in this poem saw it as descriptive of the sorrow that leads to repentance. She hesitates because she is not dressed, not ready, and groggy from sleep. When the Holy Spirit prompts us to do a good thing, and we dither and then don't, this is such a missed opportunity. However, often enough our sleepy spiritual torpor may involve a more definite rejection of our Bridegroom's calling. Apponius, a 5th century commentator, interpreted the start of the poem this way:

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Gifts of the Spirit: VII

Wisdom

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

A WORD ABOUT WORDS

One of the difficulties we encounter when we begin to take theology seriously is the technical vocabulary of our subject. Every science has its own vocabulary, but we soon discover that our Church's theology, rather than using unfamiliar words, employs familiar words, but in unfamiliar ways. In our reflection on the gifts of the Spirit we have seen this several times already; "fear" is, perhaps, the most obvious example. In our everyday life, fear is the reasonable aversion we feel in the face of danger.

THEOLOGICAL VOCABULARY

In our theology, however, fear is something entirely different, and we have discovered it to be the source of strength that enables us to assign money, public honor, and even personal relations their proper place in our lives. Genuine, theological fear is the sign of love that characterizes our union with God when it is purified of mere dread that we will be punished for misbehavior.

THE EXAMPLE OF WISDOM

In this final reflection on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit we will consider the Gift of Wisdom, which one spiritual writer calls "the greatest gift." Here, too, our vocabulary betrays us. We shall discover, perhaps to our surprise, that spiritual wisdom is not the wisdom we commonly associate with intelligence, study, and the ability to apply the fruits of our hard work to concrete problems.

Rather, the Wisdom that will be the subject of our present investigation is faith made perfect, the intellect guided directly by the Holy Spirit to gain entry into the very life of God. This is the gift that allows us to penetrate what our author, Fr. Vonier, names "*all the wonderful intimacies of God with [us], all the mystical nuptials of the saints, all the woundings of their hearts through the arrow of divine love . . .*" (*The Spirit and the Bride*, p. 190) This is what St. Paul revels in when he cries out, in his Letter to the Romans, "*O the depths of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!*" (Rom. 11:33)

WISDOM AND FEAR

Wisdom bears the same relation to the Spirit's intellectual gifts that the Fear of the Lord bears to the gifts of the will. In fact, the two are related, as the Book of Proverbs suggests, when it claims, "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.*" (Prov. 1.7) As our comments unfold, we shall see that as Fear grows to become the child's pure love of a loving Father, this love grows until words and images are no longer necessary, and our soul stands, at last, in utter silence before God.

WISDOM AND LOVE

The difficulty, of course, is that while we long to see God as He is, our love is limited and bound by everything that holds us firmly here – as creatures – on earth. The gifts of knowledge and understanding purify our faith and lead us to a greater and greater certitude about God. To our immense delight, this increases our longing to love Him, and the more we love Him, the more we discover to know about Him. Knowledge increases our certitude, but – sadly – it can do nothing to satisfy our longing to embrace the object of our love.

The Dominican theologian, H.D. Gardeil, who has been our companion throughout these reflections of the Spirit's gifts, paints a dramatic and poignant picture of the soul's yearning to see the God it was created to love.

Even now, charity is already made for heaven, proportioned to heaven, proportioned to God seen face to face, in all his ravishing beauty, It has infinite sources of strength which it cannot put into action here on hearth, even with the aid of the gifts of knowledge and understanding. The terms in which we think of God are terms of creatures, limited, finite. Now the charity of earth would see the infinite God as he is infinite, and yet it knows him in such an imperfect way....

Our charity desires then, that God be shown to it face to face. Faith...however secure it may be, cannot thus show him. From this fact there is in charity a breadth of love which is not satisfied. Consequently, charity remains unsatiated, so long as it simply follows faith, even though enlightened by the gifts which give it strength, removing obstacles and placing its object in the full light. What then shall charity do, imprisoned by faith?
(H.D. Gardeil, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Life*, pp. 132-3)

WISDOM THE LIBERATOR

We can hardly imagine more vivid imagery, but Fr. Gardeil employs an even stronger metaphor when he speaks of the soul's desire to be "*free from this restraint, this strait-jacket of faith.*" The soul's liberator, he says, is the Holy Spirit. Encountering who and what the Spirit is, is what so ravished St. Paul. The same Spirit dwells within us, and He offers us, no less than St. Paul or any of the other saints, the same capacity to grasp who He is. The means by which we do so is the Gift of Wisdom. Thus, Fr. Gardeil concludes,

The inspiration of wisdom is nothing less than a movement of the Holy Spirit through which he

communicates to us by way of the heart, as it were, an experience of the heavenly vision. (p. 133)

What the Gift of Wisdom enables us to see is God Himself, the object of our faith. But we do not see with our physical eyes, or with our intellect. The Spirit's gift of sight is a gift that enlightens the heart. To be sure, this experience is limited by all the limitations of our humanity, so it can be no more than a foretaste or "preview" of what we look forward to enjoying fully in heaven, but it is an experience that soars above anything else we can know, understand or feel of or about God while we are still on earth.

THE SILENCE OF LOVE

We might imagine that such an encounter would invite us to bring forward all our expressions of love, all our concerns for ourselves and those we love, all our prayers for the salvation and well-being of the world. But, on the contrary, we are assured by the saints who have enjoyed this vision, that the only response is one of awed silence in which we are aware of nothing but God's presence and our complete nothingness.

There is no more than adoration, an amen; a moment of losing oneself in God. For the time being, one puts aside all definite concepts, even those which have brought one to this state....

That is as far as the spirit of wisdom can lead us. It lasts for an instant. It is a fleeting stealing of our heart, a flight of the spirit, a swift soaring. We fall again very soon on to the earth of faith. Then we begin again. As St. Francis of Sales says, we land on the soil of faith, we revive ourselves with some good thought, we gain strength to take off once more. (p. 135)

WISDOM AND PRAYER

This is not, our author reminds us, the ecstatic rapture of the mystics, which is altogether the result of God's initiative. It is, however, as close to this state as we can come by our own effort. Faith, assisted by knowledge and understanding, reveals God to us and removes our doubts. But it does so through words and images, and these are a constant reminder of the distance between God and us. Wisdom, by contrast, enables us to leave the images behind, and to bow in loving silence before the God who calls to us in love.

St. Thomas Aquinas warns

Some, however, receive a higher degree of the gift of wisdom, both as to the contemplation of Divine things (by both knowing more exalted mysteries and being able to impart this knowledge to others) and as to the direction of human affairs according to Divine rules... (ST, II-II, 45.5)

WISDOM MISSED?

But our modern Dominican guide stresses that the Gift of Wisdom is given to each of us at Baptism. Not equally, to be sure – what gifts, talents, or capabilities are given equally? But each of us enjoys the possibility, to the extent of our own capacities, to enjoy this experience. Fr. Gardeil explains that although the encounter with God that the Gift of Wisdom equips us

to enjoy is not the extraordinary, ecstatic experience of the contemplative saints. It is within the grasp of every person in the state of grace, and he suggests that we may have approached it unaware.

At certain moments, have we not experienced this kind of annihilation of ourselves before God, present in our interior soul. Perhaps on the occasion of a Communion? Then the presence of our Lord is close... God was there, and not seeking to understand more, we prostrate ourselves in a close sense of his immediate presence, and by the attitude of our mind and the power of our charity, we have made contact with this God.

These things do happen, but it is with difficulty that we perceive their value, their dignity and their normal existence in our life; we do not attach much importance to them. We say truly, 'This is a grace'... We add, 'It must be God who puts me in this state.' He will do so, but we must prepare ourselves for such a great favour.' (p. 139)

WISDOM AND PEACE

One of the maxims of our faith teaches us that gifts are never given just to enrich the individual to whom they are given; rather, they are given to enrich the entire Church. Such is the case with the Gift of Wisdom. Although it immeasurably increases our love for God, and our awareness of God's love for us, the gift does not cease with the awareness. St. Thomas draws a connection between the Gift of Wisdom and the beatitude promising a blessing to those who are peacemakers,

...a peacemaker is one who make peace, either in himself, or in others; and in both cases this is the result of setting in due order those things in which peace is established, for peace is the tranquility of order, according to Augustine... Now it belongs to wisdom to set things in order... wherefore peaceableness is fittingly ascribed to wisdom. The reward is expressed in the words, they shall be called the children of God, Now men are called the children of God in so far as they participate in the likeness of the natural and only-begotten Son of God... Who is Wisdom begotten. Hence, by participating in the gift of wisdom [we attain] to the sonship of God. (ST, II-II, 45.6)

THE PURIFICATION OF WISDOM

Cardinal Manning, whom we have quoted throughout these reflections, gives a concrete example of the Gift of Wisdom in action. He writes that Wisdom purifies charity, ordering it so that we first love God, then ourselves, then our neighbor. He adds that the Gift of Wisdom is the source of our mental prayer.

If you find it hard to meditate, you may know the reason. The gift of wisdom is in some way hindered. But this gift is not to be obtained by eager poring over books, nor by the stretch and strain of the imagination or of the intellect. It is the gentle and calm contemplation of God and His truth... If you wish to learn the habit of meditation,

unite your heart with God humbly and patiently, sitting, as it were, at the feet of God, and looking into His face. (Internal Mission of the Holy Ghost, p. 298)

And he comments that “*There are some among us who have a greater facility in acquiring the gift of wisdom than others.*” These are, he says, children and the poor. Children because they have not had the chance to sin; the poor because Wisdom casts out pride, and makes us realize our nothingness in comparison to God. The Gift of Fear gives us the opportunity to cultivate the hearts of children; the Spirit’s Gift of Wisdom opens our ears to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the poor,” He tells us, “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” These words are in invitation to cultivate a spirit of voluntary poverty in which we realize that we need to be nothing because God is “all in all.” ■

The Bride is rightly faint with love when having been beaten and wounded by the sword of the Spirit she puts off the mantle of carnal desire, for as a holy soul gains strength in God, her fondness for this world becomes more feeble and infirm.... the daughters of Jerusalem are the citizens of the heavenly homeland, some of whom are still on pilgrimage on earth, and some of whom are already reigning there.

The maidens ask her what is so great about this guy, and she replies with her own praises of his physical attributes. In her description she, too, starts at the top of the body with his head, and works her way down to his legs and feet (5:10-16), but closes with a jump back up to his mouth. In the traditional interpretations, these various details are related to the excellencies of our savior, Jesus Christ. In the end, he is discovered to be where he should be, in his garden (6:1-3). Her report echoes 2:16.

SONG OF SONGS

Continued from page 1

For when the soul is not stimulated by tribulations, she does not seek to know whether the Bridegroom is near or whether he has departed.... She, moreover, though she lies there stripped of the garment that the grace of Christ bestowed on her, though her feet are bare and washed when they had been “shod” by the hope of attaining blessedness...does not blush to rise up from the bed of evil custom, and by repentance to open the door of her mind to the Christ who knocks.

Now you might be thinking that the Church Fathers would be hard pressed to find a mystical meaning to night watchman beating up a stray young woman at night. But have not fear! On a mystic reading, this corresponds to what St. John of the Cross termed “the dark night of the soul.” The most famous person of recent memory we know who had this mystic experience is Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The “dark night” is the experience of having no personal sense of God’s presence. It can involve intense suffering, and longing for the previous mountain-top experiences.

Alternatively, her night search and rough encounter with the guards could signify that she goes forth once more as Christ’s bride, wearing the mantle that is the grace leading to a spotless life, and while seeking him anew she faces tribulations which test and train her. As St. Ambrose put it:

They took her mantle away from her, trying to see whether she brought with her the true beauty of naked virtue; or else because one is bound to enter that heavenly city bare, without bringing along any clothing to disguise oneself.... So she bears no loss, for even if someone wants to, he cannot carry off true wisdom. Even if the Adversary rages against her, the true integrity of a spotless way of life shines through such a person.

Her loving yearning has become so intense, that she asks the Daughters of Jerusalem to give her Lover this message: *I am sick with love* (5:8). Some patristic commentators see in this an image of the Communion of Saints. The Venerable Bede put it this way:

His mouth is sweetness itself; he is all delight. (5:16)
From the mystical perspective, the lady’s appreciation of the beauty of the lover images the love of the soul for God, the love of the Church for Christ, the source of all beauty and himself Beauty Unsurpassable.

*So when the Eternal Wisdom, the Beauty uncreated, did show Himself to men, He inspired such passionate yearning in them that they could not but rise up, leave all, and follow Him, to poverty, exile, shame and death. **Altogether lovely**, because He is lovely as GOD, and lovely as Man also. He is lovely in Himself, and lovely in His Saints. Lovely was the vision of His Humanity upon earth, but lovelier by far will be His glorified Humanity in heaven...**Altogether lovely**, because the more He is possessed, the more He is longer for.* (Littledale, 262-263)

LITERAL INTERPRETATION

And what might we make of this poem taken at the literal level as a love song? Surely this describes the experience of many couples when a misunderstanding arises. In this life, no matter how much in love a couple may be, they are never perfectly attentive to each other all of their days. Some contemporary commentators have seen a not-so-veiled reference to sexual intercourse in the language of opening the door and inserting the hand. Now while, as I previously wrote, the entire Song quivers with sexual desire and tension, I do not see a reference to its consummation here. It does not fit the context of the lover’s nocturnal disappointment, and her regretful search. Certainly there is innuendo here of such desire, but not its fulfillment.

Years ago I noticed that the fellow ringing up my purchase in a store had a tattoo in Hebrew that encircled his arm. I asked him what it said, and he replied: “My beloved is mine, and I am his.” To which I replied, “Ah, the Song of Songs!” And he just smiled. This poem ends with these words, as does 2:16; these will find an echo once more in 7:11.