

A Patristic Commentary

THE
SONG OF SONGS

FR. TADROS Y. MALATY

2005

Translated by
FERIAL MOAWAD

English Text Revised by:
**RAFIK & MARY NICOLA,
NAGUI ABDELSAYED & LINDA RAGHEB**

*St. George's Coptic Orthodox Church
Sporting - Alexandria*

INTRODUCTION TO THE SONG OF SONGS

STATUS AMONG THE JEWS

The Jewish faith has handed down the Old Testament books to the Christian Church, and Song of Songs is no exception. This book holds a special status among the other books because of its symbolic style announcing the mutual love between God and His Church, or between God and the human soul as a member of the Church.

The Hebrew edition of the Torah, which Ezra the scribe gathered in the fifth century B.C., contained this book. Like the other books of the Septuagint, it was translated into Greek in the third century B.C., without any doubt of its spiritual meanings.

During the time of our Lord Jesus Christ, Rabbi Shammai tried to exclude Song of Songs from the Holy Bible because of his desire to interpret the book literally. However, the canonicity of this book was confirmed by both the Jewish Traditional Hillel School and the council at Jamnia¹ (95-100 A.D.).

In the year 135 A.D., Rabbi Akiba emphasized the importance of this book. He said, “The book is all holy; in fact, the book of Song of Songs is the holiest book. The whole world did not give us a more important book.”

In the *Targum* (means ‘translation’), “The songs and chants which Solomon, the prophet and king of Israel, had uttered through the Holy Spirit before God, were ten, but this song was the best.”

The *Midrash* emphasized that: “The book of Song of Songs is the best song presented to God through the Holy Spirit. It is a song which God praises us and we praise Him!”

DIVINE INSPIRATION

Perhaps some may wonder why the divine inspiration used this courting style to express the mutual love between God and His Church. Through the divine inspiration, God speaks to us with the same style in a colloquial manner. Moreover, He also uses the same expressions we use, so that the inspiration is not foreign to us.

¹ James Hastings: *Dictionary of the Bible*, N.Y., p. 930.

² When the Jews came back from the Babylonian captivity, they were unable to understand the Hebrew language of their fathers. Therefore, some of the books of the Bible were orally translated into Aramaic, and then the Aramaic was translated in writing and was called “Targum.”

³ The Midrash: This name is derived from the Hebrew verb “darash” or “daras” which means “investigate” or “search out,” i.e. to discover or develop a thought not apparent on the surface. In the rabbinical literature, Midrash means the study of the sacred text in general, but more particularly a commentary, or an explanation of a homiletic character. (See our book: “Tradition and Orthodoxy.” 1979, ch. 8, p. 29. (in Arabic)

For example, although the Bible mentions that at certain times the Lord became angry, relentless and sorrowful, God cannot become angry (because He is full of love), relentless (because He is all-knowing) or sorrowful (because He does not suffer). However, when the Bible discusses the wrath of God, He wants to declare to us that when we sin, we fall under God's judgment. Such action is the natural consequence of our sins because we stray from God's love.

In the same manner, the divine inspiration uses human expressions. "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry. The face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (Ps. 34:15-16). Does this mean that God has physical features? Here, the Psalmist talks about God's care for us with the same language we use! Also, when the Holy Bible mentions God's throne, does this mean that God has a limited throne to sit upon? All these were written so we may understand God's kingdom, glory, and splendor, according to our language and human expressions!

The divine inspiration speaks to us in a similar manner about the deepest part of our spiritual life: our unity with God through the mysterious spiritual love. Therefore, He uses human language in expressing love between a bride and groom. Our relationship with Him is not based on carnal love but on symbols that carry the depth of the mysteries of this unutterable love. This figurative style of writing is not unique, for all the Gentiles have used it in their writings on the divine passion. The soul is embraced in God's bosom to live with Him and to satisfy all her needs.

This interpretation of the divine love as a spiritual marital love that binds the soul with God is not strange in the Bible, but has been used by both the prophets of the Old Testament as well as the Disciples of the New Testament. We shall see this when we discuss the "The Heavenly Wedding Banquet."

NOT ABOUT CARNAL LOVE

The expression of this book cannot be applied to the carnal love, and it cannot agree with what some have said that it is a song which Solomon sung when he married Pharaoh's daughter. Here are some examples: ¹

- ❖ ***"Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth, for Your love is better than wine"*** (Song 1:2). Thus the bride is communing with her Groom, but she asks for the kisses of someone else's mouth ("his mouth"). However, she declares that his love ("your love") is better than wine. How can a bride ask that someone else beside her groom kiss her, while she is communing with her groom? This is impossible to be applied to the carnal love. This is the conversing of the Church with her Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ. She asks for the kisses of the Father (i.e., His plan for salvation), which was fulfilled through the practical love of the Son. For the Bible says, "The Only-Begotten Son, who

¹ Fr. Abdel-Messih El-Nekhely: "Lights on the Song of Songs." p. 22-23 (in Arabic)

is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18).

- ❖ **“Because of the fragrance of Your good ointments, Your name is ointment poured forth; therefore, the virgins love You” (Song 1:3).** The bride adores the fragrance of her bridegroom and that his name is ointment poured forth. She declares that the virgins love him. How can a bride rejoice when the other virgins love her bridegroom? The bride here again symbolizes the Church, who wants all believers (all virgins), to love her Bridegroom.
- ❖ **“Lead me away! We will run after You” (Song 1:4).** After she started talking in a singular form, she switched to the plural form. Is the speaker here singular or plural? If they were a group, then how can they meet and make love with only one? How can a bride ask her bridegroom to lead her, but take others with her to make love to him?

From these examples, we discover that this book was not meant to express physical love between a bride and her bridegroom, but rather it explains a divine love binding God with His Church.

AUTHOR AND TITLE

Solomon wrote this book, and he also wrote many songs (1 Kings 4:32). This book was named “Song of Songs” to show that repeating the word “song” refers to its superiority over the other songs. This resembles the similar phrases such as “King of kings,” “Lord of lords,” “Holy of holies,” “Sabbath of Sabbaths,” “Heaven of heavens,” “vanity of vanities,” “slave of slaves,” etc.¹

CHARACTERISTICS

1. Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes

After Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, and recognized the reality that the earthly life is “vanity of vanities,” he then experienced the heavenly life and described it as the “Song of songs.”

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon declared that abundance of knowledge does not satisfy the soul. In Song of Songs, the soul is completely satisfied with the divine love and does not need anything else besides Him.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon mentioned that there is nothing new under the sun, but in the book of Song of Songs the soul, entering God’s bosom, opens new horizons.

2. Allegorical Interpretation

The Jews understood that this book symbolizes the relationship between God (the Bridegroom) with His people (the bride), until the coming of the Messiah. The Christians

¹ Rev. 7:14, 19:16; 1Tim. 6:15; Eccl. 1:2; Deut. 10:17; Gen. 9:35

understood that this book represents the relationship between the Messiah the Savior and His bride, the Church. The Christians took three approaches in explaining the symbolic interpretations of this book, and all these approaches compliment and supplement one another. These are:

- ❖ **Origen, St. Jerome, St. Augustine** and others see that this book refers to the relationship between the Lord Jesus Christ and His Church (i.e., the community of believers).
- ❖ **St. Gregory of Nyssa** and Bernard of Clairvaux relate that this book expresses the relationship between the Lord Christ and the human soul, on a personal level. **Origen** took this approach for his interpretation, along with the previous approach.¹
- ❖ Some Catholics interpret this book as addressing the divine incarnation, and relate the bride to being the Virgin St. Mary, the *Theotokos*.

Truly, since the believer tastes the mutual love between God and the catholic (universal) Church, he sees it as a personal love touching his life personally. The relationship that binds God with His community confirms the relationship between God and the human soul, not as an individual relationship where one is isolated away from the community, but a personal relationship where the individual is a member in the community. St. Mary represents the catholic (universal) Church as a perfect member.² If some interpret this book as a love relationship between the Lord Jesus and St. Virgin Mary, this is because she has enjoyed God's love as one of us, but at a different level!

THE SEVEN SONGS

Origen sees that the believer sings many songs when forsaking this world and entering the Heavenly Jerusalem. When he settles in the bosom of the Eternal Bridegroom in the heavenly chamber, he then sings the Song of Songs. The songs that he had sung on the way are as follows:

1. The soul, crossing the Red Sea with the Israelites, says: "I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea! The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation..." (Ex. 15:1,2). **Origen** comments on this song saying, [If you are singing this first song, yet you have to know that the road is still long to reach the Song of Songs.³]

This is the first song that the soul sings **when entering the water of baptism**. Then one realizes that "God" is the source of her strength, salvation and victory over the devil and his army. Through baptism, she becomes His daughter under His care, and He is the One who grants her His Holy Spirit to accomplish her salvation.

¹ *Origen: Commentary on Song of Songs, Prol. 1.*

² *The author: St. Mary in the Orthodox Concept, 1978, p. 50 (in Arabic).*

³ *Origen: On Song of Songs, Homily 1.*

That is why the Church has put this song as a basic part of the daily praise. It reminds her children of the day of their baptism when they were freed from the slavery of sin to enjoy the adoption of God. Then, they are assured of their victory over the powers of darkness and witness to their Lord and Savior!

2. **Origen** explains that we sing the second song, in this spiritual journey, **at the well, which the chiefs had dug in the wilderness**,¹ when the Lord told Moses, “Gather the people together, and I will give them water” (Num. 21:16). Then Israel sang this song: “Spring up, O well! All of you sing to it, the well the leaders sank, dug by the nation’s nobles, by the lawgiver, with *their staves*” (Num. 21:17-18).

This is the song of a soul that accepts God Himself through the church leaders, the fountains of living water. The wells of the fathers or the leaders are a gift from God Himself, as the Lord’s saying to Moses, “Give them water.” However, those who dig these wells are the leaders, that is, those working in the Lord’s vine.

3. We sing the third song when **we stand with Moses the Prophet on the banks of the Jordan** and hear him singing: “Give ear O heavens and I will speak; and hear O earth, the words of my mouth. Let my teaching drop as the rain, my speech as still as the dew, as raindrops on the tender herb, and as showers on the grass... As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreading its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings, so the Lord led him and there was no foreign god with him. He made him ride in the heights of the earth that he may eat the produce of the fields; He made him draw honey from the rock, and oil from the flinty rock; curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock, with fat of lambs; and rams of the breed of Bashan and goats with the choicest wheat; and you drank wine, the blood of grapes” (Deut. 32:1-2, 11-14).

This is the song of the one who has realized God’s care in the wilderness. He accompanies the soul as a father who accompanies his children on the road; He leads her and cares for all her material and spiritual needs. The soul sees Him as an eagle that hovers over its young children by spanning its wings to protect its young. He is compassionate toward her and carries her over His shoulders, giving her all His care so that she does not need anything but Him. He satisfies her amidst the wilderness, so He can extract honey from the rock and oil from the flinty rock, that is, He does the impossible!

4. **Origen** relates about the fourth song **during the spiritual struggle** saying, [You have to struggle under the leadership of Joshua and reign over the holy land as an inheritance to you. Deborah becomes your judge, for ‘Deborah’ means ‘bee,’ so that your lips may utter the praise that was mentioned in the book of Judges.²]

¹ *Origen: On Song of Songs, Homily 1.*

² *Origen: On Song of Songs, Homily 1.*

We sing this praise during our spiritual strife, so we may become like a bee, until we inherit the kingdom of heaven saying, “*I, even I, will sing to the Lord; I will sing praise to the Lord...The mountains gushed before the Lord*” (Jud. 5:1, 3). The Lord gushes the mountains during our spiritual strife and opens the door to heaven so we may enter with joy and inherit it forever.

5. The fifth song is the one that David had uttered when he was escaping from his enemies, for he said, “The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation” (Ps. 118:14). Thus, the soul reigns with King David when she subdues all the powers of the devil by God, her refuge, power and salvation. As David succeeded to the throne of Saul, we also take the place of the devil before his fall, for he was the greatest heavenly host.
6. **When one discovers the mysteries of the kingdom**, one sings with the prophets like in the sixth song saying, “Now, let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard” (Is. 5:1).
7. Finally, the seventh song is the Song of Songs which the soul utters when she **enters in the presence of the Heavenly Bridegroom** and stays with Him in His heavenly chamber face to face.

Briefly, we can say that **Origen** saw the soul singing continuously seven songs:

- a. She comes out of the baptismal font to become a child of God.
- b. She drinks from the fountains of God which is flowing in His Church.
- c. She feels God’s continuous care in the wilderness.
- d. She praises Him while struggling like a bee.
- e. She sings because of her victory over the devil and she reigns with the Lord.
- f. She sings with the prophets when she feels the mysteries of the eternal heavenly life.
- g. She sings the Song of Songs before her Heavenly Bridegroom.

4. This book was read on the eighth day after the celebration of the Passover¹, being the song of eternal love offered to God, or the song that binds God with the believers who enjoyed the salvation through the blood. The eighth day refers to the day after the seven days of the week, that is, the new life, or the life to come in Christ, our true Passover. This song is a prophecy about the true Passover, who delivers us from death and enters us to His chamber “the heaven of heavens,” a chaste virgin, eternally united with Him.

Truly, this book is an excellent symphony, which the soul sings, after leaving the captivity of this world and the dominion of the true Pharaoh, “the devil.” She enters the Heavenly Jerusalem in the liberty of the glory of God’s children, leaning on the bosom of her Lord. That is why this book does not mention any of the commandments or teachings, but it is all about the mystery of the eternal love and the life with the Heavenly Bridegroom. It is

¹ J. Daniélou: *The Bible and The Liturgy; The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible.*

the symphony of the heart united with its Savior! It is a unique song in its kind and meaning. Anyone, sanctified with the blood of the Lamb, sings this song, entering with intimacy with the holy of holies, without any routine or formalities, until he rests in the bosom of the Father, above all material and physical thoughts to the true spiritual thought. **St. Gregory of Nyssa**, said: [In this book, the Word commands us not to think of carnal matters, even if we are in the flesh, but to ascend to the Spirit, so that all the love expressions are like pure offerings presented to the good Lord, who surpasses all understanding, and whom we find all sweetness, love and desire.]”

“THE BOOK FOR THE MATURE”

The book of Song of Songs is the song of the divine love, recorded with courting symbols, carrying deeper heavenly meanings, which are sung by those who have matured spiritually and who have crossed from the cares of this world to live by the Spirit. That is why **Origen** calls this book, “*the book for the mature*,” saying, [The solid food is for the mature, who can discern; however, the children in faith find their food in other books of the word of God. It is very dangerous if the carnal people read this book! It is very risky for a carnal person to accept the language of love in purity. My advice, for those who are still in the darkness of the flesh, is not to read this book. The Hebrew people were correct when they forbade the reading of this book, as well as some other excerpts of the Old Testament, to those who have not yet attained perfection¹.]

When **St. Gregory** talked about this book he said, [I talk about the mystery of the Song of Songs to you because you have been transferred to the divine matters. Come and enter His undefiled marital chamber, you, who have put on the white clothes of purity! Some do not put on the clothes of pure conscience befitting the divine bride because they are occupied with their thoughts and degrade the pure words of the Bridegroom to their carnal desires, and it becomes a disgrace².]

St. Paphnutius, one of the desert fathers of Egypt, explains that there are three ascetic levels in the books of Solomon the wise, which lifts the person to the life of love and unity with the Lord. He said: [The book of Proverbs corresponds to the first kind of asceticism, where one subdues the desires of the flesh and all the temporal sins. The second kind corresponds to the book of Ecclesiastes, where he declares that everything that happens under the sun is vain. The third kind corresponds to the book of Song of Songs, where one is elevated above the visible matters and reflects on the heavenly matters, and is attached to the word of God.”³]

THE BOOK OF HEAVENLY WEDDING

¹ Origen: *Song of Songs*, translated by Dr. Ragheb Abd-el-Nour, *El-Keraza Magazine*, year 1, issue 2

² *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Sermon 1.

³ *John Cassian, Conferences*, 3.

When discussing the wedding, we should not be confined to the physical marriage between two people, for marriage is a deep mystical union in which unlimited love extends beyond carnal matters. In the spiritual marriage, the soul accepts her Lord as her Bridegroom, who embraces her to unite with Him!

In the Old Testament, the prophets understood the covenant between God and His people as a marital covenant. Isaiah the Prophet said, “For the Lord delights in you... As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Is. 62:4-5). Hosea the Prophet also said, “And it shall be in that day, says the Lord, that you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer call Me ‘My Master’... I will betroth you to Me forever; yes I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in loving kindness and mercy. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord” (Hos. 2:16, 19-20). Similar statements are found in Exodus 45, Jeremiah 2:2 and Ezekiel 16:7-14. This is the marital union that the prophets have foretold of. It was a symbol of the more perfect union achieved by the Logos (Divine Word) in the fullness of time.

The book of the Song of Songs is the book of the heavenly marriage, where God’s eternal will toward man was fulfilled. It is a prophecy of the sacrament of eternal matrimony, where the Church, which extends from Adam to the end of ages, is the holy Bride.

John the Baptist looked at this marriage saying: “*He who has the bride is the Bridegroom*” (John 3:29). This is the purpose of the mission of the apostles. St. Paul said, “*For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to One husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ*” (2 Cor. 11:2). “*This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church*” (Eph. 5:32).

In the Book of Revelation, St. John the Beloved witnessed the eternal marriage. “Then, I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). He also heard a multitude crying, “Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen...” (Rev. 19:6-8). Finally, he writes, “And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come’” (Rev. 22:17).¹

In the book of Song of Songs, we journey into eternity and practice the language of the heavenly love. We find a dialogue between the Messiah, the Bridegroom, and His Bride: the catholic (universal) and apostolic Church, or every soul united with Him as a living member in this Church. This dialogue reveals the mutual love between the two partners: God and man. Each one seeks the other until they find true rest in the shared ownership, which each one presents to the other.

¹ See Matt. 9:15, Jn. 3:29, Eph. 5:23-27.

THE BOOK OF THE CHURCH SACRAMENTS¹

This book carries a true prophecy about God's mystical works in His Church. The early Church Fathers interpreted it in a way through which we can understand the sacraments.

The sacrament of Baptism is the sacrament of the spiritual matrimony with the Crucified and Risen Messiah, fulfilled by the Holy Spirit. **St. Cyril of Jerusalem** explained that the baptismal font refers to the chamber of the Groom².

St. Didymus the Blind wrote, [The One who created the soul accepts her as a bride in the baptismal font.³]

St. Gregory of Nazianzus tells those who are coming for baptism, [I want to proclaim to you one thing: your condition after baptism before the great sanctuary is an example for the glory to come. The praises, with which they welcome you, are preparations for the praises of heaven! The torches, which they light, are the mystery of enlightenment, with whom they welcome the Bridegroom!⁴

When the soul enters the mystery of spiritual matrimony in baptism, the angels see her in the wedding garment and sing, "Who is this coming up from the wilderness, white?" (Song 8:5, LXX).

In this book we also can understand the sacrament of Confirmation, where the Bridegroom seals the heart of His bride with His seal, so that she may be ready by the Holy Spirit for the eternal wedding.

Finally, in this book we hear a divine calling to enjoy the sacrament of Eucharist, the wedding banquet. **St. Cyril of Jerusalem** said, [Christ grants His children to enjoy His Body and Blood.]

THE BOOK OF SPIRITUAL VIRGINITY

Since this book describes the spiritual marriage of the Lord Christ, the Virgin, with His virgin Church, some of the Early Fathers call Song of Songs the book of "*the mystery of virginity*," where the virgin soul is satisfied with the Virgin Bridegroom. She does not need anything besides Him, not even the temporary marriage. She does not despise marriage, but desires a different kind of marriage: one that is on a much greater and eternal level!

Many Church Fathers used some of the statements in this book to praise virginity and the virgins. Here is an excerpt from the words of **St. Jerome** against Jovinian, who despised virginity. St. Jerome declared the honor of virginity, witnessing with the Holy Bible. When he came to the book of the Song of Songs, he saw it as the book of virginity, for he related the Gospel with virginity and the Mosaic Law with the chastity of marriage. In his opinion,

¹ J. Daniélou: *The Bible and the Liturgy. The Author: Christ in the Eucharist*, 1973, p. 188-193 (in Arabic).

² See, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem: Catechetical Lectures*, 3:2.

³ *On the Holy Trinity*.

⁵ *St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration on the Holy Baptism*, 46

this book declared that the season of winter had passed. This was the fulfillment of the search of the Law for chastity through the holy marriage. The time for spring had come where the flowers of virginity, as a fruit of the gospel. He praised virginity, saying, [I look at the book of Song of Songs. Our foe thought that this book discusses marriage, but I clarify how this book contained the mysteries of virginity.¹]

Let us hear what was said to the bride before the Bridegroom came to the earth, suffered and rose: “We will make you ornaments of gold with studs of silver. While the King is at His table...” (Song 1:11-12). Before the Lord’s resurrection and the light of the Gospel, the Church did not have the gold (virginity), but had a form of gold (chaste marriage). She had many kinds of ornaments of silver: like the widows and chaste married couples.

The Bridegroom answered the bride saying that the shadows of the old Law had passed away, and the truth of the Gospel had come. He said, “Rise up, My love, My fair one, and come away, for lo the winter is past, the rain is over and gone” (Song 2:10-11).

Once more, he talks about the Gospel and virginity saying, “*The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come... The fig tree puts forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grapes*” (Song 2:12-13). Isn’t this clear that he wants to say that, “...the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none” (1 Cor. 7:29)? Very clearly, he declares purity by saying, “*The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land*” (Song 2:12). Since the turtledove is purest of all birds and lives in high places, it is a symbol of the Savior.

“*Rise up, My love, My fair one, and come away! O My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff, let Me see your face, let Me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely*” (Song 2:13,14). The Bridegroom says, “If you hide your face like Moses and veil yourself with the Law, I cannot see your face nor hear your voice... ‘Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear.’ But now, look at My glory with an unveiled face, so you may hide in the clefts of the rock and in the secret niches of the cliff” (Is. 1:15). Hearing this, the bride reveals the mysteries of purity by saying: “*My Beloved is mine, and I am His*” (Song 2:16). The source of her purity is her Shepherd, who cares for the pure virgins.

He says, “I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh” (Is. 1:15), to those who mortified their bodies, and “to the hill of frankincense” to the pure virgins.

The Bridegroom continues by saying, “*I have drunk My wine with My milk. Eat O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones!*” (Song 5:1). It was said that the apostles were filled with new wine not old wine (Matt. 4:17). The new wine is put into new wineskins, for they served in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter (Rom. 7:6). When this wine is drunk, the youth become thirsty for virginity and filled with the spirit of

¹ Against Jovinian 1:30,31.

chastity.

“My Beloved is white and ruddy” (Song 5:10). He is white due to virginity, and ruddy (red) due to martyrdom.

Thus, the time is not enough to explain the book and clarify all the mysteries of virginity, as mentioned in the book of Song of Songs.

CHRIST IN THE BOOK OF SONG OF SONGS

Studying this book, we do not stop at the basic text, but go into the depth to meet God, the Logos Himself. We see our Christ clearly, living and desiring to unite with us to live by Him and with Him forever.

St. Gregory said, [In the art of painting, one does not look merely at the colors, but looks deeply to the picture which the artist painted with these colors. In the same manner, when studying the Bible, we should not stop at just looking at the colors, but we should look to the form of the King which is expressed by the words. The colors here are the words carrying mysterious meanings like what was mentioned in this book as the mouth, kisses, myrrh, wine, members of the body, the bed and the maids etc. However, the forms, which these words expressed, are as follows: perfection and virginity, unity with God, punishment for evil, reward for everything good.]

CHARACTERS IN THE BOOK

The main characters in this book include:

1. **The bridegroom**, who is the Lord Jesus Christ who betrothed the Church as a holy bride for Him (Eph. 5:27).
2. **The bride**, the catholic (universal) Church, or the believer as a living member in the Church. She is also called “The Shulamite.”
3. **The virgins**, who, according to **Origen**, are the believers who have not yet attained spiritual depth, but have achieved some progress on the road to salvation.
4. **The daughters of Jerusalem**, representing the Jews who should have preached the Messiah, the Savior of the world.
5. **The friends of the bridegroom**, or the angels who attained the perfect man (Eph. 4:13).
6. **The young sister** represents humanity who needs the Lord Jesus Christ to serve and care for her.

DIVISIONS OF THE BOOK

This book is the book of deep love, or the book of the heart. Although it does not require any specific divisions because it carries the unity of mutual love, the book is divided into six sections for the sake of simplicity.

- | | |
|---|------------------|
| I. The Personality of the Bridegroom | 1:1 – 2:7 |
| A. The Suffering Messiah | 1:1 – 1:6 |

B. The Messiah as the Shepherd	1:7 – 1:12
C. The Messiah as the King	1:12 – 1:16
D. The Messiah as the Beloved	2:1 – 2:7
II. The Fiancé Seeks His Beloved	2:8 - 3:11
A. He Himself Descends to Her	2:8-14
B. He Warns Her from the Deceivers	2:15
C. The Wedding Banquet	2:16 - 3:11
III. Heavenly Matrimony	4:1-16
A. The Beautiful Risen Bride	4:1-15
B. The Bride Speaks with her Bridegroom	4:16
IV. Marital Life	5:1-9
A. The Beginning of Marital Life	5:1
B. The Shadows of Marital Life	5:2-5
C. Love is Regained by the Cross	5:6-9
V. Mutual Marital Love	5:10 – 7:13
A. The Bride Praises Her Bridegroom	5:10-16
B. Conversation in the Garden	6:1-13
C. His Description of the “Shulamite” Bride	7:1-13
VI. The Working Bride	8:1-14

1

THE PERSONALITY OF THE BRIDEGROOM

(SONG OF SONGS 1:1 – 2:7)

THE BRIDE DECLARES HER BRIDEGROOM'S PERSONALITY

During the engagement period, the bride gets to know her bridegroom. She discovers his personality and his secrets. She recognizes his love to her, and knows his capabilities so that she may be attached to him for good.

After she tastes his love, the bridegroom absorbs all her thoughts to the extent that he becomes the topic of her discussions with her relatives and friends. Moreover, he becomes everything to her.

What does the Church see in the Messiah, her Bridegroom? She sees her Messiah:

- **A Sufferer.**
- **Her Shepherd.**
- **Her King.**
- **Her Beloved.**

A. THE SUFFERING MESSIAH (Song 1:1 – 1:6)

THE KISSES OF THE DIVINE MOUTH

If this book were for beginners, then it would have started by the flattering of God the Bridegroom to His bride, declaring His love to her, so she may repent and unite with Him. However, this book is for the mature who have tasted His love and their hearts were inflamed with His love. They accepted His love, which emanated through the Cross and they desire to live all their lives meditating in this divine love saying, *“Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth, for Your love is better than wine. Because of the fragrance of Your good ointments, Your name is ointment poured forth; therefore, the virgins love You”* (Song 1:1-2).

This is the voice of the catholic (universal) Church, which lifts her eyes toward the Cross, tastes His sweet fragrance and sees His Blood shed for her. Thus, she finds pleasure in His love and begins to flatter Him, saying, *“Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth.”* Here we notice the following:

1. She requests the kisses of the mouth of the Father. Truly, God has accepted her with many kisses throughout the ages. He declared His love to her by creating the whole world for her. He made her from nothing and gave her His image and likeness. Essentially, she did not need anything. After the fall, He did not forsake her but promised to give her life through salvation. He granted her the Law as a helper and sent her the prophets to assure her salvation, but all that did not satisfy the bride because she wanted Him to be close to her. She wanted all the kisses of His mouth directly! She is the bride who rejoices in the Bridegroom who proposed to her and sent her many expensive gifts. But these gifts will not satisfy her since she only wants Him, Himself!

Origen said that the Church in the Old Testament was like an immature child who did not enjoy the company of the Bridegroom Himself but enjoyed the company of His friends, the angels, the patriarchs (fathers) and the prophets. Through them, she accepted the sweet kisses of God, which are the doctrines of the Old Testament and the commandments¹. As she grew, she matured to see her Bridegroom coming to her on the mountains of the Law and the prophets. Her heart became inflamed with love saying, “May He comes down from the Cross to embrace me so I may be united with Him.” This is what St. Paul said to the Hebrews: “God who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these days spoken to us by His Son ...” (Heb. 1:1-2). He talks to us directly with the kisses of the practical love.

¹ *Homilies on Song of Songs, homily 1.*

2. She is not shy to ask for the kisses of the Father from the Son, for whatever is for the Father is for the Son too, and whatever the Son has offered by His free will, He offered in obedience to the Father. Thus, the Bible says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His Only Begotten Son...” (John 3:16). Also, St. Paul said, “Who loved and gave His life for me.” These are the kisses of the Cross, which are signs of the love of both the Father and the Son!

We have mentioned earlier that this expression cannot be applied on any physical or temporal love; the bride will never ask her bridegroom for the kisses of someone else. Here this expression is about the spiritual divine kisses which carry the hidden union so we may become one with the Father in His Son through the kisses of the Cross.

3. The bride does not ask for one kiss or two kisses but many kisses from His mouth. These are the feelings of the believer whose heart is kindled with God’s love. He sees no one in life except God Himself and him, therefore he asks for all God’s love to be directed to him.

4. The Church does not ask for any kind of kiss but a special kind of kiss, that which defines the unique marital relation. The Holy Bible has recorded for us different kinds of kisses, but they did not satisfy. Laban said farewell to his sons and daughter by kissing them (Gen. 31:55). Jacob welcomed his grandchildren, Joseph’s sons, by kissing them (Gen. 48:1). Naomi said farewell to her daughters-in-law by kissing them (Ruth 1:9). Isaac asked his son Jacob to kiss him to get his blessing (Gen. 27:26). Absalom, David’s son, kissed the children of the people to win their love (2 Sam. 15:5). Jonathan kissed David as a sign of friendship and loyalty (1 Sam. 20:41). The church at Ephesus said farewell to St. Paul by kissing him (Acts 20:37).

These were all kisses based on the bond of friendship, blood, or as a sign of the bitterness of separation. However, these were temporary kisses, but the Church asks for the kisses of the eternal love; the unceasing kisses from the mouth of God.

LOVE BETTER THAN WINE

The Church communes with her crucified Bridegroom saying, “*Your love is better than wine*” (Song 1:2). It is love that makes one forget all what is earthly to remember only God’s love to her.

In the Septuagint Version, the word “love” was translated as “your breast.” In the divine milk flowing from the breast that satisfies babies, the believers find more power and effectiveness than the wine which men use for warmth and strength. **St. Gregory of Nyssa**, said, [Whatever is considered dignified in the eyes of the world becomes diminished before the doctrines of the divine word presented to children. Here, we find the divine breast better than the human wine.]

When one repeats, “*Your breast is better than wine*,” one goes back to the simplicity of childhood. She looks at her Bridegroom hung on the Cross and she clings to Him, in

simple faith, as a child lies on his mother's chest. She nurses from God's love, thus she forgets all the cares of the world and is filled with consolation. As the Psalmist says, "In the multitude of my anxieties within me, your comforts delight my soul" (Ps. 94:19).

"Your breast is better than wine," as if the wine presented to guests, especially in feasts, is a sign of joy, and it was presented when offering sacrifices (Ex. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5). The love of our Lord Jesus Christ is unique, for He grants us inexpressible joy which the world cannot take away!

In Egypt and in Palestine, grapes were crushed by the feet in a winepress (Neh. 13:15; Job 14:11). The juice of red grapes flows like blood, and the men go out with red clothes. Isaiah the Prophet saw that the Lord Jesus, the beloved Bridegroom, has trodden the winepress alone with red clothes, for the salvation of His bride. "Who is this who comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, this One who is glorious in His apparel, traveling in the greatness of His strength? I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save. Why are your apparel red, and your garments like one who treads in the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with Me" (Is. 63:1-4).

This is the unique love which is better than wine, for the Lord has trodden the winepress by Himself, not to present us with earthly wine but to offer us His Blood shed for us, the mystery of our life, our power and our salvation.

No wonder the Lord Jesus started His ministry in Cana of Galilee by transforming the water into wine; not to get them drunk, but to make them sober. He gave them the new wine as a sign of His love, granting them joy and power. **St. John Chrysostom** said, [God does not cease to change our shortcomings and weak will. There are people who are like water, very cold and weak. Let us bring such people into the presence of the Lord to change their will into wine, so they are no longer like water and become a source of joy for themselves and others¹.] This is the love better than wine which takes our weak nature to the new life and carries the power of life.

Through this new wine or through the love of the Bridegroom which is better than wine, the believer smells the sweet fragrant aroma of Christ and sees His name, ointment, poured forth as He has trodden the Cross by Himself. She communes with Him saying,

"Because of the fragrance of your good ointments, Your name is ointment poured forth" (Song 1:3).

ANOINTED WITH GOOD OINTMENTS

On the Cross the Lord poured His perfect fragrance so the sweet aroma spread all over the world.

Thus, the Church realized that by the eyes of Christ who was anointed with fragrance from the Father for our salvation, of whom the Prophet witnessed saying, "You loved

¹ *Homilies on St. John, 22.*

righteousness and hated lawlessness, therefore, God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions” (Ps. 44; Heb. 1:9). The Lord emphasized that when He entered the synagogue and read from the book of Isaiah the Prophet, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk. 4:17-21; Is. 61:1). Then the Lord said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your ears.”

When the Jews revolted against the Apostles, the Church prayed saying, “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together” (Acts 4:27).

In the Old Testament, Jacob anointed the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar in the house of the Lord (Gen. 28:18; 31:13). This was a sign of many things:

1. The opening of heaven on earth (Gen 28:18; 31:13).
2. The meeting between God and man.
3. The dwelling of God among His people.
4. The anointing of priests and kings according to the Law (Ex. 40:15, 1 Sam.10:1).
5. In addition the Temple and the vessels inside it were all anointed with the holy ointment.

This ointment, whether placed on people or objects, signified consecration to the Lord. This meant that those people did not work except in the ministry of the Lord, and the vessels were only used in the Lord’s ministry. Here the Lord’s ministry represents “the Lord’s ministry among His people,” or man entering in the presence of the Lord. When we talk about the Bridegroom (the Word of God) as the Anointed, we see the anointment fulfilled in Him, for He carried us and made us united with God. The Lord said, “For their sakes, I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth” (John 17:19). He devotes His work for our sake.

The fragrance of this unique anointment has spread to heaven, the aroma of which the Father is satisfied. It carries the aroma of the obedience of the Only-Begotten Son, for He obeyed until death. We, on earth, smell it as a sweet aroma, for it kills the awful fragrance of our sins (Ps. 83:5), and makes us “sweet aroma” (2 Cor. 2:15). This is the effect of His anointment, for from the sinners Christ can anoint people, making them His sweet aroma.

The Church Fathers have spoken about the effect of this holy anointment on our lives. **St. Gregory of Nazianzus** saw that the baptized person has the characteristics of Christ, and attains His sweet fragrance in all his feelings. He said, [Let us be cured, also in the sense of smell, so that a sweet fragrance surrounds us (Is. 5:24). Let us smell the anointment shed for our sake, may we accept Him spiritually, so we may be molded and transformed by Him, and

others may smell the sweet fragrance in us¹.]

St. Augustine related the sweet fragrance to the heavenly aroma of Christ, whose Cross draws the heart to heaven. He said, [Let us love Him and follow His example. Let us run after His ointments. He came and spread His sweet fragrance all over the world! From where did this sweet fragrance come? From heaven².]

If we want to honestly respond to the priest when he says, “Lift up your hearts³,” let us proceed toward heaven. Let us lift our thoughts, our love, our hope so that they may not spoil on earth; because where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also (Matt. 6:21).

St. Augustine talks about the attractiveness of that sweet ointment saying: [Let us switch our senses from our bad fragrance to His sweet fragrance!⁴]

THE NAME POURED FORTH

On the Cross this sweet ointment was poured out. It entered the graves so that all the dead could smell the sweet aroma instead of the corruption they were in. By His resurrection, He offered the world this sweet ointment that was poured out for us.

St. Ambrose said that the believer is buried with Christ in baptism, rises and smells the sweet fragrance of the Lord’s clothes. He breathes His name shed on the Cross, and takes Him from the aroma of His resurrection⁵.

It is strange that the fragrance of this sweet name, which was shed on the Cross, has spread all over the world. Thus, God’s name was known not only among the Jews but among the Gentiles as well. **St. Ambrose** said, [God was known in Judea and His name was great in Israel (Ps. 26:1), but when He was raised on the cross, His name became wonderful all over the world⁶.]

In other words, humanity has known His name: *Jesus*, the Savior of the world, and *Emmanuel* (God with us). Through the Cross we have realized His salvation and His reconciling us with God; therefore we tell Him, “*Your name is ointment poured forth*” (Song 1:3).

THE LOVE OF THE VIRGINS FOR HIM

Since the human race smelled the fragrance of His sweet name shed for their sake, they are drawn to Him with virginity. They do not want to be occupied with anyone else, and their thoughts are all directed toward Him. They do not want to think of all the cares of life; and all their emotions, feelings and inner energies are directed toward Him saying,

¹ *On the Holy Baptism*, 38.

² *On Psalm 91(90): 16*.

³ *St. Basil’s Liturgy of the Eucharist*.

⁴ *On Psalm 38 (37)*.

⁵ *On the Mysteries*, 6.

⁶ *On the Holy Spirit*, 96.

“Therefore the virgins love You” (Song 1:3).

This attraction which the Cross has created in our inner depths, made us seek the Bridegroom, so we do not run after Him alone but we attract others to Him saying,

“Lead me away! We will run after You. The King has brought me into His chambers. We will be glad and rejoice in You. We will remember Your love more than wine. Rightly do they love You” (Song 1:4).

She says, ***“Lead me,”*** which means only myself (singular), then she says, ***“We will run after You”*** (plural) and rejoice. This is the mystery of the Cross and its effect, for it carries the power of the witness and magnetism, and the source of joy! Since the human soul rejoices in You and You dwell inside me through the Cross, people know You and seek You through me; then our hearts are filled with joy so that even the heavenly creatures rejoice with us!

Zacchaeus the publican was attracted to the Lord Jesus, then He invited all the sinners and publicans to meet the Lord and rejoice with Him (Luke 19). Also, when the Samaritan woman sat with Him, she called all the people in the city to meet the Lord Jesus and enjoy His attractive speech (John 4).

This is the mystery of the Church: the attractive power of the Cross. But when the Church forgets the Cross and cares for the worldly things, she cannot win others to Christ. She conquers the world by the Cross, and through the Cross only people are drawn to the Church through repentance. However, the enticing methods of the world destroy the image of the Church even in the eyes of the world itself.

THE DIVINE CHAMBER

“The king has brought me into His chambers...” (Song 1:4).

The human soul asks the heavenly Bridegroom to lead her so that He may support her and take her into His spiritual chamber in a joyous encounter.

Origen relates that the attraction of the human soul when entering the chamber of the Lord is a symbol of the spiritual believers who are transformed from the literal interpretation of the word of God to the deep spiritual interpretation of the mysteries of the Word, discovering the mysteries of the kingdom. This is the divine chamber which satisfies the soul, in this world and also in the age to come. According to **Origen** this is the heavenly food of the soul.

Some Church Fathers see the divine chamber as the mystery of baptism. In the baptismal font, the believer meets the Lord Jesus as the Bridegroom, puts on the new man and enjoys the divine kingdom. The soul then puts on Christ as a white robe for the wedding, wears Him as her righteousness and the source of her holiness. St. Paul said, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27).

BETWEEN BEING DARK AND LOVELY

Since the soul puts on Christ as righteousness and sanctification for her life, she compares her past with her present, thus telling the daughters of Jerusalem,

“I am dark but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon” (Song 1:5).

She admits her weakness and declares her beauty, which she has obtained by her unity with the Lord Jesus saying, I am dark like the tents of Kedar, but in the same time lovely like the curtains of Solomon.

St. Augustine relates that the human soul before her unity with Christ is as black as coal. After her unity with Christ and becoming inflamed with His holy fire, she becomes hot in the Spirit, like fire, and full of beauty. **St. Augustine** said about Saul of Tarsus, [Saul was earlier a persecutor and a blasphemer like a black coal, but then he became inflamed with fire from heaven and received mercy. The voice of the Lord Jesus kindled him with fire and removed all darkness from him. He became inflamed with a fervent spirit until he inflamed others around him with the same fire¹.]

St. Ambrose saw a picture of the condition of the Church, which has enjoyed her spiritual beauty by her immersion in the baptismal font by the grace of God. He said, [In the book of Song of Songs, the Church says, ‘I am dark but lovely.’ I am dark with the human weakness, but perfect through the mystery of faith².]

He also says, [The Church is dark with her sins, but perfect with the grace of God. She is dark with the human nature, perfect with the salvation.... Dark with the filth of strife, but perfect when she is crowned with the clothes of victory!³]

This statement is truly like medicine for the believer, for when he feels self-righteous and is tempted by pride, he shouts saying, “I am dark.” But when tempted by shortcomings and despair, he screams, “I am lovely.” The feeling of both being dark and beautiful is not contradictory but complimentary. One feeling supports in some instances and the other feeling supports in different situations. Each feeling balances the other.

Origen explains further by saying, [The Church here does not direct her talk to the Bridegroom nor to the virgins who are seeking God’s way, but to the daughters of Jerusalem who accused the bride, the Church, of her darkness. The Church responds to this accusation that she is truly dark. May the daughters of Jerusalem realize the inner beauty of the Church, for while she is dark from outside, yet she is beautiful from inside.]

Though she is dark like the tents of Kedar, yet she is lovely like the curtains of the house of King Solomon. The Church is for all the Gentiles. How can the Church of the Gentiles brag before the daughters of the earthly Jerusalem (the Jews)? They are the ones who were angry at the Church and her Bridegroom, and despised the Church because her

¹ *On Psalm 140 (139).*

² *De Mystr., 7.*

³ *The Holy Spirit, 112.*

veins lacked the blood of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, flowing through them. In the eyes of the Jews, this is a great mistake that the Gentile Church is not from the same genealogy of the Fathers. The Church admits this and repeats the same accusation the daughters of Jerusalem were accused of: “*I am dark.*” This darkness is not due to the deprivation of the genealogy of the Fathers, but also for the deprivation of the teachings of the Fathers and prophets.

The Bible called those who rejected the Law and were expelled from the Tabernacle of Isaac the curtains of the house of King Solomon. The curtains of the king of peace were the curtains of the Tabernacle, where God dwells with His people. From outside, the Tabernacle was covered with the ugly skin of goats, but from inside it contained the beautiful curtains before the glory of God. The outer curtains of the Tabernacle were made of the hair of the goats and the skin of the bulls; but from inside, it was covered with blue, purple, scarlet, and fine linen threads.

Origen described some of the events of the Old Testament that prophesied about the calling of the dark Gentiles into the unity with Christ as a beautiful and holy bride. These events were:

1. **The marriage of Moses the Prophet with the Ethiopian woman**, which caused Miriam, his sister, to speak against him (Numbers 12). Thus she was struck with leprosy and cast outside the camp. This was a symbol of the unity of Christ with the Gentile Church, which stirred the Jews until they rejected the Faith and reviled the Gentiles because of their evil past.

Origen said from the perspective of the Gentile Church: [Truly I wonder how the daughters of Jerusalem can rebuke me for my darkness. Did you forget what was mentioned in your Law when Miriam spoke against Moses because he married the Ethiopian woman? I am the Ethiopian! Truly I am dark because of my roots; however, I am beautiful through repentance and faith. I accepted the Son of God. I accepted the Word who became Flesh (John 1:14). I came to the One who is ‘the Image of the invisible God and the Firstborn over all creation’ (Col. 1:15), who is ‘the brightness of His glory and the express image of His glory’ (Heb. 1:3), then I became beautiful! Do you seek the glory of the Law while reviling Him?¹]

2. **The story of the Queen of Sheba who came to hear the wisdom of Solomon** (1Kgs. 10), was a symbol of the church of the Gentiles, who came to hear the wisdom of Solomon. The Lord Jesus rebuked the Jews saying, “The Queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here” (Matt.12:42).

The queen of Sheba came and spoke with King Solomon and asked him questions (1 Kings 10:20); however, the true Solomon solved all her problems and declared to her the true

¹ *Commentary on Canticle, 2:1.*

knowledge of God, and declared the eternity of the soul and the last Judgment, matters which philosophers could not explain to the Gentiles.

The queen came to Jerusalem, which means “the vision of peace,”¹ and the Lord Jesus announces to the Church, “My peace I give to you” in the Holy Passion week

When the queen saw all the wealth that Solomon had, there was no more spirit in her (1 Kings 10:5). Likewise, when the Church discovers the mysteries of her Christ, she is inflamed with love, and longs to be with Him.

She offered King Solomon 120 talents of gold (1 Kings 10:10). This is the same figure that the Lord allowed for the age of man during the days of Noah (Gen. 6:3), as well as the age of Moses the Prophet (Deut. 34:7). The Gentile Church wanted to offer her entire life as golden talents, that is, carrying the heavenly nature. She also offered many spices (1 Kings 10:10), which is the love the Lord Jesus accepts from repentant sinners.

3. **In the book of Psalms**, “Envoys will come out of Egypt; Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hand to God. Sing to God, you kingdoms of the earth; Oh, sing praises to the Lord” (Ps. 68:31-32). Thus the black Gentile Church stretched out her hands to God to become beautiful; and through her, the tongues of all the kingdoms of the earth praise God.

4. It was mentioned **in the Book of Zephaniah**, “Therefore, wait for Me, says the Lord. Until the day I rise up for plunder; my determination is to gather the nations to My assembly of kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all my fierce anger; all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy. For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language that they may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, the daughters of My dispersed ones, shall bring My offering” (Zeph. 3:8-10). Thus the lips of the pagan nations were purified and transformed, praising God. They crossed the rivers of Ethiopia, that is, they forsook the darkness through their worship to God and offering the sacrifice of praise.

5. When **the Ethiopian eunuch delivered Jeremiah from the dungeon** (Jer. 38:7-13), the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah saying, “Go and speak to Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, “Behold, I will bring My words upon this city for adversity and not for good, and they shall be performed in that day before you. But I will deliver you in that day,” says the Lord, “and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid. For I will surely deliver you, and you shall not fall by the sword; but your life shall be as a prize to you, because you have put your trust in Me,” says the Lord”’ (Jer. 39:15-18). Thus, this Ethiopian eunuch was a symbol of the Gentile Church, which was saved because she trusted in the Lord.

¹The ancestors see that the word “Jerusalem” means “vision of peace” (Philo, *De Somn*, 2: 250; *St. Clement of Alexandria, Strom.*, 1:29:4; Origen, *Comm. on Song* 2:1.

Origen concluded his analogy by saying, [As you see there are many statements which testify that the dark and beautiful has dealt well with the daughters of Jerusalem. She confidently says, '*I am dark like the tents of Kedar but beautiful like the curtains of Solomon.*']

Origen also states that though the speaker here is singular, yet he mentioned the tents and the curtains in the plural form. Therefore, we have to know what is meant is a multitude of churches and many nations, as was mentioned that the kingdom of God is one, but there are many mansions in the Father's house (John 14:2).]

BETWEEN THE SUN OF TEMPTATION AND THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The bride presents a reason for her darkness by saying,

"Do not look upon me, because I am dark, because the sun has tanned me" (Song 1:6).

It was appropriate for the Jews to support the Gentiles and preach the Cross to them; however, instead of ministering to them they reviled them because of the darkness of their paganism. The Gentiles replied that their darkness was not natural, but was due to experience, for the sun had tanned them. **Origen** commented by saying, [She became dark because she descended, but as soon as she ascended (coming up from the wilderness), she was supported by her nephew (who was born from the Jews). She became white and beautiful, her darkness was completely abolished and she was enlightened by the surrounding light. Thus the Church of the Gentiles apologized to the daughters of Jerusalem saying, "O daughters of Jerusalem do not think that the darkness on my face is natural, but this was because the Sun of Righteousness has ignored me. The Sun of Righteousness did not direct His rays toward me because he found me crooked. I am from the Gentiles who did not look to the Sun of Righteousness nor stood before the Lord (Lk. 21:36). God has chosen you and you have received grace, while He ignored me and tanned me because of my disobedience and unbelief. But now, since you are rebellious and unbelieving, my hope is that the Sun of Righteousness looks to me so I may find grace!¹]

This illustrates what St. Paul said, "For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience" (Rom. 11:30). In the past, the Gentiles were burdened by the sun of temptation and deprived from the Sun of Justice. The opportunity was granted to Israel; they were chosen and were given grace. But now since the Jews rejected the Sun of Justice and fell under the sun of rebellion and unbelief, the Gentile Church enjoyed Christ, the Sun of Justice. Her darkness was abolished by the shining of the Sun of Justice, and the sun of sin could not overcome her, as the Psalmist said, "The sun shall not strike you

¹ *Commentary on Canticle, 2:2.*

by day, nor the moon by night” (Ps. 121:6).

THE INNER WAR

Since the Church has met her suffering Bridegroom, He attracted her and she entered his chamber and rejoiced with Him. He gave her His infinite love, and then the smell of His sweet fragrance spread everywhere, sanctifying all her feelings and depths, abolishing the darkness of sin and evil and reflecting His beauty on her. As a result, the power of darkness revolted against the bride.

The bride says,

“My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept” (Song 1:6).

Who are her mother’s sons? And what is the cause of their anger at her? What are the vineyard which the bride protected and the vineyard which she did not keep?

1. **Origen** says that the true translation of the verse is: *“My mother’s sons fought for me and not against me.”* Here the mother’s sons are the Apostles who are the Jews, for the Gentiles and the Jews are from one mother. Those Apostles did not cease to stir a fierce war on the Gentiles until they destroy all the towers of vanities and the wrong pagan teachings and overcome all evil. Thus they create from the entire pagan Gentiles keeper of the vine of the Lord and keeper of the Law and prophets. However, she does not keep her own vine, that is, her pagan teachings.

2. **Origen** has another opinion that the angels are the mother’s sons. Humans and angels belong to one nation and all are members in the Church of Christ. The angels support us and fight for us and with us; for God sent them to help us in the inner war against sin until one is able to care for the vine of the Lord, which is the heart, and eliminates her ego and the works of the old man.

3. A third interpretation is that the mother’s sons refer to the ego or the self, for “A man’s foes will be those of his own household” (Matt. 10:36). The ego is an enemy against the Christ’s work inside us. During this war, the believer is tempted to care for the vines of others and is occupied with the outer appearance of the ministry without caring for the inner vine or his inner life.

B. THE MESSIAH AS THE SHEPHERD

(Song 1:7 – 1:12)

When the Church speaks about her Bridegroom as “The Crucified Messiah,” she is truly fascinated in His sufferings and attracts many others to Him. However, since the enemy is stirred against her, the Church also calls her Bridegroom “The Good Shepherd” who cares for her life. She connects with Him, saying,

“Tell me, O whom I love, where You feed Your flock, where You make it rest at noon” (Song 1:7).

Amidst the bitterness of the inner war with the enemy, one feels the sweetness of God’s care toward her, so she calls Him, “whom I love.” She says with **St. Gregory of Nyssa**, [This is the name I call You: ‘the One whom I love,’ for Your name is above all things, and it is beyond all the rational creatures. This name declares your goodness and attracts my soul to You; how can I not love You? You are the One who loved me while I am dark (Song 1:4), so You sacrificed Your life for the sake of the flock, who are the subject of your care.]

THE SUBJECT OF CARE

She asks the Shepherd, whom she loves with all her heart and soul, about His resting place. She asks Him for the way so she may not walk according to her personal desires.

In the past, when the sun of trials was fierce on David the Prophet, he sought the house of God, being the place where the Lord shepherds at noon. He said, “When the wicked came against me to eat up my flesh, my enemies and foes, they stumbled and fell. Though an army should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise should rise against me, in this I will be confident. One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple. For in the time of trouble, He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His Tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock. And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me; therefore, I will offer sacrifices of joy in His Tabernacle; I will sing yes, I will sing praises to the Lord” (Ps. 27:2-6).

We are in dire need for the Shepherd to hold our hands and enter with us into His Church, the place of His rest, the pasture of His salvation. There we meet the Lord Jesus, the Source of our peace and happiness, and we are granted the gifts of the Holy Spirit, who comforts us. In His house, we find the adoption to God through the Sacrament of Baptism, and we accept the Holy Spirit to dwell inside us through the Sacrament of Confirmation. In His house, we find forgiveness of our sins and we partake of His living sacrifice, the Body of

Son of God and His Blood shed for us. In His house, we sit under the shadow of His Cross, the secret of our reconciliation with God and our inner peace. When the enemy stirs a fierce war against us and sin is aroused inside us, we run to His house repenting with tears to find the Shepherd Himself looking for us, and His Holy Spirit desiring to sanctify us.

AT NOON

Why did the bride wish to meet her Bridegroom at noon, saying, “*Where you make it rest at noon*”?

Since we meet the Good Shepherd in His one Church extending across the ages, we see Him transfigured at the midday (noon) sun. His members do not know neither darkness nor shade, but live in the light of their Shepherd, being enlightened through Him, and becoming the light of the world. Solomon said, “But the path of the sun is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day. The way of the wicked is like darkness” (Prov. 4:18-19).

St. Gregory of Nyssa said, [You make rest at noon, means the light which does not know shade, for there is no shade at noon where the sun is horizontal¹.]

No one deserves the rest at noon unless he becomes a son of the light and day.

The bride says, “Show me how to rest? Show me the way of rest at noon lest I fall astray away from Your faithful guidance and I become ignorant, which happens to the flock who is against you!”

St. Augustine said, [What does noon mean? Great heat and light! I know that your wise people are fervent in the spirit and enlightened in the teachings².]

Origen related that noon is a symbol of the perfect glory of God. The bride desires to cleave to the Lord, for she communes with Him saying, “I want to seek You at noon, not at night or in the morning or at sunset, but at noon because You will be in the fullness of the light, in the light of Your greatness!”

Origen had another explanation for the word “noon,” which is the perfect knowledge of the mysteries of the word of God. He said, [What you call noon refers to the place of the inner heart where one follows the trace of the light of the knowledge of the word of God more clearly, because noon is the time when the sun is at its peak. Thus, the Lord Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, reveals the mysteries of the great power of His Church by knowing the places of His rest at noon. The Church, when learning the beginning matters, accepts the rays of the inner knowledge. David the Prophet said, ‘God shall help her, just at the break of dawn’ (Ps. 46:6). However, now she seeks better things and desires higher standards, thus she is looking for knowledge at noon³.]

¹ *Sermons on Song, 2.*

² *Sermons on the N.T. Lessons, 33:7.*

³ *Commentary on Canticle, 3:4.*

MEETING WITH THE SHEPHERD AT NOON

The Church wants to meet her Bridegroom at noon, for this time has many memories in her life. We mention a few of these:

1. At noon, the Lord appeared to Abraham with two angels and promised him a son who will be a blessing to many nations (Gen. 18). He can create a new life from the deadness of Sarah's womb, and that is what the Church requires from her Shepherd at noon.

With the angels, she enters into the fellowship of the heavenly glory to grant her new life. We were under the judgment of death and fruitless; but as Abraham and Sarah we experienced the power of the resurrection, for the Lord had granted them life from death. Likewise we ask our Shepherd that we experience the power of the resurrection within us.

As Abraham, the Patriarch, met the Lord at noon outside the tent, the children of Abraham should likewise do the works of Abraham (John 8:39). They should go outside the limits of the temporary tent of the body, expelling every carnal thought and lust by the Holy Spirit until they enjoy seeing Him and His care.

2. At noon, Joseph met his younger brother Benjamin, and he had compassion on him and entered the inner room and wept (Gen. 43). This is the picture of the union we desire; where the true Shepherd our Lord Jesus Christ meets us, His younger brothers. He is then compassionate towards us and calls us "Benjamin," or "sons of the right hand."

3. At noon, Elijah mocked the priests of Baal saying, "Cry aloud for he is a god; either he is meditating or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping, and must be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27). Thus the Church wants to be close to her Shepherd at noon, to see Him the true Elijah (i.e., "My Lord"), who mocks Satan and all his soldiers. This was fulfilled when the Messiah was lifted up on the Cross at noon to crush Satan and all his soldiers, granting us the authority to crush him under our feet.

4. At noon, the true Shepherd the Lord Jesus Christ revealed Himself to Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted the Church (Acts 22:9). But then he discovered the truth of the living Immortal Shepherd, and his life was changed, becoming a chosen vessel to witness to the name of the Lord Jesus among the Gentiles. This is the Messiah's concern: to transform the persecutors to witnesses and ministers of the Word of God.

5. The statement of the bride, "where you make it rest at noon" reminds us of the prophecy of our Father Jacob to Judah saying, "Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down; he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people" (Gen. 49:9-10). This prophecy was fulfilled when the Lion coming out of the tribe of Judah died on the Cross at the sixth hour (noon), not to rest, but to love the entire human race offering His blood a

ransom and salvation.

STRANGE PASTURES

The Church asks her Shepherd:

“Where do You feed Your flock? Where do You make it rest at noon? For why should I be as one (dilute¹) who veils herself by the flocks of Your companions?” (Song 1:7).

Origen comments, [She longs to learn the way which He wants her to walk through, lest because of her ignorance of its direction, she turns to the flocks of His companions, then others may see her; as if she says ‘I do not want anyone to see me except You. I desire to know the way which brings me to You and no one should be in between us.’]

She wants to know the true way so she can enjoy the care of Christ; lest she becomes dilute, shaken by the winds of strange teachings and falls under the shepherds who work for their private interests and not for the interest of the Lord Christ. Thus, she becomes veiled, and her face is hidden behind the veil instead of meeting with her Shepherd with an unveiled face. In other words, she is deprived from being the bride united with her Bridegroom without any obstacle between them.

St. Jerome says that the veil refers to the veil of the Old Law². At noon, when the bride meets her Shepherd at the Cross, she does not put on a veil, for the veil was abolished. She enters into a new covenant where one meets God with an uncovered face, with the spirit of love, (fatherly love or marital love). Now, we do not need a veil to put on our face like Moses, but we enter into the mysteries of God and remain in His presence united with Him.

THE METHOD OF SHEPHERDING

The Shepherd loves His Church:

“If you do not know, O fairest, among women, follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed your little goats beside the shepherds’ tents” (Song 1:8).

Since the bride asked Him about the special way so she may not become veiled, deviating to the flocks of His companions, the Shepherd clarifies the way in three steps:

1. First, she must know herself and realize the new nature that was granted to her during His care.
2. She is no more introverted or self-centered, but rather must follow in the footsteps of her fathers, the saints.
3. She gives her testimony of the Shepherd before the goats, so they may enter into the place of His rest.

1. First the Good Shepherd asks her to know herself, that is, she starts with her inner

¹ *Septuagint Version.*

² *St. Jerome: Against Jovinianus, 1:30.*

life to realize that God has created her in His own image and likeness without any guile, and has decorated her with unique beauty to be *“fairest among women.”* He has paid the price of caring for her through the Cross.

Thus the Shepherd drives His children to the spirit of hope, and emphasizes that even if she does not know herself, He knows that she is **“the fairest among women;”** for she became a dwelling of His Holy Spirit, has put on Christ and has become His eternal bride.

The believer has to examine himself to realize the new nature, which was granted to him in baptism. He must also know that in the eyes of the Heavenly Shepherd he is fair among all the creation.

2. He commands her to go out, for she cannot become *“the fairest among women”* unless she goes with her Shepherd outside the camp carrying His reproach (Heb. 13:13). Let her leave her ego and not be self-centered. Let her be crucified with her Bridegroom so she may live in Him and by Him. He advises her to go to His Cross if she truly desires His shepherding.

When she departs, she leaves with the Head Himself, the crucified Shepherd, and with the rest of the members of the body, *“in the footsteps of the flock”* whether with the earlier fathers or those who are struggling. The Apostle advises us to “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct” (Heb. 13:7). If we fear the Cross let us look to how our fathers the saints loved the Cross, and how they were sanctified and beautified through it.

3. Realizing that one’s soul is a beautiful bride following the footsteps of the fathers, carrying the reproach of the Cross outside the camp that is outside the human nature she has to witness to the Shepherd before the goats. She does not live poorly, but her hearts burns within her for the sinners as the Psalmist said, “I was bitter for the sinners who forsook your Law.” She wants them to enter into *“the shepherds’ tents,”* that is, to the Church of Christ where the shepherds dwell.

A CALL FOR LABOR AND STRIFE

Carrying the responsibility of witnessing to the salvation, the Church carries the goats to the sheepfold so they may become His sheep. He asks her to work with the spirit of power, which does not know fear, and the spirit of unity without division. He tells her:

“I have compared you My love, to My filly⁸ among Pharaoh’s chariots” (Song 1:9).

1. Here, we notice Him calling her *“my filly,”* in the plural form, because when one carries the responsibility of witnessing to His Cross, one is obligated to work with the spirit of unity with the rest of the horses. In her spiritual struggle, as well as her witnessing, she is

⁸ *The Septuagint Version*

united with all the members of the body of Christ, following the footsteps of the early fathers (follow the footsteps of the flock), and caring for the future generations (feed your little goats beside the shepherds' tents). She joins those who are struggling, as one of the fillies, in the procession of the Lord Jesus Christ. The source of strength in the life of the believer is his unity with the Head of the Church. He works with the rest of the members in one spirit, and he is attached with the Church that extends from generation to generation.

2. Calling her His filly declares that the Lord Jesus owns the Church; He has bought her with His own blood. He leads her by Himself and she works to extend His kingdom on earth. In Revelation, St. John saw the Church as a white horse: "He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to Him, and He went out conquering and to conquer" (Rev. 6:2). Every victory for us is by His name and for Him. Because the Lord loves His Church that He leads, He was called, "Him who sat on the horse" (Rev. 19:19).

3. Horses are known for their strength and their power to hastily enter battles without fear. It was written, "Have you given the horse strength? Have you clothed his neck with thunder? Can you frighten him like a locust? His majestic snorting strikes terror. He paws in the valley, and rejoices in his strength; he gallops into the clash of arms" (Job 39:19-21). Zechariah the Prophet talks about the power of the house of Judah by saying, "For the Lord of hosts will visit His flock, the house of Judah, and will make them as His royal horse in the battle" (Zech. 10:3). St. Paul also wrote, "But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57).

4. Horses refer to the heavenly power of God, for in the book of Habakkuk the Prophet wrote, "His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of His praise. His brightness was like the light; He had rays flashing from His hand, and there His power was hidden. O Lord, were You displeased with the rivers, was Your anger against the rivers, was Your wrath against the sea, that You rode on Your horses, Your chariots of salvation?" (Hab. 3:3,8). When Elisha's servant saw the army surrounding the city, he was troubled. But Elisha asked the Lord to open his eyes, "Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:17).

Saying "*Pharaoh's chariots*" means that the believers are like chariots, but they still live on earth, that is, Egypt; and Egypt was known for the beauty of its horses (1 Kings 1:28-29).

Origen¹ said that this saying declares that she deserves to be drowned in the Red Sea. But going through the waters of baptism, she comes out holy and sanctified; therefore she becomes a white horse!

¹ Origen: *Commentary on Canticle, 2:6.*

THE FRUITS OF SHEPHERDING

Since the Shepherd met His Church, declared to her that she is *“fairest among women”* and asked her to struggle as one of the horses in the chariot of salvation, He declared to her the fruits of that work in her life by saying:

“Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with chains of gold. We will make you ornaments of gold with studs of silver. While the King is at His table, my spikenard sends forth its fragrance” (Song 1:10-12).

We can summarize the fruits of shepherding by the following:

1. She has lovely cheeks with ornaments, that is, she carries the spirit of humility with chastity.
2. Her neck is decorated with the spirit of obedience and serving others.
3. She is decorated with gold and silver, that is, with the Law and the commandments, so she may enjoy the gold, that is, the gospel of grace or the heavenly life.

1. Lovely cheeks with ornaments. The cheeks of the Church were decorated with jewels. She carried inside of her the Holy Spirit who fills her inner life, reflecting in her face the fruit of the Holy Spirit she carried: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control (Gal. 5:22).

The Septuagint Version says, *“Your cheeks are beautiful like a dove,”* meaning that the secret of the beauty of the Church is in her enjoyment of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who appears in the form of a dove.

Origen comments on this by saying, [He did not say ‘How beautiful are your cheeks,’ but he said, *‘Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments.’* He wanted to clarify that they were not beautiful before, but his beauty came after she (the Church) accepted the kisses of the Bridegroom, and after the One who was spoken of by the prophets had come. He cleansed the Church in the baptismal font, and made her without guile, and made her to know herself. Thus her cheeks became beautiful, for chastity, virtue and virginity, which earlier she did not have, were spread in her by a special beauty through the cheeks of the Church¹.]

The cheeks of the dove refer to the meekness and purity. Regarding meekness, the Lord commands us by saying, *“Be simple as the dove”* (Matt. 10:16). He means not to carry any craftiness of the world. Regarding the purity of turtledoves, **Origen** said that they have a peculiar nature: if any of the mates dies, the other partner does not accept anyone else.

Origen says, [The turtle-dove symbolizes the Church because the Church does not unite with anyone else beside Christ, and the turtle-dove symbolizes chastity and meekness.]

2. The neck with chains of gold. Usually man’s neck, without any ornaments, refers to the fierceness of human nature. However, when it is decorated with the gifts of the Holy

¹ Origen: *Commentary on Canticle*, 2:7.

Spirit, the symbol of spiritual beauty and endurance, these are the Church ornaments! Our necks carried shame and disgrace because of our disobedience and pride; however, now we carry the yoke of Christ and accept His obedience. Thus we carry this surpassing spiritual beauty.

3. **Gold and silver.** In the Septuagint Version, it is written, “*We make you like gold with ornaments from silver, as long as the King is on His table.*” In the Old Testament the Church did not have any gold, but things similar to gold and silver; however, since the King sat on His table, His bride had the gold.

When the Lord the King was lifted on the Cross, we received the gold: the heavenly life. Before we lived in the symbols and shadows of the heavenly (golden) matters (Gal. 3:19, Heb. 10:1, 1 Cor. 10:11).

Some Fathers see that the Church of the Old Testament enjoyed the shadows of gold with ornaments of silver, that is, she enjoyed the Law and the prophets; where the chastity of marriage and widowhood was the constitution of life. However, when the King the Virgin came, He gave the members of His body the capability of the life of virginity. This is the law of heaven, where they do not marry nor get married.

C. THE MESSIAH AS THE KING (Song 1:12 –17)

Since the Bridegroom compared His Church with a horse in the chariots of salvation that He leads and guides to His kingdom, the Church looks at Him as a King who fights for her and is united with her to make her a queen that sits at His right hand.

THE SPIKENARD OF THE QUEEN

“While the King is at His table, my spikenard sends forth its fragrance” (Song 1:12).

When the Lord Jesus reigned on the Cross and sacrificed His life for us, the queen came to give Him back her love as a spikenard, whose aroma has spread wherever the Gospel is preached.

At the Lord’s table, or on His altar, the King meets the queen, who offers the sacrifice of the King Himself as an acceptable fragrance before the Father. The Father considers His sacrifice as her sacrifice and the fragrance of her spikenard! Therefore He allows the queen (the Church) to offer the same sacrifice as a fragrance of the King’s love to the queen, and the love of the queen to the King.

St. Augustine looks at the sacrifice of the King and sees it as the same sacrifice of the queen, saying, [You are above the table! You are inside the chalice! This is what the Church offers through the mystery of the altar! Offering the oblations to God, she offers herself as an oblation!”¹ This great awesome sacrifice is we!] **St. Augustine** also said, [As long as the Church is the body of the Head, then she learns to offer herself through Him.²]

Thus, as long as the King is sitting on His table, the queen comes to Him, and the fragrance of His knowledge appears in her (2 Cor. 2:15). She offers the spikenard of her love to Him, sacrificing herself for His sake, as He sacrificed His life for her sake. She goes with Him to the myrrh saying:

“A bundle of myrrh is my Beloved to me, that lies all night between my breasts” (Song 1:13).

Since He suffered for her and died on the Cross, she comes to Him with myrrh, which is used in ointments and spices. She enters with Him to the tomb carrying the myrrh to embalm His body.

The queen realized that her Bridegroom is the King “The Conqueror of death.” The doors of Hades and the grave cannot prevail against Him. She knew Him as the “Resurrection” who grants life, so she prepared for Him myrrh so he may enter in her heart,

¹ *Christ in the Eucharist by the author, 1972, p. 105,107 (in Arabic).*

² *City of God, 10:, 20.*

which becomes like a new tomb. There, between her breasts, He sleeps to enter His holy tomb, where He does not smell the aroma of death, but spikenard and myrrh, and the grave is transformed into a holy temple where God dwells.

In this call of the queen to the King, we notice the following:

1. The queen does not present the myrrh in any way, but she wraps it as “*a bundle of myrrh.*” **Origen** said, [Henceforth, the fragrance of the myrrh is not scattered outside, but remains inside, becoming stronger and better. Then the king dwells in her heart and in her bosom.^{1]}

2. The queen used the expression “*a bundle of myrrh is my Beloved to me,*” because according to the Law, everything unwrapped is defiled (Num. 19:15). The soul which touches what is defiled becomes defiled. However, the Lord Christ has no guile in Him, but everything in Him is pure; thus the one who comes to Him is sanctified.

Origen said that the bundle of myrrh refers to the teachings of the Church pertaining to the divine incarnation; the teachings which bundle up to the truth. Henceforth, no heresies can penetrate those teachings. Those affected by heresy, or the teachings not bundled up, become defiled.

3. **Origen** also said that the bundle of a drop of myrrh refers to God the unlimited Word, who through His Incarnation became “*as a drop,*” emptying Himself carrying our nature.

4. **Origen** explains that the word “*Beloved*” means “my nephew.” The Gentile Church is saying that the Gentile community is like her older sister in her knowledge of God. The Lord Christ came from the Jews according to the flesh. When the queen says that this myrrh resembles her nephew, she refers to the Incarnation of the Lord Christ in the flesh.

5. The queen did not say that He dwells in her house, but between her breasts. This statement is taken from an old custom where the wife used to hang a small picture of her husband on her breast¹.

As the king has two breasts the Old Testament and the New Testament, the queen also has two breasts. God’s book is the Book of the Church, where God rejoices when He finds that His Church offers to the world His word as food for souls. **St. Jerome** wrote to St. Pamachius the monk encouraging him to study the Holy Bible saying, [Give him Your breasts to nurse from your bosom and to rest in His inheritance” (Ps. 68:13).]

6. At last, she calls him to sleep between her breasts, as if she is telling him with Hosea the Prophet, “Let her put away her harlotries from her sight, and her adulteries from between her breasts” (Hos. 2:2).

¹ *Commentary on Song 2:10*

¹ *Father Abdel Messih El Nekhiely: Lights on the book of the Song of Songs, p. 58,59.*

O Holy Lord, may You find a dwelling place in my heart so You may rest the whole night. As long as I am in this temporal earth, I badly need You. May You enter in my life until the light of the eternity shines. May You sleep between my breasts, so I may hide You inside me. I will never forsake You, for I have none besides You!

A CLUSTER OF HENNA BLOOMS

“My Beloved is to me cluster of henna blooms in the vineyards of En Gedi” (Song 1:14).

A cluster of henna blooms is a bundle of the fruit of henna, which the bride uses to dye her hands with on the night before her wedding. She becomes red with a nice aroma, ready for her bridegroom. En Gedi was the city famous for good quality henna.

The King holds on to the Cross as the scepter of His kingdom; and the queen holds her Bridegroom with her hand until His characteristics and the sign of His kingdom are printed on her (the red color). She will not become a queen until she carries the signs of the Cross and sacrifices herself to the point of bloodshed, as her Bridegroom. This is the source of her strength and her beauty; therefore, the King communes with her saying:

“Beloved, you are fair, my love! Beloved, you are fair! You have dove’s eyes” (Song 1:15).

THE MYSTERY OF HER BEAUTY

For the second time the Bridegroom, the King, communicates with His bride. The first time, He urged her to know herself that she is **“fairest among women” (Song 1:8)**. Now He communes with her emphasizing her beauty: **“Beloved, you are fair, my love! Beloved, you are fair!”** Here, the word **“my love”** means my neighbor. He is telling her that the source of her beauty is stay close to Him after He came close to her and descended to her. On Christmas Eve **St. Ephraem the Syrian** said, [This is a beautiful night; the Beautiful One came and made everything beautiful¹.] The king repeating **“Beloved, you are fair”** confirms his admiration to her. Here He mixes the kingdom with the wedding feast, strife with beauty, appreciation and respect with love.

“YOU HAVE DOVE’S EYES” (Song 1:15)

1. The Lord Jesus Christ, the King, sees special beauty in the Church. Her beauty is realized for she has dove’s eyes. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, came upon her and enlightened her.

Origen said, [Her eyes are compared to the doves because now she understands the Scriptures according to the spirit and not according to the letter. She understands the spiritual

¹ *Hymns on the Nativity, 1.*

mysteries in the Scriptures, for the dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. When we understand the Law and the prophets in a spiritual manner, then our eyes become like the doves. In the book of the Psalms, the human soul longed to have wings like the dove (Ps. 67:14), so she may fly to understand the spiritual mysteries and get settled in the courts of wisdom.^{1]}

Once more, **Origen** summarizes this expression by saying: [Your eyes are like the doves, which can look and comprehend in a spiritual manner.]

For the third time, **Origen** emphasized that the eyes of the dove refer to the pure, chaste heart that can understand the word of God spiritually. He said, [Who has the eyes of a dove sees the truth and deserves mercy... “The righteous see it and rejoice, and all iniquity stops its mouth” (Ps. 107:42). Who sees the truth except the one with a chaste and pure attitude? This matter does not apply to the physical eyes but to the eyes of the heart. May you go into the deep and seek with your spirit the eyes that receive their light from the commandments of God...; for the commandment of God enlightens the eyes (Ps. 118:9). The one with the simple eye can understand the Spirit descending from heaven in the form of a dove.]

St. Gregory of Nyssa said, [In seeing, the eye functions by receiving the impression of certain images which flow from the visible object. Thus the beauty of the bride’s eyes is praised because of the image of the Dove (the Holy Spirit) which appears in her pupils. For we receive within ourselves a likeness of whatever we look upon. Now the man who no longer looks toward flesh and blood, gazes rather on the life of the Spirit; as the Apostle says (Gal. 5:16), he lives and walks in the spirit, and by killing the deeds of the flesh by means of the Spirit, he becomes neither natural nor carnal but wholly spiritual. This is the reason why the Bridegroom praises the soul that has been freed of all carnal passion by saying that the image of the Dove is in its eyes; for this means that the impression of the spiritual life shines within the clarity of the soul.^{1]}

2. The dove’s eyes refer to the simple soul who quickly confesses her sins and comes to God with a pure repentance, as Ezekiel the Prophet said, “Those who survive will escape and be on the mountains like doves of the valleys, all of them mourning, each for his iniquity” (Ezek. 7:16).

3. The simple eyes refer to the simple heart in dealing with others, as the Lord Jesus said, “Be harmless as doves.” **St. Augustine** commented, [Notice how the doves preserve the life of love, for even if they fight, yet in simplicity, they cannot separate from each other².]

4. **St. Ambrose** said that the Lord Jesus always sees His Church as a dove, for in baptism He sees her wearing white clothes, without any defilement, conquering the darkness

¹ *Commentary on Song 3:1*

¹ *Sermon 4*

²

of water. Her eyes become like doves, for the Holy Spirit descends from heaven in the form of a dove.

5. In baptism, the eyes of the believer become like the dove's eyes; moreover, all his life becomes like a dove. "If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Matt. 6:22-23). Hence, the whole body is enlightened, and man becomes like a dove, flying with the Holy Spirit inside the ark, to be continuously in the bosom of the true Noah!

THE MYSTERY OF THE UNITY

Since the soul has dove's eyes, she looks at the mysteries of the word of God with the Holy Spirit, and realizes the beauty of her Bridegroom and enters in deep unity communing with Him:

"Behold, You are handsome, my Beloved! Yes, pleasant! Also, our bed is green. The beams of our houses are cedar, and our rafters of fir" (Song 1:16-17).

Through the Holy Spirit, the Church looks at her Bridegroom the King and sees that He is truly handsome and His love is sweet. She realizes that He takes the credit for every beauty in her. **Origen** said, [It seems that the bride has seen the beauty of her Bridegroom more closely, and with her dove's eyes, she realized the beauty and sweetness of the word of God. Truly, no one can realize how awesome the word of God is unless he has the eyes of a dove, that is, through spiritual enlightenment¹.]

"OUR BED IS GREEN" (Song 1:16)

What is this bed related to the king and queen (our bed)? This is the body in which the soul rests and which accepts the dwelling of God. No more is our body a burden on the soul nor does it reject the work of God; but it is sanctified to become a temple of God in which the soul rests and in whom God rejoices. In the body, one meets God, and through the body, we enjoy the fellowship with God, receiving the fruit of the Spirit. Therefore, the bed is called green because it is fruitful.

Origen said: [In spite of the soul being in the body, she deserves to be in the company of the word of God. She receives divine power to grant goodness to the body and plants in it the grace of purity, chastity and other good deeds².]

The queen does not say "my bed," but "*our bed*." Her body does not only belong to her, but also to the Bridegroom the King. Therefore, St. Paul calls our bodies the members of Christ (1 Cor. 6:15). Our bodies reflect the inner unity between the divine word and the soul.

The green bed also declares the mystery of the incarnation, for it is the Body of the King. The divine Word took our human nature and carried us in Him; thus, we look at His

¹ *Origen: Commentary on Canticle, 3:2.*

² *Origen: Commentary on Canticle, 3:2.*

body as a bed to us, for we find rest in Him and we are united with Him! The Body of the Lord was obedient to the Father, in contrast to our disobedience. He became pure in contrast of our defilement, and gave us victory over the devil!

WORKERS IN THE ROYAL PALACE

After the queen talked about the fruit of her unity with the King, she declared the responsibility of the workers in the royal palace for the sake of this unity. She said:

“The beams of our houses are cedar, and our rafters of fir” (Song 1:16).

Origen relates that the rafters, which are the slanted roofs which protect the houses from the heat of the sun, rain and storms, are the bishops who work with the Spirit of Christ to keep the believers in the faith. The beams, which bind the whole palace, are the priests who serve for the edification of the children of God. He said, [When the bishops perform their daily work in the Church, they are like the rafters which protect the whole building from rain, heat of the sun. Next to them come the priests who are like beams¹.]

The bishop has to be from the fir tree for the following reasons:

1. Fir trees are known for their great power and beautiful aroma. **Origen** said, [This indicates that the bishop has to have good deeds and carries the aroma of the grace of teaching².] This means that he has two functions: to carry the Christian spiritual conduct and to spread the sweet aroma of Christ. He serves with his life and with his teachings!

2. Fir trees are characterized with their power and greatness (2 Kings 19:23). The branches moving with the wind are like the shaking of the spears during wars (Nahum 2:3). The bishop as a shepherd has to be strong in his spirit and in his faith, carrying inner authority by the Holy Spirit and through his holy life. If he weakens, then the whole flock will also stumble. The bishop has to preserve the faith against all heresies.

3. During the building of Solomon’s temple, the whole floor was covered with planks of cypress (1 Kings 6:15). The bishop, appointed by the Spirit to be a leader and a shepherd, has to be humble (covered on the floor of the house). He sits at his children’s feet, washing them with the spirit of love and humility! The congregation offers him as a head representing the Lord Christ. In his heart, he sees himself the last of all, helping the weak and the despised. He has to serve every one rather than be served by them.

4. The wood of fir trees is used in building ships (Ezek. 27:5), which cross the sea of this world to the heavenly port. Also, fir wood is used in making musical instruments (2 Sam. 6:5), to instill in the people the spirit of joy and hope in Christ Jesus!

5. The wood of fir trees is used in making spears (Nahum 2:3), for the bishop is

¹ *Origen: Commentary on Canticle, 3:2.*

² *Origen: Commentary on Canticle, 3:2.*

responsible of protecting faith from every heresy.

6. Due to the height of the fir trees, the bird builds its nest in them (Ps. 104:7). Everyone, even the non-believers, sees in the spiritual bishop the heart elevated toward the heavenly matters and the mind occupied with the eternity.

This also applies to the priest. **Origen** said, [The beams were made of cedar, and cedar is known for its straight forwardness and nice aroma; in the same manner, the priests are filled with the aroma of the knowledge of Christ.]

Cedar was used to build masts of ships (Ezek. 27:5). An analogy for that, the priest leads his people to the divine port. Cedar was used to build musical instruments; in the same manner, priests stir the spirit of joy in their children. Cedar was used in building the inner part of the temple of Solomon (1 Kings 6:20), as well as the altar (1 Kings 6:18). The message of the priest is to build the inner house of the heart, so he does not care about the outside appearance or is occupied with any other job. He represents the altar, whose main function is to offer to his people the slain Christ and offer prayers for them. He testifies to the Cross and does not cease to pray for them until they all enter the eternal life.

D. THE MESSIAH AS THE BELOVED (Song 2:1 – 2:7)

Since the soul has spoken with her relatives about the Lord Christ as her Bridegroom, praising His love, she then meets Him as the Good Shepherd. She also gets acquainted with Him as the King, who makes her as a queen sitting beside Him. Now, she meets Him in the garden, informally to commune with Him.

He tells her, “If the world attracted you with all its temptations and you have requested its pleasures, I must descend to the valleys in the world so we may get to know each other.”

“I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys” (Song 2:1).

Sharon is a valley in Judea, a fertile region where there is plenty of water. However, there were no plantations in it because it was in a narrow land used as a road between Egypt and Syria. The valley of Sharon is of superior quality; there is plantation without anyone tiring himself in planting. In the same manner, our Beloved appears in our land. He came to us, not because of our righteousness, but with His grace.

In the middle of the barren valleys, the Lord appears as a lily. **St. Gregory of Nyssa** described the lily as a straight flower rising to the heights, whose bud is far from the ground. Likewise the Lord came to our barren valleys to lift us up so that we may have the heavenly blossoms.

This expression in the Septuagint says, ***“I am the flower of the field (plains) and the lily of the valleys.”*** **Origen** commented, [The field is a piece of land where the farmers plant. But the valleys are usually stony land, which was never planted. Thus, we understand that the field or plain represents the people whom the prophets and the Law have cultivated, and the stony valleys represent the Gentiles. The Bridegroom appears as a lily among the people, because the Law could not make anyone attain perfection (Heb. 7:19). In the Old Testament, the Word of God could not lead the people to progress toward perfection. In the valleys, which represent the Gentiles, He became like a lily¹.]

The Lord Jesus is the flower of the Jewish nation; for He directed the Law to Christ, the lily of the Gentiles, when they accepted Him as their Savior. He is the Christ of the whole world, for both Jews and Gentiles.

St. Jerome said that the flower of the field, or the lily of the valley, is the Messiah who blossomed in Aaron’s rod; the blossom that brought forth the Holy Virgin Mary. The blossom itself does not carry life but carried “Life Himself¹.”

He also said, [Saying that He came from the wilderness refers to the virgin who

¹ *Origen: Commentary on Canticle, 3:4.*

¹ *Epistle to Eustachim, 22: 18*

presented to us God incarnate, without any marital relations. Let us sing with the Psalmist, “In a dry and thirsty land where there is no water, so I have looked for You in the sanctuary” (Ps. 63:1-2).^{2]}

St. Ambrose said: [St. Mary is the rod and Christ is the blossom of St. Mary who spreads the sweet aroma of faith in the whole world, for He appeared as blossom in the virgin’s womb, for He said about Himself, *‘I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.’* (Song 2:1). When you pluck a flower, it keeps its smell; and when it is crushed or cut in pieces, it smells even more. In the same manner, when the Lord Jesus was hung on the Cross, He did not fail when bruised nor weaken when being torn. When pierced with the spear, He became more handsome with the Blood that shed from Him and carried a new beauty. He cannot die spiritually, but grants the dead the gift of eternal life. The Holy Spirit has descended on this rose which blossomed in the royal rod.^{3]}

This is our Beloved, and we are His bride. With His sufferings, He carries the sweet aroma smelled by those in the plains (the Jews) and the valleys (the Gentiles). What are we in relation to Him?

“Like a lily among the thorns, so is my love among the daughters” (Song 2:2).

Origen said, [Since He became the lily of the valleys, He wants His beloved to become also a lily to follow His example, meaning that every soul who gets close to Him and follows His example becomes a lily^{1].}

St. Gregory of Nyssa says the soul is like a lily ascending to the Messiah, her true Vine-dresser. She rises above the cares of this life, the thorns of sin that choke the soul (Mark. 4:18) and the dirt of this life so she may become undefiled.

In the eyes of God, the believer is like a gorgeous flower, which even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them. She is beautiful not because of her self-righteousness but due to the grace of the Blood that flows inside of her.

Although man accepted the thorns of sin, God still sees him as a lily. He descends to him and passes through the thorns to remove the curse from him!

When the Beloved says, *“Like a lily among the thorns,”* He means that if she wants to be adorned with virtues, she must endure the sufferings of the thorns very cautiously. **St. Ambrose** said, [Virtues are surrounded with the thorns of spiritual evil, and no one can gather the fruits unless he approaches with caution^{2].}

Origen sees here a true beautiful picture of the Church that is surrounded by heresies and heretics who unsuccessfully attempt to destroy the Church.

² Epistle to Theodora, 75:1

³ On the Holy Spirit, 38-39

¹ Origen: Commentary on Canticle, 3:4.

² Concerning Virgins, 1:8.

St. Augustine¹ relates that those who are doing well are a minority in the world, as lilies among thorns, which wait until the harvest when they are separated.

THE NEED FOR THE BELOVED

Although the human soul becomes a lily among the thorns, she does not become occupied with the thorns around her but with the Bridegroom who satisfies her, quenches her thirst and grants her rest. She sees Him approaching her and ascending the Cross, where she rests within His eternal love. When He offers her the sweet fruit of the Cross, she tells Him:

“Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my Beloved among the sons. I sat down in His shade with great delight, and His fruit was sweet to my taste” (Song 2:3).

Since she lives among the thorns and cannot rise to Him, He descends to her and becomes like an apple tree (a symbol of the incarnation). He dwelt among us, we the fruitless trees, and became like one of us. He was not fruitless like us, but became as the beautiful, sweet smelling apple tree. Its fruit is eaten and its juice is drunk. It is the tree of life from which we pick instead of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Truly, the earth has dried up because we ate from the tree of disobedience. The Beloved, the obedient Son, came from among the thorns, passed through our sufferings and carried the curse of the thorns so that we may sit at His feet resting in the shade of the Cross of His love among the tribulations of this world.

In the world there are many unfruitful trees, but there is only one true tree: the tree of the spiritual apple, full of satisfaction.

Since the apple tree refers to the divine incarnation, the unfruitful trees refer to the heresies and strange doctrines. There is no rest for us except in the Word Incarnate, away from all heresy. **Origen** said, [The bride desires to sit under the shade of the apple tree, meaning that the Church becomes under the refuge of the Son of God; or meaning that the soul flees from all strange doctrines to cleave only to the Word of God. Then she finds His fruit sweet to her taste, through continuous meditation in God’s Law, digesting His words as a clean animal does².]

In the past the Gentiles sat in the shades of death (Is. 9:2, Matt. 4:16), for they sat under the tree of disobedience; but now they enjoy the shade of the Grantor of life by their sitting under the Cross of obedience. In the Old Testament the Jews sat under the Law, through literal understanding; but now we are allowed to enter under the shade of Christ by tasting the spiritual understanding of the Law that edifies us.

Here is **Origen**’s contrast between the shade of the Law and the shade of Christ: [It is apparent that every soul in this present life needs shade, because of the heat of the sun withers seeds with no roots. The shade of the Law provided some protection against the heat;

¹ Reply to Fastus the Manichean, 8:16

² Origen: Commentary on Canticle, 3:5.

however the shade of Christ, under whom the Gentiles live, that is faith in the incarnation, provides perfect protection from the heat, and moreover, it removes the heat completely. Satan, who used to burn those who were under the shade of the Law, was seen falling like lightning, during the time of Christ. But this shade will be completed at the end of ages, for as we said that at the end of all ages, we no longer see Christ dimly in a mirror but face to face.^{1]}

St. Mary, representing the Church, as a perfect member, sat under the shade of the Almighty through the divine incarnation, as the angel told her, “The power of the highest shall overshadow you, and the Holy One born of you is called the Son of God.” Hence, the believer was able to sit under the shade of the Lord and eat His sweet fruit after his mouth was embittered because of sin. The Psalms say that for the sinful, “his throat is an open tomb” (Ps. 5:9). The bride opened her mouth, not as a tomb carrying the death of sin, but rather eating the Body of the Grantor of life and tasting the sweetness of his fruits. She also says, “I opened my mouth and panted, for I longed for your commandments” (Ps. 119:131).

Origen said, [His fruit is sweet to my taste applies to the soul who has no defilement in her mouth, and does not follow those whom was said, ‘Their throat are open tombs.’ The mouths that utter words of death and destruction are called tombs. These utter words against the true faith, purity, justice and dignity.^{2]}

IN THE HOUSE OF PERFECT LOVE

The soul sitting with her Beloved under the Cross, tasting His infinite love, asks Him to go in the deep to be quenched from the springs of His deep love. She says:

“He brought me to the banqueting house, and His banner over me was love. Sustain me with cakes of raisins; refresh me with apples, for I am lovesick” (Song 2:4-5).

The banqueting house is the house of new life³ granted to us through the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. The banqueting house symbolizes the house of feasting and wisdom, where one receives the teachings of the truth in the divine wisdom. He is revived daily, for one is acquainted with the mysteries of God as if they are new every day.

Origen said [The wine which is extracted from the true vine, the Lord Jesus, is continuously new. The understanding of the the spiritual well-educated is continuously renewed, that is why the Lord Jesus said to his disciples, ‘But I say to you, I will not drink the fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom’ (Matt. 26:29). Understanding the hidden mysteries and declaring the mysteries is continuously renewed through the wisdom of God, not only to human beings but also to

¹ *Origen: Commentary on Canticle, 3:5.*

² *Origen: Commentary on Canticle, 3:5.*

³ *See Commentary on Song 1:2.*

angels and the heavenly hosts.^{1]}

When the Lord enters with the believer to the banqueting house and reveals the mysteries of new wisdom to him, then love is understood as a sign of victory of her Beloved King. The believer then raises the banner of love. The Lord has completely ruled over the believer, for the Septuagint says, “Put in me the virtue of love” (Song 2:4).

When the soul enters the house of her Beloved, she is obligated to abide by the rule of His house: love. However, because she does not know how to apply it, she asks him to plan the life of love, that is, to receive true love from God. Through this reign of true love she learns how to love God, her parents and her brothers.

One is obligated to love God from all the heart, soul, and strength; to have unlimited and unconditional love, and to love one’s neighbor as one’s self (Mark 12:30; Deut. 6:4). If one prefers his love for himself (his salvation) more than his love to his brothers, then his love is not perfect. One must love his parents by honoring them in the Lord. The love of a husband to his wife is much different than a child’s love for his parents or a shepherd’s love for his people. Truly, in the house of love we receive the nature of true love from its source: God Himself. Therefore, we need to learn the law of practical love.

The bride then cries, declaring her need to love saying,

“Sustain me with cakes of raisins; refresh me with apples, for I am lovesick” (Song 2:5).

After entering the banqueting house and accepting true love, she declares that she has become lovesick. It is impossible that this love sickness pertains to physical love, for according to Eastern tradition, a female cannot say that she is lovesick; only the male can.

On the other hand, how can one tell someone besides her beloved to refresh her and sustain her? Can the cakes of raisins and apples cure the wounds of her love or heal her sickness? These are the cries of one inside the church (the banqueting house), for she asks from the servants of Christ to pour the love of Christ inside her and to let His sweet aroma spread. She asks for the apple, a symbol of the Holy Body and the secret of her spiritual revival! He alone can satisfy her heart with His love.

The source of the lovesickness, as **Origen** said,¹ is Christ Himself. For He is the living Word of God, sharper than a two edged sword that enters into the depths of the soul, and wounds it with the divine love.

❖ Let the sick be wounded, for when they are wounded, they become well!²

St. Augustine

❖ The Holy Bible teaches that God is love (1John 4:8). He has pointed His Only Son ‘the chosen arrow’ (Is. 49:2), toward the chosen ones. The head of the arrow is the faith that

¹ Origen: *Commentary on Canticle*, 3:6.

¹ *Commentary on John*, 36

² *On Ps. 144:7*.

binds those who shoot the arrow with those who are hit; as if the soul rises up with divine elevations and sees inside her the arrow of sweet love. It is a nice wound and sweet suffering where life hits the soul, for through the tears of the arrow the soul opens the door which is her inner self¹.

St. Gregory of Nyssa

- ❖ When one is inflamed with true love for the Word of God, one accepts to be wounded with what the Prophet calls “the chosen arrow.” One can say that the soul is lovesick only when she longs and pants for Him by day and by night to the extent that she cannot speak about anything but Him, listen to anyone but Him, think about anything but Him, has no other desire but to be with Him and has no hope in anything but Him. The soul says in truth, **“I am lovesick.”** She is wounded by Him, about whom it was said, “He has made Me a polished shaft: in His quiver He has hidden Me” (Is. 49:2).

God can wound our souls with these shafts and arrows. He can hit us with these healing wounds. As long as God is love, then they say about them, **“I am lovesick.”** Truly, this is dramatic love, for one says, “I have accepted the wounds of love!”

When one pants toward the wisdom of God, that is, when one is able to look at the beauty of His wisdom, he says, ‘I am lovesick with His wisdom.’ The one who is dazzled with the power of His word and His might can say, ‘I am lovesick with His might.’ This is the same soul who said, ‘The Lord is my light and salvation whom shall I fear, the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?’ (Ps. 27:1) When one is inflamed with the love of God’s justice and meditates on His care, he says ‘I am lovesick with His justice.’ The one overwhelmed with His compassionate love says the same things. All this is the sickness of love, which the bride declares saying, **‘I am lovesick.’**²

Origen

These are the sicknesses of love when one is hit with this polished shaft, the Lord Jesus. He puts His left hand under our heads to direct us away from the temporal matters, and draws us toward the heavenly things with His right hand. Therefore one calls to Him:

“His left hand is under my head, and His right hand embraces me” (Song 2:6).

This means that He chastises us with His left hand, then all temporal and carnal matters seem trifle before us. And with His right hand He pities us and opens our heart to desire the heavenly matters. In any case, the Lord puts His chastening under our heads, for without it, our heads would not be stable. He also surrounds us with His right hand so our hearts are filled with hope in Him! These are the sicknesses of the true, healing and divine love.

When one enters the banqueting house and is pierced with the chosen shaft, one feels

¹ Sermon 4.

² Origen: *Commentary on Canticle*, 3:8.

His infinite love, whether in His chastisement or His compassion. In both cases, one feels that her head is lying on His left hand and surrounded by His right hand. Thus, one is embraced in His divine bosom, and is face to face with Him, so she can receive all the kisses of His divine mouth. She is cautious that no one interrupts this deep relationship, and says:

“I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases” (Song 2:7).

She carried the same feeling that St. Peter had on the mountain of Transfiguration when he said, “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (Matt. 17:4).

This statement cannot apply to carnal love, for how can a girl ask her friends not to awaken her beloved? Is this her job? However, this is a marvelous picture of the mother Church who asks her children (*the daughters of Jerusalem*) to remain in the divine bosom and not to trouble the Lord, resting in their hearts, by committing sin or evil! This is the voice of the mother Church to every believer who is called a “*daughter of Jerusalem*” to remain in the divine bosom, and not to trouble the Lord who wants to rest in their hearts! This is the voice of the mother Church to every believer looking toward the heavenly Jerusalem as her mother, charging her by the gazelles of the fields which the Lord has blessed (Gen. 27:27). For she is the field of the Lord (1 Cor. 3:9) to remain attached to the divine love living inside her.¹

This is the voice of the Church directed to the Jews, the daughters of Jerusalem, who saw the Messiah on the Cross and buried in a tomb. He appeared in weakness, but rose on the third day by His own free will. He said, “I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:18). Unfortunately, the Jews have failed to accept the Crucified Christ, waiting for another Christ according to their desires.

¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa sees that the bride addresses the souls under her direction, asking them to pass through this world (field) not giving attention to the outside temporary forces, but to concentrate on the inner purity by sacrificing themselves (Commentary on Song of Songs, Sermon 4).

2

THE FIANCÉ SEEKS HIS BELOVED

(Song 2:8 – 3:11)

A. HE HIMSELF DESCENDS TO HER

(Song 2:8 –14)

“The voice of my Beloved, Behold, He comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. My Beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, He stands behind our wall; He is looking through the windows, gazing through the lattice” (Song 2:8-9).

The Gentile Church gently rebukes the Jewish nation saying, “I became acquainted with the word of God, the voice of the Beloved, who became incarnate through the Jews (nephew). I have known Him through the Law and the shadows of prophecies. He came leaping joyfully through the Law; and in the fullness of time He came like a gazelle, carrying our nature, hiding in it, standing behind our wall and talking directly with us.”

She accepted the message of His incarnation through the Law and the prophets, and was able to recognize His voice (John 10:3-4).

St. Gregory of Nyssa said, [The majesty of the Word has gone to the Church first through the prophets. Finally, through the declaration of the Gospel, all the shadows of the symbols were abolished, the middle wall was destroyed, and the atmosphere of the inner house was connected to the heavenly light. There was no more need for the window lights as long as the True Light has lighted the inside with the light of the Gospel.]

MEETING ON THE MOUNTAIN

Since the Church knew the Incarnate Word through the Old Testament Law and the prophecies, here is a catholic (universal) calling to climb the mountain of the Holy Bible to meet the Fiancé who is coming to propose to His bride. The Psalmist says, “His foundation is in the holy mountain” (Ps. 87:1), and “I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence comes my help?” (Ps. 121:1).

Origen states that the one who wants to meet the Word of God on the mountains and on the hills has at first meet Him on the highly mountains of the New Testament books and on the hills of the Old Testament books, which were hidden for long time.

In the book of Jeremiah the Lord sends fishermen and hunters to hunt people from every mountain and every hill (Jer. 16:16). This is a prophecy about the missionary work of the Church, where she fishes for souls through the Holy Bible, so they may enjoy the

blessings of salvation.

On these holy mountains, the soul meets the Word of God, sees her Fiancé, and hears the voice of His proposal to her. Then she experiences His love, discovers His divine mysteries and sees His glory.

The soul rises with Moses on Mount Horeb to see the burning bush (Ex. 3:2) and understand the mystery of the incarnation. She sees St. Mary (the bush) carrying the coal of fire without being burnt.

She rises with Moses on the mountain not to receive the Ten Commandments engraved on two tablets of stone, but to find the Word of God, the Logos Himself, in her heart!

She sits with the multitudes to see the Lord Christ going up the mountain, opening His mouth and speaking directly and openly to her (Matt. 5:1).

She climbs with Him up Mount Tabor to see Him transfigured, realizes the majesty of His divinity and hears Him speaking with Moses and Elijah about salvation.

She rises with the Word of God on the mountain of temptation, seeing Him tempted by the devil, whom He conquered for her sake!

The believer realizes why the Lord Jesus was called a Stone cut which became a great mountain (Dan. 2:34). The Church is called Mount Zion because it refers to God's dwelling place among His people.

She hears the two angels warning Lot, "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain. Escape to the mountains, lest you be destroyed." (Gen. 19:17).

COMPARING THE GAZELLE AND THE YOUNG STAG

What does the bride compare her fiancé to?

"My Beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, He stands behind our wall; He is looking through the windows, gazing through the lattice" (Song 2:9).

1. The Lord Jesus is compared to the gazelle (deer). The word "gazelle" in Hebrew means "beauty." The Lord Jesus proposed to mankind, and pours His beauty on them who defiled their inner nature and spiritual beauty by sinning. He summarized this act of salvation in a sweet conversation with mankind: "And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, "Live!" Yes, I said to you in your blood, "Live!" I made you thrive like a plant in the field; and you grew, matured, and became very beautiful. Your breasts were formed, your hair grew, but you were naked and bare. When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into

a covenant with you, and you became Mine,' says the Lord God. 'Then, I washed you in water; yes, I thoroughly washed off your blood, and I anointed you with oil. I clothed you in embroidered cloth and gave you sandals of badger skin; I clothed you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your wrists, and a chain on your neck. And I put a jewel in your nose, earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus, you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. You are pastry of fine flour, honey, and oil. You were exceedingly beautiful and succeeded to royalty" (Ezek. 16:6-14).

What a beautiful message from the Lord Savior to the Church. He passed by her and found her naked and struggling in her own blood. He completely sanctified her, spread His wing over her (He made her His bride), clothed her nakedness with His blood, washed her in the baptismal water, anointed her with the Holy Myron oil, put His life in her, gave her His Gospel, the source of her salvation, adorned her with the works of the Holy Spirit, put His holy yoke around her neck, made her His sweet aroma, sanctified her ears, beautified her by hearing the divine promises and the heavenly praises and satisfied her with the heavenly bread. In brief, He made her "*exceedingly beautiful*," and she became worthy to become a queen reflecting the splendor of the Savior in her life.

St. John Chrysostom said: [The Great and Strong One desires an adulteress. I speak of the human nature. If one desires an adulteress, he is condemned; so why does God desire an adulteress to be His bride? He did not send one of His servants, nor an angel, nor an archangel, nor a cherub, nor a seraph; but He Himself, who loved her, came down to her. He does not lead her as an adulteress to the heavens, but He Himself descended to her. As long as she cannot go up to heaven, He descended on earth for her. He came to the adulteress, and was not ashamed to hold her while she was drunk.¹]

In other words, the Lord came to us as a gazelle to make us a beautiful perfect gazelle, who can live up in the highest, that is, in the heavenly places. For the Psalmist said, "He makes my feet like the feet of deer, and sets me on high places" (Ps. 18:33).

2. **St. Augustine** said, [He made my love perfect so that I may ascend above the world full of thorns and darkness. He lifts me above the high hills and directs my focus on the heavenly dwelling, so that I may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19).²]

3. **Origen** says that the word "gazelle," in Greek, means his eyes are very sharp. He comments on that: [Who can see as Christ sees? He is the only One who sees the Father and knows Him. It was written that the pure in heart shall see God; this is through the revelation of Christ to them (John 6:6). The nature of the gazelle is not only to see very sharply, but also to grant others to see as well. Therefore, Christ is compared to the gazelle and to the deer, not

¹ St. John Chrysostom: *The Church Loves You, two sermons for Etropius, 1966, p. 53-54 (in Arabic).*

² *On Psalms 18 (17): 34*

only because He sees the Father, but also because He makes Him seen to those whom He heals. We should not consider ‘Seeing the Father,’ with any physical understanding or think that God can be seen, for God cannot be seen with physical eyesight, but with spiritual. Then to those whom He gives the power to see, He grants the spirit of knowledge and wisdom so that they may see God. He told His disciples, ‘He who has seen Me, has seen the Father also.’ (John 14:9).”^{1]}

4. The gazelle or the deer is known for the swiftness of walking (2 Sam. 2:18). The Word Incarnate, who came in the fullness of time (many years after the fall of man), was not slow to save us. He came to prepare salvation; in the fullness of time, He descended to us before we even began to seek Him.

5. **St. Augustine** said that the deer are not only swift in motion but also in running toward the brooks of water. On the way, he kills the serpents and becomes thirstier for the water brooks. David the Psalmist said, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for you, O God” (Ps. 42:1).

All the believers assemble with one spirit, panting for the love of God as a deer panting for the water brooks. The Son of God came as a deer thirsty for our love. Along the path of salvation, because of His love to us, He destroyed the old serpent, (Satan).

6. One of the habits of deer is jumping over rocks (2 Sam. 22:34, Hab. 3:19). The Bridegroom did not ask for the easy road but swiftly and joyfully accepted to suffer for our sake. St. Paul said, “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross, despising the shame...” (Heb. 12:2).

7. According to the Mosaic Law, the deer (or the gazelle) was considered a clean animal, which was lawful to eat of (Deut. 12:22, 14:5). Therefore when the Fiancé proposes to the bride, He offers His Body and Blood as a dowry for her; this is the source of her sanctification and eternity!

8. As the Fiancé was compared to the gazelle His bride, who carried his characteristics, is also compared to the gazelle. The Psalmist says, “The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth” (Ps. 29:9). In God’s speech with Job in the storm, He said, “Do you know the time when the wild mountain goats bear young? Or can you mark when the deer gives birth? Can you number the months that they fulfill? Or do you know the time when they bear young? They bow down, they bring forth their young, they deliver their offspring. Their young ones are healthy, they grow strong with grain; they depart and do not return to them” (Job 39:1-4).

Origen states that these verses speak of the spiritual gazelles. The voice of the Lord, who is Christ the Word of God, grants the gazelles the life of perfection (Ps. 29:9). He is the

¹ *Origen, Commentary on Song 3: 12*

Source of her perfection. In the Lord's talk with Job about the gazelles, He emphasized His personal care with all the believers. He cares for them spiritually, and when they beget virtues, He nurtures them, as a gazelle. In Song of Songs, He also compares us, our inner life and our virtues to the gazelle. This is our behavior in Christ Jesus.

In the book of Proverbs, the wife is compared to the gazelle and her children to the doe, being the image of the Church, the true bride, the loving wife to her Bridegroom, full of grace. Therefore, it was said, "As a loving deer and a graceful doe..." (Prov. 5:19).

9. Comparing Him with the small gazelle confirms His incarnation, for the infinite God became an infant, emptying Himself for our sake.

10. His comparison with the gazelle reminds us with the title of Psalm 22 "To the chief musician. Set to the deer of the dawn." This is the psalm that describes the detailed events of the crucifixion and the resurrection. What does he mean by "the deer of the dawn" except the new life that the Savior has offered us by His resurrection on Sunday morning?

He came leaping on the mountains, jumping on the hills to help us enter into the power of His resurrection, that is, to accept the new life we have in Christ Jesus. St. Paul said, "And raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6).

11. At last, mentioning "*mountains of Bethel*" refers to the holy books for the house of God (El), that is the Church. We cannot experience the beauty of the house of God and cannot accept His incarnation, resurrection or His work in us without the work of the Church (the house of God).

HIS STANDING BEHIND OUR WALL

1. Since the Savior descended to us and proposed to us, He came even to the wall we built out of our disobedience to Him. He came to the veil that separated us from the Holy of Holies, and stood resisting even to bloodshed (Heb. 12:4). He conquered it and opened a heavenly road through which we can walk. Since we were the ones who built this veil we are unable to ascend to Him. Therefore, He descended to us and tore the veil of the temple on the Cross so that He could appear with His resurrection through the window that He had made.

2. The wall refers to our human nature, for He descended to us hidden behind our nature so that we would not fear Him, but rather accept Him, love Him and unite with Him.

THE CALL TO RESURRECTION

The fiancé descended to the house of his bride, aware of the many traps laid for her, which prevent her from going outside alone and ascending to His house. He, who cannot be trapped by sin or death, conquered sin under His feet, and trampled over death by His death. He asks His fiancé to fearlessly depart with Him and experience the new life of resurrection,

which became hers. He tells her, **“Rise up My love, My fair one, and come away”** (v. 10). Do not fear, be of good cheer, for I have overcome all the evils of the world and the dominion of death.

Origen commented on the call of the Lord Jesus to His fiancée saying, [He tells her that, so that she may despise the windows which Satan has opened in front of her, and not fear all the traps.]

He called her, with authority to cleave to Him and become His meek dove carrying the fruits of the resurrection in her life. He said,

“Rise up, My love, My fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past. The rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth. The time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grapes give a good smell. Rise up, My love, My fair one, and come away!” (Song 2:10-13).

This is a call to the first resurrection: the resurrection of the human soul from the death of sin and its release over the carnal lusts to live according to the spirit and not according to the flesh.

Origen said, [The Word of God talks to the beautiful soul and appears to her through the readings of the Holy Bible and listening to the teachings, as though from the windows. He appears as a tall great Person talking with the previous words, bowing to her and asking her to go out of the carnal lusts, so she may deserve to listen to the voice saying, ‘You are not in the flesh but in the spirit...’ (Rom. 8:9).]

The Word of God could not call her His relative nor be united with her (1 Cor. 6:17), and call her beautiful unless He sees her picture renewed every day (2 Cor. 4:16). He would not have seen her capable of accepting the Holy Spirit, who descended on the Lord Jesus in the form of a dove (Matt. 3:6), nor have called her His dove unless she has realized the love of the Word of God and desired to be released with Him saying, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! For then, I would fly away and be at rest” (Ps. 55:6). I fly with my emotions, with my spiritual understanding, and rest when I realize the treasures of His wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3).

Those who mortify their earthly desires become partakers in the likeness of His death (Col. 3:5, Rom. 6:5). Those who accept the power of the Holy Spirit and are sanctified and filled by the Holy Spirit become doves like Him, for He appeared in the form of a dove. They rise with the wings of the Holy Spirit and fly from the earthly to the heavenly places.

In order for the appropriate time to come, he interferes in a logical way saying,

“For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone”

The human soul does not unite with the Word of God until the winter of her worries and the storms of her vice are over. She is no more shaken by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14). When the storms of the lusts subside, then the flowers of the virtues begin to blossom.

Then the voice of the dove is heard, which refers to the wisdom uttered by the Word, the hidden wisdom of God in a mystery (1 Cor. 2:7).

The turtle-dove is mentioned because this bird spends its time in hidden and secluded places. He loves mountainous desert and hidden sections of the forest, so it can be far from the multitudes.

What fits this age and its luxuries? He says,

“The fig tree puts forth her green figs”

The spiritual person, to whom the fig tree refers, does not carry yet the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, etc. (Gal. 5:23), but carries green figs.

The different kinds of trees symbolize the souls of the believers; for it is written, “Every plant which my Heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted” (Matt. 15:13). St. Paul also described himself as working with God in His vineyard, saying, “I planted and Apollos watered” (1 Cor. 3:6). The Lord Jesus also said, “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit” (Matt. 12:33). The different varieties of trees symbolize the different virtues of the soul. Hence, in the soul, the fig tree produces green figs and the vine produces tender, sweet-smelling grapes. The vinedresser is the Heavenly Father, who prunes the vineyard until it brings forth more fruits (John 15:1).

It is strange that He calls her to experience the resurrection by saying, ***“Rise up... the time of singing has come.”*** This means the time of pruning has come, referring to the crucifixion, where the sinful deeds and carnal lusts of the old man are removed until they carry more spiritual, heavenly fruits. He takes her through suffering to the Cross so that she may bear the fruits of the resurrection. He separates her from the coldness of the spirit, so she may enter the spring of the new life, resurrected in Christ Jesus.

This invitation to the resurrection is directed to the whole world, to both Jews and Gentiles. The fig tree refers to the Law, for through the descent of the Word to the world, the Law was not interpreted through the letter but through the Spirit. The Jews who accepted the Lord Christ carried the fruit of the Spirit with a heart love open to the whole world. They ceased using the Law for boasting with the Gentiles as before. He says, ***“The fig tree has brought forth green figs,”*** and ***“The time of singing has come,”*** referring to the time of pruning the vine, or the Old Testament. To the Jewish nation, therefore, it is essential to prune its proud branches until they accept the membership of the Gentiles and the pleasant aroma of Christ fills the whole world. It is important to prune the vine from the earthly and temporal concepts until it comprehends the spiritual and heavenly meanings.

THE RESURRECTION: OUT FROM THE COLD AND INTO THE WARMTH

St. Gregory of Nyssa relates that the spring where the flowers appeared and the smell

of the figs and vine spread were God's creation. David the Psalmist said, "You have made summer and winter" (Ps. 73:17). The cold winter season is over and the warm spring has come. In the winter man was in the coldness of paganism. His nature changed to evil solid nature like that of the gods they worshipped. "Those who look to the true God accept the characteristics of the divine nature inside them; similarly, those who look to the pagan gods become like stones rather than human beings. By worshipping the idols, they become stagnant rocks unable to progress. 'The Sun of Righteousness' shone amidst the cold bitter winter and the spring appeared. The wind of the south abolished that stagnation, and warmth spread to all those on whom the rays have fallen."

Although the cold winter of paganism had changed man into stone, the divine Word, the "Sun of Righteousness" shone and transformed the cold stones into warm water. Similarly, our Lord said, "God is able to raise children of Abraham from these stones" (Matt. 3:9).

In this spring, which the Lord has done by His resurrection, the Divine Word calls His bride to rise, saying,

"Rise up, My love, My fair one, and come away"

This call is directed to the bride to rise and proceed toward the road of perfection. The Lord said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed and go to your house" (Matt. 9:6). The Word did not ask him only to carry his bed, but also to go to his house. By going to his house, he meant to grow and progress toward the road of perfection. He also commands his bride, ***"Rise up and come away."*** This order carries power that the Groom offers to His bride by rising and proceeding toward the road of perfection.

"My love, My fair one"

His calling is arranged very precisely, as **St. Gregory** says, [Notice the order of the words, how each word is associated with the previous word. All the words are interrelated as if in a chain. The bride listens to the commandment, carrying power to implement it. She rises then she comes away, then she cleaves to Him and becomes beautiful and is called a dove. How can you see a beautiful picture in a mirror unless this mirror accepts the reflections of a beautiful form? In the same manner, the mirror of the human nature cannot be beautiful unless the beautiful God approaches her, and is formed in her through the image of divine beauty. When the human nature fell and obeyed the serpent, it took on its form. But now, when the human nature rises and gives its back to sin, she carries the image of goodness, for she looks at the true beauty that is the dove. When she approaches the light, she carries image of the light. Through this light, she carries the form of the beloved dove. The dove symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit.]

This is the source of being fruitful in the spring. Through His resurrection He came close to us. We then come close to Him and carry His beauty (My fair one) to become His dove (for the Holy Spirit dwelled in our inner life).

REPETITION OF THE CALL TO RESURRECTION

The Lord repeats His call to His fiancée saying:

“Rise up My love, My fair one and come away! O My dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff. Let Me see your countenance, let Me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your countenance is lovely” (Song 2:13-14).

Why does He repeat this calling to His fiancée to rise? **St. Gregory of Nyssa**¹ said that He calls the risen bride to rise again, for it is appropriate for her to go from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18). She looks at herself and finds that she is less than her expectation. Although she is a dove because she is perfect in Christ, yet He calls her to become a dove, that is, to become more perfect. When she rises, he calls her to rise giving her strength for continual progress.

The first time He calls her to ***“Rise up and come away”*** Now He calls her to come to the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff. Since winter had past, when she was in seclusion, she needed to come out of the lusts of the flesh and of the entire world. He calls her to meet Him inside the eternal invisible forts!

As St. Paul the Apostle saw the Person of the Lord Jesus in the rock (1 Cor. 10:4), the Groom here asks His bride to come out from the visible world to see the glory of Christ, the true Rock, with an unveiled face (2 Cor. 3:18), to talk with Him, and to live with Him.

Her entrance to the Rock to meet the Groom refers to her security. There the old serpent is shut out, for the Book of Proverbs says, “There are three things which are too wonderful for me. Yes, four which I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent on a rock...” (Prov. 30:18). **Origen** commented, [There is no way for a serpent on a rock, that is, there is no trace for sin on the rock which is Christ; for He alone is without sin. Since the souls take refuge inside the Rock, they go peacefully to the place of the forts, i.e. they meditate on the spiritual and eternal matters².]

In the Psalms, David compares the Rock to the land where the soul walks toward God, saying, “He put my feet on the rock...” (Ps. 40:3). To Solomon, the Rock is like a cover of protection for the soul to enjoy the inner mysteries of wisdom. The Lord Jesus Himself is called “the Way” (John 14:6), where the believers walk through. Also, St. Paul calls him the Forerunner: “Where the Forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus...” (Heb. 6:20).

In the same manner, God told Moses, “I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back...” (Exod. 33:22-23). This rock is Christ, and is not completely closed but has a cleft from where God reveals Himself to the people, for no one knows the Father except the Son (Matt. 11:27). None can see what is behind God, i.e. the events of the Last Day, until one

¹ *Sermon, 5.*

² *Commentary on Canticle of Canticles, 3:15.*

enters the cleft in the rock through the revelation of the Lord Jesus Himself.

The Lord's call for resurrection is a call to meet Him with an unveiled face. "***Let Me see your countenance, let Me hear your voice.***"

This saying does not imply that her face is hidden from Him or her voice is not heard. He wants her to be united with Him, so she appears in intimacy before Him, as an unveiled bride speaking openly with her Groom

Origen commented on this call¹¹:

[Under the cover of the rock, the word of God calls the soul which became his relative, to enter the fort, which means reflecting on the invisible eternal matters. Here, He says, '***Let Me see your countenance.***' Definitely, there is no trace for the old mask which was covering her face, but she was able to reflect on God's glory without fear saying, 'And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

She deserved to hear what was said about Moses, "Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice" (Exod. 19:19). His saying "***Let me hear your voice***" is fulfilled in her. Truly, she enjoys such a great praise when God tells her, "***Your voice is sweet***"! David the Psalmist said, "May my meditations be sweet to Him" (Ps. 104:34). The voice is sweet when it utters the word of God and interprets the true faith and teachings, revealing God's judgments. However, when the voice utters silly talk, inappropriate humor, or idle words which one has to give an account of in the Day of Judgment (Matt. 12:36), then the voice is no longer sweet. Christ does not listen to such a voice! The perfect soul sets a guard over his mouth and keeps watching over the door of his lips so that whatever she utters is seasoned with salt and gives grace to the hearers (Col. 4:6). Only then does the Word of God say, "***Your voice is sweet.***"

He also says, "***Your countenance is beautiful.***" We can realize the kind of countenance the Lord described as beautiful when we comprehend what St. Paul meant when he said, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (1 Cor. 13:12). No doubt, this kind of face is renewed every day (2 Cor. 4:16) according to the image of his Creator (Col. 3:10), without guile and sanctified like the Church, with no spot or wrinkle, so that He might present it to Himself (Eph. 5:27). In other words, the souls who attain perfection form the body of the Church that appears beautiful when the souls are persistent to attain the beauty of perfection. When the soul is troubled, the face is marred; when the soul is calm, the face is peaceful and gentle. In the same manner the face of the Church becomes beautiful or miserable according to the traits of the believers and their ambitions. It is written, "The mark of a happy heart is a cheerful face" (Sirach 13:26) and "A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of heart, the spirit is broken" (Prov. 15:13). A heart filled with the Spirit of God rejoices

¹¹ Origen: *Comm. on Song 3: 14.*

because the fruit of the Spirit are love and joy (Gal. 5:22). There are also worldly sayings which say that the wise is beautiful and the evil is ugly.]

The *“secret places of the cliff”* describe one gate in front of another. Isaiah expressed this by saying, “...God will appoint salvation for walls and bulwarks” (Is. 26:1). The inner wall refers to the city and the outer to stronger shields. The Word of God calls the soul to be detached from the carnal cares to learn the mysteries of the life to come. She is sheltered and puts her hope in eternity and is not worried by temptations.

The Lord’s call to the Church and the soul to experience the resurrection is a call to be released from the ego and carnal matters and cross over to the new, heavenly life. This crossing is an entrance to the *“secret places of the cliff,”* i.e. to the bosom of the Heavenly Father in which the Church takes refuge as the dove for Christ. The risen Christ wants His believers to enter into the bosom of the Father and declares to them the divine mysteries. He says, “No one has seen God at any time. The Only-Begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18), “All things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15), and “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me, will be with Me where I am, that they behold My glory” (John 17:24).

He calls her to be united with Him (the True Rock) and to enter to the bosom of the Father, the secret places of the cliff, to be with Him forever. These are the eternal refuges that impart beauty on the Church, making her voice sweet and her countenance beautiful!

In the same manner, the Fiancé calls His bride to rise from carnal thoughts to spiritual ones, so she may no more be a silly dove (Hosea 7:11). He sees us pure and meek, and longs for us to pray to Him and cleave to Him. He continually sees her face and hears her voice.

B. HE WARNS HER FROM THE SLANDERERS (SONG 2:15)

Although the Word of God descended to man, stretched forth His hand to him and was accepted by man, He still warns him from the slanderers who want to destroy his union with Him:

“Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes” (Song 2:15).

Repeating the word “*foxes*” is a warning, for they quietly crawl from the small holes to spoil the vine at the beginning of its growth. Thus they spoil large quantities of the coming fruits. Although they are small, they ruin man’s growth and maturity.

WHAT ARE THESE LITTLE FOXES?

1. This warning from the Lord Jesus is directed to the believer, or to the soul, who desires to be united with Christ. These little foxes are the sins that we may consider small, such as white lies, improper joking, or anything (friends, books, places, etc.) that may be harmful to our bodies and our spirits. Therefore, we must keep our inner doors closed from any little fox, abstaining from every form of evil (1 Thess. 5:22).

Origen said, [These little foxes are the evil powers of Satan which destroy the flowers of virtues and ruin the fruits of faith through evil thoughts and misconceptions¹.] And [Definitely, at the moment of sin, an evil spirit works in the heart of man. We welcome him to enter in our lives by our evil motives.²]

St. Mark the Ascetic said, [Satan tempts us with small sins, as if they are trifle, but then they will lead us to bigger sins.³]

2. This warning is directed from the Lord Jesus to the Church. **Origen** said, [These words are directed to the teachers in the Church, and the orders are given to them by removing the foxes that ruin the vines. By “foxes” we mean the teachers who teach heresy, mislead the simple hearts, and ruin the vine of the Lord without producing the flower of the Orthodox faith. Therefore, the orders are given to the Church teachers to rebuke those foxes and to let those who attack the word of truth, while still young and beginning, to submit to the truth and reveal it.⁴]

THE LITTLE FOXES IN THE HOLY BIBLE⁵

¹ *Origen: Commentary on Songs 3:15*

² *Origen: Homily on Numbers 4:3*

³ *Two topics about the spiritual Law, 94; Philokalia 1966, p. 126*

⁴ *Origen: Commentary on Canticle 3:15*

⁵ *Origen: Commentary on Canticle 3:15*

It is written in the Psalms, “But those who seek my life to destroy it, shall go into the lower parts of the earth. They shall fall by the sword; they shall be a portion for jackals” (Ps. 63:9-10). Those are the evil teachers who like to deceive people, speaking idle words to destroy them. They use the temporary earthly wisdom to drive the righteous souls down to the pit instead of lifting them up toward the heavenly and eternal matters. Instead of becoming the portion of the Lord, they become a portion of the foxes (evil and satanic teachings). To those He says, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matt. 8:20). The Lord has no place to rest in such hearts because they become as holes for the devils (foxes) to rest in.

When Herod became a deceiver, the Lord Jesus called him a fox (Luke 13:31).

In the book of Judges “Samson went and caught three hundred foxes; and he took torches, turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. When he had set the torches on fire, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up both the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves” (15:4-5). This represents the true and faithful teacher who knows how to collect all the heresies and tie their tails, showing how the heresies contradict one another. When the fire of the truth is inflamed, then the fields of evil and heresies are burnt.

In the book of Nehemiah, Tobiah the Ammonite mocked Nehemiah saying, “Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall” (Neh. 4:3). This is a symbolic picture of what the world does when the Gospel is spread: the believers, the living stones, are released from the captivity of sin to become walls and temples on a heavenly level. The world mocks the Gospel saying that it was not built on philosophical basis, considering that any fox, or any earthly excuse, is able to destroy it.

The Holy Bible warns us from the little foxes, but we should not fear them because God grants us authority to trample on serpents, scorpions and every power of the enemy (Luke 10:19). In Christ Jesus, we say, “Happy shall he who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock” (Ps. 137:9). Since its inception, we have been struggling to conquer evil and bury it under the feet of the Lord Jesus, our Rock.

THE HUNTERS OF THE LITTLE FOXES

St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote that the hunters of the little foxes are the angelic hosts or the saintly apostles.¹

Perhaps they are the angelic hosts who accompany God in His descent to the earth and work for His kingdom. It was said, “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle” (Ps. 24:8).

They may represent the apostles who were sent to catch these wild animals from the hearts of men to give the Son of Man a place to rest His head.

¹ *Sermon 5 on Song of Songs*

C. THE WEDDING BANQUET

(Song 2:16 – 3:11)

Through the Incarnation, the Fiancé descended to propose to His bride; and through His resurrection, He called her to rise without fearing death or the dominion of sin and warned her of the little foxes that ruin the vine. The bride accepted her Fiancé's repeated call: "**Rise... come,**" so she entered the wedding banquet, which is His crucifixion and resurrection, to enjoy uniting and communing with Him:

"My Beloved is mine, and I am His. He feeds His flock among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, turn my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of Bether" (Song 2:16,17).

THE MUTUAL AGREEMENT

The Coptic Church calls the sacrament of matrimony "contract and marriage." In this sacrament, each partner offers himself to the other, as St. Paul said, "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Cor. 7:4). He does not ask for what is his, but what pleases her, forsaking his desires for her sake, offering all what he has for her and vice versa.

The Church, as well as the soul, sees this sacrament completely fulfilled on the Cross, where the Lord offered His Blood as a dowry. Therefore, each one is in possession of the other, as the bride says, "***My Beloved is mine, and I am His.***"

She saw Him hung on the Cross, realizing the true meaning of heavenly matrimony. He bought her with all His love and offered His life as a ransom for her life. Hence, she willingly and joyfully offered her life to Him, singing in the eternal life, "For you were slain and have redeemed us to God by Your Blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

The apostles realized the mystery of the matrimonial unity through the Blood shed on the Cross. St. Peter said, "Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. 1:18-19). St. Paul asked us to present our lives to our Savior not to people, saying, "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men" (1 Cor. 7:23) and, "You are not your own. For you were bought at a price; therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's (1 Cor. 6:19-20). St. John explained this price to be the cause of our following Him in eternal life when he wrote, "These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being first-fruits to God and to the Lamb" (Rev. 14:4-5).

St. Augustine tasted the wedding banquet which was fulfilled on the Cross. He felt as if God did not care for anyone else except himself “*My Beloved is mine.*” He said:

[My Lord...While reflecting on my conscience, I see You looking only at me, and with great concern caring for me night and day, as if no one exists in heaven and on earth except me.

You watch over me, as if You have forgotten the whole creation!

You grant me Your gifts, as if I, only, am the subject of Your love!^{1]}

St. Augustine felt that God did not care about anyone else except him, and wanted only to be occupied with God and to be with Him, saying with the bride, “*I am my Beloved’s.*” He also said,

[I beg You: where are You? Where can I meet You so I can see all of You and am found in You!

I desire death so I can see You.

I do not want to live so I can be with You!

Possess me, so I may cleave to You^{2].}

Through the Cross the soul communes with her eternal Groom saying, “*My Beloved is mine, and I am His.*” As if she is telling Him, “You have offered all Your life to me, how can I repay You? You do not need my slavery or my ministry or my praise, but You desire my entire life!]

THE SHEPHERD AMONG THE LILIES

Since the Groom has called Himself the “*Lily of the valleys*” (Song 2:1), the Church then wants to rejoice and call Him “The Shepherd among the lilies.” She is telling him, “You are the suffering Lily. The tree of Your Cross became fruitful and produced unity by making us into lilies according to Your likeness. Rejoice, for Your Church has carried Your characteristics and shared even Your name!”

St. Jerome³ wrote that the lily refers to virginity, as if the Virgin Lord became the Shepherd to the virgins who did not defile their clothes. The Virgin united with us so all what is inside us became virginal: the thoughts, the senses, and the heart.

THE BANQUET OF RESURRECTION OR THE BANQUET OF ETERNITY

Since the soul entered the banquet of the divine matrimony and tasted the first resurrection of the Lord in her life (the resurrection of the soul from the death of sin), she desired the second resurrection (the resurrection of the bodies in the Second Coming of the

¹ *The Divine Love, by Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, p. 15-17 (in Arabic).*

² *The Divine Love, by Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, p. 15-17 (in Arabic).*

³ *Epistle 730.*

Lord). She pleads with the Groom saying, “Come back, my Beloved,” as if she is telling Him, “In Your first coming, You were behind our walls and I did not know You and I did not wait for You. But now, I know You as a gazelle⁴, and I have experience with You. I say, ‘Yes, come, O Lord Jesus, I want to meet with You and live with You forever.’”

She pleads with Him, so He comes to her. He does not come behind the walls, as the time before, but rather on the clouds, apparent to everyone on the New Day, “*Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away.*”

At His first coming we enjoy the fellowship of His suffering and resurrection; the night has changed to day, as St. Peter said, “We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19).

When the Lord arises from the dead and dwells in the heart, His light shines upon us, the day dawns inside of us, and the Lord remains working in the day in the temple inside our hearts (Luke 21:37). He continuously makes us “sons of light and sons of day..., not of the night nor of darkness” (1Thess. 5:5-6). The Psalmist said, “Surely the darkness shall fall on me, even the night shall be light about me; indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You” (Ps. 139:11,12). Let us say with St. Paul, “The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore, let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the day...” (Rom. 13:12-13).

Entering the resurrection banquet, we hear God repeating, “I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people” (Is. 65:2). The Father stretches out His hands with love, through the Cross of the Son, desiring to embrace even the rebellious people. God remains working as long as it is daytime; that is, He works inside us as long as His light is shining inside of us, until we also walk in the day without stumbling (John 11:9).

By the first resurrection, we enter into the New Day; however, when we lift our eyes to the second resurrection and the Second Coming of the Lord, we see our life as if it is in a shadow waiting for the Eternal Day. Then we admit our weaknesses and cry, “*Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away*” (Song 2:17). We see Him coming upon the mountains full of troubles to overcome the shadows of time and make us enter into the day. Here there is no night at all, as St. John described: “And there shall be no night there. They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 22:5). “Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there)” (Rev. 21:25).

KNOWING THE RISEN FROM THE DEAD

After the bride praised the effect of the Cross in her life, she declares the resurrection

⁴ Refer to the commentary on Song 2:8

banquet to be her wedding banquet, where she is united with the Bridegroom and longs for His Second Coming. She remembers the events of the resurrection, saying:

“By night, I sought the one I love; I sought Him but I did not find Him. ‘I will rise now,’ I said, ‘and go about the city; in the streets and in the squares I will seek the one I love.’ I sought Him but I did not find Him. The watchmen who go about the city found me; I said, ‘Have you seen the One I love?’ Scarcely had I passed by them, when I found the One I love. I held Him and would not let him go, until I had brought Him to the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her who conceived me. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases” (Song 3:1-5).

There are two interpretations to this speech: either an account of the catholic (universal) Church with Christ, her Bridegroom; or an account of the soul, as a member of the Church, to Christ.

The First Interpretation: An Account of the Catholic (universal) Church

This symbolic speech paints a living portrait of the events of the resurrection; for she sought Him three times and could not find Him except at the third time.

The first time, she sought Him “at night,” referring to the darkness that covered the earth during His crucifixion. “Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour, there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice... Jesus, when He had cried out again with a loud voice, yielded up His spirit. And behold the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth quaked and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Matt. 27:45-52).

Day became night, and darkness prevailed over all the earth. At that time not even the disciples were able to realize the mystery of salvation, for they had not yet been enlightened. They sought Him lying in their beds, but they could not find Him. They called to Him, but He did not hear them. They sought Him in bed, while in the darkness of carnal thoughts, unable to struggle with Him or to realize the mysteries of the Spirit; but they could not find Him. Perhaps they were wondering, “Is this the Messiah?” Perhaps they were wondering like the disciples of Emmaus, “But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel” (Lk. 24:21). Maybe they were hoping that He would escape from those who were crucifying Him, take vengeance for Himself, and establish a kingdom. However, none of these things happened!

The second time the bride sought Him was at night, but this time she was not in her bed. She said, ***“I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares I will seek the One I love.”*** This was the case of the disciples after the Lord was buried, and they entered the upper room very frightened. Their light changed to darkness, and they fearfully sought the Lord behind locked doors. They attempted to seek Him in the city, in the markets,

and in the streets, but it was the Sabbath and they could not taste any rest. Their upper room changed into a city and their thoughts and talks changed into markets and streets. Each one was wandering and asking the other, “What is the end of this matter?” They sought Him and they had no peace at all!

In the third time, they sought Him at the empty tomb. At the dawn of Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene was not afraid to walk in the streets, while it was still dark, until she reached the tomb. She was the only one who went, instead of the sad church, and asked the angel while crying about the One whom she loves. A moment later, she saw the Lord and cleaved to Him⁷. She held Him first, and while she wanted to remain holding Him, He told her to go and tell the disciples to meet Him at Galilee, as if she made Him enter into the Church, the house of her mother, into the chamber of her who conceived her.

“I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles, or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases” (Song 3:5).

This speech of the Church is of rebuke, but also full of love. It is directed from the Christian Church to the Jewish community. They mocked the Bridegroom on the Cross saying, “You who destroy the temple and built it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the Cross” (Matt. 27:40). The chief priests, with the scribes and Pharisees, also mocked Him saying, “He save others. Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the Cross, and we will believe Him” (Matt. 27:41-42). After the resurrection, the Church is telling the daughters of Jerusalem, “Why do you hasten the Bridegroom to rise? I charge you, by the prophets, that is, “the gazelles and the does of the field.” to leave Him to rise on the third day, as He wishes! If He died on the Cross, go back to the prophecies and remember how He will rise whenever He wants! Now I know the mystery of His death and burial, for He died out of power not of weakness, and He rose to raise us up with Him!

The Second Interpretation: The Talk of the Human Soul

The Church sought Him three times: first at the Cross, then inside the tomb, and finally just outside the empty tomb after His resurrection; and she found Him on the third day. The human soul may seek Him by personal effort, through the servants, or by trusting in Gods work without ignoring, neither her strife nor the ministry of those who work in His vine.

1. Seeking Him with our personal effort: the human soul started her talk ***“By night on my bed...”*** Perhaps during her weakness, she dreamt that she had lost her Groom, so she went out to seek Him by her personal effort. However, she could not meet Him because it is He who He draws her to Him.

“By night,” this may mean that she was in the darkness of negligence, seeking Him

⁷ *Catechetical Lectures 14: 12,13.*

while lying on bed, in laziness without any spiritual struggle. Hence, she sought Him but could not find Him. She did not rest on the bed, which she had described earlier as “*our bed is green*” (Song 1:16), but she wanted to rest on her human bed.

“*The green bed*” refers to the unity of God the Word with our human nature, by taking human flesh. However, mentioning “*my bed*” refers to “my body,” or “my human nature,” in its own self righteousness. **St. Augustine** sought God while lying on bed, in great pride, so he could find Him. He said: [I locked the door of my Lord, and when I wanted to knock so He may open to me, I used to let Him close it again, for I dared to seek Him, whom no one can know except the humble. While I was perishing, I thought that I could fly, but I fell before I was able. But the God of mercy lifted me, so people would not trample over me and put me back in the nest¹.]

St. Gregory of Nyssa said that she calls Him the One whom I love, without giving Him a name. When she sought Him by name, she could not find Him. She asked the innumerable angelic hosts and they could not answer. In their silence, she realized her sins, and now she does not call Him by a certain name.

2. The second time, she goes out of her self, arising from her bed, saying, “*I will rise now and go about the city; in the streets and in the squares.*” She entered the city looking for her Bridegroom in the streets and in the squares.

St. Augustine went into the markets by seeking God in philosophical books, and went into the streets seeking Him in nature, however; he did not find Him. In his foolishness, he sought God outside himself; but, God was inside Him, in the inner depth of his soul.

The city here refers to the Holy Bible. The soul entered into the streets and markets of the Bible (its symbols and prophecies) but still she could not meet her Bridegroom because she did not ask God’s help in drawing her to Him. That is what the high priests and the scribes did when they investigated the books, found that the Messiah will be born in Judea (Matt. 2:4-6), and told Herod the king before meeting their Lord Christ!

3. In the third stage, she looked for Him through the “guards,” who are the ministers of the Divine word. This time, she could not meet her Bridegroom until she passed them. The workers in the vine support the soul until she enters into the Bridegroom, but they cannot take her into Him unless He works through her, for He alone can attract the heart to Him.

Truly, the priests are obliged to guard, but, “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (Ps. 127:1). Since they perform the acts of priesthood, then it is through the Bridegroom Himself, “The Priest forever on the order of Melchizedek.”

St. Paul realized that his people should ignore him and his companions, for he assured this to the Corinthians, “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos...? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3:5,6).

¹ *Sermons on Lessons of the New Testament 1: 6*

Through Christ Jesus away from everyone, the soul experiences the unity with God. In the inner heart, she communes with Him, and in intimacy, where they reveal their secrets to one another!

She asks the daughters of Jerusalem (her close friends) to leave her with her Bridegroom in the life of solitude and secret prayers. She wishes that nothing in the world would occupy her life than staying in the bosom of the Bridegroom, the Life-Giver.

THE RISEN BRIDE

The nightmare is over and darkness is abolished through the resurrection of the Lord. We enjoy uniting with the Lord, and taking the mark of “His resurrection.” That is why the angels stood as friends of the Bridegroom, who rose from the dead, singing and praising the bride who rose with her Bridegroom:

“Who is this coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the merchant’s fragrant powders?” (Song 3:6).

It is obvious that this proclamation cannot be applied to physical love, or else there would have been a relation between it and the previous talk. At the beginning of the chapter, we find the bride lying in bed asking for her Groom but not finding him. Then after some effort, she found him and made him enter into her mother’s house. Suddenly, we find her coming out of the wilderness perfumed with myrrh, frankincense, and all the fragrant powders bought from the merchant. Does she go to her mother’s house and leave him, while she goes out with perfumes and ornaments? This is a marvelous spiritual talk, for when the bride met her Bridegroom, who arose from the dead and ascended into heaven, she put Him inside of her heart. As a consequence to that act, she ascended with Him to the heaven. St. Paul said, “He raised us up and placed us in the heavens...” When He entered into her depths, He raised her above the wilderness of this world, so she communed with Him, “Having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better” (Phil. 1:23).

Probably the words “Who is this...?” are said by the Bridegroom Himself who supports her and encourages her, ascertaining that He sees her ascending to heaven, in spite of her existence on earth. Though she is still in the flesh, she becomes like smoke, carrying the nice aroma of prayer. These are the words of the heavenly creatures, who look to the earthly creatures and seeing the door of Paradise open before them, they ascend to the heavenly matters, with Christ living inside them. These also are the words of the daughters of Jerusalem who earlier were mocking the Church because it was black and not related to the prophets and the Fathers. Although she is from the Gentiles, through her unity with Christ she is beautiful ascends from glory to glory!

ASCENSION FROM THE WILDERNESS

The Israelites were lost in the wilderness for forty years, bitten by serpents because of their disobedience and complaining. The Gentiles were represented by the wilderness of this

world and are defiled with evil. However, now the believers are united with the Messiah, the only One able to deliver us from this world and give us the liberty of the heavenly kingdom. The Lord Himself said, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” (John 3:13). **St. John Chrysostom** said, [We, who do not deserve even the earthly glory, ascend to the kingdom of heaven, enter heaven and receive our status before the divine throne.]

PILLARS OF PERFUMED SMOKE

In the Old Testament God appeared on Mount Sinai and smoke appeared as a sign of His awesome glory and power (Ex. 19:18, Ex. 20:18, Ps. 104:32, Ps.144:5). When His glory descended on His house, whether in the Tabernacle or in the Temple, the place was filled with smoke (Is. 6:4, Rev. 15:8). When the believer’s heart is opened to the Lord, his life glorifies God and becomes like smoke ascending to the heavens from the wilderness of this world.

Smoke refers to the dwelling and the presence of God, and the fulfillment of His promises to His beloved people, as He did with Abram when he cut the bloody sacrifices in half down in the middle. The Lord made a covenant with him: “And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold there was a smoking over and a burning torch that passed between those pieces” (Gen. 15:17). However, now God dwells in the hearts of His people and releases them as smoke, not only to hear His promises but to enjoy God Himself, who is their portion and their inheritance.

Smoke also refers to the presence of God to sanctify His people, as Isaiah the Prophet said, “When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and purged the blood of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and by the spirit of burning, the Lord will create above every dwelling place of Mount Zion and above her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day and the shining of a flaming fire by night” (Is. 4:4-5). After the Church was sanctified by the Blood of Christ and was cleansed in the baptismal water, the Holy Spirit inflamed the Church, and she became as holy smoke ascending before the throne of Christ.

The smoke here also depicts the life of prayer, as St. John the Beloved said, “And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand” (Rev. 8:4). That is why it was mentioned in the book of Song of Songs: “*Who is this coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,*” for frankincense is a symbol of the life of prayer.

This smoke does not choke, symbolizing God’s wrath (Deut. 29:20, Is. 34:10, Rev. 9:20, 14:11, 18:9, 18, 19:3). In Sodom and Gomorrah the smoke went up like that of a furnace (Gen. 19:28). The smoke also does not signify weakness or death, as Isaiah the

Prophet said, “For the heavens will vanish away like smoke” (Is. 51:6). David the Psalmist said, “For my days are consumed like smoke” (Ps. 102:3). It is neither a sign of evil nor laziness which ruin the inner perception, as Solomon the Wise said, “ smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him” (Prov. 10:26). This smoke chokes the soul and spoils the eyes. However, the bride is like pillars of perfumes that gladden the heavens. The ingredients are:

1. **Myrrh.** The bride is buried with Jesus Christ who was embalmed with myrrh and spices. If you are not buried with Him, you cannot enjoy the new life: the risen life. St. Paul said, “Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). We are buried in baptism, our old man is mortified, and we are born again spiritually until we are elevated to our Heavenly Father through the Holy Spirit.

St. John Chrysostom said, [Neither through father, nor mother, nor through labor pains are we born again; but through water and the Holy Spirit we are formed and are born in a mysterious way¹.] The ovary needs some time to form the body, but through water and Spirit the new life is formed in a twinkle of an eye. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). **St. John Chrysostom** also says, [When the head is submerged under the water, as in a tomb, the old man is buried and a new man arises. As it is easy to sink and to float, it is easy for God to bury our old man and put on the new man².]

2. **Frankincense:** The aroma of her prayers rises up to the Lord, saying with the Psalmist, “I am prayer.” In her union with the Risen One from the dead, she learns the life of true worship and of continuous prayer.

3. **All the merchant’s fragrant powders:** These are the tools of beauty that the soul buys from Christ Himself (the Merchant), who alone can adorn the soul and beautify her to make her His bride.

Hence the soul needs to be perfumed with Baptism and to rely on the Holy Spirit. She lives a life of continuous prayer and casts herself in the bosom of her Bridegroom to adorn her. Thus, she deserves to be the bride adorned for her Husband (Rev. 21:2).

THE TIME OF THE WEDDING BANQUET

“Behold, it is Solomon’s couch, with sixty valiant men around it, of the valiant of Israel. They all hold swords, being expert in war. Every man has his sword on his thigh because of fear in the night. Of the wood of Lebanon Solomon the king made himself a palanquin: he made its pillars of silver, its support of gold, its seat of purple, its interior

¹ The Author: *The Divine Love*, p. 848. (in Arabic).

² The Author: *The Divine Love*, p. 853. (in Arabic).

paved with love by the daughters of Jerusalem” (Song 3:7-10).

The Lord’s Crucifixion and Resurrection are the cause of the wedding banquet. The risen Bridegroom raises His bride who suffered with Him. He dwells within her heart, and then she ascends with Him to heaven, perfumed and adorned with spiritual beauty. We may then wonder when this will happen and when the banquet will take place.

The answer is twofold: one is temporary while the other is eternal. During our sojourn, we enter into the procession of the Bridegroom and His banquet. We fight the fears of the night resting until bloodshed (Heb. 12:4), and then enjoy His eternal procession on the day that never ends, sitting at His right hand and sharing His glory. Therefore, the Bridegroom appears in two processions: one at night where He dwells among His struggling children, and the other at daytime where He sits on His eternal throne.

1. The temporary procession: In this procession, the Bridegroom appears surrounded by sixty valiant soldiers, carrying swords and struggling at night. The Church lives in this same type of procession, struggling around Christ, her Bridegroom.

Here, the Bridegroom appears to have established a “couch” (or throne) in the midst of the Church. It is not like the bride’s bed on which she laid down at night, seeking her Bridegroom, but she could not find Him, and calling Him and He did not hear her (Song 3:1)! This couch is not similar to the beds upon which the frogs went, as a sign of God’s wrath on Pharaoh, the beds where people breathed their last breath (Gen. 49:33; 2 Kings 1:4), nor the bed which David the Psalmist wet with his tears every night (Ps. 6:6). However, it is a unique bed of which it was said, “Judah is a lion’s whelp; from the prey my son, you have gone up. He bows down; He lies down as a lion” (Gen. 49:9).

It is the Cross of the Lord, where heaven and earth were reconciled, and where the Church was given peace and victory over the evil powers. Solomon declared the Cross to be secret of the peace of the Church and a sign of her rest. St. Peter rested on it inside the prison and slept without worry, until the angel awoke him and told him to leave (Acts 12:6-10). He gives sleep (i.e. His peace) to those who love Him!

The True Solomon raised up a bed among his people to rest inside the ship of our life (Matt. 8:24; Mark 4:38). Thus, even if a great tempest arises in the sea, we will not perish.

To demonstrate that it is the bed of spiritual rest and inner peace, the Book of Song of Songs shows Him surrounded by sixty valiant men, holding swords and familiar with the techniques of war. The Church gathers around the Cross as valiant men who fight and conquer as He conquered. Every believer carries his sword, which is the word of God, on his thigh because of the dreary night. The struggling Church gathers around the Cross as men of war; as He won, they also win with Him. “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death” (Rev. 12:11).

Who are the sixty valiant men surrounding Him? They are the sons of the kingdom,

the new spiritual Israel, the chosen ones who accepted the Cross and entered with God into a new covenant. They came to the banquet, with intimacy, and were equipped with the sword of the Spirit and the helmet of salvation, struggling against sin, to the point of bloodshed. “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:10-17).

Why the number sixty? We know that the number 12 refers to the kingdom of God on earth. **St. Augustine** states that the Holy Trinity (3) reigns over the four corners of the earth (4). So, the kingdom of God on earth means $3 \times 4 = 12$. The tribes of Israel were 12, the disciples of the New Testament were 12, and the number of doors of the Heavenly Jerusalem is 12. **St. Gregory of Nyssa** said that each one of them carried five swords, which symbolize the sanctification of the five senses: $12 \times 5 = 60$. The senses of all those who are members in His kingdom are sanctified by perfection in Christ Jesus.

St. Gregory of Nyssa also said that the sword of the eye continuously looks at the Lord and is not defiled by anything in the world. The sword of the ear listens to spiritual matters rather than vanity. In the same manner, the senses of taste, touch, and smell are all sanctified by the sword of self-control, being in fellowship with the Lord Jesus and smelling His sweet aroma. Through these weapons of light man is able to fight the darkness of sin.

2. The eternal procession: In the temporary procession, the Bridegroom appeared on His bed to give His people security because He is the Source of their rest and peace amidst their struggle in the world, in this transient life. However, in the eternal procession, there is no war or struggle. Thus, He appears carried on a palanquin, on His eternal throne, carried by the four incorporeal creatures (Rev. 4).

What could this couch be but the Church, in which the Lord dwells inside forever? Her features are:

- ❖ She was united with **the Cross of the Lord** and became one with Him; hence they described her as being made of wood. Her suffering and crucifixion with the Lord are the source of her life and eternal glory, for St. Paul said, “If we suffer with Him, we are glorified with Him” (Rom. 8:17). Her wood is from Lebanon, because this city is famous for its straight and sweet smelling cedars. In her sojourn, the Church of Christ lives the straight faith (Orthodox), without faltering between God’s way and the way of the world,

always carrying the aroma of her Bridegroom.

- ❖ **Her pillars are of silver**, made by Solomon himself. The silver refers to the Holy Bible, to the word of God purified seven times (Ps. 12:6). The shepherds of the Church and her ministers became pillars because they became one with the word of God.
- ❖ **The golden support** refers to the people carrying the Lord Jesus in their daily life, thus becoming heavenly (gold). They live on earth as the angels of God, or as St. Paul said, “even those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing it...” (1Cor. 7:29-31).
- ❖ **Its seat of purple** refers to the nature of the Church as a queen united with the eternal King. Its interior is paved with love for the sake of the daughters of Jerusalem, for the Church carries the mark of her Bridegroom, who is love for the salvation of the human race.

CALL TO THE BANQUET

“Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day of the gladness of his heart” (Song 3:11).

The Church is calling the whole world to enjoy the banquet of the Cross. She asks the human race to deny the ego. *“Go forth...”*, so they can enjoy seeing the true King, the **“New Solomon,”** crowned by his mother, the Jews, with the crown of thorns.

Through spiritual enlightenment the believers see the hidden crown of the Crucified, which is forgiveness of sins and the end of the curse of sin. This is the day of His marriage and the joy of His heart, for He offered His Blood as a dowry for His bride.

3

THE HEAVENLY MATRIMONY

(Song 4:1-16)

A. THE BEAUTIFUL RISEN BRIDE

Through the divine Incarnation, the Word of God descended to make us His bride, through His Crucifixion, He performed the wedding ceremony, and through His resurrection, He justified us to become the risen bride without blemish. Therefore, the Bridegroom sees her as very beautiful and He praises her saying:

“Behold, you are fair, My love! Behold, you are fair! (Song 4:1).”

The resurrection granted the Church all spiritual beauty and power. St. Peter said, “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2Pet. 1:3-4). The features of that beauty are the following:

1. ***“You have dove’s eyes behind your veil” (Song 4:1).***

St. Ambrose said: [The eyes are as beautiful as dove’s eyes, because it resembles the dove of the Holy Spirit who descended from heaven¹.] Earlier, we saw that the Lord compares His Church to the eyes of a dove². The Church, looking continuously at the Holy Spirit, has spiritual enlightenment because the image of the Holy Spirit is reflected upon her. She is simple, seeking only God, and loves as the doves. She does not rest except in the bosom of the true Noah, as the dove did from the ark (Gen. 8:6-12).

Her eyes are behind the veil because only the Church can comprehend the mysteries of the Spirit, while the world is blinded to the truth (2 Cor. 3:12-18).

The literal translation is *“in your silence.”* The Church, being enlightened to behold the mysteries of God’s love, stands in silence reflecting on God’s majestic works. **St. John Saba** said,

[Whoever wants to talk about God’s love proves his ignorance, because it is impossible to describe this divine love.]

[How amazing is the love of God! It is the language of the angels, and it is difficult to

¹ *De Myst.* 7:37.

² *Cf. Com. on Song 1:15.*

translate. Who are we to talk about Him? But You, O Lord, speak inside us as You wish.]

Describing the eyes as behind the veil shows that no matter how much we enjoy spiritual enlightenment in this world, yet it appears as though it is behind the veil, when compared with what we actually see in the eternal life. “For we know in part and prophecy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away... For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1Cor. 13:9, 12).

2. ***“Your hair is like a flock of goats, going down from Mount Gilead” (Song 4:1).***

If the Lord Christ is the Head of the Church, then the Church is the hair surrounding the head¹. Without the Head, the hair is nothing. This is the congregation of Christ; they are like the sheep grazing on Mount Gilead, the high mountain of the word of God which releases the hearts of the children of God toward heaven. The higher the sheep rise on the mountain, the more difficult it becomes for an observer to distinguish one sheep from another. In the same manner, when we resurrect with the Lord, rise through the word of salvation, and enjoy the care of the Church to abide in the heavenly spirit, the spirit of schism, fighting, seeking temporary glory, and the love of the world all vanish away.

When we rise with the Lord on Mount Gilead as the flock gathered on the mountain peaks, then the hair appears as black, with no grey color at all, for the Lord renews our youth as an eagle (Is. 40:31). The flock as going down from Mount Gilead patiently rests on the word of God, and takes refuge in God’s care.

He chose Mount Gilead for the following reasons:

A. The Lord appeared to Laban on Mount Gilead and warned him saying, “Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad” (Gen. 31:24). Hence, the believer feels secure and that no one can touch him.

B. The slopes of Mount Gilead were known for their plentiful pastures, thus they became an example of the life of satisfaction and fullness. In the Old Testament the Lord promised to save his people from the wicked Babylonians and made them enter into a life of fullness. He said, “But I will bring back Israel to his habitation, and he shall feed on Carmel and Bashan; his soul shall be satisfied on Mount Ephraim and Gilead” (Jer. 50:19). In the Book of Micah, it is written, “Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead, as in days of old” (Micah 7:14).

C. In the Old Testament balms were planted in Gilead, which are known for their nice aroma. They were praised by poets and historians and used by doctors in healing wounds and diseases. It was written in the book of Jeremiah, “Is there no balm in Gilead, is there no physician there? Why then is there no recovery for the health of the daughter of my people?”

¹ St. Ambrose: *The Holy Spirit*, 14.

(Jer. 8:22). On Mount Gilead, the true Physician, our Lord Jesus Christ, heals the wounds and diseases of His people by the balm of His Blood shed on the Cross.

D. When Gideon was fighting the Midianites, 32,000 Hebrew men came to fight in the war, but the Lord said to Gideon, “Whoever is fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead” (Judges 7:3). The Lord is not concerned about quantity, rather He desires true struggling believers who do not fear! This is the true Church of Christ, who has authority to trample on serpents, scorpions, and every power of the enemy, and who lives in complete trust in God: without any fear.

3. “Your teeth are like a flock of shorn sheep which have come up from the washing” (Song 4:2).

The Church has matured and now it is ready to use teeth, for she has grown and is no longer satisfied with the milk for babies. She yearns for His fatness, which she can chew and digest in her life.

St. Augustine¹ said that the teeth of the Church are her ministers, who chew the food and then offer it as milk to the babies. There are different kinds of teeth (ex. molars, incisors, etc.) but they all work for the same purpose and the same spirit: for edification of the Church (1 Cor. 12).

With these teeth, the Lord asked St. Peter to kill the animals and eat them, and not say that anything is defiled. The Church, through her ministers, presents the word of salvation to everyone. She kills the defilement of evil, chews the pagans, and tears their wicked mistakes until they become members in His body.

The minister is like a shorn sheep whose wool is cut; thus the minister has to cut off all carnal thoughts and deeds through the power of Holy Spirit, granted to him in the baptismal font. Wool, in the Holy Bible, refers to the carnal life. Thus, the priests of the Old Testament were forbidden to enter the Holy of Holies with clothes made of wool because their clothes had to be made of linen, a sign of the righteousness of Christ. As the Mosaic Law ascertained, “You shall not wear a garment of different sorts, such as wool and linen mixed together” (Deut. 22:11). “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor. 6:14-15).

4. “Each one of which bears twins, and none is barren among them” (Song 4:2).

When a baby starts teething, his teeth usually grow out in pairs. Similarly, the Lord sent His disciples two by two for missionary work, so that when one began preaching the word of God, the other prays for him. Thus, the word becomes anointed with divine grace.

¹ St. Augustine: *On Ps. 95 (94); On Christian Doctrine 2:6.*

When **St. Pachomius** was asked why the monks live in pairs, he answered, “So if one falls, the other lifts him up.”

St. Augustine¹ held that the statement “bears twins” refers to the two commandments: loving God and loving the neighbor. “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:40). **St. Cyril of Jerusalem**² says that this refers to dual grace, or the perfection of man through water and Spirit, or through the graces of the two Testaments, Old and New.

St. Jerome commented on this saying, [Since they are not barren, then they have to be full of milk for nursing, as St. Paul said, ‘My little children for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you’ (Gal. 4:19), and ‘I fed you with milk and not with solid food’ (1Cor. 3:2).³]

Finally, we can say that whoever has enjoyed the word of salvation through the pure teeth of the Church, her true ministers, is not barren, but gives birth to many abundant fruits. This is like the Samaritan woman who after meeting the Lord Jesus and hearing His voice, she went and called the entire town of Samaria to meet the Lord. Also Levi, after meeting with the Lord Jesus, called all his friends to enjoy the Savior with him.

5. “Your lips are like a strand of scarlet, and your mouth is lovely” (Song 4:3).

The believer must witness to the Savior by his lips and mouth. What are the features of these lips and his mouth?

A. In the Old Testament Rahab the harlot tied a scarlet cord out of her window (Josh. 2:18). This is a type of our faith in the Savior and our protection in His Blood through the forgiveness of sins. She and all of her household were saved from destruction. The same happens with a believer who binds all what comes out of his mouth with the precious Blood, witnessing to the Lord with his words as well as his deeds, until everyone is saved and enters the house of God.

B. When the soldiers mocked the Lord Jesus, they put on Him a scarlet robe as a sign of His kingdom. United with her King, the Church now appears with her lips like a strand of scarlet because no inappropriate words comes out them, and is worthy to be a queen or a bride for the Heavenly King.

C. The lips of the bride are like a thin strand which makes her mouth lovely. No insult, no deceit, no hypocrisy come out of the mouth, but it is full of love and compassion.

6. “Your temples behind your veil are like a piece of pomegranate” (Song 4:3).

In the Old Testament, the robe of the high priest was adorned with embroidered

¹ *St. Augustine: On Ps. 95 (94).*

² *Catechetical Lectures, 3:16.*

³ *Epistle 69: 6*

pomegranates (Ex. 28:33-34, 39:24-26). Also, the temple was adorned with carvings like the shape of the pomegranate (1 Kings 7:18). The pomegranates refer to adornment, in which the Church adorns herself with the robe of the Lord Jesus Christ and the temple in which dwells His Holy Spirit.

Her temples are compared to pomegranates, for they refer to the features of man that reveal feelings of joy, sorrow, or trouble. The features of the Church expose her complete peace and joy.

He did not say your temples are like pomegranates, but like a piece of pomegranate, to show the inside, which is filled with seeds full of red juice, and does not know dryness at all!

Your temples are like a piece of pomegranate, full of redness. The secret of her beauty is the Blood of Christ, which sanctifies her. Also this redness refers to being shy and decent, rather than proud or haughty like the children of this world.

Her temples, being under the veil, reveal that her true glory is from within (Ps. 45).

7. *“Your neck is like the tower of David, built for an armory, on which hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men” (Song 4:4).*

Often the Lord associates the beauty of the Church with her strife, so that the believers understand that the secret of their beauty in Christ Jesus is their lawful spiritual strife. The temples of the Church are not beautiful like a piece of pomegranate without the neck stretched out like the tower of David built for an armory, that is, without the living Orthodox faith associated with the strife.

Through the neck, which is faith, the face of the Church is lifted up to heaven. Then the Lord shines upon her with His light and makes her live an upright life, unlike the woman with the spirit of infirmity who was bent over and could in no way raise herself up (Lk. 13:11-16). She sees in God the secret of her power and strife and hears Him saying, “I am your shield” (Gen. 15:1). Through Him, she is protected from all the fiery darts of the enemy (Eph. 6:16).

He compares her neck with the tower of David, for David represents the man of faith who fought Goliath and conquered him saying, “You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you with the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied” (1 Sam. 17:45). In his Psalms David the Prophet declared that God was his refuge and the strength of his life; meanwhile, he never ceased struggling.

Leaders used to hang their shields on a tower to remember their great victories and to illustrate their valor. In the same manner, the believers use this spiritual tower, which is the working faith, as a center for their triumph in Christ Jesus and their victory over the wicked enemy.

Mentioning the number of bucklers as thousand refers to their nature, for the number

1,000 is a symbol of the heavenly life. He says that the weapons of the Church are heavenly and spiritual, as St. Paul said, “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4).

8. ***“Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense” (Song 4:5-6).***

Since the Lord Jesus Christ is girded about the chest with a golden band (Rev. 1:13), He offers to the Church both the Old and New Testaments as two breasts to nurse the Church. The Church of Christ has both Testaments as two breasts to feed her children.

The word of God appears in both Testaments as twins of a gazelle, born from one mother, which symbolizes that the two Testaments compliment one another, without any partiality, for the Old Testament prophesied about the New Testament, which in turn, clarified the Old Testament.

The lilies refer to the group of believers who resemble the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, ***“the Lily of the valleys” (Song 2:1)***. They also refer to the inner emotions and capabilities which become as food for the living word of God!

The Bridegroom is praising the bride for her inner perception, her strife in the oneness of the spirit, her mission work, her gentleness, faith and abiding in the word of God. Dazzled by all His praises, the bride declares to her Bridegroom that the mystery of all her beauty lies in the Cross of the Groom and in His Resurrection. Therefore she promises to go with Him to the mountain of myrrh, that is, to enter with Him the life of suffering. She is buried with Him and goes to the hills of frankincense, so she may live all her sojourn in continuous prayer until the day breaks and the shadows flee away. The Bridegroom answers,

“You are all fair, My love, and there is no spot in you” (Song 4:7).

He concludes His speech by saying that it takes Him a long time to describe the beauty of the one who shared with Him His suffering and lived in continuous prayer and fellowship. He sees in her all beauty because His love hides all her weaknesses, and His blood covers all her sins, showing all the adornment of her beauty. Thus He sees no spot in her.

St. Jerome commented on the Bridegroom’s speech, [What is more beautiful than one to be called the daughter of God (Ps. 45:10), who does not ask for outward adorning (1 Pet. 3:3)? She believes in Christ, and granting His Spirit to her He leads her way toward Him, her Bridegroom and Lord, with great hope.¹]

CALL TO LABOR AND STRIFE

“Come with Me from Lebanon², My spouse, with Me from Lebanon. Look from the

¹ St. Jerome, *Epistle to Furia*, 54.

² Or “*Libanus*” in the Septuagint

top of Amana,¹ from the top of Senir and Hermon,² from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards" (Song 4:8).

When the bride first meets the Bridegroom, she feels comforted and rested; however, she knows that she has to accompany Him to lawful spiritual strife. In this call which the Lord repeats, we notice the following:

This is a call to go out with the Bridegroom, for the spiritual war is for the Lord, and it is in His name. When the soul goes out feeling secure in Him, she is victorious, for without Him there is nothing but defeat.

The call here is directed toward the soul to depart with her spiritual Bridegroom from Libanus.³ This means that she is called to go out from the life of prayer⁴ to be ready to meet the lions and leopards. Christian life is not mere comfort in the prayer room, but rather it is a fierce war against sin, against the evil powers, and against Satan himself. It is true that St. Peter desired to remain with the Lord on the Mount of transfiguration saying, "It is good for us to be here," but the Lord compelled him to go down to encounter the events of the Cross.

The call is directed to leave Lebanon, which is a tourist country known for luxury. The heavenly Bridegroom calls the human soul to accompany Him. He calls her to leave the easy life, the life of physical rest, and go to face the battle against darkness with her Bridegroom, the Conqueror of lions and leopards.

In the true departure, she goes out from the top of faith (Amana), and through faith she enters the top of Hermon, or the life of self-deprivation and voluntary poverty. She practices the Cross in her life by emptying herself from the lust of the flesh to live a life of satisfaction with the Lord Jesus only. She says in faith with St. Paul, "And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (1 Tim. 6:8), and "I know how to be abased and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:12-13).

Through this living of the inner life in Christ Jesus, the soul enters into a war to overcome the lions and leopards by the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the essence of the victorious life, where one crosses with the victorious Lord from a fierce war to a spiritual triumph, thereby attaining eternity.

St. Augustine commented on this call, declaring that the call here is not crossing *with* Christ, but rather it is crossing *to* Him. He describes it as a uniting with Him to practice the

¹ The Hebrew origin "Amana" means faith, and it is the top of a mountain in Lebanon.

² Hermon means "El Moharem" which is a mountain in Lebanon, its peak is 9,232 feet, and has three peaks, which the Sidianites call "Sirion." while the Emerites call "Shenir" or Senir. From the top of these peaks, one can see Lebanon and the valley surrounding Damascus, Carmel, Galilee. This mountain is called now "the mountain of Sheikh."

³ Taken from frankincense or incense

⁴ Incense reflects prayer (Rev. 5:8)

spiritual marital life, saying, [Cross to me from the beginning of faith, for faith is the beginning of matrimony.¹]

St. Augustine further describes the bride crossing to the Heavenly Father, through her unity with Christ the Bridegroom, saying, [She comes as a chariot of God carrying thousands of joyful men, walking successfully, crossing this world to the Father, for her Bridegroom Himself crosses the world and takes her to the Father. ‘Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am...’ (John 17:24). Hence, they go through the beginning of faith.²]

St. Gregory of Nyssa says that this passage declares the bride’s unlimited thirst to follow the Bridegroom: [The one who walks toward God continuously experiences a yearning toward continuous progress.³]

He also paraphrases the Bridegroom’s call, **“Come with Me from Lebanon, My spouse...”** saying, [you did well when you came with Me to the mountain of incense. You were buried with Me in baptism, and you were raised and ascended to heaven... Now arise to two other tops so you may grow through knowledge. As long as you have reached that height, do not cease climbing. This frankincense is the beginning of your faith, which is the start of your progress, to attain greater gifts. Cross and come from the beginning, that is the faith, and you will attain. Do not cease to keep crossing and rising forward.⁴]

St. Gregory of Nyssa relates that the Bridegroom calling her to cross with Him from the lions’ dens and from the mountains of the leopards means that sin is a wild beast like a lion or a leopard. Man has been transformed from this sinful nature, but the Bridegroom fears lest His bride goes back to sin. Therefore, He calls her to put off the old man. This is a call for continuous struggle in the life of faith.

Since the Bridegroom calls the bride to cross with Him through the life of faith and continuous strife against the spiritual beasts, the bride sometimes feels the bitterness of this conflict, so she lifts up her inner eyes asking for help. She hears Him answering:

“You have ravished My heart, my sister, My spouse; you have ravished My heart with one look of your eyes, with one link of your necklace” (Song 4:9).

At the beginning of the relationship with God, He takes her to Lebanon, like when a bridegroom takes his bride to a tourist place away from the cares of life. There they get to know each other. However, the marital life will not remain like that, but they have to leave Lebanon to start labor and strife. Hence, the Lord called her to go with Him from Lebanon to face the lions and leopards in their dens, or to go with Him from the mountain of frankincense to a life of struggle against the deeds of the old man, which are like the wild

¹ St. Augustine, *Sermons of N T Lessons*, 55:6.

² St. Augustine, *Sermons of N T Lessons*, 55:6.

³ *Sermon 8*

⁴ *Ibid*

beasts.

Amidst the bitter struggle, she weeps and groans in her heart, but He cannot stand her tears, so He is drawn to her and is captivated by her inner crying.

St. Gregory of Nyssa noticed that the Bridegroom here says, “*With one look of your eyes.*” Man has two kinds of vision: the outer vision where he sees the visible matters, and the inner vision, which is the heart, where he sees God. The tears of the inner vision are what captivate God’s heart.

He is the Heavenly Bridegroom who understands his bride’s heart. He cares for her through her strife and suffering and does not require any talking. He understands the language of her inner eyes. When Peter denied the Lord Jesus, he did not apologize with words, but the Lord knew what inside his heart, from his tears. When the adulterous woman entered the house of Simon the leper, she did not talk, but the Lord, who examines the heart, said, “Her sins which are many are forgiven, for she loved much” (Lk. 7:47).

The Church taught us to talk with the Lord with this language, the language of tears. During vespers of every day, we pray saying, “Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until He has mercy on us! Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us! For we are exceedingly filled with the scorn of those who are at ease, with the contempt of the proud” (Ps. 123).

The Lord answers: “I cannot endure your contempt and humiliation. You have ravished My heart and all My love. I do not call you servants but friends. You are My brothers, My bride.”

In his letter to a blind priest in Baetica, Spain, **St. Jerome** talked about the eye which ravishes God’s heart, saying: [You should not be sad because you were deprived from the physical eyes, which the ants, flies, reptiles and human beings have, but rather rejoice because you have the eye, which was mentioned in the book of Song of Songs, as ‘*You have ravished My heart with one look of your eyes.*’¹] This eye can see God, as Moses referred to this eye when he said, “I will now turn aside and see this great sight” (Ex. 3:3). We heard about philosophers from this world who ruined their eyes so their thoughts may completely turn to their deep pure minds.

God’s heart is ravished by the language of the contrite eyes before Him, and by the language of obedience and sacrifice. He says, “*You have ravished My heart ... with one link of your necklace*” (Song. 4:9). What is this necklace which adorns the inner neck of the soul except carrying the yoke and obeying the divine commandment? It was written in the book of Proverbs: “My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother, for they will be graceful ornaments on your head, and chains about your neck” (Prov.

¹ Epistle to Abigaus, 2

1:8-9). The bride adorns herself by accepting her father's chastening with joy and keeping the commandments of her mother, "the Church," that is, she carries, on her neck, the yoke of obedience, which is Christ easy yoke.

THE RESULT OF THE SUFFERINGS OF STRIFE

Amidst sufferings, we feel our weaknesses, thus, we lift our inner eyes with contrition, toward God who is inside us. Then, we draw His heart and ravish His love by our broken hearts. He declares our position that we are powerful and not weak, and we live in glory and not reproach. We groan feeling our weakness, but He ascertains the hidden truth, that our strife, in spite of all this weaknesses, declares the sweetness of our love and a sweet aroma spreads out of it. He says:

"How fair is your love, My sister, My spouse! How much better than wine is your love and the scent of your perfumes than all spices!" (Song 4:10).

The words of the Bridegroom correspond to the words of the bride in her praise to Him, but in a stronger version. The words of the bride: ***"For Your love is better than wine. Because of the fragrance of Your good ointments..." (Song 1:2-3).*** The words of the Bridegroom: ***"How fair is your love, My sister, My spouse. How much better than wine is your love..."*** We commune saying, "The fragrance of your good ointments," and He says, "How much better is the scent of your perfumes!"

Amazing are the Lord's praises to us, although all the love we have for Him is a reflection of His love in us, and all what we have of sweet fragrance are the fruits of His fragrance working in us! It is astonishing that He gives us all what He has, and He gives us the credit for it, praising us, and rewarding us for it!

The honor of the fragrance of the New Testament Church ***"is much better than all the scent of perfumes,"*** and surpasses the scent of all the previous kinds of worship. **St. Gregory of Nyssa** describes this in saying, [The mystery of the truth which was fulfilled through the message of the Gospel is considered very sweet to God and better than all the scents of the Law. It is no more hidden behind symbols and shadows, but its fragrance is spread by openly declaring the truth. Since one of the earlier scents pleased the Lord as a sweet aroma, then the secret of her acceptance is not due to the honorable material used in worship, but the meaning which was revealed through this kind of worship. This is very clear from the saying of the Prophet, 'I will not take a bull from your house, nor goats out of your folds. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?'" (Ps. 50:9, 13)¹.]

Now we do not have the animal sacrifices, but the unique Sacrifice which the Father smelled as a sweet aroma. Through this Sacrifice God smells all our worship and spiritual strife as a sweet aroma ***"much better than all spices."***

Henceforth, through our bitterness due to the feeling of our weakness, the Lord

¹ The Greek translation Libanus is excerpted from frankincense and not from Lebanon.

praises us without hypocrisy and continues to discuss the blessings of sharing His suffering and struggling for His sake, saying:

“Your lips, O My spouse, drip as the honeycomb; honey and milk are under your tongue; and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon” (Song. 4:11).

What does the Lord see in His struggling and suffering bride? He sees her like a bee, for “The bee is small among flying creatures, but her product is the best of sweet things” (Sirach 11:3). **St. Gregory of Nyssa** spoke of the secret of the honeycomb dripping from the bride’s lips and the honey under her tongue, saying, [We ought not despise any teaching of piety, but, as we fly over the meadow of the inspired doctrines, we ought to gather from each one something for our store of wisdom. Thus, we may mould within ourselves a honeycomb, as it were, storing this sweet product in our hearts as it were in a hive, and with the various doctrines fashioning in our memory storehouses, just like the different cells in the wax, that cannot be destroyed. Just like the bee whose honeycomb is sweet and whose sting does not prick, we should constantly be busy in the important labor of virtue. It busies itself indeed by exchanging the labors of this life for eternal blessings, and offering its own toils for the health of kings and people. In this way too the soul attracts the Bridegroom, and is an object of admiration to the angels, perfecting her power in weakness by honoring wisdom.¹]

What else does the Lord see in His struggling and suffering bride? He sees her like the holy land flowing with honey and milk (Ex. 3:8, 17).

The Lord presented His struggling and suffering bride in a very beautiful picture. Since the Lord had promised His people with a land flowing with milk and honey, and a place for physical rest, satisfaction, and worship, His bride, in turn, becomes a place for rest for her Lord, where the Holy Trinity dwells inside her and overflows from the fruit of the spiritual milk and honey which angels desire and by which the saints rejoice. This milk and honey flows over even to unbelievers.

Amidst the afflictions of the believer, the Lord sees her lips dripping as the honeycomb, her tongue hiding honey, and her bosom full of spiritual milk.

The honeycomb which drips from his lips refers to the words of grace that proceed from the believer’s mouth. They are few, but nevertheless are sweet and delicious! They give the listener blessing and inner satisfaction!

The honey symbolizes a hidden (under the tongue) treasure presented to others by the believer, without boasting, for the mature to cherish and be nourished! This hidden honey is the word of God, who is called the heavenly manna. In the Old Testament, God sent them manna similar to wafers made with honey (Ex. 16:31). Ezekiel the Prophet ate the word of God and said, “It was in my mouth like honey in sweetness” (Ezek. 3:3). David the Psalmist

¹ Sermon 9

described it as, “How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth” (Ps. 119:103). “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (Ps. 19:9-10). Solomon the wise also asked us to enjoy eating the good word of God, saying, “My son, eat honey because it is good, and the honeycomb which is sweet to your taste” (Prov. 24:13). “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones” (Prov. 16:24).

When the Lord speaks about caring for His people, He emphasizes that He offers them honey referring to the sweetness of His gift, or the sweetness of His words in their mouths, saying, “You ate pastry of fine flour, honey and oil. You were exceedingly beautiful and succeeded to royalty” (Ezek. 16:13). “And with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you” (Ps. 81:16). “...He made him to draw honey from the rock...” (Deut. 32:13). The honey of the word of God is the source of the beauty of His people until they are good to become a queen. He who nourishes His people with honey finds His work hiding under the tongue of His bride; and then He rejoices with her!

The Lord presents His honey through the tongue of His bride to satisfy the mature people, and also nurses the babies with undefiled milk. **St. Gregory of Nyssa** described this person, saying, [The one who knows how to speak to every sort of person and has under his tongue the varied power of the divine word is the one who can offer to each according to his capacities what each one needs in good season.¹]

During our afflictions we become disinterested in our clothes; however, during the afflictions of the bride the Bridegroom smells the fragrance of her clothes as a pure aroma of prayer (frankincense). He hears her groaning and supplications while she suffers! He listens to her and answers her prayers because she asks with a broken heart! In the spiritual struggles, the believer takes off his earthly clothes and, by the Holy Spirit, he puts on the imperishable heavenly clothes: love, joy, peace... (Gal. 5:23). This is the work of the Spirit in the life of the suffering bride!

Finally, during tribulations one often looks at himself as though he is in a wilderness and barren. The Lord sees the opposite, saying:

“A garden enclosed is My sister, My spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed”
(Song 4:12).

He asks her to remember all the hidden capabilities inside of her, saying, ‘You are a garden, a spring, and a fountain. These are the capabilities of the Holy Spirit dwelling inside you. These cannot be declared to you unless you accept the sufferings and you bow yourself before the Cross.’

Why the bride was called a garden enclosed, a spring, and a fountain?

¹ Sermon 9

1. **St. Gregory of Nyssa**¹ says that the spouse of the Lord must become a flourishing garden, having within himself the beauty of all kinds of trees. The fruits of the trees may be bitter at the beginning, but later at due time, they will ripen and become delicious and sweet to all the senses. In the same manner, in the spiritual life, the Lord plants the soul and gives her water. She carries sufferings and bitterness of labor, but in due time she will bear fruits bringing joy to the soul.

2. **St. Gregory of Nyssa** talks about the reason of her being enclosed, saying, [Our garden is closed in on all sides by the fence of the commandments, so that no thief or a wild beast can gain entrance to it... It cannot be reached by the solitary wild boar or the 'boar out of the woods' (Ps. 80:13).]

3. Since the garden needs a spring or a fountain, the spring has to be closed and the fountain sealed. Solomon the Wise said, "Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well. Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed." (Prov. 5:15-18) Hence, divine inspiration commands us not to waste the water of our fountain outside in the streets with strangers. **St. Gregory of Nyssa** declares that when our thoughts deviate towards sin (strange), we become weak, offering our water to strangers.

St. Ambrose relates the sealed fountain to Baptism, which remains closed and sealed until it is manifested by words and deeds². Through the Holy Baptism we became a paradise, capable of life and bearing fruit. Although its springs can erupt with pure water to quench many, it is a closed paradise with sealed fountains that surge forth living water!

We may think that we are empty; however, the Lord sees in us a paradise, a spring, and a fountain. All of these are only opened for Him, for He is the Only Bridegroom of the soul who has the right to enter the paradise of the heart and drink from the living fountains! Hence, as a bride, the soul must remain virgin and only desire the Heavenly Bridegroom. She opens her heart, her feelings, her emotions, and all her energy, as a chaste virgin waiting for her Bridegroom (Matt. 25) and as a member in the Church of the first-fruits.

St. Ambrose splendidly comments, [The Lord says that to the Church, whom He wants to be chaste virgin, without guile or blemish. The fertilized garden is virginity which carries many fruits with nice aroma. It is a closed garden surrounded by a fence of purity. It is a sealed fountain for virginity is the fountain of chastity and its origin. It keeps the seal of purity, where God's image is reflected, and where the purity of simplicity with the holiness of the body is combined.³]

St. Ambrose links here between this seal and the Eucharist. The Lord the Bridegroom

¹ *Ibid*

² *St. Ambrose, De Myster., 55*

³ *Epistle 63:63*

gave the Church, His bride nourished by His Holy Body and Precious Blood, a commandment to keep this sacrament sealed in her life, which neither can be unbound by evil deeds nor losing purity¹.

St. Augustine describes this closed garden to be the Church, saying, [Paradise is the Church as was called in the book of Song of Songs. The four rivers of the Paradise are the four gospels, the fruitful trees are the saints, the fruits are their deeds, the tree of life is the holy of holies, that is Christ, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is free will. When someone despises God's will, he destroys himself; then he can distinguish between sanctifying himself for doing good and between behaving according to his personal will.²]

Many of the Church Fathers saw in the Holy Virgin Mary "*the enclosed garden.*" for she represents the virgin Church who was devoted for the Lord only. **St. Augustine** said, [Christ Himself is a virgin, and His mother is a virgin. Yes, although she is His mother, she remains a virgin, for the Lord Jesus entered through the locked doors (Jn. 20:19). He was laid in His new tomb, where no one has laid in it before (Jn. 19:41).] St. Mary is "*a garden enclosed*" and "*a sealed fountain.*" Joel the Prophet said that this fountain was also the source of watering the valley of thorns, the thorns of sins which we have committed (Prov. 5:22).³]

The enclosed garden, the closed spring, and the sealed fountain refer to the life which no one enters except the Lord Jesus Himself, who has the key of David "He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens" (Rev. 3:7). This life bears the precious heavenly fruits of the Holy Spirit, for He says:

"Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits, fragrant henna with spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices, a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon" (Song 4:13-15).

What does the Lord find inside us? He finds various kinds of fruits to eat, such as pomegranates, fragrant spices, frankincense, other ointments, and living water to drink.

Christ's bride appears to be rich in everything: she has food to satisfy her, water to quench her thirst, precious spices for beautification, medicines for treatment, etc. Her Bridegroom and His friends rejoice in her. We notice that the words "all" and "every" are repeated several times, because she is not deficient in anything. This is the same expression which St. Paul used in describing the believers, saying, "And God is able to make **all** grace abound toward you, that you, always having **all** sufficiency in all things, have an abundance for every good word" (2 Cor. 9:8). "For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in **all**

¹ St. Ambrose, *De Myster*, 55

² *City of God*, 13:21

³ *Epistle* 48:21

wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good word and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with **all** might, according to His glorious power, for **all** patience and longsuffering with joy” (Col. 1:9-11).

The following are some examples of the fruits the soul bears:

1. **Orchard of pomegranates**¹: The temple of the bride is like a piece of red pomegranate, a sign of the spiritual beauty through the Blood of Christ, as well as the sign of shyness, meekness, and calmness. She carries the beauty of God’s love and meekness.

St. Gregory of Nyssa said about the tree of pomegranate: [We ought never to grow soft in the indulgence and luxury of this life, but that we should choose the way of life that has become hardened by continence. In this way the fruit of virtue will never be accessible to thieves, protected by the harsh covering of continence; and surrounded by a severe (self-control) and rigorous way of life, as though by the pricks of thorns, it will sting those who approach it bent on an evil purpose. But when the season allows us to enjoy it, the pomegranate offers us the combined pleasure of every kind of fruit.”²]

2. **Fragrant henna**³: is what the bride uses for adornment the night before her wedding. She dyes her hands and feet red and prepares herself for the Bridegroom with sweet fragrance.

3. **Spikenard**: is extracted from a small plant from the Himalayan Mountains, about 1100–1700 feet above sea level. It is very expensive and is used in business. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointed the Lord Jesus’ feet with the precious spikenard (Jn. 12:3), and she poured it on His head six days before the Passover (Mk. 14:3) as a sign of her love and gratitude to Him.

4. **Saffron**: Although yellow in color, its flower is purple with red veins. It is ground and mixed with olive oil, and is used both as spice in food and as a medicine.

5. **Calamus**: has a sweet aroma, and oil is extracted from it to be used in matters concerning the sacrifice (Is. 43:24, Jer. 6:20).

6. **Cinnamon**: is a kind of wood with a sweet fragrance, and is used instead of tea by some Middle Easterners. It was used as one of the ingredients of the holy oil which was used to sanctify Aaron and his sons (Ex. 20:22). It is still used as one of the elements of Holy Myron (chrismation) oil when it is cooked. It is also used as a kind of medicine.

7. Finally, the Bridegroom communes with her saying,

¹ See commentary on Song of Songs 4:3.

² Sermon 9

³ See commentary on Song of Songs 1:14.

“A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon” (Song 4:15).

The Lord Jesus, the Living Fountain, waters the vines inside of her enclosed garden, pours water on her, and draws her complete attention towards eternity.

B. THE BRIDE SPEAKS WITH HER BRIDEGROOM

“Awake, O north wind, and come, O south! Blow upon my garden that its spices may flow out. Let my Beloved come to His garden and eat its pleasant fruits” (Song 4:16).

In the wedding banquet, the Bridegroom praised His bride and called her to go out with Him outside of the camp to share His suffering and crucifixion, to be anointed with myrrh, to be buried with Him, and to rise, carrying many branches. This is an act of His resurrection inside of her. She drips her ointment, and her Bridegroom descends to her, and enjoys His fruits inside her. The bride asks for the cold north wind and the warm south wind to blow on her. **What does the bride mean by the north wind and the south wind?**

1. The word “wind” in Greek means the same as “spirit.” The bride asks her Bridegroom to send to her His Holy Spirit so she may bear abundant fruit.

2. Calling on the wind refers to calling on the Beloved, Himself, who is the quiet and gentle Spirit who penetrates the heart¹ and dwells in it. Thus, Christ works in us.

3. Perhaps the wind describes the outer circumstances. The soul, being an enclosed garden, is devoted to God, and does not fear any outer circumstances, “For all things work together for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). St. Paul was given honor which led to the progress of the Gospel. Even when he was imprisoned, his chains led to more progress (Phil. 1:12). He also said about himself, “Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or death” (Phil. 1:20).

4. The wind also refers to temptations, whether from the left side (sin that erupts on the soul), or from the right side, (self-righteousness). The Lord protects her from these temptations and brings forth fruit which gladden the Bridegroom! He is like Samson who out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet!

Notice that the soul calls her heart *“my garden;”* it belongs to her. However, as soon she says, *“Let my Beloved come to His garden.”* she becomes His vine, the work of His hands, and under His care. He is in her midst and cannot be shaken. The soul cannot drip her spices amidst afflictions unless she submits herself to become His garden. He takes care of her and eats her fruit which is “His fruit.”

She calls to Him to descend to her, for the heart is His and the fruit is related to Him. **St. Ambrose** sees that this call is directed to the Bridegroom for Him to descend to the soul in the baptismal font. She then receives His garden, He works in her with His Holy Spirit, and she becomes fruitful. He said,

[“Let my Beloved come to His garden and eat from the apple tree which is His.”

¹ *The Jerome Biblical Comm., London 1970, p. 509.*

Truly, it is a beautiful tree full of fruits, and its roots extend to the baptismal water, the baptismal font! He descended to her through the incarnation, through His crucifixion and burial. He also descends to her when she is baptized in the holy font. She still asks Him to descend to her, and to come on the clouds to take her with Him, for she has carried His fruits inside her!¹]

¹ *St. Ambrose: De Myst. 56.*

4

MARITAL LIFE

(Song of Songs 5:1-9)

A. THE BEGINNING OF MARITAL LIFE

As soon as the Church calls her Bridegroom to come to her and to eat from the garden inside of her, full of the Holy Spirit and watered from the fountain of the Holy Baptism, He immediately answers her call, without any hesitation, saying,

“I have come to My garden, My sister, My spouse; I have gathered My myrrh with My spice; I have eaten My honeycomb¹ with My honey; I have drunk My wine with My milk. Eat, O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones!” (Song 5:1).

Without hesitation He descended to His garden, in which He always desired to be; for this particular call corresponds to His will. Since the beginning, God prepared the events of salvation, the subject of His delight, in spite of all the suffering, shame, and death that was involved. St. Paul said, “Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross, despising the shame...” (Heb. 12:2).

His bride calls Him to come to His gardens: the one He entered on the night before His Crucifixion and the one which contained His tomb. She asks Him to fill up in her flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ (Col. 1:24). Here she shares with Him in His suffering, crucifixion and burial; thus she does not hesitate to tell Him, ***“I have gathered my myrrh with my spice,”*** as if the events of the salvation are still active and extend into the lives of His children!

Fr. Rufinus² relates that the garden is where the Lord was crucified, where Solomon the Wise declares that the Bridegroom drinks wine mingled with myrrh, which was offered to the Lord at His crucifixion.

The Lord immediately accepted her call, for He found that all what belongs to the bride was His. He addressed her as His garden, His sister and His bride. Inside of her He finds myrrh, spices, honeycomb, honey, wine, and milk. He also found the fruit of His Holy Spirit inside of her, so He ran to her. He found neither the wages of sin, nor adultery, nor any evil thing that He detests; for He said, “You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the price of a dog to the house of the Lord your God for any vowed offering, for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God” (Deut. 23:18).

¹ or “bread,” the Septuagint

² Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostolic Creed*, p. 26

Before explaining what was inside the garden, **St. Gregory** questioned, “Whom does she call to feast on what he has prepared?”

[Him, from Whom and by Whom and in Whom all things consist (Col. 1:17), Who gives sustenance to everyone in due season (Lk. 12:42), Who opens His hand and fills with blessing every living creature (Ps. 145:16), Who descends as the bread of heaven (Jn. 6:14), gives life to the world, and from His own Source pours life upon every creature.

“It is for Him that the bride sets her table. And the table is a garden, planted with living trees. We are the trees, and the food we offer Him is the salvation of our souls, as He Himself said when He took His fill of our human existence: ‘My food is to do the will of the Father’ (John 4:34). And the object of the divine will is clear, for ‘He desires that all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Tim. 2:4). It is our salvation, then, that is the food prepared for Him. The fruit is our free will, which offers God our souls, as it were, on a branch to pluck.

“Here too we should consider that earlier it was the bride who enjoyed the fruit of the apple, saying: ‘*His fruit was sweet to my taste*’ (**Song 2:3**). Here, however, she herself becomes the sweet, ripe fruit, offered to the Husbandman for His enjoyment.

“Now the phrase, ‘*Let my beloved descend,*’ is similar in construction to the prayer, ‘Hallowed by Thy name,’ and ‘Thy will be done.’ Just as the construction of these two expressions denotes a prayer, so it is with the prayer of the bride, ‘*Let my beloved come,*’ as she indicates to God the abundant fruit of her perfection.”

His coming down, then suggests the operation of divine love, for we cannot be exalted to the Most High unless the Lord ‘lifts up the humble’ (Ps. 147:6) and exalts the meek. Hence the soul that is rising to heaven calls upon the assistance of the transcendent Godhead and begs Him to come down from His immensity and mingle with us here below.

“And His reply comes through the Prophet: ‘Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry and He will say, “Here I am”’ (Is. 58:9). Even before the bride has made her prayer, He hears her petition and attends to the preparation of her heart (Ps. 10:17).

“He comes to her garden... and plucks the fruit of her aromatic spices, and is filled with the fruit of her virtues. He then tells of His feasting, saying to the bride: ‘*I have come to my garden, my sister, my spouse...*’¹]

He descends to the heart, dwells in it, and rests in it. He plucks its myrrh with spices, and harvests the fruits of the Cross (myrrh) with the blessings of His holy tomb (spices). He sees the cup of our bitterness as His cup, and the spices which we are buried in are like the spices of His burial. He sees us carrying His Cross and being buried with Him.

He eats honeycomb and honey, as if he has entered the Promised Land that overflows with milk and honey. He eats the two kinds of food He had eaten with His disciples after His

¹ *Sermon 10*

Resurrection, proving with many signs that He is living and active in His Church. He finds everything in our hearts to be as sweet and delicious as honey and the honeycomb. He also drinks His wine (His love that He pours in us by His Holy Spirit) with His undefiled milk (purity and holiness).

He then calls His friends to enter with Him into His private garden to be filled and to rejoice with His bride. Who are those friends? They are the heavenly creatures who rejoice over one sinner who repents more than ninety nine righteous who do not need repentance (Lk. 15:7). These enter the heart with the Lord, not to reign, but as the soldiers of the Heavenly King and friends of the Bridegroom, saying with John the Baptist, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom, but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice” (John 3:29).

These are some of the sayings of the Fathers about those friends and their work in the heart:

❖ The heart is Christ’s palace, where the king enters to rest; and with Him goes the angels, the spirits of the saints. There He dwells and brings His kingdom!¹

St. Macarius the Great

❖ He does not stand by Himself but the angels go before Him saying, ‘Lift up your heads O you gates!’ (Ps. 24:7). Which gates are these? These are the gates of which David the Psalmist said, ‘Open to me the gates of righteousness.’ Open the gates to Christ so He may enter. Open the gates of purity, the gates of courage, and the gates of wisdom. Trust the message of the angels: ‘Be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the king of glory shall come in’ (Ps. 24:7)².

St. Ambrose

Therefore let us open our hearts to God and His angels, so that we may attain the heavenly joy!



¹ *Sermons related to St. Macarius, 15*

² *On the Faith 4: 2:20.*

B. SHADOWS IN THE MARITAL LIFE

“I sleep, but my heart is awake; it is the voice of my Beloved! He knocks saying, ‘Open for me, My sister, My love, My dove, My perfect one; for My head is covered with dew, My locks with the drops of the night’ (Song 5:2-3).

What a precise picture of the relationship between God and man! Long ago man became slothful, neglecting his salvation in spite of all the warnings God gave him to be watchful. God wanted him to be a child of the light, but man was determined to spend his entire life in the night, even if his heart was awake.

God gave the human race the natural Law to awaken their hearts so they would have no excuse. “Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, and birds and four footed beasts and creeping things” (Rom. 1:21-23).

He gave them the written Law, but when they sinned against the Law, they fell under its condemnation. “For not the hearers of the Law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the Law will be justified” (Rom. 2:13). The holy Law, together with the just and good commandment, revealed sin to me; then sin revived and I died (Rom. 7:9,12).

God sent His prophets, but what did the human race do to them? The Lord Himself said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37).

Finally, the voice of my beloved is calling me! Finally, the Word of God Himself has descended to knock on the door of man’s heart! He stands beseeching the human soul to open for Him. The Sun of Righteousness descends and enters our life, which we darkened, so that He may shine on those of us who are in darkness and in the shadow of death and awaken us from sleep!

The conversation here is directed to the soul who calls the Messiah her Bridegroom. After a while, she becomes lukewarm in loving Him. Overcome by sleep, she could not stay awake on the night of His suffering, although her heart became a dwelling for the Holy Spirit. Despite being so lukewarm in her love to Him, God, the Lover of Mankind, looks at her heart and does not cease to descend to her door to call her and say, ***“Open for Me, My sister, My love, My dove, My perfect one.”***

The voice of the Beloved is gently rebuking her so He does not hurt her feelings, but encourages her and calls her His sister, love, dove, and perfect one. He does not reprimand her for sleeping, but rather gives her hope and encouragement.

Repeating His request: ***“Open, open for me...”*** clarifies the repeated call to the

human race in both Old and New Testaments. God does not change, and His call does not change; for He asks the heart to open for Him and accept Him!

Repeating the call is a declaration of the perfect freedom of the soul. Although He is the Creator, the Lord, and the King, He does not force Himself on us, but pleads with us to open for Him. In the Book of Revelation He says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20). Even when He went to His disciples walking on the sea amidst the storm, He did not force Himself on them, but the Evangelist said, “Then they willingly received Him into the boat” (John 6:20).

St. Athanasius used this gentle description of the Lord Jesus toward the human soul to refute the violence of the Arians, saying, [The Lord comes to everyone, but He does not force anyone to open, for He knocks the door saying: ‘Open to Me, My sister...’ If one opens to Him, He will enter, but if one is late in responding, He will leave. He uses the method of persuasion and advice, and not violence and force¹.]

He convinces the soul to open for Him through love, for she is His sister, and He is her older Brother who can help her. He became the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:29), and conquered death and became the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15:20). Let us open our hearts to the One who opened the door of life!

Due to the strong friendship between them, He continues and begs her to open for Him, for He calls her His friend. He used the same title for Abraham, the father of believers (2 Chron. 20:7, Is. 41:8). Since God said to His friend Abraham “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?” (Gen. 18:17), it is more appropriate for the believer, being a friend of God, to completely open his heart to God.

He attracts her to open the door of her heart by calling her His dove, for she carries the Holy Spirit, Who came in the form of a dove inside her and gave her the capability to open her heart.

Finally, He encourages her to be “the perfect one” without guile, thus she cannot close the door in front of His face.

In the same manner God deals with us, declares His love to us (not through commandments but through His friendship), reveals the potentials of His Holy Spirit working in us, and encourages us to reach our goal! Finally, He pleads with us as the One who carries our suffering and pain for our sake. He said:

“For my head is covered with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night” (Song 5:2).

Although our life is full of darkness and sleep, through love He will penetrate through that darkness to bear the pains of the night. The Lord Jesus entered the garden of Gethsemane

¹ *The History of the Arians by St. Athanasius, 33*

at night. While His disciples slept, not watching even one hour (Matt. 26:40), He entered in the deep and received the cup of suffering to drink for the sake of the entire human race. In the garden He was sorrowful and deeply distressed, saying, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even to death” (Matt. 26:38). His sweat was dripping like drops of blood!

He communes with her and pleads with her to open to Him for the sake of what He had endured for her. His head was covered with dew and His locks with the drops of the night. He carried the divine wrath in His body and as Isaiah the Prophet said, “Surely, He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgression, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed” (Is. 53:4-5).

In spite of all this love, she presented inappropriate human excuses. She neither called Him her Lord nor even called Him by His name, but said:

“I have taken off my robe; how can I put it on again? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them?” (Song 5:3).

All these are excuses for not opening her heart to the One who truly loves her. This is a picture of the lukewarm person who does not wish to weary himself to meet the Lord Jesus; the One who greatly suffered for his sake!

How easy it is for her to put on her robe and her shoes! She was more occupied with the comfort of her body than enjoying her Bridegroom. She resembled those who gave excuses for not attending the wedding feast (Matt. 22:5).

Although she took off her robe, the Lord Jesus Himself is the eternal robe who covers us, as St. Paul said, “You have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). This is the best robe whom the Heavenly Father put on His son who returns to Him (Lk. 15:22). This is the robe presented from God’s hand, as Zechariah says, “I will clothe you with rich robes” (Zech. 3:4).

Even if she has taken off her robe, He will give her His Holy Spirit to put on as the secret of life in her. He commanded His disciples, “Behold, I send the promise of My Father upon you, but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Lk. 24:49).

Although she has washed her feet, let us realize that the One who knocks at her door is her Lord who washed His bride’s feet (Jn. 13:5). She washed her feet with her self-righteousness to relieve her conscious; however, when the Lord’s hands extend to wash her feet, she will have rest in His eternal kingdom. That is why the Lord Jesus said to Peter, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me” (Jn. 13:8). Let us rise from our ego and proceed to our Bridegroom who covers us with His Blood, puts His Holy Spirit inside of us, and washes our inner life so we live sanctified for Him.

C. MARITAL LOVE IS RESTORED THROUGH THE CROSS

Since the soul does not listen to the voice of the One who greatly loves her, He extends His wounded hands on the Cross so she may see, in her mind, the scars of the wounds of love which He endured for her. Then she yearns for Him saying:

“My Beloved put His hand by the latch of the door, and my heart yearned for Him. I arose to open for my Beloved and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh on the handles of the lock” (Song 5:4-5).

After the resurrection the disciples were scared and locked their doors. They did not know that the locked doors could not prevent the Lord from coming to them to show them His hands and side for them to rejoice (Jn. 20:20). He opened an inner latch inside their hearts so they may touch the wounds of His love. In the same manner the Lord extends His wounded hand through the latch to reveal the mystery of His love to His believers, so they may yearn for Him. This latch is nothing but the Lord’s side and His wounds. Through it, the Lord extends the hand of His love to reveal His inner bowels inflamed with love, so we may also yearn for Him. He first loved us, therefore, we have to love Him back (1Jn. 4:19).

The latch has special memories, mentioned in the Old Testament, which are symbolic of the Lord’s work of salvation in the life of His bride. We mention some:

1. Through a latch (window), Abimelech realized that Rebecca was Isaac’s wife and not his sister (Gen. 26:8). Similarly, through the Lord’s wounds the Church is declared as the bride of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Through a window, the two spies descended from Rahab’s house (Josh. 2:15). Through a window, David also escaped and was delivered from the hands of Saul and his messengers (1Sam. 19:21). Through a window, we descend from the pride of this world to cross its gates and be delivered from all the wiles of the devil.

3. From a window, a scarlet cord was tied; the means by which Rahab and all her household were saved (Josh. 2:18), and a symbol of the Blood of the Lord Jesus that saves all people.

4. The window also symbolizes the destruction of evil as well as salvation. When Isabel, the evil queen, decorated herself with the ornaments of the world, she was thrown from a window and dogs licked her blood (2 Kings 9). When Ahaziah the evil king depended on Beelzebub, the god of Ekron, instead of the living God, he fell from the lattice of his upper room in Samaria, fell sick, and died (2 Kgs. 1:2). In her praise, Deborah also requested from the mother of King Sisera to look through her window (Jud. 5:28) to see why her son’s chariots and their rattling had delayed. He and his chariots were destroyed.

5. Through this latch the believers yearn for God's redeeming love, while the unbelievers mock these wounds, resembling Michal, King Saul's daughter. When she looked through the window and saw King David dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart (2 Sam. 6:16, 1 Chron. 15:29).

The bride who enjoys the Lord's hand in hers and realizes the mystery of His Cross opens for her Beloved. She cries with the prodigal son saying, "I will rise and go to My Father" (Lk. 15:18). With true repentance and bitter tears, she declares her yearning for the One who loves her, and says, "*My hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh.*"

St. Gregory said, [The myrrh resembles the death which Christ has died for us. We have touched Him, through repentance, and have accepted to die with Him, so He may open for us the everlasting doors¹.]

"I opened for my Beloved, but My Beloved had turned away and was gone. My heart went out to Him when He spoke. I sought Him but I could not find Him; I called Him but He gave me no answer. The watchmen who went about the city found me. They struck me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took my veil away from me. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my Beloved, that you tell Him I am lovesick! What is your beloved more than another beloved, O fairest among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you so charge us?" (Song 5:6-9).

After a long sleep, she went to open for her Bridegroom; but He had left her. Why did He do that? He chastens the one who is late in responding. In His chastisement, He seems as though He has left us for a while, but this shows His concern for us. **Abbot Daniel**² gave two reasons for forsaking us:

1. God may forsake us for a little while so we may remember our weaknesses, and we may realize that our pure heart is a free gift from God.

2. When He forsakes us, our inner goal is revealed and we look for the Holy Spirit. This becomes like a test in perseverance, strong determination and true zeal. When we have spiritual happiness and purity, we become very cautious in preserving them. We are always careful to preserve that which we have not easily attained.

Abbot Daniel said, [David the Prophet relates that when God temporarily forsakes us, this is for our own good. That is why he asked God not to permanently forsake him. He said, 'Do not forsake me utterly!' (Ps. 119:8). In other words, he said, 'I know that You may forsake Your saints for their own good and for testing them. So I do not ask that You do not forsake me, for it is good that I feel my weakness. "It is good for me that I have been afflicted" (Ps. 119:71). It is not good for me if there is no opportunity for battle. The devil

¹ Sermon 12

² By the author: John Cassian on Spiritual Lukewarmness, p. 110 (in Arabic).

cannot dare to fight me unless I am depending on his protection. I ask that You forsake me for a little while, but not for long; for when You forsake me for a little while, it is for testing my love.]

Abbot Daniel spoke of spiritual lukewarmness due to God's temporarily forsaking us temporarily to test our faith and to purify us. This is not true forsaking, but it is considered divine concern. **St. John Chrysostom** compared God's position to a nanny who holds her baby's hand. She walks with him for a while, then, she takes her hand away to let him walk by himself. She still looks at him with her heart, her thoughts, and her eyes; and her hands are ready to support him.

The human soul said, *"I sought him but I could not find him"* (Song 5:6), although He was not standing beside her, but rather inside of her. He waits to see her struggle for Him to say with Jacob, "I will not let you go until you bless me" (Gen. 32:26).

"I called him, but he gave me no answer," although He is busy arranging everything for my salvation.

The soul wanders around the world seeking the One she loves, although He is inside of her. **St. Augustine** said that he foolishly went to seek Him outside himself, in nature and in books, although God was inside of him, in his inner depths.

Who are the guards who went about the city, found her, struck her, wounded her, and took her veil away from her?

1. If the speaker here is the believer in the Church of the New Testament, then he is rebuking the Jews and their leaders, who represent the watchmen in the city of Jerusalem and those who are responsible for keeping the word of God. They were the ones who ought to preach the Messiah; however, they attack the Church and wound her.

In spite of all these insults the believer does not deviate from looking toward his Bridegroom but, on the contrary, he says he is wounded with the love of the Heavenly Bridegroom, saying, *"I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my Beloved, that you tell him I am lovesick"* (Song 5:8).

This is the fifth time that the church of the Gentiles rebuked the Jews:

A. **First Rebuke** (Song 1:5): the Church of the Gentiles rebuked the Jews because they said that she was black like the tents of Kedar, and that she had no roots and did not receive the Law, nor did the prophets come from her. She answered that although she was black because of her pagan origin, yet she is in the bosom of the Father, who embraced her and beautified her through His Son Jesus Christ and made her like the curtains of Solomon.

B. **Second Rebuke** (Song 2:7): Starting to unite with the Lord who put His left hand under her head and embraced her with His right hand, the Jews attempted to ruin this unity and destroy it. Nevertheless, she declared that the day will come when she Lord will be revealed and declare the reality of their unity.

C. **Third Rebuke** (Song 3:5): Since the Bridegroom entered the tomb, the Jews mocked Him saying, “Get out of the tomb, so we may believe in You.” The Church replied saying, “Do not think that He died and His mission is abolished, but He is living! He has risen from the dead, and has raised me with Him and I have ascended from the wilderness as white as pillars of smoke scented with myrrh and frankincense. Through Him, I ascend to the Father!

D. **Fourth Rebuke** (Song 3:11): The Church clarified to the Jews that although they crown Him with thorns and mock Him, He is crowned as the Bridegroom of the whole creation on the day of His wedding.

E. **Fifth Rebuke** (Song 5:8): The Church declares to the Jews that though her children may go through periods of lukewarmness and though it may seem that the Lord has forsaken them, yet the Church is alive and full of love. She struggles until the Lord removes their lukewarmness.

2. The watchmen who went about the city refer to the ministers of the Church, the city of God; and the keepers of the walls refer to the preachers of the Word. All the ministers have to hide behind the Word of God when preaching to the lukewarm. Those souls that have become lukewarm feel chastised and wounded by the ministers of the word of God, which is like a sword that kills evil and expels it from their souls. It is also like a mirror that reveals the weakness of man. The wounds and the chastisement were neither made to annoy those souls nor to mock them, but they were the wounds of love which lead to repentance. As St. Paul said, “For if I make you sorrowful, then, who is he who makes me glad but the one who is made sorrowful by me?” (2 Cor. 2:2).

In any case, when the soul is no more lukewarm she returns to the Fatherly bosom in Christ Jesus, and she witnesses to the power of this act before unbelievers, who question:

“What is your beloved more than another beloved, O fairest among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you so charge us?”

You are beautiful and you lack nothing. Who then is this Beloved with whom you are occupied? Who is this Beloved whom you charge for being united with Him?

Perhaps these questions are a prophecy about the Jews accepting the Lord Jesus at the end of days. A day will come when the Jews will realize that they were wrong in asking for an earthly kingdom and temporal gains. They will realize that they need eternal salvation and to taste the heavenly love of God.

5

MUTUAL MARITAL LOVE

(Song 5:10-7:13)

A. THE BRIDE PRAISES HER BRIDEGROOM

(Song 5:10-16)

When the world discovers the bride's love for her Bridegroom and realizes how it affects her inner life, the world begins to wonder about how extraordinary the Bridegroom is. The bride testifies to her Bridegroom, not with mere words but with her life. She knows, touches, unites, and experiences the unseen God., giving a truthful and practical testimony, saying:

1. "*My Beloved is white and ruddy*" (Song 5:10).

How sweet is the Savior, the Bridegroom; in Him are two colors: *white and red*, each complimenting the other. He is white, but not the pale, lifeless white mentioned by St. Paul concerning Ananias the high priest: "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the Law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the Law?" (Acts 23:3). By disobeying the commandment and the Law, he became under the judgment of death, without life. He lost his blood, the sign of life, and became as pale as the dead. Conversely, the Savior of the Church is white and pure, but bears a certain redness: the sign of life, vitality and strength! He does not bear this redness apart from the whiteness, for this is a sign of murder and bloodshed, as mentioned in the book of Revelation (Rev. 6:4). Sin is described as scarlet and crimson (Is. 1:18). But He is "Who is this who comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, the One who is glorious in His apparel, traveling in the greatness of His strength... I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save" (Is. 63:1).

The word "*white*" means "splendor." for He is the Sun of Righteousness who shone on us, who were sitting in the darkness, to make us enter through His Holy Spirit to the perfect light of the knowledge of the Father. Through the worthiness of His red Blood, He carried us in His splendor to the bosom of the Father. Thus, His splendor is mingled with His redeeming act, that is his whiteness with his redness, until we carry the reflection of His splendor inside us, so we may enter to His Father.

In the book of Daniel His clothes were as white as snow (Song 7:2). Also, in the Transfiguration "His clothes became white as the light" (Matt. 17:2). These clothes are His Church, for He dwells inside of her. He reflects all of His whiteness and splendor on His

Church, as with the heavenly creatures who are continuously in His presence (Mark 16:5, Acts 1:10). We will appear in heaven with white clothes (Rev. 3:4, 7:9), and we are also commanded to have white garments: “Let your garments always be white” (Eccles. 9:8).

The Holy Bible mentioned many appearances of angels, but did not describe their clothes. However, in the events of the resurrection and ascension, the Bible confirmed that the angels appeared with white clothes. For our sake, they appeared to show us that through the Lord’s Resurrection and Ascension, we have been washed and have become whiter than snow (Ps. 51:7). Our sins, which are like scarlet, are buried in the tomb; then the Lord raises us like snow (Is. 1:18). That is why Daniel the Prophet said, “purge them and make them white” (Dan. 11:35).

Thus, the Church sees her Bridegroom and she rejoices in His splendor and Blood. The devil, however, fears the splendor of the Savior and the Blood of His Cross, which is why the Church calls Him the:

2. “Chief among ten thousand” (Song 5:10).

He became known among people and the devil. The Church knows Him as a “Banner to the people” (Is. 11:10). He was lifted on the Cross, and He drew everyone to Himself to pour His splendor on them and to sanctify them with His Blood. The devils then cried, “Come down from the Cross!” because He through it, He destroyed their kingdom and “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15).

3. “His head is like the finest gold; His locks are wavy, and black as a raven” (Song 5:11).

Since gold refers to the heavenly life, the finest gold describes His divinity, “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9). The Father appointed Him the Head of the Church “From whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments” (Col. 2:19). He is the Son of God and the Word of God, Who has the authority to allow the whole body of Christ to enter the heavens. Since the Head is heavenly and the body is connected to the Head, the body too must live on a heavenly level. This is the mystery of her love for her Bridegroom. He takes her to the heaven, i.e. to the bosom of the Father, through uniting with her.

His hair surrounding the Church is the community of saints, who are like the hair of the Lord, whom one hair cannot fall without the Father’s permission. They live by Him, thus none of His hair becomes white, but His hair is dark black as the crow. The believer does not get old, but his youth is renewed like the eagle’s. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, Who grants fellowship between the Head and the members, so that all the members are strengthened by abiding in the Head Who never weakens.

The Lord Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). His Church is

also timeless and neither ages nor is affected by earthly events!

4. “His eyes are like doves, by the rivers of water, washed with milk and fitly set” (Song 5:12, Septuagint).

He is the fearful King Who scares the enemies. His eyes are like flames of fire (Rev. 1:14) that examine the hidden matters. When He appears to His believers, however, they see His eyes like that of a simple dove, full of innocence¹. “You are of purer eyes than to behold evil” (Hab. 1:13).

Fr. Victorinus, bishop of Pateu in the third century, says that the water refers to many nations, which returned to God, through Baptism². Thus, describing His eyes as doves on the water refers to the incarnation of the Lord and the declaration of a new, holy generation through the Holy Baptism.

Being washed in milk refers to God’s concern to present undefiled faith as food for their souls. **St. Ambrose** said, [The Lord is baptized in milk, meaning that He is baptized in sincerity, and those who are baptized in milk are those who have the undefiled faith.]

Being fitly set, or being settled in their places, refers to God’s care for His Church and His children. He keeps His eyes on every member until He brings them into the fellowship of His glory.

We can also say that the eyes of Christ are His priests and ministers, who guide the human race towards Christ. They have spiritual insight enlightened by the Holy Spirit, like a dove, to make everyone enter into the baptismal water, where they wash their sins and are granted undefiled faith like milk. They are fitly set, that is, they have a place in the Head, Christ. Through Him, they can care for the salvation of souls. Comparing them to the eyes of Christ is a literal comparison, for in the Old Testament a prophet was known as a “seer” (Amos 7:12), who could see what the others could not through the spirit of prophecy. Sometimes the prophet was also called “a watchman” (Ezek. 3:17, 33:7), who can stand on a tower to warn the people when the enemies came.

5. “His cheeks are like a bed of spices, like banks of scented herbs” (Song 5:13).

The cheeks of the Lord Jesus were mocked and smitten, as the Prophet Isaiah mentions, “I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard” (Is. 50:6). This face, which the Lord did not hide from the shame of spitting (Matt. 27:3), is the proof of His sacrificial love; thus the Church compares it to a bed of spices (sweet-smelling plants) and banks of scented herbs, which bear the fragrance of life.

6. “His lips are lilies dripping liquid myrrh” (Song 5:13).

We mentioned earlier that the Bridegroom is the Lily of the valleys, and by uniting

¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, Sermon 14

² Ante-Nicean Fathers, Vol. 7

with Him the believers also become lilies. Alternatively, the cheeks of the Bridegroom here are compared to the lily. What does that mean?

The lily refers to royal glory, for the Lord explained this when He said, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matt. 28:29). The lips of the Lord Jesus declare glorious teachings, or in other words, they present the word of life able to let the believer enter into the glorious eternal life. David the Psalmist said, “Grace is poured upon Your lips” (Ps. 45:2).

These lips carry a scented aroma and drip with myrrh. St. John the Evangelist described the words coming from His lips when he said, “No man ever spoke like this Man” (John 7:46). Everyone witnessed and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth. And they said, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” (Lk. 4:22).

Dripping liquid myrrh means that His words are mingled with the bitterness of His suffering and burial, for He was embalmed with myrrh. Whoever hears Him desires to enter in the fellowship of His suffering and dying with Him. **St. Gregory of Nyssa** wrote, [Myrrh flows from His body and fills the souls of those who accepted Him. This is a clear symbol of mortifying the body¹.]

St. Gregory also said that the lips overflow with lilies and myrrh, which represent the Apostles, who are the Lord’s mouth, witnessing to the Word of His Gospel: the Lily of the valleys. They enter with the believers into the liquid myrrh, which is the mortification and burial of the self to be baptized and granted the power of the Resurrection. St. Peter overflowed with lilies, which is the Word of God, in the house of Cornelius and filled the souls of those who heard him with myrrh, for they were buried with Christ in Baptism and had died to the world.

7. “His hands are rods of gold set with beryl” (Song 5:14).

The rods or circles refer to eternity, for they have no beginning and no end. His hands are eternal, perpetually satisfying the soul and the body. His hands are also heavenly, being made of gold. He holds His bride, and puts her hand in His heavenly hand to pour His work on her so she may carry His power and heavenly capabilities to pass over with Him into heaven.

The Old Testament mentions beryl several times (Ezek. 1:16, Dan. 10:6) to refer to the power of laying the foundation, for the works of His hands are faithfulness and truth, which build His bride on steadfast faith and truth.

8. “His body is carved ivory inlaid with sapphires” (Song 5:14)

The belly refers to God’s deep love and compassion, as was mentioned in Jeremiah,

¹ Sermon 14

“My heart yearns for him, I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord” (Jer. 31:20). This compassion is like carved ivory, for ivory is extracted from the elephant through suffering. Being inlaid with sapphires refers to his love being heavenly and eternal, for sapphire is a heavenly color.

9. “His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of fine gold” (Song 5:15).

The legs refer to the ability of walking steadfastly, and the fine gold refers to the heavenly nature. The one who unites with the Bridegroom can walk steadfastly toward heaven and crush all the powers of the devil, conquering death and sin.

St. Ambrose commented, [His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of fine gold, for Christ walks inside the souls and makes His ways in the minds of His saints, as if they are golden bases and foundation of precious stones, which have the traces of the footsteps of the Word of God.]

10. “His countenance is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars” (Song 5:15).

Lebanon is a tourist place with excellent weather, where newlyweds go for their honeymoon. In the same manner, the compassionate, smiling countenance of the Lord Jesus makes the soul, who wants to live a spiritual marital life with the Lord, rejoice. David the Psalmist said, “You are fairer than the sons of men” (Ps. 45:2). Also, in the record that Pilate sent to Herod about the Lord Jesus, it was written that, “He had desired for a long time to see Him” (Lk. 23:8).

The mystery of His beauty lies in Him being “youth like cedar.” which is known by its length, straightness, and sweet smell. In the same manner, the Lord Jesus appears to the soul as a youth who never ages.

It is amazing that the Lord Jesus in His humility carried our human nature, sharing with us all the stages of our growth, except the aging process. He became a fetus, then an infant, a child, a youth, and then a man, but He ascended before growing old. It was not befitting for Him to become old so that His Church would not bear the spirit of spiritually growing old. It is written by divine inspiration, “Your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (Ps. 103:5). In the Church rites, it was written that the Church and St. Mary are like “the vine that does not grow old.”

A Christian does not grow old at all, but as the days pass by, his youth abounds more. “Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16). Also, St. Paul wrote, “And have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Col. 3:10). Truly the body may weaken and may get old, but the spirit remains strong and active (Matt. 26:41, Mk. 14:38).

11. “His mouth is most sweet, yes, He is altogether lovely. This is my Beloved, and this is my Friend, O daughters of Jerusalem” (Song 5:16).

David the Psalmist said, “How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey

to my mouth” (Ps. 119:103). Thus, the believer finds in the words of Christ special sweetness, because His words are spirit and life. Whoever eats of these words comes back to the Lord hungry for Him and whoever drinks from Him is more thirsty for Him.

When one listens to the words of the Lord Jesus, his heart yearns for knowing the divine mysteries, and he remains sitting at the Lord’s feet, without leaving Him, saying, “I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad” (Ps. 119:96).

The sweetness of His words lies in its power and authority, so He does not give mere commandments or warnings, or advice, but gives power to implement the words. Then the commandment lifts man to enter into the knowledge of the mysteries of heaven, and the soul is elevated from glory to glory, continuously carrying the mystery of an endless new power.

Finally, when the bride feels unable to describe her Bridegroom, she says, “*He is altogether lovely.*” This is her true Beloved whom she seeks; He satisfies her, and in Him she finds all her love and desires!

B. CONVERSATION IN THE GARDEN (Song 6:1-13)

Since the soul witnessed to her Bridegroom, the unbelievers began to question:

“Where has your Beloved gone, O fairest among women? Where has your Beloved turned aside that we may seek Him with you?” (Song 6:1).

The testimony of the soul to her Bridegroom reflected His glory in her life and her acceptance of Him in calling her ***“the fairest among women.”*** Her spiritual beauty created a special attraction, not for herself, but for the Bridegroom, who is the secret of her beauty!

The unbelievers were very eager to see Him and at the same time very perplexed. They questioned, “Where has your Beloved gone? Where has your Beloved turned aside? Where did He hide? We want to know Him with you.” The unbelievers realized that they could not become acquainted with the Bridegroom outside of the Church, therefore they have to be inside the Church. For He is the Bridegroom and the Head of the Church; without the Church the world would not know Christ, and outside of Christ there is no Church.

The reply of the Church then was,

“My Beloved has gone to His garden, to the beds of spices, to feed his flock in the gardens and to gather lilies. I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine. He feeds His flock among the lilies” (Song 6:2-3).

This book emphasizes the existence of the Bridegroom inside the Church, and inside the soul whom He bought with His Blood. He enters the stony heart and changes it into a garden for Him (Song 4:12,16;5:1). Moreover, He changes it to inner gardens where He gathers the lilies which carry the characteristics of the Bridegroom Himself, who is also called the Lily (Song 2:1).

The bride is warned not to waste time in looking for the Bridegroom outside; for through His humility He descended to the Church and entered the hearts of His people. St. Paul said, “Do not say in your heart, ‘who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is to bring Christ down from above)...But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’” (Rom. 10:7,8).

The bride’s response clarifies to the outsiders the mystery of the relationship between God and the soul. God entered into His garden to gather the lilies. He does so, not as one who takes advantage of His creation nor as One who likes to be authoritative, but He entered because of a love call from His bride, for she tells Him, “I am my Beloved’s.”

In other words, she tells Him, “All what is mine is Yours. Please enter my heart and take all the inner feelings and energies, for all what I have is yours. This call is a mere response to the act of love which I show to Him, for My Beloved is mine. He offered His life to me and I am repaying Him for all what He has done for me! I love Him with my own free

will, for He also loves me with His own free will.”

Her saying “*He descended*” means that the Bridegroom’s descent to her heart is not because He needs her, but out of His humility to accept her call to enter her life and raise her up to His heaven. He takes all of her, as He gave Himself to her.

“He descended to my heart. What do I ask of Him? I cannot ask for anything except to have Him; nothing will satisfy me except Him alone. No gifts nor human reward can quench my thirst, but I seek Him. My Beloved is mine.”

THE CONVERSATION OF THE BRIDEGROOM WITH HIS BRIDE IN THE GARDEN

1. “*O, my love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners!*” (Song 6:4).

When the bride unites with her Bridegroom, each one communes with the other. Witnessing to the unbelievers that the Bridegroom is inside her, the bride asks that they should not seek Him outside. The Bridegroom praises her for that (Song 4), and reveals a deeper beauty, which is a deeper union.

Here He sees her as “*beautiful as Tirzah.*” In Hebrew Tirzah means “joy.” This was also the name of the youngest daughter of Zelophehad (Num. 26:33), who died and had no son. The daughters stood before Moses and Eliazar the priest and all the elders in the Tabernacle, and asked that they inherit their father with their father’s brothers. They also received their share of inheritance when Joshua divided the land (Josh. 17:3-6). God gave them this right, and this became a statute of judgment (Num. 27:1-11).

In this book, Solomon compares the bride with Tirzah, who asked for what she was entitled to from Moses and Joshua. As the Lord granted her a share in the inheritance. This is the beauty of the person who is united with the Lord Jesus. He asks without fear for his inheritance, that is, to live as a living member in the holy congregation. This inheritance is the Lord Himself, whom the soul accepts inside her, the mystery of her glory and richness.

Tirzah may also refer to the beautiful city which was originally inhabited by the Canaanites. Joshua later conquered it (Josh. 12:24) and gave it to the tribes of Israel. It was the capital of the ten tribes of the kingdom of Israel for about fifty years (1 Kgs. 14:17; 15:21,33; 16:6,23). The secret of its beauty was that it became the Lord’s possession after Joshua conquered the city of Gentile and pagan worshipers.

Tirzah is also beautiful as Jerusalem. The source of its beauty is that it resembles Jerusalem, the city of the king. Similarly, the Church represents the heavenly holies and the capital of His kingdom, where everything in it is beautiful and splendid.

The beauty of Tirzah was mingled with power, for it was as awesome as a heavenly army carrying banners of victory and triumph before its enemies. Because the Lord, her Conqueror, protects her with the spirit of power and victory, she experiences neither defeat

nor despair. According to the Greek translation, she is like an army led by the Lord Himself.

In other words, a Christian carries power with beauty. He is beautiful by his meekness and gentleness, yet powerful by his courage and strictness. He is beautiful by his inner quietness, yet strong in his struggle against sin until shedding blood. The source of his power and victory is his tears, which he pours before the Lord with a contrite heart. This captivates the divine love, for He says to her:

“Turn your eyes away from Me, for they have overcome me” (Song 6:5).

God cannot endure to see man’s tears and his contrition. The best example for that is that of the evil king Ahab who murdered and took possession (1 Kgs. 21:19), and of whom the Bible says, “But there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife stirred him up. And he behaved very abominably in following idols...” (1 Kgs. 21:25-26). Upon hearing God’s punishment by Elijah the Prophet, Ahab tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his body, fasted, laid in sackcloth, and went about mourning. The Lord could not endure the sight and told Elijah, “See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days” (1 Kgs. 21:29).

2. “Your hair is like a flock of goats going down from Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep which have come up from the washing; every one bears twins, and none is barren among them. Like a piece of pomegranate are your temples behind your veil” (Song 6:5-7).

Earlier in the book¹, the Lord praised her with similar features. The purpose of this repetition is to emphasize a certain truth: God’s love to man will never change. In spite of the lukewarmness of her soul², when the bride returns with tears of repentance, she finds Him praising her with the same traits; His outlook toward her has not changed. Moreover, His love to her has increased. This reminds us of what God did with St. Peter after he had denied Him: the Lord assured him three times that He accepted him in the apostolic service by saying, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me? Feed My sheep.” God’s love never changes; however our love to Him may change. His divine arms are always open with love to all.

3. “There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, the favorite of the one who bore her. The daughters saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines, and they praised her” (Song 6:8-9).

He praises her using the language of numbers. What does he mean by sixty queens, eighty concubines, virgins without number and His one perfect dove?

¹ Song 4:1-5

² cf. Commentary on Song 5:2-3, 8-9

First: Perhaps, He compares the Church with the heavenly hosts who love Him. He sees in as many hosts. They are like sixty queens, eighty concubines and virgins without number... These vary according to their statures; however, His Church, which He purchased with His own Blood (Acts. 20:28) and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, became the only bride, the perfect dove. This is the source of her beauty, her power and her perfection. She became the united Body of the Lord, although she is made up of many members, for “He would gather together in one the children of God” (John 11:52), and “He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth, in Him” (Eph. 1:10).

The mystery of her unity¹ does not depend on the members being in one place or uniting in one language or one culture, but on the following factors:

A. She is His dove. Since the Holy Spirit is one, yet He is the Spirit of the Father and the Son together. He granted His Church this divine Spirit so that the believers may become one dove, having fellowship with God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who grants fellowship to the believers with God and with one another. Through the Holy Spirit and the worthiness of the Blood of the Son, we are reconciled with the Father. And in Baptism, we receive the spirit of adoption, through which we cry “Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15). Through this reconciliation, we see ourselves members of one another.

- ❖ The Holy Spirit who gathers God’s people into one, expels the evil spirit who is divided against himself.”²
- ❖ One of the characteristics of the Holy Spirit is fellowship, through which we become one body to the Son of God; for it is written, “Therefore, if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy” (Phil. 2:1).

St. Augustine

- ❖ When the Almighty descended and babbled the tongues, the nations were divided. But when He divided the tongues of fire, He called everyone to unity. Hence, with one accord, we glorify the Spirit full of holiness.³

“Kontakon” Greek Hymn of Pentecost

B. She is perfect. When the Church puts on Christ, who is Perfect, she becomes perfect. Her unity is based on attaining the perfect new life, which we have in Christ Jesus. In this new life we do not submit to the law of schism or the spirit of enmity, but rather to the Spirit of love, who grants inner unity. Thus our unity becomes established through our

¹ To further understand the concept of the unity of the Church with the perspective of the Fathers, refer to book *Introductions in the Science of Patrology*, 1974, p. 119-141.

² *Augustine: Sermons on the New Testament, Sermon 21.*

³ Cf. *Archbishop Harion: Christianity or Church.*

sanctification by uniting with the Holy One, so we resemble the unity of the Holy Trinity. This is very obvious in the Lord's farewell prayer on the night of His suffering: "Holy Father, keep through your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are... That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be one in Us... I in them, and You in Me, that they may be made perfect in one" (John 17:11, 21, 23).

St. Cyprian the Martyr said, [This is what He desired for us: that we may live according to the unity between the Father and the Son, being One.¹]

St. Cyril of Alexandria said, [He desires for us a unity with each other, like the unity of the Holy Trinity. This should be reflected on the unity of the believers.²]

C. She is the only one, the only one of her mother. Who is this mother who looks at the Church as the only one? She is the Heavenly Jerusalem, who has no work except to wait for this one bride, whom the Lord Jesus has betrothed her to be His partner in eternal glory. The mystery of the union stems from the believers entering into eternity that is they are released from the limitations of time. Since our temporal life creates the spirit of division and jealousy, then our enjoying the deposit of the heavens grants us love toward the entire human race and eagerness on an eternal level, for the law of heaven is peace, unity, and its language is love.

The Bridegroom said, "*The daughters saw her and called her blessed, the queens and the concubines and they praised her.*" The heavenly creatures praise her, for they see her submitting to their law and talking their language and becoming one of them and not a stranger.

Second: From the language of the symbolic numbers, we also can understand that these are manifestations of the mystery of the beauty and power of the Church.

1. Sixty queens: resemble the Church, for the number 12 represents the kingdom of God on earth, for the Holy Trinity reigns over the four corners of the earth ($4 \times 3 = 12$). When God reigns over the five senses of the believers ($12 \times 5 = 60$), then the number 60 becomes a symbol of God's reign over one's life, or the life of the Church that extends from one end of the earth to the other. Hence the Church becomes sixty queens, where the King of kings rules inside us, and our lives are no more in bondage, but we are elevated to carry the royal glory.

2. Eighty concubines: The first number showed the Church as queen, through God's reign over her feelings; however here she appears as concubine, that is, she lives in a secret spiritual life with the Bridegroom. The number 80 refers to the Church, although she is still on earth, resembles the life to come.

¹ *On the Lord's Prayer*

² *On St. John. Book 2, ch.2*

The number ten refers to the temporal life, thus the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament were a divine law which we have to obey on earth. The number eight refers to the life to come because it exceeds number seven, which refers to the week of our life. That is why circumcision was done on the eighth day, and the Lord Jesus rose on the first day of the new week, that is on the eighth day of the old week. There were also only eight people in the ark that were saved. These all refer to the new, heavenly life. Therefore, the Church, although she dwells on earth (10), yet she lives a new heavenly life (8).

3. **Virgins without number.** The infinite number here refers to the virginity of life, which is wholly devoted to the Lord. Thus the believer presents

- a) a virginal heart, not accepting another Bridegroom besides the Lord,
- b) a virginal thought, which does not think of anything but in the Lord, and
- c) virginal feelings. That is why the Lord compared the kingdom of God to virgins who went to meet the bridegroom (Matt. 25:1).

4. **The only one.** The oneness of the Church is a basic feature of the life of the Church, for we declare in the creed, “We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” Earlier, we saw the secret of this oneness, which is our adoption to God, the one Father, by uniting with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

St. Irenaeus saw that the secret of this oneness is the one faith, saying, [The true Church, which is truly old, is one Church. The early catholic (universal) Church is the one who works for the unity of faith.¹]

In **Fr. Rufinus’** talk about the Creed, he mentioned this phrase (Song 6:9), clarifying that the source of this union is the one faith. He said, [Whoever accepts this faith in the Church, let him not seek the evil counsel nor participate with the oppressors.²]

4. We may interpret “*My dove, my perfect one, is the only one*” to be St. Virgin Mary, for she has surpassed all who preceded her in honor. The *Sunday Theotokia* mentions, “Hail to you, O Mary, the perfect dove, who bore for us the Logos.”

The following verse can also be applied to St. Mary:

“Who is she who looks forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?” (Song 6:10).

St. Mary is bright as the morning, for the Sun of Righteousness was incarnate from her, and He shone on those who were living in darkness. She is beautiful as the moon, which gets her beauty from the light of her Son. She is pure as the sun, for the Holy Spirit descended on her, sanctified her, and prepared her for the divine Incarnation. She is awesome as an army with banners for she carried inside of her the Lord of Hosts, the leader of the

¹ *Against the Heresies*, 3:3:1.

² *Rufinus, A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*, 39

battle against sin and Satan's kingdom.

There is another interpretation for this verse. He calls every soul, who meets the Lord and carries His Holy Spirit and puts on Christ, by her name. By His light, she shines without any darkness; through His Blood she becomes as beautiful as the moon; and through His Cross, she conquers.

THE BRIDE'S DILIGENCE AT WORK

“I went down to the garden of nuts to see the verdure of the valley, to see whether the vine had budded and the pomegranates had bloomed. Before I was even aware, my soul had made me as the chariots of my noble people (or “Amminadab”). Return, return, O Shulamite, return, return, that we may look upon you! What would you see in the Shulamite as it were, the dance of the two camps?” (Song 6:11-13).

Since the Lord praised His bride, she could do nothing but go down to her inner valley to work in the garden of nuts. In a priestly manner, she revealed the budding of the nuts. Aaron's rod budded, blossomed and yielded ripe walnuts (Num. 17:8), which walnuts represent the Word of God that perpetually occupies the priest's heart. God presents the Word of God as a delicious meal so that his people may eat, be filled, and be fruitful. When the Lord's Word came to Jeremiah, He said, “Jeremiah, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘I see a branch of an almond tree.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am ready to perform My word’” (Jer. 1:11,12).

Origen also said the walnut symbolized the Word of God. It has a bitter outer layer, which dries up and falls. When the thick inner layer is broken, the sweet inner fruit may be eaten. **Origen** describes the bitter layer as the Jewish literal interpretation of the Word of God. He also described the inner layer as the moral interpretation that drives one to mortify the self and struggle to bloodshed until one enters the sweet spiritual interpretation which nourishes the soul, not only in this world, but also in the world to come.

The soul descended to her inner depth, as in a garden of the Word of God, where she sees the fruits of the valley. There in the heart, she realizes the spiritual meaning of the Word that satisfies her soul. She tells the Bridegroom, “I do not take credit for all your praises to me, but this a fruit of your divine work implanted in me by your divine hand.”

It is amazing that the Lord praising the faithful soul, does not drive her to pride, but rather pushes her to work. So she descends to see the Lord's vine inside her, and the trees which His hand had planted: did the vine bud? Did the pomegranate bloom?

Abiding in the Lord's garden and feeling His work inside her, she rejoices with the fruit, although it is still in the beginning. She communes with her Bridegroom saying, “There I give You my breasts¹.” In a sense, she is telling Him, “I render my love for Your love. You offered me Your breasts, the Old and the New Testaments, and now Your word has become

¹ *The Septuagint*

fruitful in me; so I consecrate them back to You. I offer my breasts, i.e. the two Testaments, for Your Book has become my Book!” But how does she offer Him her two breasts? She practically witnesses to the Word of God before others. When she gives to His brothers, it is like giving to the Bridegroom Himself; for He said, “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matt. 25:40).

Although all she sees in the vine is a bud; and all in the pomegranate, a bloom; yet she realizes that the Lord has made her like the chariots of noble people, or “Amminadab¹.” By the power of the Word she became God’s noble nation, who struggles against sin until bloodshed.

Her description as chariots of Amminadab has other interpretations:

1. Amminadab, the father of Nahshon (Ruth 4:20, Ex. 6:23), of the tribe of Judah (the tribe from which the Lord Jesus came). The secret of nobility is being related to the Lord Christ, the leader of the true chariots, by whom we conquer the world.

2. Amminadab, the son of Uzziel the Levite (1Chron. 15:3, 10), was one of the chiefs whom David chose to carry the Ark of the Covenant. In the New Testament, the soul carries the Lord Jesus Himself inside of her; this is the mystery of her sanctification and her fruitfulness.

3. Amminadab, the son of Kohath (1Chron. 6:24), was also one of the Levites whom David chose to sing and praise the Lord in the house of the Lord after the ark was settled there (1Chron. 6:31). In the same manner, the work of the soul united with Christ, her Bridegroom, is to continuously praise Him.

The Church, or the soul, as a member in the Church, struggles under the guidance of the Bridegroom, by whom she is sanctified, and she continuously praises and thanks Him!

In this atmosphere full of strife, joy and praise, the Bridegroom calls His bride saying:

“Return, return, O Shulamite, return, return, that we may look upon you!” (Song 6:13).

He called her “Shulamite.” which is the feminine of “Shalem, Salem, or Solomon”; as if the Lord Jesus, who is the true Solomon, calls her by His name. She bears His being inside of her, and she is called by His name.

He looks at her as she is in this state of struggle, but calls her “Shulamite.” that is, the one who brings peace! The mystery of her peace is the continuous return to the Lord. The Holy Trinity cares for her and never forgets her, saying, **“Return, return, that we may look upon you.”**

He returns and looks at those surrounding Him saying:

“What would you see in the Shulamite, as it were, the dance of the double camp?”

¹ meaning “my noble nation”

(Song 6:13).

The Lord Jesus loves His Church; and He loves the soul who is a member in the Church, for He sees her carrying His peace, as if she were an organized army ready for spiritual warfare!

In the Hebrew translation, the word “*double camp*” means two armies. The Lord describes His Church as bearing the dance of two armies, as a sign of victory and triumph. This reminds us of the joyful dance of Miriam the Prophetess, Aaron’s sister, and the other women as they praised God for delivering them from Pharaoh and his army (Ex. 15:20). Also, when David killed Goliath the giant, the women came out singing and dancing (1 Sam. 18:6).

C. HIS DESCRIPTION OF THE “SHULAMITE” BRIDE (Song 7:1-13)

The bride and the Bridegroom entered the garden, and experienced mutual love through their eternal spiritual union. The Bridegroom then describes his bride, the Church, differently than before, and communes with her saying:

1. “*How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O prince’s daughter!*” (Song 7:1).

He calls her the daughter of a prince, for she is related to Him. She is born from water and the Spirit, as a daughter to the Heavenly King, therefore she is called in the Psalm, “The royal daughter” (Ps. 45:13). After her fall she became wretched, but through her relationship with God, she became of a royal descent.

The bride praised her Bridegroom earlier (Song 5:11-15), and she described Him from head to toe, for she was fascinated by His glory and majesty. She said His head represented His Person, then, praised His feet.

Conversely, when the Bridegroom praised the bride, He starts with the feet, or her footsteps, then, tells of her head. There are two reasons for this: first, He wanted to emphasize that the cause of her beauty and her life, or her walk in the royal path, is her repentance and her return to the Bridegroom. Secondly, He wanted to give greater honor to the members of the body which seem less honorable (1 Cor. 12:23-24).

His talk of the sandals refer to the Church, as a community or as individual members, that has shod her feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15). The Bridegroom first concentrated in describing her footsteps toward the gospel of peace. She followed the same path of the Bridegroom, practicing her righteous life full of peace. This is the source of her spiritual beauty, she knew the way and entered through it! Thus, she carried the testimony to her Bridegroom, as St. Paul said, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!” (Rom. 10:15). The Prophets also said, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bring good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Is. 52:7), and “Behold, on the mountains, the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! O Judah, keep your appointed feasts, perform your vows, for the wicked one shall no more pass through you; He is utterly cut off” (Nah. 1:15).

When one bears the Word of God, one has the Source of inner peace for the self and for others. Then one may preach the word of salvation and the kingdom of God that was declared on the Cross. One pours joy into the hearts of believers; thus, they receive the spirit of victory and triumph over Satan.

2. “The curves of your thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a skillful workman” (Song 7:1).

The thighs carry the whole body and help it to move. The curves of the thighs refer to the unity of the whole Church in Christ Jesus through love. St. Paul said, “From the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16). Through this love the body grows and is strengthened (Col. 2:19), then, the message of the Church is achieved.

This unity is like chains that bind the human race together, in spite of various languages, races, and cultures. It also binds different generations so the Church may carry its catholic (universal) spirit throughout the entire world. This is the handiwork of the great Creator, the Holy Spirit, who grants fellowship to all.

3. “Your navel is a rounded goblet which lacks no blended beverage” (Song 7:2).

The navel is anointed with the Holy Myron oil in the Sacrament of Confirmation (Chrismation). The Holy Spirit sanctifies the outer members as well as the inner ones, so that one is consecrated completely to the Lord.

When the Lord spoke with Ezekiel about the abomination of the people’s sins He said, “As for your nativity, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut” (Ezek. 16:4). Before the child is independent from his mother, his navel cord must be cut. He no more needs nourishment from his mother’s blood. Similarly, when bridal couples start their new life, they must be cut from their parents’ houses to practice mature love in unity of the spirit. The Lord Jesus sees His Church the same way. On a heavenly level, her navel cord is cut, and her navel is like a rounded goblet. She bears the heavenly nature (a circle has neither beginning nor end), and does not seek the same food as before; for she does not seek worldly pleasure but she is truly satisfied with the Heavenly Bridegroom.

4. “Your waist is a heap of wheat set about with lilies” (Song 7:2).

The Church is the storehouse of spiritual food (wheat), or the living bread coming down from heaven (John 6:51) that satisfies the soul, in whom the Lord dwells. From outside, the Church may seem poor and hungry, but inside, she is stored with abundant blessings, as St. Paul said, “As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (2 Cor. 6:10). These blessings are surrounded by sweet-smelling lilies, for the fruits of the Church satisfy and attract souls.

5. “Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle” (Song 7:3).¹

6. “Your neck is like an ivory tower” (Song 7:4).

He spoke of her strength and endurance in temptation earlier, saying, “Your neck is

¹ Please refer to commentary on Song 4:5

like the tower of David, built for an armory” (Song 4:4). Now, however, he describes her neck as an ivory tower. We previously mentioned that the ivory refers to accepting suffering to the point of death, as does the elephant when ivory is extracted from it. Since the Faith of the Church is as high as a tower, the Church accepts various types of suffering until the point of death. She remains faithful and steadfast in the Faith, not deviating toward any strange doctrine or heresy, to preserve her priceless, apostolic faith! Her faith is like ivory, very white, with no impurities and very precious!

The bride’s neck also refers to the purity of the Church, for her head is continuously elevated, which cannot be humiliated by sin in the dust.

7. “Your eyes like the pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim” (Song 7:4).

Earlier, He compares her eyes to those of a dove, for the eyes are where the Holy Spirit is apparent and sanctifies her inner life. Now He describes her eyes as fish pools in Heshbon, which means that she can see as far as pools opened toward heaven. This openness reflects concern for the entire human race; for whoever looks at her, finds all the fish (community of believers) inside of her pools.

He did not use a fountain in this description, for she does not have any air bubbles (vanity and empty life); nor did he use the sea, for she is not burdened with worry. In simplicity of faith, she lives with a calm and spiritual outlook towards life.

The city of Heshbon was chosen here for the following reasons:

A. Heshbon means “account.” One with simple, far-sighted vision does not necessarily live without accountability or circumspection, but with wisdom he counts the cost.

B. The city of Heshbon is now called “Hesyan.” which is the remnants of a city on a hill, about 16 miles east of Jordan and 9 miles north of Madaba, which is between Arnok and Gabok. Sihon, the king of the Amorites, took this city to be the capital of his kingdom. Lying on the boundaries of Ruben and Gad (Num. 32:37, Josh. 13:26), Moses the Prophet gave it to the children of Reuben as a possession. Out of the 48 cities given to the Levites (Josh. 21:37, 1 Chron. 6:66), Heshbon was one of the six refuge cities. The eyes of the Church, or the spiritual vision of the believer, are like quiet pools and a refuge city, to which people go to enjoy the Lord Jesus Christ, our true Refuge (rest)¹.

C. The city of Heshbon was at the main crossroads where many multitudes passed by. This refers to the openness of the believer’s heart to enjoy the Lord Jesus, “The eternal Refuge.” That is why the Bridegroom continues His talk: **“By the gate of Bath Rabbim.”** The bath was a unit of measure the Jews used to measure liquid. Rabbim, meaning “the daughter

¹ Refer to the cities of the shelter and their symbols to the Lord Jesus in the “Book of Numbers.” by St. George Church of Alexandria, p. 45, by the author.

of the multitudes.” refers to the believer’s becoming a son of the multitudes, or the believer’s enjoying of spiritual visions and calling everyone to share with him this vision.

8. “Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon which looks toward Damascus” (Song 7:4).

This statement reveals the bravery of the Church in witnessing the truth and not fearing evil. Although she is meek and humble, she is strong and mighty.

The nose refers to the sense of smell, which discerns between the nice aroma of Christ and the vain temporal aroma of the world. The true believer has a nose like a tower, who can discern between an enemy and a friend, between what is for edification and what is for destruction. In looking toward Damascus, the commercial city caring for temporal affairs refers to the strength of the Church attacking all temptations.

Since the believer has to have such a nose, how much more the shepherd should not have a marred face (Lev. 21:18). **Fr. Gregory the Great** said: [The one with a marred face is the one who is unable to discern. With the sense of smell, we can discern between sweet aroma and bad aroma. This sense can refer to the sense of discerning between virtue and vice. That is why in praising the Church, the bride, it was mentioned “*Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon.*” The holy Church can discern between different temptations, and knows in advance, from its tower, the battles of evil about to take place.^{1]}

9. “Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel, and the hair of your head is like purple; the king is held captive by its tresses” (Song 7:5).²

The head of the Church is elevated like Mount Carmel, the mountain which is 2000 feet high, not in human pride, but in the power of victory over the love of the world and all its storms.

Carmel means “the land of the garden,” which is characterized by lush green and plentiful fruits and forests³. Hence, the head of the Church is not empty but fruitful, where no vain thoughts can stay, but carries glorious deeds and presents fruits which fill many.

Mount Carmel was in the south of Brook Shihor (Josh. 19:26), which carried glorious memories. There, Elijah the Prophet stood against all the priests of the Baal and told them not to falter between two opinions, either to follow the Lord God or the Baal! There, he killed all the priests of the Baal (1Kgs. 18:17-40). Thus, when the Church rises toward the heavenly matters, she does not know how to falter between the love of God and the love of the world, but she mortifies every deviation and leads everyone toward the truth.

On top of Mount Carmel, Elijah the Prophet bowed down on the ground and worshiped God asking for rain (1 Kgs. 18:42-46). Likewise, in the Church, the believers worship with contrite hearts, so that God may rain the waters of His grace in their hearts,

¹ The author, *The Shepherd's Love*, 1965 ed., p. 657-658

² *The Septuagint*

³ *Is. 33:9, 35:2, Amos 1:2, Nah.1:4*

until they repent and bring forth fruits.

His disciple, Elisha the Prophet, visited Mount Carmel (2 Kgs. 2:25) when the widow met him and he raised her only son (2 Kgs. 4:25).

These are some of the memories about Mount Carmel, to which the head of the Church was compared (Ps. 27:6). However, the hair refers to the community of believers. It is like purple, which is the attire of kings, as well as it is a symbol of the blood of Christ when we unite with the Bridegroom the King. All the members carry the royal characteristics, through the sanctification with the precious blood.

Before this righteous, wonderful scene, the Bridegroom said, "The king is held captive by its tresses," as if He does not want to forsake her. This is what the Psalmist David ascertained when he said, "For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation; This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it" (Ps. 132:13-14).

10. *"How fair and how pleasant you are, O love, with your delights! This stature of yours is like a palm tree, and your breasts like its clusters. I said, 'I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of its branches.' Let now your breasts be like clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and the roof of your mouth like the best wine. The wine goes down smoothly for my beloved, moving gently the lips of sleepers"* (Song 7:6-9).

At the end of His description, He communes with her saying, "*How fair and how pleasant you are!*" According to the origin of this statement, He said, "*How beautiful you are!*" The beauty of the Bridegroom was reflected on her, and by living inside her, she had a special beauty! This beauty was mingled with the fruit, for which He asks and finds inside her. He looked at her and found her resembling the palm tree and her breasts like the clusters.

The stature of the Church is like a palm tree and she is straight forward. She advances to reach "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). David the Psalmist said, "The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon" (Ps. 92:12). The seventy apostles were symbolized with the seventy palm trees (Ex. 15:27, Num. 33:9), and the temple of God was decorated with palm trees (1 Kgs. 6:29, Ex. 40:22, 41:18). In eternity, the believers carry palm branches as a sign of victory (Rev. 7). A palm tree, with its hidden deep roots, meets the fountains of living water and presents its fruits apparent to many especially in poor regions. Its branches are used in welcoming kings, whom they wave as a sign of victory and triumph. In this analogy of the Church and the palm tree, the Heavenly Bridegroom sees in His Church the hidden deep union with Him, and the fruits presented to the hungry world and the victorious royal life!

The Bridegroom rejoices with His fruitful bride, so He rises to the palm tree to reap its fruits. He does not send any of the servants to reap its fruits, but He Himself rises to pluck the fruits with His hands. Here, He declares the honor and greatness of the human soul; for her sake, He descended to the world to be united with her, and now He arises above her. She rose after she fell, and by her rising with her Bridegroom to share His glory in heaven, He

sees Himself ascending on His palm tree to pluck her fruits, which is the work of His Holy Spirit!

He holds her high branches, as if her victory is His victory, and in her rising, she glorifies His act of salvation. We hold the branches, for we conquer with the Lord's help. He holds our victory, for it is for the glory of His holy name. He rejoices for every triumph we achieve!

The kinds of fruits are:

A. He sees her breasts like clusters of vine. Earlier, we mentioned that the breasts of the Church are the Old and New Testaments, for they stir the spirit of joy in the lives of believers.

B. He sees her nose as apples. Apples symbolize the divine incarnation, as if she continuously smells the aroma of the Incarnate God.

C. The roof of her mouth like the best wine refers to the words of continuous joy, which makes the Bridegroom Himself rejoice for her joy, then the signs of joy appear on His lips and teeth.



Hearing the praise of the Bridegroom to His bride, the bride responds, "All the good qualities with which you have described me, are from You and for You, O My Beloved."

"I am my Beloved's, and His desire is toward me" (Song 7:10).

In the second chapter, when the bride looked at the Crucified One, she realized His love when He offered Himself on the Cross, so she presented her life to Him, saying, "***My Beloved is mine and I am His, He feeds His flock among the lilies" (Song 2:16).***

In the sixth chapter, she asks Him to enter His garden, that is her heart, to accept her love and receive her life, with all its inner energies, as a love response for His work for her, saying, "***I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine. He feeds His flock among the lilies" (Song 6:3).***

However, here she is elevated to the eternity, not to offer her life as a love response, but to reveal His desire toward her, "***I am my Beloved's, and His desire is toward me" (Song 7:10).*** She is telling Him that she knew the mystery of His praising her, and that He seeks her to be with Him and to be the subject of His yearning forever!

This time, she does not tell Him, "My Beloved is mine," but she is astonished in front of His joy and yearning for her. "For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation" (Ps. 132:13).

In front of this great love of the Bridegroom toward her, she calls Him saying,

"Come, my Beloved, let us go forth to the field; let us lodge in the villages. Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine has budded, whether the grape blossoms are open, and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love" (Song 7:11-12).

Realizing His love for her, the bride asks Him to go out with her alone to the field and lodge in the village, away from the hustle of the city, where they can pluck the fruits.

THE FIELD

Which field is this, where she invited her Bridegroom to go out with her? This is the vast field of divine work, which the Lord Jesus has said, "Lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest" (John 4:35). The Lord Himself calls us for work; however, we cannot go out without Him, but with Him, for He is the owner of the vineyard, and He grants it growth. St. Paul said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building" (1Cor. 3:6-9).

Cain went out to the field by himself, but the Lord was not with him, and there he could not endure Abel the righteous, so he killed him. When the Lord rebuked him, he answered, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). Then He cursed the land and said, "So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth" (Gen. 4:11-12). The bride refuses to go out to the field unless she is accompanied by the Bridegroom, then her heart will be widened with love to her brother and she feels the responsibility toward him, then the land will be blessed because of her.

The field reminds us of the meeting, full of love, between Isaac and Rebecca. Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening, and he lifted his eyes and saw Rebecca, his bride, on the camel. When she saw him, she dismounted from the camel and met him. The bride desires to go out with him in the field of meditations, where the Heavenly Bridegroom reveals His divine mysteries. Then, she realizes His unutterable glories. He accepts her to be His bride forever, and she lives in His eternal bosom.

Also, the field can mean the life of continuous strife. In the book of Proverbs, it is mentioned, "He who tills his land will be satisfied with bread" (Prov. 12:11). One cannot struggle to be satisfied unless the Lord works with him and in him.

LET US GO FORTH!

The bride says, "*let us go forth.*" In the Lord's talk to His bride, she discovered a fact which she had not realized before, which is that God is not isolated in heaven, as Aristotle said that God moved the world but stopped to control it. On the contrary, God is dynamic, and continuously in motion with dealing with man. God is love, not isolated; He came for us, forsaking His glories, so we may not fear Him, but love Him and accept Him. He came to us and dwelt among us, and for our sake, He became a slave! He came outside the camp

carrying our reproach on His shoulders! He reveals in us beauty, which is a reflection of His beauty on us and the fruit of His love which surrounds us. Now the soul seeks Him saying, “*Let us go forth;*” she realizes that without Him, she loves herself and becomes captive to her “ego.” She pleads with her Bridegroom to release her from her ego, so she may live with Him in the field of love, seeking what is for others.

This is a living picture of a true marital love, where each partner does not captivate the other partner inside him, but rather he opens the heart for the other partner and appreciates him as an independent person. Sometimes, we see that one partner seeks what is for himself, and does not share with the other partner, but rather exploits him to satisfy his own psychological, social, and biological needs. It is a selfish love where one partner chokes the will of the other partner and his freedom, thinking that he loves him!

When the bride opens her heart to the bridegroom, she does not want to exploit him, as **St. John Chrysostom** said, and to shape him the way she wants, where he fulfills all her requests, fills all her needs, and solves her problems. But she goes out of herself seeking him and submitting to his will. If she asks him to solve her problem or to bless her work, this becomes as a result of their meeting together and not as the purpose of that meeting, in other words, God becomes priority in her life; she loves Him for Himself and not just for His gifts!

LET US LODGE IN THE VILLAGES!

What are these villages, where she wants to lodge there with her Bridegroom?

1. She means her inner life with its various aspects. She tells him to get away from the outward signs of the city, and to enter her heart, thought, emotion, and inner energies. She asks him to lodge in the village, so both of them may reveal the fruits of the Holy Spirit inside her, where the vine has budded, the grape blossoms are open and the pomegranates are in bloom.

2. This may also be a call to serve in the villages, for many may like to serve in rich cities; however, here the bride, which is the Church, is obligated to minister in the villages where the poor and the simple live.

3. Here the call is to lodge in different villages, that is, to accompany him from one village to another. Her heart does not rest in the city or in a certain village, but rather she unites with her Bridegroom while ministering in every place. Hence, the believer does not find his complete rest until he preaches to the entire human race. In the first chapter (Song 1:6), the soul rebuked the daughters of Jerusalem that they made her a keeper of the vineyards, but now she asks to rise early to go to the various vineyards. She went out of her selfishness to rise early to the vineyards, to work with the True Vinedresser. It is amazing that she not only wants to serve others, but she hastens to serve them, “get up early.” She realized that the time is short and the days are evil (Eph. 5:16).

The bride then says, ***“There I will give you my love.”*** There, in the field of ministry, in the field of the Lord, in the villages, in the vineyards, she presents her unity with Christ, that is her love to the Lord. She presents her breasts (the two Testaments), that is the word of God, being the food which satisfies the soul.

Finally, she tells him,

“The mandrakes give off a fragrance, and at our gates are pleasant fruits, all manner, new and old, which I have laid up for you, my Beloved” (Song 7:13).

The mandrakes are one of the most beautiful flowers which refer to the unity between the husband and the wife. Because of the mandrakes, Rachel and Leah had a fight (Gen. 30:14).

The bride concludes her talk by saying that the fragrance of the marital love is apparent, between the Heavenly Bridegroom and the bride, and the time has come to perfect this unity.

This unity with a nice fragrance carries pleasant fruits. It comes new every day and is old with deep roots. These are the fruits of the word of God, working in the souls of the believers. The precious fruits appear at the doors of the believers, who are members in the holy bride.

This is what the bride, the mother, presents to Christ, the eternal Bridegroom. She presents the fruits of her members through the Holy Spirit!

6

THE WORKING BRIDE

(Songs 8:1-14)

St. Ambrose said that when the intimacy between the bride and her Bridegroom was ascertained, the bride started negotiating to take care of her younger sister¹, who represents her unbelieving human race. In the mean time, the bride was yearning to be united with her Bridegroom. Thus, the conclusion of this song is to let the believer serve others, besides his yearning to the Paradise. These two desires may seem contradictory, but in truth, they compliment one another and go side by side. The believer lives with an inflamed heart to preach to every person who has not experienced the salvation, and in the mean time, has the desire to depart to be with Christ face to face.

At the beginning of the song, the bride insisted to be in fellowship with Him, wishing to be **alone** with Him, one time **in the wilderness**, a second time **in the garden**, a third time **in the field** and in the village, and a fourth time **in her mother's house** to let him drink from the wine of her love, as He has quenched her thirst from His eternal love.

“Oh, that you were like my brother, who nursed at my mother's breasts! If I should find you outside, I would kiss you; I would not be despised, I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother². She³ who used to instruct me⁴, I would cause you to drink of spiced wine, of the juice of my pomegranate” (Song 8:1-2).

This chapter is a talk about the ministry, for the basis of the ministry is the servant's enjoyment with the Bridegroom of the Church, so when he meets his brothers, they smell in him the fragrance of “the life.” and accept membership in the Church, the body of the living Christ.

We also notice the following:

1. She wants to accept him as a brother, the one who nurses from her mother's breasts. According to the old eastern traditions, no one was allowed to kiss another publicly, even a husband and a wife. The only exception was relatives from the first degree, like parents and brothers and sisters. That is why she wants him as a brother who nurses from her mother's breasts, so she can take him in her arms and appear with him publicly and kiss him publicly, and no one can blame her.

¹ *The Holy Bible: The Jesuit edition, Beirut*

² *The Septuagint version*

³ *The Jesuit edition*

⁴ *Not in the Septuagint version*

2. The secret of wishing that he is her brother “*Oh, that you were like my brother.*” declares the desire of the Church of the Old Testament, who looked at God as if He were outside, “*If I should find you outside.*” She asks that He descends to the level of the human race, so He becomes the Older Brother who shares our nature and dwells among us. Then, we get to know Him and kiss Him publicly and enter Him in our inner life.

3. This is the talk of the New Testament Church. In the New Testament, the believers who realize that Christ is their Lord, their Older Brother and Bridegroom, accept Him and kiss Him with the kisses of the true worship. They make Him enter in the house of their mother, the Heavenly Jerusalem, to live with Him, face to face, in His Fatherly bosom.

4. “*She who used to instruct me*” reveals the nature of the true Christian and the faithful servant who always wants to learn. The soul who meets her Bridegroom and lives with Him in the house of her mother, the Church or the Heavenly Jerusalem, and there she lets Him drink of her spiced wine and the juice of pomegranate, is always humble and wanting to learn. She needs Him to teach her His heavenly mysteries, so in eternity, she sees Him new in her eyes. In eternity, there is no time, and there she may learn something new about His divine mysteries.

The true servant continuously stays in the Church, the house of his mother, at the feet of the Savior, desiring to learn, even if he is called “*teacher*” or “*father*” to many! **St. Ambrose** said: [I desire to struggle to learn so I may be able to teach, for there is One Master (God) who alone does not learn what He teaches to others.¹] **St. Irenaeus** said, [The one who desires to learn deserves to be praised, even though he does not have a teacher².]

5. Learning in the Church, the mother’s house, is not mere mental knowledge or by rote doctrines, but in essence, it is practicing “the life with Christ.” That is why the bride says, “*I would cause you to drink of spiced wine, or the juice of my pomegranate.*” This is what I want to learn, to repay Your love.

6. When one accompanies the Lord in the Church and sits to learn at the feet of the Savior, he presents spiced wine mingled with the juice of pomegranate. What does that mean? Wine is a symbol of a life of joy and happiness. The Church is the joyful house, which receives the repentant sinners, where God gives them inner joy, which all the temporal events cannot remove. Pomegranate refers to the life of strife. Pomegranate trees are full of thorns and the skin is bitter, and inside are many seeds, but its juice is delicious and sweet. Likewise, in Christianity, joy is mingled with labor and spiritual strife until the end.

¹ By the author, “*The Pastoral Love.*” p. 700.

² *The precious reference*, p. 701.

Finally, the bride is ascertaining her unity with the Bridegroom and her close attachment to Him, so she says,

“His left hand is under my head, and His right hand embraces me. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases” (Song 8:3,4).

These are the same words which she uttered when she declared that she was lovesick¹.

She wanted to emphasize that although she offers all her life to serve Him, yet this cannot hinder her being occupied with Him and being in continuous fellowship with Him. She assures that she cannot permit anyone to hinder her unity with Him. True ministry does not occupy the servant to the extent that he neglects his Christ, but on the contrary, he goes into deep fellowship with Him.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE WORLD ABOUT HIM

The world, looking at the Church, who is the body of Christ who witnesses to Him, says:

“Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her Beloved?” (Song 8:5)²

Previously, the daughters of Jerusalem uttered similar words (Song 3:6), when they saw the amazing change in the life of the believers. Baptism has granted them a white heavenly garment and they enjoyed true dependence on the Beloved who lifted them up from the wilderness of this world to enter His heavens. Now the world is amazed about the testimony of the bride working before them. She does not marvel because of the multitude of the work but rather because of the fruits in her life. The servant, appearing with the white clothes of baptism, is the best testimony of the Bridegroom.

St. Augustine commented on that by saying: [She was not white from the beginning, but she became white, for it is written, ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow’ (Is. 1:18).³] He also wrote, [Who is this white coming up in the splendor of that light and not in a vain color?⁴]

St. Ambrose said, [She was previously black; how come she became white all of a sudden? (This is through baptism).⁵]

St. Augustine justifies the source of her continuing white by saying, [She who became white behaves nicely, for she is depending on the One who makes her white; for she is trusting the Lord Jesus, who said to His disciples, ‘Without Me, you can do nothing’ (John 15:5).⁶]

¹ Refer to commentary on Song 2:5-7

² The Septuagint Version

³ On Ps. 45: 24.

⁴ Sermon on the N. T. Lesson 45:5

⁵ On Myst. 1:36

⁶ On Grace & Freewill 13

The world was not the only one amazed, but also the heavenly creatures were amazed, seeing what man has achieved through uniting with Christ in the baptismal font. **St. Cyril of Jerusalem** described man in baptism by saying: [The angels dance around you, while saying, ‘Who is this coming up white, leaning upon her Beloved?’ The Lord adopted the soul who was a slave and made her His beloved.] The heavenly hosts repeat cry: “*I awakened you under the apple tree. There your mother brought you forth; there she who bore you brought you forth*” (Song 8:5)¹.]

This is the mystery of her rising from the wilderness, all white leaning upon her Beloved. Her mother has bore her under the apple tree.

Previously, we have seen that the apple tree refers to the divine Incarnation, for the Lord appeared “*like an apple tree among the trees of the woods*” (Song 2:3). Through the divine Incarnation the Church, the mother, was able to bear children in baptism, who are able to rise toward the heavenly matters through God Incarnate. This is the new birth and its effect in the life of the believer.

Here he connects between the divine Incarnation and our spiritual birth, for the Lord was born physically, so we may be born spiritually. This was the cause of celebrating Christmas and Epiphany on one day in the early Church, for the two feasts are related in the mind of the Church.

NOT BEING OCCUPIED IN THE SERVICE ON THE EXPENSE OF THE BRIDEGROOM

The working bride assures her cleaving to her Bridegroom, although she is occupied with serving her relatives. She says:

“Set me as a seal upon Your heart, as a seal upon Your arm; for love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave;² its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised” (Song 8:6,7).

Since the soul has enjoyed the new birth in the sacrament of baptism, and in the sacrament of confirmation, she is sealed with the seal of the Holy Spirit and she belongs to the Bridegroom, carrying His seal and characteristics, then she dearly appreciates that seal which is on all the sides of her life. This new life has inflamed her love toward Him, so she asks Him not only to accept her in His arms nor take her in His eternal bosom, but she desires to cleave to Him as the seal on His heart and on His arm. Nothing separates her from Him, even death!

She asks to be a seal on the heart of the Bridegroom, not only to take a place in his heart, but to occupy the whole heart, as if God is not occupied except by her. She desires not

¹ *Catechetical Lectures 3:16*

² *The Septuagint Version.*

only that her name is carved on His heart, but that all her life is sealed on Him, so no one can erase her name from God's face.

In the book of Isaiah, the Lord says, "See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands" (Is. 49:16). However, here the bride desires to be a seal on His arm.

Hence, the bride rests in God's heart, the center of emotion and love, and upon His arm, the center of labor. She rests forever on the throne of His love and power! This is the kind of intimacy that the Church has with her Bridegroom!

The source of this strong intimacy is the love which God has poured in our hearts toward Him. Therefore, she says, "*Love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave.*" She tells him, "Death is easy, and it cannot separate me from my love to you. Plenty of water and all the rivers cannot quench love. As St. Paul said, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress, or persecution or famine, or nakedness or peril, or sword?... For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is to in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:35-39).

St. Augustine¹ said: [The storms of the world or the trials cannot quench the flames of love, that is why it is written, '*Love is as strong as death.*'] When death comes, no one can resist it, even by medicine nor by any art; in the same manner, the world cannot stand against love. Death is strong in destruction, but love is strong in rescuing (salvation). Through love, many died to the world to live for God.]

Amidst the world, the bride presented to her Bridegroom what the world cannot resist; she presented her heart to the One who finds His delight in her. She did not only present her service, struggle and vigil, but first presented her heart, that is "all her love." to whom it is written, "If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised." She is repeating what St. Paul said, "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3).

She is not like the wife who thinks that she is well serving her husband, but her heart is not with him! First, she has to present her heart, then she can not but continuously serve him!

HER LOVE TO HER BRIDEGROOM INFLAMES HER LOVE TO HER BROTHERS

When she presented all her love to the Lord, her heart widened to serve her brothers, so she said,

¹ On Ps. 48: 13.

“We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister in the day when she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; and if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar. I am a wall, and my breasts like towers; then I became in his eyes as one who found peace” (Song 8:8-10).

These simple expressions carry a constitution to the life of the ministry which can be summarized as follows:

1. To the Church, unbelievers represent “*the little sister.*” She is not only her sister, but rather a sister to the Bridegroom, too. Through this outlook, the Church does not deal with unbelievers, or even the attackers or atheists, as a teacher deals with his students, but rather as an older brother who is compassionate to the younger. The younger sister may err, but the older sister will endure her because she is the older, and she will give her an excuse because the younger sister does not have breasts, that is, she does not know yet the truth in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.

2. The reason for the weakness of the younger sister is that the younger sister does not have breasts. So the older sister has to present the word of God, that is both the Old and New Testaments, to the younger sister so she may taste the word of God and like it. This is the work of the evangelist Church, presenting the living word of God to every person.

3. What does the Church do to the younger sister who has no breasts, to whom the Bridegroom has proposed? She will treat her very affectionately and compassionately. She will not reproach her nor hurt her feelings, but offers her all the help needed. If she is a wall, she will build upon her a silver tower; and if she is a door, she will enclose her with boards of cedar. She supports her with positive reinforcement.

The older sister offers her life to the younger sister, as if telling her, “If you need a wall to surround you and two towers to lift you up, I can serve you. I can be your wall and my breasts are like two towers. Accept the Lord Jesus living inside you as a wall to you and the Holy Bible as two breasts who can fill you.”

4. It is not enough that the older sister treats the younger sister, but she has to build upon her a silver tower and surround her with boards of cedar, which means, she has to support her until she becomes a servant in the Lord’s vine. The Church’s duty is to enter the unbeliever to the faith and to drive him to a practical testimony to the word of God. He, then becomes like a silver tower (silver refers to the word of God, refined like silver) and the tower refers to the public testimony.

In the eyes of everyone, the Church finds true peace in the life of the human race.

THE FINAL CONVERSATION

“Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon; he leased the vineyard to keepers; everyone was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver. My own vineyard is before

me. You, O Solomon, may have a thousand, and those who keep its fruit two hundred. You who dwell in the gardens, the companions listen for your voice, let me hear it! Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices” (Song 8:11-14).

1. The Church, introducing her Bridegroom to the world and calling everyone to enjoy the Lord, clarifies an important concept in the ministry: the vine is the Lord’s vineyard, and He is the One who works in it through the lives of the keepers. He says, “*Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon.*” The vine is not hers but belongs to “the True Solomon.”

St. Augustine said, [The Lord cultivates us, his vine. The crops are the work in our hearts, and He does not do it with human hands but He is the One who works in us, as the farmer works in his field. What does the Bible say? ‘I am the vine, you are the branches’ (John 15:5), ‘I am the true vine and My Father is the vinedresser’ (John 15:1). What does the vinedresser do? He cultivates his field. The Father, the Vinedresser has a field which He cultivates, and expects fruits from it. The Lord Jesus said, ‘A certain man planted a vineyard and leased it to vinedressers’ (Luke 20:9). These are obligated to present fruits in due season¹.]

Commenting on St. Paul’s words, “We are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9), **St. John Chrysostom** says, [The field does not belong to the one who plants in it, but to its owner².]

2. The word “Baal” means “lord or king.” and the word “Hamon” means “multitudes”³. The vine of the Lord, the King of Peace, is the human race. He becomes their King to escort them into His heavens.

3. The Lord leased this vine to keepers. “*He leased the vineyards to keepers*” (Song 8: 11). Still, He cannot stop but to care for his vineyard affectionately. He said, “*My own vineyard is before me*” (Song 8:12). He says, “I keep it night and day” (Is. 27:3). He, generously, gives it everything, for He says, “What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done it?” (Is. 5:4).

4. What are the fruits that the King of peace requests? “*Everyone has to bring for his fruit a thousand pieces of silver*” (Song 8:11). He asks that each keeper presents a thousand pieces of silver, for thousand symbolizes heaven and the heavenly matters⁴. God does not request from his servants except the heavenly and spiritual fruits. This is the work of the Church and the message of God’s ministers, to enter those whom they serve into the heavenly

¹ By the author: *The Pastoral Love*, p. 13.

² The previous reference, p. 14.

³ *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 83.

⁴ By the author, *Book of Rev.*, 1979, p. 92.

life.

5. Since the fruits are presented to the Lord's favor, what, then, is the servant's reward? "*You, O Solomon may have a thousand, and those who keep its fruit two hundreds.*" Probably, he meant by two hundred, that one hundred is the men of the Old Testament and one hundred is for the men of the New Testament. Ministers in both testaments enjoy the plentiful fruits, that is why St. Paul called his people "my joy and crown" (Phil. 4:1).

6. Since the Church works in the Lord's vine and all the workers work for the glory of God, who has the thousand, and for themselves, who have the two hundreds. they become like those who are sitting in gardens. The difficult road and the narrow way change to an easy yoke and a light burden. While on earth, they live as if they are in joyful gardens. Hence, the Lord communes with His bride by saying, "*You who dwell in the gardens, the companions listen for your voice, let me hear it!*" "The voice of your love is no more suppressed, but those who dwell on earth as well as in heaven, rejoice when they hear it. Now come to me so I may hear your practical and joyful voice. Come, so you may inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world."

These are the words of the Bridegroom who brings joy to His bride's heart, and assures her that whatever she does, will receive its fruits in eternity!

Joyfully, she answers Him, "*Make haste, my Beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices*" (Song 8:14). Previously, we have explained why the Church compares her Bridegroom with a gazelle or a young stag. Here, she responds to His call, "Make haste, and come quickly for I am longing to You. "Since you call me to meet You so you can hear My voice, I also need to meet You."

His haste coming on the mountains of spices reminds us of the spices with which the Lord Jesus was buried. He meets with her when she is buried with Him, for every day she dies with Him so she may live forever with Him.

This is the conclusion of the Song: she repeats what the bride says in the Book of Revelation, "Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction to the Song of Songs</i>	5
Status Among the Jews, Divine Inspiration, Not About Carnal Love, Author and Title, Characteristics, The Book for the Mature, The Book of Heavenly Wedding, The Book of the Church Sacraments, The Book of Spiritual Virginity, Christ in the Book of Song of Songs, Characters in the Book, Divisions of the Book.	
I. THE PERSONALITY OF THE BRIDEGROOM (1:1 – 2:7)	20
A. The Suffering Messiah (1:1-1:6)	21
The Kisses of the Divine Mouth, Love Better Than Wine, Anointed with Good Ointments, The Name Poured Forth, The Love of the Virgins for Him, The Divine Chamber, Between Being Dark and Lovely, Between The Sun of Temptation and the Sun of Righteousness, The Inner War.	
B. The Messiah as the Shepherd (1:7-1:12)	35
The Subject of Care, At Noon, Meeting with the Shepherd At Noon, Strange Pastures, The Method of Shepherding, A Call for Labor and Strife, The Fruits of Shepherding.	
C. The Messiah as the King (1:12-1:16)	45
The Spikenard of the Queen, A Cluster of Henna Blooms, The Mystery of Her Beauty, “You have Dove’s Eyes,” The Mystery of the Unity, “Our Bed is Green,” Workers in the Royal Palace.	
D. The Messiah as the Beloved (2:1-2:7)	53
The Need for the Beloved, In the House of Perfect Love.	
II. THE FIANCÉ SEEKS HIS BELOVED (2:8-3:11)	62
A. He Himself Descends to Her (2:8-14)	62
Meeting on the Mountain, Comparing the Gazelle and the Young Stag, His Standing Behind Our Wall, The Call To Resurrection, The Resurrection: Out From the Cold and Into the Warmth.	
B. He Warns Her from the Deceivers (2:15)	76
What Are These Little Foxes?, The Little Foxes in the Holy Bible, The Hunters of the Little Foxes.	
C. The Wedding Banquet (2:16-3:11)	79
What Are These Little Foxes?, The Little Foxes in the Holy Bible, The Hunters of the Little Foxes, The Mutual Agreement, The Shepherd Among the Lilies, The Banquet of the Banquet of Resurrection Or the Banquet of Eternity, Knowing the Risen From the Dead, The Risen Bride, Ascension From the Wilderness, Pillars of Perfumed Smoke,	

The Time of the Wedding Banquet, Call To the Banquet

III. HEAVENLY MATRIMONY (4:1-16)	94
A. The Beautiful Risen Bride (4:1-15)	94
Call To Labor and Strife, Call To the Banquet, The Result of the Sufferings of Strife.	
B. The Bride Speaks with her Bridegroom (4:16)	113
IV. MARITAL LIFE (5:1-9)	115
A. The Beginning of Marital Life (5:1)	115
B. The Shadows of Marital Life (5:2-5)	119
C. Love is Regained by the Cross (5:6-9)	123
V. MUTUAL MARITAL LOVE (5:10-7:13)	128
A. The Bride Praises Her Bridegroom (5:10-16)	128
B. Conversation in the Garden (6:1-13)	135
Call To Labor and Strife, With His Bride in the Garden. The Bride's Diligence At Work.	
C. His Description of the "Shulamite" Bride (7:1-13)	146
The Field, Let Us Go Forth!, Let Us Lodge in the Villages!	
VI. THE WORKING BRIDE (8:1-14)	157
The Testimony of the World About Him, Not Being Occupied in the Service on the Expense of the Bridegroom, Her Love To Her Bridegroom Inflames Her Love To Her Brothers, The Final Conversation	