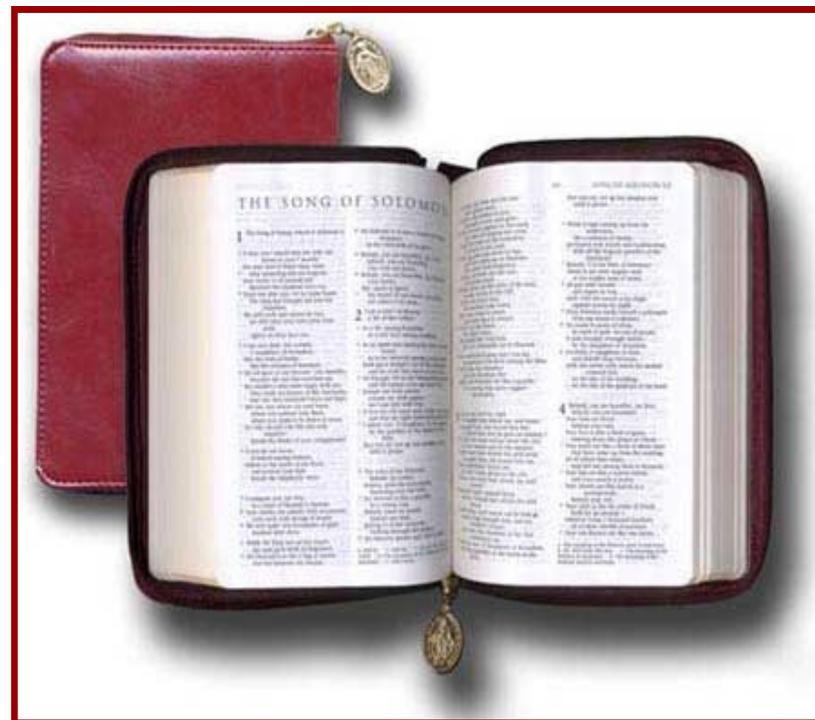




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SONG OF SONGS—47

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE CHURCH AND ITS MEMBERS
THE VIRTUES THAT LEAD TO
CONTEMPLATION***

The Song of Songs is the story of the love between God and the soul. God is deeply in love with us, and wills our love in return. This love between the soul and God, which is the most intimate love possible, is expressed in the analogy of the bride (the Church) and the bridegroom (Jesus), where the intimacy of love is especially expressed. Commentary on the Song of Songs is presented by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and takes the form of sermons on the meaning of the various allegories used in the psalms and are presented in the order Saint Bernard composed the commentaries. Introductory comments are made by the Early Church Fathers.

The Church and its Ministers - The Virtues that Lead to Contemplation

Our bed is covered with flowers; the beams of our houses are of cedar, the paneling of cypress." She is singing her marriage-song, describing in beautiful language the marriage bed and bridal suite. She invites the bridegroom to repose: for the better thing is to remain at ease and be with Christ; but necessity drives one forth to help those who are to be saved. So now when she feels that the opportunity presents itself, she announces that the bridal suite has been furnished, and pointing to the bed with her finger she invites, as I have said, the Beloved to rest there. Like the disciples on the way to Emmaus she cannot contain the ardor in her heart, but entices him to be the guest of her soul, compels him to spend the night with her. With Peter she says: "Lord it is good for us to be here."

2. Let us now seek the spiritual content of these words. And indeed in the Church the "bed" where one reposes is, in my opinion, the cloisters and monasteries, where one lives undisturbed by the cares of the world and the anxieties of life. This bed is seen to be adorned with flowers when the conduct and life of the brothers brightly reflect the examples and rules of the Fathers, as if strewn with sweet smelling flowers. By "houses" understand the ordinary communities of Christians. Those who enjoy high office, the Christian leaders of both orders, strongly bind them together with laws justly imposed, as beams bind the walls, lest living by their own law and will, they should fall apart from each other like tilting walls and tottering fences, and thus the whole building fall to the ground and be destroyed. The paneling however, which is firmly attached to the beams, and impressively adds to the beauty of the house, seems to me to designate the courteous and disciplined behavior of a well-trained clergy, who carry out their duties correctly. For how shall the clerical orders stand and fulfill their duties unless they are sustained, as by beams, by the beneficence and munificence of those who govern and protect by their power?

**Cleanse your conscience
of every defilement of anger
and quarreling,
and murmuring
and envy.**

8. A spiritual house is what each one should recognize himself to be, provided he walks in the Spirit and not in the flesh. "The temple of God is sacred," says the Apostle, "and you are that temple." Therefore, Brothers, take care of this spiritual building that you are, lest perhaps when it begins to rise upward it should totter and fall because it was not supported and fastened together with strong beams. Take care to supply it with girders that are incorruptible and immovable, with the fear of the Lord which remains for ever; with patience of which it is written that "the patience of the poor shall not perish forever;" with forbearance also, that endures inflexibly no matter what the weight of the building, and reaches out to the endless ages of the life of the blessed. The Savior said in the Gospel: "He who endures to the end will be saved." But before all else take care of charity which will never come to an end, for love is strong as death, jealousy as relentless as the grave. Study then how to cover these girders and bind them with woods that are also precious and beautiful, provided they are available, to form a paneling for the embellishment of the house. Such are words of wisdom or knowledge, prophecy, the gift of healing, the interpretation of words. These are more fittingly regarded as ornaments than as necessary for salvation. Concerning them I have no command, but I give my opinion: because it is evident that timbers of this kind must be arduously sought for, are discovered with difficulty, and wrought into shape with risk - for in these times especially they are found to be rare products on our earth - I advise and admonish that they be not too eagerly sought for. The paneling should rather be prepared from other timbers which, though less splendid in appearance are proved nevertheless to be no less strong and moreover are found more easily and safely.

9. Would that I possessed an abundance of these trees that grow so thickly in the Bridegroom's garden, the Church: peace, goodness, kindness, joy in the Holy Spirit, cheerful compassion, open-hearted alms-giving, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. Does it not seem to you that the house whose ceiling you perceive to be adequately and skillfully covered with these timbers is adorned richly enough? "Lord, I love the beauty of your house." I desire that you will always give me wood like this, so that I may exhibit my conscience to you as a room that is always adorned: both my own conscience and my neighbor's. With this I shall be content. And there will be those who will wish to follow my guidance in this matter, because I think that it contents you, too; the rest I leave to the holy apostles and to apostolic men. As for you, dearly beloved, although you may not have those rarer timbers, nevertheless if you have these less splendid ones, be confident. Approach with full trust to that chief stone, the corner-stone, chosen, precious. Build yourselves up as living stones on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Be, in fact, houses in which to offer spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God, through Jesus Christ, the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord, who is blessed forever. Amen.

3. Since the beams are described as cedar and the paneling as cypress, these timbers must possess natural properties that liken them to the aforesaid orders. The cedar, an incorruptible and fragrant wood of great height, sufficiently indicates the qualities of the men who ought to be selected for the role of beams. Hence it is necessary that those who are appointed over others should be strong and reliable, tenacious in hope, their minds directed to supernatural truths, radiating everywhere the good odor of their faith and conduct. With the Apostle they can say: We are the incense offered by Christ to God in every place. The cypress, too, a wood that is equally incorruptible and fragrant, shows that every cleric ought to be of unblemished life and faith, that he may be seen as an ornamental paneling for the beauty of the house. For it is written: "Holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore," which expresses both the beauty of virtue and the constancy of unfailing grace. It is necessary therefore that the man who is chosen for the adornment and beauty of the house should have an excellent moral character, and though living always within, nevertheless be well thought of by those outside. There are yet other qualities in the nature of these timbers that suit the spiritual themes under discussion, but for the sake of brevity I pass them over.

4. It is worth noting how beautifully every state of the Church is comprehended in one brief expression: the authority of prelates, the good repute of the clergy, the dutifulness of the people, the peacefulness of the monks. As she reflects on these, holy Mother Church rejoices when everything is right; and then she presents them to the beloved to contemplate, since she refers everything to his goodness as the author of all things, attributing nothing of them all to herself. The fact that she says "our" and "ours" is not a sign of usurpation but of love: for with the confidence of superabundant charity she considers nothing belonging to the one she loves so much to be alien to her. She who was accustomed to pursue always not her own concerns but his, I will not imagine that she is to be excluded from the Bridegroom's dwelling or from the companionship of his repose; and this is the reason why she dares to proclaim that the bed and the houses are common to herself and the Bridegroom. For she said "our bed," and "the beams of our houses," and "our paneling," thus boldly uniting herself in ownership to one with whom she knows she is united in love. It is not so with one who has not yet renounced her own will. She lies down by herself, she dwells by herself. Or rather not by herself, for she lives licentiously in the company of prostitutes, I mean the lusts of the flesh, on which she squanders her goods, and that share of the estate which she demanded to be set aside for her.

5. For the rest, when you hear or read these words of the Holy Spirit, do you think you can apply to yourself some of what is said? Can you recognize in yourself any share in the happiness of the bride that is celebrated by the Holy Spirit himself in this song of love? Otherwise you also may be told that you hear his voice, but know not whence he comes or whither he goes. Perhaps you too long for the repose of contemplation, and you do well; only do not forget the flowers with which you read the bed of the bride is strewn. Therefore you must take care to surround yours with the flowers of good works, with the practice of virtues, that precede holy contemplation as the flower precedes the fruit. Otherwise, instead of seeking rest after labor you will want to slumber on in luxurious ease. Indifferent to the fertility of Leah you desire the pleasure of Rachel's embraces only. But it is a perversion of order to demand the reward before it is earned, to take food and not to work, for the Apostle says: "If anyone will not work, let him not eat." "From your precepts I learn wisdom" said the Psalmist, that you may know that the grace of contemplation is never owed except to the commandments. Do not imagine that love of your own repose is to become an obstacle to the way of obedience and the traditions of the seniors. If so, the Bridegroom will not sleep in the same bed with you, especially if, instead of the flowers of obedience, you have bestrewn it with the hemlock and nettles of disobedience. Because of this he will not listen to your prayers. When you call he will not come. Nor will this great lover of obedience who preferred to die rather than disobey, put himself into the power of one who will not obey. He will not approve the empty repose of your contemplation, for he said through the Prophet: "I have labored with patience," referring to the time when, an exile from heaven and the homeland of supreme peace, he performed saving acts throughout the earth. I fear indeed that the terrible judgment that he thundered forth against the perfidy of the Jews may also involve you: "Your new moons and Sabbaths and other assemblies I will not endure;" and again: "Your new moons and appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me." And the Prophet will mourn over you and say: "The enemies saw her, and mocked at her Sabbaths." For why should not the enemy deride that which the beloved repudiates?

6. I am exceedingly astonished at the shamelessness of some who are not among us, who, after they have troubled us all with their impatience, and infected us with their disobedience, dare nevertheless to invite the Lord of all purity, with most urgent prayers, to the bed of a conscience that is so polluted. "When you spread forth your hands," he said, "I will turn my eyes from you; and when you multiply prayers I will not listen." And why? The bed is not covered with flowers, it is even filthy; and you would woo there the King of Glory? Are you doing this in order to rest or in order to wrangle? The centurion whose faith breathes forth a perfume throughout Israel, forbids him to enter this house because of his own unworthiness; and do you, defiled with the filth of vices so great, compel him to come in to you? The Prince of the Apostles cries out: "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man;" and do you say: "Come in to me, O Lord, because I am holy?" "Be you all of one mind in prayer," he says, "love the brotherhood." And the Chosen Vessel speaks of "lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling." Do you not see how the Prince of the Apostles and the Teacher of the Nations agree with each other, and speak with the same mind about the peace and tranquillity of soul which the man who prays should possess? Continue then all day to raise your hands to God, you who all day disturb your brothers, undermine concord and stand apart from unity.

7. "And what do you wish me to do?" you ask? Certainly in the first place, cleanse your conscience of every defilement of anger and quarreling, and murmuring and envy. Hasten to eliminate from the heart's dwelling-place whatever is known to be entirely hostile either to the peace of the brothers or to obedience to the seniors. Then surround yourself with the flowers of good works of all kinds and praiseworthy desires, with the perfumes of the virtues, that is, of whatever is true, whatever is just, whatever is holy, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, whatever is strong and to the praise of discipline. Think about these things, strive to put them into practice. Then you may confidently invite the Bridegroom because when you lead him in you also can truly say: "Our bed is covered with flowers," since the conscience undeniably breathes forth affection, peace, meekness, righteousness, obedience, joyfulness, humility. This suffices for the bed.