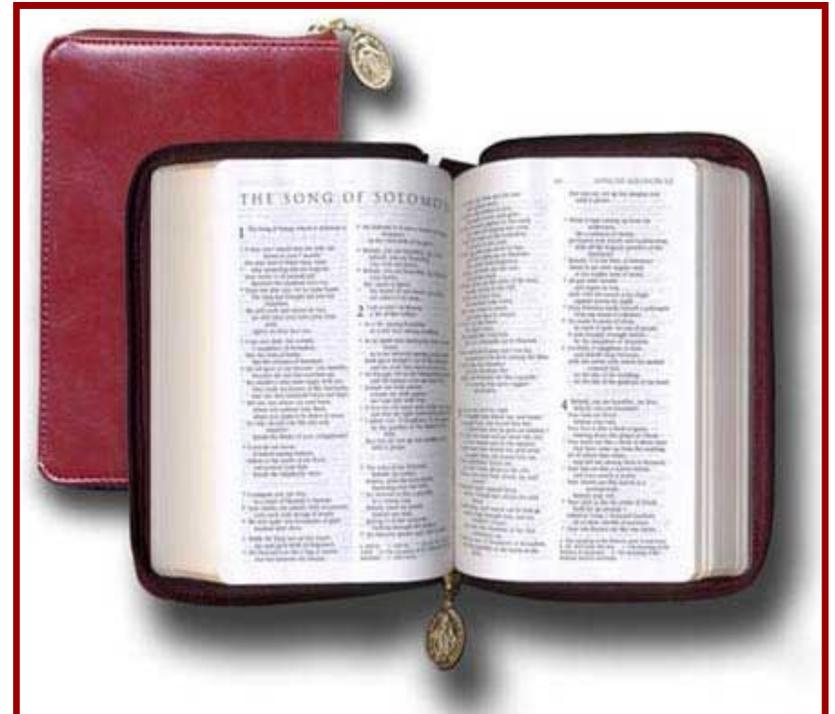




SONG OF SONGS—19

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE TWO OPERATIONS
OF THE HOLY SPIRIT***

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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 Two Operations of the Holy Spirit

"Your name is oil poured out." Of what truth of our interior life does the Holy Spirit wish to assure us by means of this text? He refers to the experience of a twofold operation, one by which he inwardly strengthens the virtues that lead us to salvation, the other by which he outwardly endows us with serviceable gifts. The former is of benefit to ourselves, the latter to our neighbors. For example, faith, hope and charity are given to us for our own sake, without them we cannot be saved. But the gift of wise and learned speech, the power to heal, to prophesy, and endowments of this kind without which we can fully achieve our own salvation, are undoubtedly meant to be used for our neighbor's salvation. And these operations of the Holy Spirit, that we take note of either in ourselves or in others, are named from their method of functioning: we call them infusion and effusion. To which of them may we suitably apply the words: "Your name is oil poured out"? Is it not to effusion? If he had meant infusion he would have said "poured in." When the bride says: "Your name is oil poured out," she refers to the perfumes sprinkled on her breasts, attributing their scent to the Bridegroom's name, as if it were an unguent poured on her breasts. Any man who perceives that he is endowed with an exterior grace enabling him to influence others, can also say to the Lord: "Your name is oil poured out."

2. At this point we need to be warned not to give away what we have received for our own welfare, nor to retain for ourselves what must be expended for others. For example, you keep for yourself what belongs to your neighbor, if along with your full endowment of interior virtues you are also adorned with the external gifts of knowledge and eloquence, and, through fear or sloth or ill-judged humility, smother this gift of speech that could be of help to so many, in a useless and even pernicious silence; for "the people's curse is on the man who hoards the wheat." On the other hand, you squander and lose what is meant to be your own if, before you are totally permeated by the infusion of the Holy Spirit, you rashly proceed to pour out your unfulfilled self upon others; you contravene the law which says: "You must not put the first-born of your herd to work, nor shear the first-born of your flock." You deprive yourself of the life and salvation which you impart to another if, lacking right intention and inspired by self you become infected with the poison of worldly ambition that swells into a deadly ulcer and destroys you.

**I am convinced that no degree of the charity
that leads to salvation
may be preferred
to that suggested by the Wise Man:**

"HAVE PITY ON YOUR OWN SOUL, PLEASING GOD."

6. The sick man has had his food and drink; what should he do now but take his ease and let the sweat of his labors dry while he enjoys the quiet of contemplation? Falling asleep in the midst of his prayer he dreams of God; what he sees is a dim reflection in a mirror, not a vision face to face. However, although it be but a vague apprehension and not an actual vision, a fleeting glimpse of the sparkling glory as it passes, utterly delicate in its impact, yet he burns with love and says: "At night my soul longs for you and my spirit in me seeks for you." A love like this is full of zeal; it is a love becoming the Bridegroom's friend, the love that must inspire the faithful and prudent servant whom the Lord appoints over his household. It fills the soul's capacity, grows heated and brims over, gushing with abandon into streamlets. This is the love that cries out: "Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is scandalized and I am not inflamed?" Let such a man preach, let him bear fruit, let him show new signs and do fresh wonders, for vanity can find no toehold in the man whom charity totally possesses. A total love is the law in all its fullness, it can effectively fill the heart's capacity. Finally God himself is love, and nothing created can satisfy the man who is made to the image of God, except the God who is love, who alone is above all created natures. The man who has not yet attained to this love is promoted to office at the gravest risk to himself, no matter how distinguished he be with other virtues. Even if he knows everything, if he gives all his goods to the poor and lets his body be taken for burning, without charity he is worthless. See how precious the graces that must first be infused, so that when we venture to pour them out we may dispense them from a spirit that is filled rather than impoverished. We need first of all compunction of heart, then fervor of spirit; thirdly, the labor of penance; fourthly, works of charity; fifthly, zeal for prayer; sixthly, leisure for contemplation; seventhly, love in all its fullness. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, accomplished by the process called infusion; and, in so far as it has taken place those services called effusion can be truly and hence safely performed to the praise and glory of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who with the Father and the same Holy Spirit lives and reigns, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 19

3. The man who is wise, therefore, will see his life as more like a reservoir than a canal. The canal simultaneously pours out what it receives; the reservoir retains the water till it is filled, then discharges the overflow without loss to itself. He knows that a curse is on the man who allows his own property to degenerate. And if you think my opinion worthless, then listen to one who is wiser than I: "The fool," said Solomon, "comes out with all his feelings at once, but the wise man subdues and restrains them." Today there are many in the Church who act like canals, the reservoirs are far too rare. So urgent is the charity of those through whom the streams of heavenly doctrine flow to us, that they want to pour it forth before they have been filled; they are more ready to speak than to listen, impatient to teach what they have not grasped, and full of presumption to govern others while they know not how to govern themselves.

I am convinced that no degree of the charity that leads to salvation may be preferred to that suggested by the Wise Man: "Have pity on your own soul, pleasing God." If I have but a little oil, sufficient for my own anointing, do you suppose I should give it to you and be left with nothing? I am keeping it for myself, utterly unwilling to proffer it to anyone except at the Prophet's bidding. And should any of you, thinking me to be better than I seem or than my words suggest, insist on asking for it, here is my answer to him: "There may not be enough for us and for you; you had better go to those who sell it and buy some for yourselves." But charity, you reply, does not seek what is its own. And do you know why? It does not seek what is its own precisely because it has it. Who seeks for what he possesses? Charity never lacks what is her own, all that she needs for her own security. Not alone does she have it, she abounds with it. She wants this abundance for herself that she may share it with all; and she reserves enough for herself so that she disappoints nobody. For charity is perfect only when full.

4. But you, my brother, your salvation is not yet assured; your charity as yet is either non-existent or so meager and reed-like that it bends with every breeze, puts its trust in every spirit, and is carried along by every wind of doctrine; or it is so great that you transcend the limits of the commandment by loving your neighbor more than yourself, or yet again so unsound that, contrary to the commandment, it bows to flattery, flinches under fear, is upset by sadness, shriveled by avarice, entangled by ambition, disquieted by suspicions, tormented by insults, exhausted by anxieties, puffed up by honors, consumed by envy. If you discover this chaos in your own interior, what madness drives you to insinuate yourself into other people's business? But listen to what a prudent and vigilant charity advises: "This does not mean that to give relief to others you ought to make things difficult for yourselves: it is a question of balancing." "Do not be over-virtuous." It is enough that you love your neighbor as yourself; this is the balancing to which the Apostle refers. David says: "My soul will feast most richly, on my lips a song of joy and, in my mouth, praise." To preclude a mere empty yawning, he wishes that infusion should precede the effusion, an infusion to the fullest capacity that gushes out. In this he shows prudence, his relieving of others does not embarrass himself; and he has a right intention, since he imitates him of whose fullness we have all received. You too must learn to await this fullness before pouring out your gifts, do not try to be more generous than God. The reservoir resembles the fountain that runs to form a stream or spreads to form a pool only when its own waters are brimming over. The reservoir is not ashamed to be no more lavish than the spring that fills it. And so, he who is the primal Fountain of life, full in himself and filled with himself, gushed forth and danced into the secret places of the heavens about him, to fill them all with his favors. And having endowed these remotest heights and recesses, he burst upon our earth, saving men and beasts through his munificence, multiplying his mercies everywhere. When he had first filled up the secret places, his teeming mercies billowed over; they poured upon the earth and drenched it, to multiply its riches. You must imitate this process. First be filled, and then control the outpouring. The charity that is benign and prudent does not flow outwards until it abounds within. "My son," said Solomon, "do not let yourself drift away." And the Apostle says: "We ought then to turn our minds more attentively than before to what we have been taught, so that we do not drift away." See what is involved here. Are you holier than Paul, wiser than Solomon? Besides, I cannot see myself being enriched by your wasting of your powers. For if you are mean to yourself, to whom will you be good? Help me out of your abundance if you have it; if not, then spare yourself the trouble.

5. But I wish to remind you now of the principles necessary for our salvation and how to apply them, the truths that must be infused into us and their order of importance, before we can presume to pour ourselves out. Circumstances oblige me to be as brief as possible, for the time's quick passage demands that I bring this sermon to a close. Just as a doctor comes to a wounded man, so the Holy Spirit comes to the soul. Is it possible to find any person whom the devil's sword does not wound, even after the wound of original sin has been healed by the medicine of baptism? Therefore, when the Spirit draws near to a soul that says: "My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness," what is the first thing he should do? Before all else he must amputate the ulcerous tumor that has grown upon the wound and prevents its healing. This ulcer, caused by inveterate bad habits, must be sliced away with the scalpel of piercing sorrow. The pain will be bitter, but it can be alleviated with the ointment of devotion which is nothing other than the joy born of the hope of pardon. This in turn springs from the power of self-control, from victory over sin. Soon the victor is pouring out words of thanks: "You have loosed my bonds, I will offer you the thanksgiving sacrifice." He then applies the medicine of penance, a poultice of fastings, vigils, prayers, and other tasks that penitents perform. And as he toils he must be fed with the food of good works that he may not falter. We are not left in doubt about what the necessary food is: "My food," said Christ, "is to do the will of my Father." Hence works motivated by love, that are a sure source of strength, should accompany the performance of penances. For instance it is said: "Alms is a most effective offering for all those who give it in the presence of the Most High." Food causes thirst, therefore one must drink, so let the food of good works be moistened with the beverage of prayer, that a work well done may rest quietly in the stomach of conscience and give pleasure to God. In prayer one drinks the wine that gladdens a man's heart, the intoxicating wine of the Spirit that downs all memory of the pleasures of the flesh. It drenches anew the arid recesses of the conscience, stimulates digestion of the meats of good works, fills the faculties of the soul with a robust faith, a solid hope, a love that is living and true; it enriches all the actions of our life.