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SONG OF SONGS: FROM THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH TO MOTHER THERESA OF CALCUTTA

Not without pride I can consider Rev. prof. Marek Starowieyski as an example and master in the practice of the theological research. As professor of the Pontifical Theological Faculty in Warsaw he taught us not only what theology is, but how to integrate the scientific approach to theology with spirituality and pastoral care.

Therefore, the paper I have the honor to offer in the festschrift dedicated to Rev. prof. Marek Starowieyski goes in that direction: to apply the fruits of patristic research in the life of the Church today.

Preaching spiritual retreats to the Sisters Missionaries of Charity in different parts of the world (Athens, Ravalpindi, Kigali, Nairobi, etc.) I was looking for inspiration in the biblical Song of Songs, especially explained by the Fathers of the Church. I found out a deep spiritual convergence between the charisma of mother Theresa of Calcutta, expressed in the main documents of her Society (Constitutions and Spiritual Directory), and the tradition of the Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs.

Following the footprints of the Fathers of the Church, I prepared the spiritual conferences, based on selected interpretations taken from the ancient and medieval writers. Like the great Alexandrian interpreters (Origen, Didymos the Blind, etc.), every passage of the Scripture is followed by an explanation. Nevertheless, the consecutive commentaries are subjected to the principle of *akoloutheia*. That means the verses are not independent and separated but in their context they form an organic unity.

At the beginning of every explanation there is a short note connected with the literal sense of the sentence. That is followed by some patristic and medieval more-than-literal interpretations I consider valid and interesting for the modern man's mentality. Finally we have the accommodation of the biblical text to the ideas expressed by the Constitutions and Spiritual Directory of the Missionaries of Charity.

The paper contains a commentary to the prologue of the Songs of Songs (1,1-4). Hopefully the commentary to the whole biblical poem will be published soon.

1:1. The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's¹.

It's a song of love. The ancient biblical author gave us a wonderful poetic expression of the love of two young persons. But this love has a deeper meaning when we read the text as part of the Bible, as Word of God. The tradition of Israel and the Church read this poem as the most beautiful poem about the love of God. The words of the bridegroom are words of Jesus to His Church and to every soul, they are also words of God to Mary whom He has chosen to become the Mother of His Son. The words of the bride are the answer of the Church and Mary to the love of God. They are also a call to me and to you to answer wholeheartedly to the love of Jesus.

Let us contemplate the mystical wedding of Jesus and His Church², of the perfect soul and the Word of God³. Let us penetrate in the inmost chamber of the Holy of Holies, as St. Gregory of Nyssa called the Song of Songs⁴.

1: 2a. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

The girl desires the kiss of her beloved. The Church and my soul wishes to be kissed by Jesus. Our Lady received the kiss of God since the first moment of Her existence: the immaculate conception.

In the ancient tradition of Israel the kiss of God symbolizes the gift of the Torah to Moses on the mount Sinai⁵. But the Torah was just the beginning. Our real Moses was about to come. Therefore the People of God is calling with hope: Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! Let him come personally! For a long time He was speaking to us through prophets and angels, but now, let him come⁶ and give the kiss that brings peace between God and mankind⁷.

We shall ask Our Lady to obtain for us the grace to surrender ourselves totally to the kiss of Jesus from the cross transforming us into our true selves – the princesses of the Kingdom of God. Yes! The kiss of Jesus is His kiss from the cross! "The more we empty ourselves, the sweeter will be the kiss of Jesus from the cross"⁸.

¹ The biblical quotations are taken from: *The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*, San Francisco 1966 (Ignatius Bible).

² Ambrosius Mediolanensis, in: Guillelmus Abbas S. Theodorici, *Commento Ambrosiano al Cantico dei Cantici*, prol, 1, G. Banterle, Opera omnia di Sant' Ambrogio 27, Milano-Roma 1993, p.16.

³ NILUS ANCYRENSIS, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, prol. 3, M.-G. Guérard, SCh 403 (1994), p.118.

⁴ GREGORIUS NYSSENUS, *In Canticum Cantorum*, 1, H. Langerbeck, Gregorii Nysseni Opera 6, p.22.

⁵ Cf. Targum Shir ha-Shirim, 1,2; *The Song of Songs in the targumic Tradition*, I, Jerusalmi, Cincinnati 1993, p.17.

⁶ Cf. ORIGEN, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 1,1,7; L. B. Brésard, H. Crouzel, SCh 375 (1991), p.180.

⁷ Cf. BERNARDUS CLARAEVALLENSIS, *Sermines super Cantica Cantorum*, 2,1,3, J. Leclercq, C.H. Talbot, H.M. Rochais, Bernardi Opera, vol.1 (1957), p.10.

⁸ Cf. *Spiritual Directory of the Missionaries of Charity*, Section B, 161b, p.100.

1:2b. For your love is better than wine,

The wine is a symbol of love, but here we have something better than any kind of love we can find on earth: Your love, the love of Jesus is better than any love. God is love (1Jn 4,8).

The expression of God's love is his Word given to us. The Midrash says that the wine in a barrel is becoming better and better as the years go by – much more the word of God in the human heart! The wine changes the human behavior – much more the word of God in the human heart! The wine gives joy – much more the word of God!⁹ For St. Ambrose the visible expression of the love of God are His gifts to the Church, the sacraments, that are better than any worldly pleasure¹⁰.

Charity is divine love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5,5). The characteristic of this quality of love, which is not just human love, is selflessness: it shares in the selfless giving of God's love¹¹.

1:3a. Your anointing oils are fragrant,

The anointment in ancient Israel was connected with the mission of priest or king. In the Church it recalls the Holy Spirit. The fragrance of Jesus is the Spirit He sent to us and the sacramental gifts He confers¹².

Jesus is giving His Spirit to the Church. He also has given His Spirit to me and to you in the baptism and confirmation. The Spirit working in the Church through our Society is a Spirit of unity in diversity. He gives different gifts, but all for greater unity in the loving plan of God¹³. The wonderful fragrance of Jesus is the perfume of His spirit in the holiness of His saints. But there is another fragrance of Jesus: the delicate scent of the poorest of the poor, lepers, ulcerous, dying... unsupportable smell from the human point of view, but precious for God. The perfume of the cross.

1:3b. Your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you.

The girl of the biblical poem desires her beloved with all the senses of her body: the touch – kiss, the taste – wine, the smell – oils, and now the hearing – the name.

For the ancient Israelites the name of God was the essence of the holiness. Even the second commandment was issued in order to preserve the sanctity of the Holy

⁹ Cf. Midrash Shir ha-Shirim, 2,8,17-19; *Midras Cantar de los Cantares Rabba*, L.F. Girón Blanc, Biblioteca Midrasica 11, Pamplona 1991, p. 72.

¹⁰ Cf. Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 1,7; p. 24.

¹¹ Cf. *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Charity*, 19, p.11.

¹² Cf. Gregorius Magnus, *Expositio in Canticum Canticorum*, 1,2, P. Verbraken, CCL 144 (1963), p.16; Beda Venerabilis, *Allegorica expositio in Cantica Canticorum*, 1,1,2, D. Hurst, CCL 119B (1983), p.192; Alcuinus, *Compendium in Canticum Canticorum*; PL 100,642C.

¹³ Cf. *Constitutions*, 72, p. 48.

Name. St. Paul says the name of Jesus has the same spiritual power: “God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name” (Phil 2,9).

What does it mean the name has been poured out? Nilus contemplates in this verse the mystery of the Incarnation: from the eternity the Son was in the bosom of the Father, but in the history he was “poured out” becoming man¹⁴. Ambrose and Bernard of Clairvaux see in this verse the call to evangelization: as long the perfume is enclosed in a vase, it gives no smell, but poured out – it diffuses its fragrance all around¹⁵.

To listen and to repeat the name of Jesus is something fantastic. Peacefully and lovingly we shall call out unceasingly the saving Name of Jesus, breathe in and out His healing Name, ponder deeply on, and taste the sweetness of this name, listen to the sound of this Name ‘Jesus’ and let our hearts leap for joy, pray in the powerful name of Jesus relying entirely on His promises and his tender and personal thoughtfulness for us¹⁶.

1:4a. Draw me after you, let us make haste. The king has brought me into his chambers.

The hidden desire of the bride became reality. The beloved has come and he revealed himself as king! He took her hand and they began to run. Their aim was to reach the place of a perfect intimacy: the royal chamber.

Jesus said: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt 16,24). But to follow Jesus we need the grace of God, our own forces are not enough¹⁷. The first one who followed Jesus in such perfect way, says Alanus de Insulis, was the Virgin Mary. And He drew Her with body and soul to the ultimate place of happiness¹⁸.

The love of Christ impels us (2Cor 5,14). Jesus calls us to follow Him in haste. We have just the present time to answer to His call. We have no influence neither on the past nor on the future, but only the present moment in our hands. By trusting Him He introduces me into his chambers. Faith, a gift of God introduces us into the spiritual reality of the kingdom whose coming was announced by Christ. It grows in obedience to His law and expresses itself by fraternal charity. Finally it is sealed by fidelity and confidence, for “we know in whom we placed our faith” (2Tim 1,12). It is He who grants to those that believe in Him to do greater things even than those He Himself did on earth (Jn 14,12). Where are the chambers of the King? Where is He drawing me in haste? As Missionaries of Charity we are especially called upon to see Christ in the appearance of Bread and to touch Him in the broken bodies of the poor¹⁹. The chapel and the dwelling of the poor are the chambers of Jesus.

¹⁴ Cf. Nilus Ancyrensis, 7; p.38-40.

¹⁵ Cf. Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 1,9; p.28; Bernardus Claraevallensis, 15,2,3; p.84.

¹⁶ Cf. *Spiritual Directiry*, Section B, 130, p.82.

¹⁷ Cf. Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 1,14; p.32.

¹⁸ Cf. Alanus de Insulis, *In Cantica Canticorum elucidatio*; PL 210,56A.

¹⁹ Cf. *Constitutions*, 27, p.17.

1:4b. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine;

In the chamber of the King love finds its fulfillment, that is joy. But it is not a simple and selfish joy. It is the joy “in You”. You are the source and the reason for our joy: “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (J 15,11).

Where is that chamber of the King, source of joy? The fathers indicate us the final goal of our life, our heavenly fatherland²⁰. But according to Origen we can reach already in this life the inmost chamber of Jesus, when He reveals us the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2,7)²¹. This chamber is His own Body, the perfect union with Him²², especially in the mystery of his passion²³.

Joy is indeed the fruit of the Holy Spirit and a characteristic mark of the Kingdom of God, for God is joy. Christ wanted to share His joy with His apostles. “That my joy be in you, and that your joy may be full” (Jn 15,11). Joy was the strength of Our Lady, too. Only joy could have given her the strength to go in haste over the hills of Judea to do the work of a handmaid for her cousin²⁴. “We will exult and rejoice in you”: we, not “I”, because cheerfulness is our joy shared with all God’s creation²⁵.

1:4c. Rightly do they adore you.

Adoration is closely connected with love. The Hebrew text in this verse can be translated: “rightly do they love You”. During the meeting with the young people in Köln in 2005 the Pope Benedict XVI explained a specific etymology of the Latin word *adoro*. It is composed with ad (to) and os, oris (mouth). To adore means to kiss in the mouth. Our meditation of the first stanza of the Song of Songs began with the desire of the bride to kiss her Beloved. Now the time has arrived. Let us come and kiss Jesus adoring Him in his Eucharistic presence.

“The closer we understand the living Bread the more fervent is our adoration”. To adore Jesus present in the Holy Sacrament is an extraordinary gift, “let not your going in and out of the chapel be just in and out, but a love meeting with the living God to whom you belong in a special way – His spouse to the full meaning of the word”²⁶.

²⁰ Cf. Beda Venerabilis, 1,1,3; p.194; Alcuinus, 1,3; 643C.

²¹ Cf. Origen, 1,5,4; p.244; Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 1,17; p.34.

²² Cf. Philo Carpasii, 7; *Commento al Cantico dei Cantici nell’antica versione di Epifanio Scolastico*, A. Ceresa-Gastalgo, Corona Patrum 6, Torino 1979, p.68.

²³ Cf. Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 1,17; p.34.

²⁴ Cf. *Constitutions*, 25, p.15.

²⁵ Cf. *Spiritual Directory*, Section B, 25, p.57.

²⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 132, p.83-84.

PIEŚŃ NAD PIEŚNIAMI: OD OJCÓW KOŚCIOŁA
DO MATKI TERESY Z KALKUTY

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi próbę duszpasterskiej aktualizacji myśli Ojców Kościoła z perspektywy charyzmatu Zgromadzenia Misjonarek Miłości, założonego przez matkę Teresę z Kalkuty. Jest owocem głoszonych od lat rekolekcji oraz stanowi część przygotowywanego komentarza do całości biblijnego poematu.

Poszczególne wersety prologu Pnp 1,1-4 zostały wyjaśnione z zastosowaniem metody charakterystycznej dla starożytnych interpretatorów Biblii: najpierw krótka nota odnosząca się do sensu dosłownego, następnie interpretacja duchowa zaczerpnięta ze spuścizny Ojców Kościoła i pisarzy średniowiecznych, na zakończenie zaś akomodacja pod kątem podstawowych dokumentów Zgromadzenia.