

THE LORD JESUS CHRIST:



SPOUSE OF THE CHURCH and the SOUL

Christology and Contemplation

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[for the private use of Students]

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THE LORD JESUS CHRIST:
SPOUSE OF THE CHURCH/THE SOUL¹

Introduction

1. From Christology to Contemplation: General Orientations

a. This course will ponder the mystery of the *mind* of Christ Jesus, His *sentiments* - which we are invited to 'put on' by St. Paul [cf. Ph 2:5, ff.]. The course has been inspired by St. Gaspar Bertoni's [1777-1853] Christology – as communicated to his Stigmatine Community – providing for its members the Holy Patrons, Mary and Joseph, precisely in the Mystery of their Holy Espousals². This mystery is presented to us in the key of DV 8: to be contemplated, studied, experienced and obedience to the Magisterium [cf. also SC 2].

b. This is a reflection on the **inner sentiments**, the *mind* of Jesus Christ, in so far as these are made known to us in God's Holy Word. There is evident in Jesus Christ **a total Self-giving Love** for His Father, and for the Church – and its members. It is this Christological mystery that most inspired Fr. Bertoni's Christological, Apostolic Missionary charism. Our contemplation of all this may be described as a loving communion, a spousal union, that inspires the attitude that is brought to reflecting on this mystery. The *putting on of the mind, the sentiments of Christ Jesus*, is the call of all Christians – those interested in these aspects of the mystery, might [please God!] find some encouragement to persevere in the quest.

c. Jesus' *mind, sentiments* may be summarized **substantially in His charity towards His Father to toward humanity of which He is the only Savior**. Any reflection on the *sentiments of Christ Jesus* will lead us to the heart of the Christian spiritual experience – this is the goal toward which the *grace* which the Father gives us, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Each believer is being called to become conform to His Only-begotten and most beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in Whose image we have all been created. As the ultimate source of this challenge and the very reason for its coming to our attention is the loving union with which Jesus Christ, Lord and God, sealed and nourished by the Holy Spirit. It is to Him all our *following, imitating, putting on His sentiments* tend and ceaselessly are directed. Whenever 'love' in communion is pondered, *sponsality* seems to provide the most complete expression, the most sublime degree possible to human beings. This image provides the most sublime level of human love, which Jesus has sacramentalized – even though He did not follow that path in His journey through time. The Church is the **Beloved Spouse** of Jesus Christ – united to Him, by and in the Holy Spirit, and

¹ Cf. Vincenzo Battaglia, *Il Signore Gesu' Cristo: Sposo della Chiesa. Cristologia e contemplazione*. 2. Corso di Teologia Sistemica. Complementi 8. Bologna: EDB 2001.

² Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, III, q. 29, aa. 1-2.

each of the baptized participates according to the specific vocation of all, in this **nuptial love**.

d. Thus it might prove profitable – and this is the hope! - that any effort to uncover the deepest *sentiments, mind* of Christ Jesus, the theological treatise needs to be as far as is possible, solid, mature and convincing – above all in the efforts to make this study one that will harmonize speculation, meditation and contemplation. There is repeated mention from the Council documents on, of **Christ the Spouse** in so many papal documents, and much recent theological reflection. Any serious effort to reflect on this image presents its own challenge to see the Person of Jesus Christ in this redemptive key. One finds in a study of this theme that there is a solid foundation for it, a Christology that flows from a better appreciation of His loving, spousal bond toward the Church. The most sublime conclusion that will flow from all this is precisely that a **Spousal Christology** is in itself an approach that is sublimely spiritual, with a most solid doctrinal base.

e. In addition to Sacred Scripture, so many works of the spiritual masters and mistresses have had recourse to this theme that is of primary importance. Commentaries on the ***Canticle of Canticles*** that are often allegorical and spiritual in style, are both highly readable and challengingly profound. Commentaries on the Gospels are often presented in a catechetical, pastoral and homiletic mode and many of these flourished in the Patristic period and in the Middle Ages. Many liturgical texts also provide a rich source of instruction and inspiration as does the post-Vatican II era, moved mightily to fathom more deeply the conciliar inspirations.

f. It goes without saying that in any analogy involving the Divinity, there always is, of course, *a greater dissimilarity than similarity*. Therefore, **the nuptial theme** can be applied beautifully and profoundly – but, there needs be also a sense of judgment in this contemplation. There always needs to be respected **the infinite chasm** between holy matrimony and the divine relationship of Jesus Christ with his Church. Yet, there is a remarkable similarity in this analogy.

g. Every symbol is **an epiphany of a mystery** and it has within itself an inexhaustible power of recalling a reality to mind. This challenges the perceptive believer to reflect, to ponder, allowing oneself to be taken over by the desire of discovering and accepting more and more that *sublime other reality* that is rendered visible and present. This presence of the mystery is rendered more accessible and one that is offered in human terms that can describe remarkably well some of the terms of the unfathomable mystery. A 'symbol' comprehends within itself a kind of polyvalence, a broad and multiple application. The loving relationship between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Church is much more than the reality of loving husbands and wives in their lives together.

g. One aspect that would need more emphasis is the ***eschatological*** reality evident in the relationship of the Lord Jesus with his Church: here the ***nuptial theme*** often comes to the fore. The use of nuptial symbolism always implies the demand to limit its use to **that loving relationship of the Risen Lord toward His Church, a love that is comparable to that of a husband and wife for each other**. It is well known that St. Paul compares the love of man and woman for each other to that of Christ's love for His Church [cf. Ep 5]. SO, it is a long-standing belief that the nuptial love between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Church has often been the object of specific studies, biblical and theological. The effort here will be to present at least the outlines of a ***Sponsal Christology***.

2. A Glance at the Modern Theological Production:

a. A Brief Bibliographical Panorama: as would be expected, the use of this theme is most often noted in studies regarding ***Ecclesiology***. While there are competent studies in this regard, there is still needed an authentic treatment of the theme **in itself, Christ as Spouse** – even though some of the recent reflections are of some depth, there is needed a comprehensive study in this regard. There are three themes that seem to recur:

- the Church stands before Christ as a subject, with her own personality;
- the reflection on the Church, as the Spouse of Christ implies a reflection on His holiness;
- there is wide-spread use of Mariology in an Ecclesiological context – as Vatican II insisted, Mary indeed is the type of the Church.

In ***Sacramental Theology*** there is also use of the Christological Nuptial theme – as would be expected, this is used in the theology of ***Matrimony***. In this connection, the Church professes that holy Matrimony is **a great mystery** since it does express the spousal love of Jesus Christ for his Church. Pope John Paul II ³ notes that in the past, much effort was placed upon the nuptial symbolism inherent in ***Covenant Theology***, *whereas* today the emphasis is much more on the relationship of Jesus Christ with His Church. This enables precious insights into the heart of Christian matrimony and that vocation of love to which the Christian Spouses are called. The Covenant Christ and Church is presented as the source and the prime example of ***the Marriage Covenant of the Baptized***.

³ Letter to Families, 19 – in: *EV* 14/299 – cf. also *EV* 1/1474. As for the use in Ecclesiology, cf. C. Valenziano, *L'anello della sposa*. Magnano 1993; V. Maraldi, *Lo Spirito e la Sposa. Il ruolo ecclesiale dello Spirito Santo del Vaticano I alla LG del Vat. II*. Piemme 1997;

There is also a somewhat broad use of the theme for the **Sacraments of Initiation, Baptism and Eucharist**. In a particular manner this would be true of the Fathers of the Church, and their many texts in this direction. This was a theme readily understood by the Catechumens and the Neophytes, and was often used in catechetical instruction. The late Cardinal Danielou⁴ has an entire chapter in his classic dedicated to a sacramental interpretation of the *Song of Songs*.

As might be expected the Nuptial Theme offers its powerful sway also in **Mariology**. The sponsality of the BVM, in addition to the evident reference to St. Joseph⁵, there is Mary's unique personal relationship within the Trinity – Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, Spouse of the Holy Spirit. This theme is much developed also in the presentation of Mary and her service as **Model of the Church**.

The nuptial theme in **Sacred Liturgy** was much developed by the late liturgist, Odo Casels⁶. So many aspects of the Church's prayer life would be more deeply understood by using this Nuptial Theme. For example, in the celebration of the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, there is that remarkable antiphon for the *Benedictus* in Morning Prayer:

Today the Church is washed from stain the Jordan River, is united to her Spouse, and the Magi come forward with their gifts for the royal nuptials and the water is changed into wine, brings joy to the banquet table. Amen!

There is ample use of the Nuptial Theme in the **Theology of the Religious Life**⁷, in the development of the treatment of the **Vows**, and also of **Consecration** in itself. There is also an ample field of research in the field of **Spiritual Theology** using the Nuptial Theme⁸. And the area of **Eschatology** has much benefited from this nuptial development⁹.

⁴ Cf. *Bible and Liturgy*. : cf. also P. Cattenoz, *Le bapteme mystere nuptial. Theologie de Saint Jean Chrysostome*. Venasque: Carmel 1993.

⁵ Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos*. Apostolic Exhortation. August 15, 1989

⁶ cf. Maria del Pilar Rio, *Teologia nupcial del Misterio Redemptor de Cristo. Estudio en la obra de Odo Casel*. Roma: Appolinare Studi 2000. Cf. also Giuseppe Baldanza, *La metafora sponsale in S. Paolo e nella tradizione liturgica siriana*. ROMA: Edizioni Liturgiche 2001.

⁷ Cf. Can. 678 § 1; John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, Post-Synodal Exhortation. March 25, 1996, # 19; Cong. Of Istitutes for Consecrated Life... *Verbi Sponsa*, 1999; cf. A. Solignac, "Virginite' chretienne", in DSp 16, col. 924-949.

⁸ Cf. Blaise Arminjon, *The Cantata of Love. A Verse by Verse Reading of the Song of Songs*. San Francisco: Ignatius 1988; Origen *Homelies sur le Cantique des cantiques*. Sources Chretiennes 37 bis. Paris: duCerf 1966; id., *Commemtaire sue le Cantique des Cantiques. Two Volumes. Sources Chretiennes 375, 376. Paris: du Cerf 1991*, Paris duCerf 1992. Gregory the Great, *Commentaire sue le Cantique des Cantiques*. Vol. 314. Sources Chretiennes Paris: du Cerf 1984; Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* [4 voumes] Kalamazoo: Cistercians 1980, 1981; cf. Juan G. Arintero, OP, *The Song of Songs. A Mystical Exposition*. TAN Books 1974.

⁹ Cf. Christine Pellistrandi, *Jerusalem, epouse et mere*. Lire la Bible 87. Paris: duCerf 1989.

b. Jesus Christ, precisely as Spouse not much studied: a specific study on this theme is still lacking. In 1977, the International Theological Commission, in its Document “The Catholic Doctrine concerning Marriage”, produced a list of themes regarding this sacrament, and it was noted that the title *Jesus Christ, Spouse par excellence*, was missing for the most part from the theological horizon. Some outstanding theologians like Scheeben in the 19th century and vonBalthasar¹⁰ in the 20th, gave profoundly intelligent effort to this reflection. There are many helpful studies of all kinds on the Nuptial Theme¹¹, but non specifically on a *Spousal Christology*.

3. The Masters/Mistresses of the Spiritual Life: a great deal of assistance is afforded by a careful reflection on the numerous commentaries composed on the *Song of Songs*. This happened particularly in the studies of the Fathers, a few of whom have already been noted, and the Latin Middle Ages. A number of characteristics do emerge from any such study and these impact the present effort in a very positive manner. While much of this research is centered on past authors, the modern times are not to be totally neglected. The remarkable aspect of this is the prevalence of the themes of *Jesus, Lord and Spouse*. Two Carmelites - Elizabeth of the tTrinity [+ 1906] and Edith Stein [+ 1942] offer their contemplative prayer to the theme.

a. Some of the Commentaries: the large majority of these, composed in the Patristic times and in the Middle Ages, are outstanding for their allegorical exegesis, and their spiritual and mystical instruction. The *Song of Songs* in fact is one of the OT books that is the most read and utilized in the Christian world. The nature of the book presents a very fertile symbolic value directed toward the loving relationship that unites the Lord Jesus Christ with the Church, His [mystical] Body and the individual members within this Body. What is largely developed by these poet-theologians would be the images of love: the gestures, the sentiments, the affective tonalities that are brought to the fore with great simplicity. Hence, the authentic, genuine, sublime spirituality dictated by the *Song of Songs* comes forth from its passionate pages, and touches on the very heights of Christian spirituality.

Two witnesses already mentioned in the bibliography need to be considered:

- **Origen [185-253]:** produced one of the most brilliant, insightful commentaries on this theme that has impacted the literature of the Church, right down to the present times. Originally, this work contained 10 books – but only four of these have reached

¹⁰ Cf. *Explorations in Theology. II: Spouse of the Word*. San Francisco: Ignatius 1991; cf. also Claudio Giuliadori, *Intelligenza teologica del maschile e del femminile problemi e prospettive nella rilettura di vonBalthasar e P. Evdokimov*. Roma: Citta' Nuova Editrice 1991.

¹¹ Cf. Anne-Marie Pelletier, *Lectures du cantique des cantiques. Del'enigme dus ens aux figures du lecteur*. Roma: PIB 1989; Luis Alonso Schokel, *I Nomi dell'Amore. Simboli matrimoniali nella Bibbia*. Piemme 1997.

us. We have the Commentary that goes up as far as Ct 2:15: by making abundant use of allegory, the great Alexandrian Master ascends from the literal sense to the spiritual interpretation, from the textual to the mystical, - bringing out with both beauty and depth the relationship of Jesus Christ as the Spouse and the Church, as His Spouse. This metaphor leads easily, then, to the union of the Word of God [the Eucharist] with the human soul – enkindling fervent love between the Spouse and the spouse – both are highly motivated by the thrust of a loving mutual desire. This is one of the great insights that Origen brought forward: for Origen, the biblical text does speak of such love – with it, the blessed human soul is inflamed and burns for the Incarnate Word and sings this inspired wedding song inspired by the Holy Spirit, by means of which the Church approaches Jesus Christ, the Heavenly Spouse, desiring to unite Himself to us by means of His Word, in order that this germinate life within us. In this manner, the human soul can be saved thanks to this chaste generation of children, if only they can persevere in the faith and in holiness with temperance, in so far as these are conceived by the seed of the Word of God and generated by the Immaculate Church, or the soul, who search nowhere else for anything bodily or material, but burns solely out of love for the Word of God.

- **St. Gregory the Great [540-604]**: from his Commentary on the *Song of Songs*, composed during his Pontificate, sometime between 594 and 598, there remains only a very small part regarding the first eight verses of the biblical text. However, given the influence that this eminent shepherd and theologian aroused, particularly during the Middle Ages, it is useful for us to refer some of the more salient aspects of his exposition.

In the Prologue, where he digresses a bit to present the rules to follow in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture, Gregory the Great teaches, among other things, that the human race, after having been expelled from the joys of Paradise, entering into the exile of this present life, finds that its heart is blind, stupefied and cold, due to its insensitivity. Hence, it is not capable of directing its attention to the spiritual and interior understanding. The criterion to adopt is therefore, that of a spiritual and sapiential reading of Scripture: one ought to penetrate behind its letter to discover there and to comprehend its hidden meanings. Hence, God inspired by the excesses of His **Mercy**, recurs to allegory, raises the soul up to the unknown realities by means of those that are known: the language of our earthly, exterior and profane love utilized in the *Canticle of Canticles* thus becomes the means which stimulates one to sacred, celestial and divine love. Therefore, it happens that God secretly inspires the soul a love that still remains unrecognized. He does this using corporal and exterior language, and we are being challenged to seek all that is interior, even though speaking about the body. Hence, one must in some way become extraneous to the body.

In other terms, we need to seek in these **sacred nuptials** of the Spouse and of the spouse, putting on the **nuptial garment**, which coincides with possessing the intelligence of interior charity. This garment is necessary: if we do not put it on – and what is meant by this, is that if we do not have an adequate knowledge of charity – we will be expelled from this nuptial banquet and thrown out into the exterior darkness, i.e., into the blindness of ignorance.

As creatures, already risen up in Jesus Christ, to the New Life, Christians ought to seek in these ancient words the sole power of authentic novelty, newness, freshness. In fact, Sacred Scripture enkindles with the fire of love the One who spiritually satisfies. The Hope is, therefore, that this fire of the Divine Precepts, of the words of Scripture, might consume all in us that is signed with rust and exterior age, so that it might arrive to offer our soul as a **holocaust** in the contemplation of God. In detail, the *Conticle* describes and celebrates the union with God: by its means, it unites us to the Lord with an intimate, familiar love. In fact, in scripture God is already called with the title **Lord**, when He wills that He be feared. He is also called **Father** when He desires to be honored – He is called **Spouse** when He wishes to be loved.

From **fear**, one moves on to **honor**, and from this to **love**: but certainly love is the most pleasing sentiment in the eyes of God: created by him, adopted as His children, we have been united to Him through a **pact of union**. This spousal language is often remembered in the NT, because there is celebrated here the union in the Word with the flesh and of Christ with the Church:

*...You see. The jealousy that I feel for you is God's own jealousy: I arranged for you to **marry** Christ so that I might give you away as a chaste virgin to this one husband... [cf. 2 Co 11:2]*

...this mystery [of marriage] has many implications; but I am saying it applies to Christ and the Church... [cf. Ep 5:27, ff.]

... Surely the Bridegroom's attendants would never think of mourning as long as the Bridegroom is still with them? But, the time will come for the Bridegroom to be taken away from them, and then they will fast... [cf. Mt 9:15].

...The bride is only for the Bridegroom; and yet the Bridegroom's friend, who stands there and listens, is glad when he hears the Bridegroom's voice. This same joy I feel, and now it is complete. He must grow greater, and I must grow smaller... [cf. Jn 3:29, ff.].

...Happy are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb...! [cf. Rv 19:9].

...I saw the Holy City, and the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband... [cf. Rv 21:2].

For Gregory the Great, it was not an accident that the ***Canticle of Canticles*** came after ***Proverbs*** and ***Qohelet*** – in his view, Solomon had built a ladder, or stair way – beginning with the **moral life**, he went then through the **natural life** to arrive eventually at the summit of all, the **contemplative life**: thus, in this work, in a general sense, it is the voice of the Church which expresses the expected Advent of the Lord – while, in a particular sense, it is each and every soul who admires the entrance of God into his/her heart, as the coming of the spouse into the wedding chamber. The *spouse* is one who *alone loves God in the perfect manner*. One reaches this experience only after a long moral and spiritual preparation.

b. A Few Thoughts on Interpretation: it is beyond question that the works written by the great Masters/Mistresses of the Spiritual Life and by the recognized Mystics in the long history of the Church, are a source that is almost inexhaustible. It is the privilege of the Church to approach these graced sources for a number of reasons: both in order that she might learn more and more how to **reflect** in a **prayerful** manner [with both mind and heart illumined by the Holy Spirit], to **ponder contemplatively** the loving and spousal union with the Lord Jesus – and also at the same time to **study** more seriously, directly, more closely, the truth of this sublime relationship and the privileged experience this brings to the Church, in harmony with the Magisterium.

In approaching this deep font of spirituality, it is not lacking in importance to note the difference, as both lived and narrated by male and female mystics. There is one emphasis given by a female mystic, and one that would be recorded by a masculine approach. This procedure consents, it would seem, not only to admire with ever greater wonder the inexhaustible fecundity of the presence and action of God in the lived experience of favored individuals, but also to appreciate ever more how the specific contribution that every single spiritual history is able to offer. While it will always be true that even the most sublime human expressions will always be pale vehicles, and totally inadequate to express in depth the ineffable gift and privilege of union with God – yet, some of these writers were true poets, theologians, doctors/doctoresses of the Church.

A particular attention may be given to the testimonies and experiences of certain graced women, particularly beginning in the 13th century, who have contributed directly to the development of this theme which is known by the title **Mystical Espousals, Nuptials** ¹². The truth of the matter is that the loving feminine sensibility, activated and elevated by the grace of the Holy Spirit, places at one's disposition an entire gamut of intuitions, reflections and sentiments that are truly extraordinary for their realism and effectiveness. They are so often endowed with a

¹² Cf. A. Deblaere, *Mystique. II. Theories de la mystique chretienne...* in: *DSp* 10, col. 1902-1919.

very rich realism, which pertains in unique manner to the female capacity of intelligent intuition.

One of the better known, of course, is found in one of the letters addressed by **St. Clare of Assisi** [1193-1253] to her sister, Agnes of Prague. After she invited her spiritual sister in the spirit to contemplate the poverty, humility and charity of Jesus Christ, Clare adds, being filled with the spirit of her prayerful reflection on the *Song of Songs*:

Contemplate, besides his indescribable riches, delights and eternal honors, and yearning for the excessive desire and love of your heart, cry out: *Draw me, after Thee, we will run following the perfume of Thy sacred anointing, o Heavenly Spouse! I will run, without ever tiring, until You introduce me into the wine cellar, until Your left hand is under my head, and Your right hand embraces me happily, and until you kiss me with the most blessed kiss of Your mouth.*

In the world of mystics, there is a very clear distinction in being the **Spouse** of Jesus Christ, and being His *friend*. There are rather eloquent testimonies that describe this difference: we cease being *Spouses* with the Church in order to become just His *friends*, not only when we begin to prefer the earthly City over the heavenly Kingdom, but also when poverty, obedience and charity become values in themselves – rather than remaining just conditions of love. And again, when faith, Hope and Charity which are the great means of love but we pass over them - when they are lived by us too weakly and leave us only half way home.

The canonized Founder of the Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata of our Lord Jesus Christ, was steeped in the mystical tradition of the Society of Jesus, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Francis of Assisi. One of the fundamental aspects of his ideal of the following/imitation of Jesus Christ is that which might be called the **Espousals Principle**. This principle is a formulation most adapted perhaps to modern sensitivity, based on the idea of St. Ignatius of Loyola and his concept of *instrument*. In a letter he wrote once to one of the Jesuit Provincials he noted this idea: an ordinary instrument may accomplish extraordinary results when he is the more intimately united to the artist, the genius. **Fr. Bertoni** re-formulated that principle in a nuptial perspective. For Fr. Bertoni, the more intense following of Christ is achieved by the one who is united to the risen Lord as Spouse. It is this intimate, spousal union which guarantees the apostolic fecundity of a missionary, no matter how meager his own talents might seem. A fundamental text in this regard is presented by the Stigmatine Founder in a panegyric, honoring St. Francis of Assisi, one of his three major 'Franciscan interventions':

... Very many follow Christ for the *temporal reward* they hope to receive. However, the mercenary, gets to the door of the master, receives his pay, remains outside the home – *you have received your reward...!* [cf. Mt 6:2].

And many follow Christ as slaves, *out of fear*: these follow Him, but from afar, and being distant from Him, there is not communicated to them the secrets of their master: *...the servant does not know the will of his lord...!* [cf. Jn 15:15].

Some follow Christ as sons, *but out of a selfish love*, their main interest is in the inheritance. But very often sons are more loved than loving: sometimes they even come to disdain their father, if he should ever command them to do something that might be good for them, but from their perspective it would be arduous and difficult: *...I have brought up sons, and raised them on high, but they have disdained me...!* [cf. Is 1:2].

A few may follow Christ as friends, who base their love on the mutual communication of goods – but, if these should cease for reasons that remain hidden, but which are however the just dispositions of Providence, the sweet influence of these goods wanes, and it is substituted only by the harsh turn of fortunes of their former friend: *... all left Him and ran away...>!* [cf. Mt 26:56]” such as these apostles were once called the *friends* of Jesus Christ: *...All seek what pertains to them, and few seek after Jesus Christ...!* [cf. Ph 2:21].

Very few are they who follow after Jesus as lovers, who in the youthful flame of their tender love follow Christ wherever He goes, either to Tabor, Even to Calvary, following in the sweet odor of his ointment, of their internal consolations and inspirations, they run after Him. However, they cannot keep up with Him, as they cannot keep up His pace, as He moves ahead not with just small steps but with giant steps, in running along His way: *...He exulted as a giant...!* [cf. Ps 18:1]

However, the Adult Spouse in the School of Love, is not attracted by any perfume, but by the right hand of the spouse: *Draw me...!* [cf. Ct 1:3] – by uniting oneself to Him strongly, and supporting oneself on His strength, the spouse keeps up the pace with Him, who does not run but flies: *...leaning on her beloved...!* [cf. Ct 8:5].

We thus arrive at becoming with Christy almost one and the same spirit, in such a way that finally we are able to say: *...I love, no longer I, but Christ lives within me...* [cf. Ga 2:20]. This occurs by an entire, perfect transformation of love: *...in order that I might gain Christ and be found in Him...* [cf. Ph 3:8, ff.]. Thus, one loses himself in order to be found totally in Christ. I would say that one can scarcely distinguish ourselves from Christ: disdained as Christ, poor as Christ, wounded as Christ...¹³

¹³ Cf. Joseph Henchey, *Saggi sullo spirito del B. Gaspare Bertoni*. 3. *L'esperienza di Gesù Cristo nella vita del P. Gaspare Bertoni*. Roma: Stigmatini 1984, pp. 57-59. Text from a Panegyric honoring St. Francis of Assisi.

Having taken note of such language, it is always necessary for the student to understand the *literary genre* of such mystical descriptions. The language utilized by the mystics narrates, calls to mind, the loving union within the Trinity of Jesus Christ with God, the Father, in and through the Holy Spirit: it is impossible to describe this Mystery of the trinity with exactness because it is the supreme Truth of the Faith – and it is also impossible to describe with precision mystical experiences. There is already this inadequacy and the same ‘distance’ in language in trying to explain human love, the union between husband and wife - and so, too, in mystical matters, the loving union between the spouse and His beloved remains inviolable, inaccessible: it is always covered and defended, and it is and remains immersed in the secrecy of loving hearts, and no extern is really ever allowed into this hallowed ground. Mystical theology itself is a secret, divine colloquy of the mind and heart, predisposed to the ardor of love, with its Beloved, Jesus Christ, to whom the committed believer turns using the language of those deeply in love. The language taught to the soul in wisdom and love is mystical theology, it is that secret knowledge of God, to which the spiritual authors give the name **contemplation**. This is most flavorful [*saporosa*] because it is a knowledge that is acquired through Christian love, which is its Divine Teacher, and which renders everything this flavorful :

... The sweet and loving knowledge [the beloved says] He taught her in mystical theology, that secret knowledge of God which spiritual persons call contemplation. This knowledge is very delightful because it is a knowledge through love. Love is the Master of this knowledge and that which makes it wholly agreeable. Since God communicates this knowledge and understanding to the love with which He communicates Himself to the soul, it is very delightful to the intellect, since it is a knowledge belonging to the intellect, and it is delightful to the will since it is communicated in love, which pertains to the will. Thus she says: And I gave myself to Him, keeping nothing back....¹⁴.

The secrets of this **mystical bridal chamber** is that loving intimacy, a profound harmony that always remains veiled, protected and eminently personal. This is a spiritual treasure to guard and to protect jealously. While the great mystics have tried to give some sort of description to this mystery of Wisdom and Love, no precise human definition is really possible. Therefore, mystical ‘spouses’ speak of it to some extent but they fully realize that there are simply unable to perceive all themselves, let alone describe the inner secrets of grace. Biblical comparisons are the Ascent of Horeb, Carmel, Tabor – and Calvary – they enter into the world of awesome clouds and fearsome darkness. They go from being simply overwhelmed, to inebriated, rendered incapable of expression, out of love for the Lord and God, the Divine Spouse. There are no human terms to describe this loving and uniting fruition with

¹⁴ Cf. St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* B. Strophe 27, 5.

the Divine Spouse which is always beyond every human level, but to which everyone is called.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux [1090-1153] tried to answer the more than rhetorical question: what does it mean to enjoy the Divine word? As the conclusion of one of his sermons on the ***Canticles***, in which he had communicated a certain personal insight into the joys that are experienced through intimacy with the Word of God. These are his words:

... There may be someone who will go on to ask me: 'What does it mean to enjoy the Word?' I would answer that he must find someone who has experience of it, and ask him.... Listen to one who has known it: *If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, that is for you..!* [cf. 2 Co 5:13]. ...Oh, whoever is curious to know what it means to enjoy the Word, make ready your mind, not your ear! The tongue does not teach this, grace does...¹⁵

Human language calls to mind, states the truth, but never totally exhausts it: the event under scrutiny here – the mystical experience, loving union with God [offered by God through Vatican II document, ***Dei Verbum*** to the entire Church] goes beyond any human words. The reality is really far more significant, more 'pregnant' than whatever form - no matter how brilliant, insightful it may be – the most gifted human words may achieve. The truth of every authentic mystical experience goes beyond contains and communicates far more than any recipient of this grace could ever narrate it. At best, the mystic describes, announces what has happened. Therefore, the writings of the mystics become, in the last analysis, simply a fervent invitation to experience directly the influence of the Sacred Spouse, by abandoning oneself completely to love, allowing oneself to be taken over and invaded entirely by the ardent love which God Himself nourishes for His beloved souls. Therefore, there must always be recognized and noted the primacy that pertains to mystical union: this is first announced by a word, but soon surpasses all description. Thus, there is aroused, imposed also on the one trying to describe these realities, very often a style of language that while it is suited for the subject matter it is trying to communicate, is always a new manner of speaking, one that is vigorous, very attractive and involving the whole person. For this reason, the beloved soul come to yearn most ardently to contract this inexorable sense of incompleteness, imperfection, a kind of incurable longing for the Beloved, infused into the truly docile human soul, mind and heart.

¹⁵ Cf. St. Bernard of Clairvaux *On the Song of Songs*. Volume IV. Sermons 67-86. Kalamazoo: Cistercians 1980. Sermon 85, n. 14, p. 210 – [the next to last Sermon of the four volumes].

4. A General Plan:

- **Title:** the basic reason for the choice of *The Lord Jesus* in the title is a title of solemnity, yet familiarity – the integral Christ, with the sorrowful as well as the glorious dimensions of His Paschal Mystery subsumed in this title. It leads one to think of His Divine Regality – the universal and eternal Lordship of our Savior and redeemer. Yet, this lofty title remains in an atmosphere of intimacy and confidence [cf. Jn 21:4-18]. It is a title used by the apostle Paul when he transmits the account of the Institution of the Eucharist [cf. 1 Co 11:23] – it leads immediately to direct the consideration of the mind and the heart towards the Eucharistic Mystery, the **Nuptial Banquet** left to us by the Lord, to which we are invited to participate. It is used also by Mk [cf. 14:29] precisely in his recollections of the **Ascension** - and it is used by the Apocalypse in its final invocation: **Come! Lord Jesus!** [cf. Rv 22:20 – Scripture almost comes to an end with this invocation. Therefore, the title becomes an efficacious appeal to remain vigilant in awaiting for the **Eschatological Nuptials**, set for the day of the **Parousia** [cf. 1 Co 16:22, f.].

The five chapters offer a progressive logic in the hopes of suggesting a comprehensive and organic outline of **Spousal Christology**:

1]. **Biblical Foundations:** Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has become Man, in order to celebrate and establish in his own Person, in a definitive manner, the **Nuptial Covenant** between god and humanity, prepared and pre-figured with the Covenant stipulated by God with the People of Israel.

2]. **The Event of the Incarnation** the union of the human and the divine in one Person.

3]. **The Event of the Sorrowful Mysteries** the Redemptive Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord, is read in a nuptial key – the Son of God become man has sustained, moved by the excess of charity, that moved Him to offer His entire self to His Spouse, the Church. This third chapter in a way is the heart of the course because the reflection on the Mystery of the Cross constitutes the core of **Spousal Christology**. This is because of the spousal character of the love which unites to the Lord Jesus increases and matures, under the guide and action of the Holy Spirit, precisely by being more intensely immersed in His Crucified Love. All of this demands contemplative study, loving compassion, conforming adherence, constant dedication.

4]. **The Pneumatological Dimension:** the Holy Spirit is the **Nuptial Gift** offered by the Lord Jesus to His spouse, and is the Bond of Love between them In addition to providing the Church with charisms, which render her a worthy spouse of Her Lord, among these there excels **charity**, that undivided love, which procures true joy. The

Spirit thus guides the Church and sustains her until the ***Parousia***. This will be a separate reflection.

5]. Experiences of these Christological Espousals: it would be impossible to offer here an exhaustive treatment - but some of these testimonies provide a good 'proof', indications of the preceding chapters. This final chapter suggests some directions that might be followed in further studies. The entire reflection has as its over-all goal that of all authentic theology: **conversion**! There is a standing invitation for ever deeper union: intellectual, moral, psychological, religious, spiritual, mystical union - loving, ***espousals*** with the Lord Jesus Himself. The hope is that in presenting these reflections, each of us might be moved to learn more about the ***Crucified and Risen Lord*** - in order to contemplate Him in His Paschal, Eucharistic mystery.

There are abundant texts that could be consulted – a very good start would be the patristic sources suggested, along with St. Bernard of Clairvaux [sometimes described as 'the Last of the Fathers' – whereas usually, the text books suggest St. Isidore in the Latin West and perhaps St. John Chrysostom.

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CHAPTER I

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SPOUSAL CHRISTOLOGY

Premise:

[1] After studying the support afforded by the OT literature – presented especially by the Prophetic Books, the Song of Songs, and the Psalms 19 & 45 - there will be noted here that of the NT writings. The effort will be to bring out both the originality and the novelty, already hinted at in recent biblical studies [such as those by the great Protestant scholar, Joachim Jeremias] – that in late Judaism the title **Spouse** was never applied to the Messiah.

[2] The word **Spouse** simply was not used as a Messianic title – and this fact brings out the more the originality manifested by the NT. These writings document on the level of metaphor, the freshness of the Christology provided, with respect to the *Messaiahology* that provided the point of departure in the late OT. The theme of the **Messiah as Spouse** has an abundant NT support [cf. Mk 2:19-20; Mt 22:1-14; 25:1; Jn 3:29; 2 Co 11:2; Ep 5:25-27]. All scholars admit, however, that it is in the **Apocalypse** that it reaches its high-point.

[3] Beginning with the Apostle **Paul** [cf. 2 Co 11:2], the early Christian communities have attributed to the Lord Jesus, both the title and the role of **Spouse of the Church**. This usage is witnessed explicitly also in the redactions of the **Synoptics**, on that saying regarding the presence of the **Spouse** [cf. Mk 2:19-20, par.] – then from the two parables that are found in Mt [22:1-14; 25:1-13] as well as in the **4th Gospel** [cf. 2:1-11, Cana of Galilee; 3:29], from the Letter to the **Ephesians** [cf. 5:21-33]. And then, of course, from the **Apocalypse** [cf. 19:7-9; 21:2, 9; 22:17].

[4] In particular, the novelty and the originality attested to by the NT are based, in the last analysis, on the Self-comprehension of Jesus Himself, as the **Messiah-Spouse**, and in the **Gift of His Life** offered by Him on the Cross for the remission of the sins of humanity and the salvation of the world. In His **Oblative Love** as Pope John Paul II often speaks of – there reaches its culmination the **spousal character** of God's love which already in the OT, and especially in the Prophets, who expressed this ideal, having recourse to the analogy of that love which a man would have towards a woman in marriage ¹⁶.

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¹⁶ Cf. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* # 25, in EV 11/1319-1320. Aug. 15, 1988/

1. **The Spousal Sense of God's Love for Israel in the Prophetic Message:** with the Prophet Hoseah the **Nuptial Symbol** entered into the rich and varied panorama of Biblical literature as a model very soon adopted in order to describe the **Covenant** between God and His People, seen above all under the aspect of *motivation*, on the basis of which God made the unilateral decision to establish this **Pact of the Covenant of Marcy** precisely with Israel. This People certainly was not the most powerful, nor the most important among all the peoples of the earth. Nonetheless, this lowly People was chosen by God simply out of love and out of fidelity to the oath that he had made to their Fathers [cf. Dt 7:7-]. From Hoseah, this **Nuptial Symbol** will be taken up then by Jeremiah, Ezechiel, and by Deutero-Isaiah, to the point of becoming the typical element of Biblical Theology. Eventually, this symbol would find its way into the NT, and then permeate the centuries of Christian Spirituality. The fundamental intuition seems to have been established by Hoseah.

a. **The Theology of Covenant in the Light of Nuptial Symbolism:** in the process of the formation of the **Theology of the Covenant**, the **Nuptial Symbolism** came along side those other pacts, steeped much more in military justice – as those contracts, or ‘just constitutions’ between a regent and his vassals. In this conception, God was presented as the Sovereign Who graciously grants His favors and His protection, as would a King, to vassals of much inferior rank. The ‘vassals’, of course, in this symbolism was the Hebrew People – and even though the King was considered supremely merciful and benevolent, the role of the People was simply to be faithful, accepting determined conditions gently imposed upon all from on high. In this **Theology of the Berit**, the Covenant, there dominated the concept of ‘commitment’, assumed by both parties. Yet, the People of Israel was considered to be inferior, the weaker of the two Partners, who received the favors and the protection from God. Therefore, high on the list of responses was obedience, to put into practice His Word, to follow the commandments which He imposes. In this conception, at least in some interpretations, God lays down the conditions: Israel accepts them; but there always lurks in the background the negative consequences which the People would have to endure, should it ever decide to unilaterally break the Pact [cf. Dt 28-29 – the colorful, yet demanding ‘sanctions’].

This ‘**Contract**’ would be broken when Israel would decide to abandon God, in order to follow and serve other unknown gods, allowing all to be seduced by idolatrous cults practiced by the peoples with whom Israel would have contact and lived among. In the sad history of Israel, as this unfolded, the majority actually became enslaved by the pagan and foreign gods. Crass infidelity of this nature presents Israel's response as naked ingratitude – this is the exchange that Israel so often gave in return to the passionate and faithful love that God continually nourished for them. The People in no way repaid the Almighty for all the benefits received: and the metaphor of the **Vineyard** brings this out. Even though it has been

cultivated with such care, it does not produce the hoped-for harvest – and this unhappy truth is presented with rare effectiveness [cf. Is 5:1-7; Jr 2:21]. On the part of God, however, the Pact of the **Covenant of Mercy** is irrevocable: the gratuitous, and merciful love which is at the basis of this Covenant that the God of Mercy initiated has rendered the election of Israel as definitive and irreversible.

As part of the Lord's 'reaction' to all this selfish infidelity, a new metaphor eventually emerged under His inspiration. From Hoseah to 'Trito-Isaiah' [cf. Is 56-66], there may be encountered a whole series of texts which, while having recourse to the **Nuptial Metaphor**, these many passages offer a re-reading that is most instructive regarding Salvation History and the **Covenant of Mercy** between God and the People of Israel. This Salvation History is clearly wounded, on the one hand, by the repeated infidelities of this vacillating People, which prostituted itself often, by committing the sin of idolatry – and yet, on the other hand, by the constant fidelity, ardor of God. He manifested Himself repeatedly as eternally disposed of taking up again and again with that spouse of His who had betrayed Him. The only reason for this 'divine folly' is that God loves His people immensely out of mercy, and He has absolutely no intention of giving up on her. Idolatry is identified in this imagery often enough as the **sin of adultery**: Israel is the Wife who chooses to betray her legitimate Divine Husband, and for this sin, would merit to be repudiated in a definitive manner [cf. Jr 3:1]. God, however, will never act this way: even if His disdain is deeply enkindled against this unfaithful People, this lights up His **Jealous Love**, which does not support being betrayed, being neglected, rejected. The warning was repeated; keep yourselves from forgetting the Covenant which the Lord your God has established with you... Since the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a **Jealous God**... [cf. Dt 4:23-24; Ex 20:5-6].

This divine 'conduct', however, needs to be seen also in the light of a truth beyond all discussion: in His love towards Israel, God manifests His Fidelity also toward Himself, a conduct which is conform to His very identity. In fact, the commitment which he has unilaterally taken up in Israel's regard with His Pact of Covenant Mercy, for God remains immutable, eternal, definitive: a **New and Everlasting Covenant**. From this aspect believers were gradually brought to comprehend and to appreciate more in depth, Divine Omnipotence, His Almighty nature, and His inviolable Holiness. Indeed the power of God consists also in being immutable and table in His love. There is nothing whimsical in the One God, a perennial problem for polytheism. Indeed, the authentic 'power' of God consists also in His being unchangeable and stable in His love: therefore, he comes across as the Rock upon Whom Israel, and every believer, are to place trustingly their support, certain they are standing safely on solid ground. II-Is teaches this vigorously: *...Does a man cast off the wife of his youth? Oracle of God. I did forsake you for a brief moment, but with great love will I take you back...My love for you will never leave you*

*and My **Covenant of Peace** with you will never be shaken, says Yahweh who takes pity on you...* [cf. Is 54:6-7, 10]. In harmony with these ideas, there is also another which ought to be placed in the light: if God reacts forcefully to the infidelity of his People, He does this also because - being the People's Creator and Redeemer - He exerts His intention of opening their eyes to the mortal dangers which fall upon all of Israel because of their sinfulness.

In a few words, it should be recognized that the use of the **Nuptial Imagery** is all the more effective in so far as it points out with utmost clarity the different comportment brought forward by the two protagonists in this Pact of **the Covenant of Mercy**. In the final analysis, there is a clear contrast placed on the one hand, between the betrayal, the willfulness, and the malice of the People - and, then, on the other hand, the love of the Almighty God, a love that is faithful, eternal, disposed always to pardon, merciful to the point of tenderness. There can be thus understood that **the Covenant of Mercy** is not a pact between two partners who are on the same level, but this pact is always and only a 'gift of Grace' bestowed by God out of His sheer benevolence to a People who certainly in exchange can offer Him very little. The advantage, therefore, is all Israel's. Under this point of view, in the eyes of the Prophets, sin always appears all the more grave, to the extent that it is indeed unmotivated, incomprehensible, the fruit only of malice and immaturity. Stupidity and immaturity lead one to realize with great clarity how the commitment to respect this Pact of the Covenant of mercy, and the relative conditions laid down by God, is the end result of a growth, an increase, a maturity in love. By the very nature of this intimate relationship, increase and intensity comes only slowly, with much effort, and yet progressively - also because the Lord knows what we are made of, He knows we are weak [cf. Ps 103], and besieged by so many temptations and dangers.

Therefore, the sacred pages penned by the inspired Prophets respect the vicissitudes of the People of Israel. Her history is severely wounded also by the drama of Exile, the Babylonian Captivity: however, in the end, there will prevail always **that hope based on trust in God**, Who loves this People with an eternal love and mercy [cf. Jr 31:3]. This divine love - as has been hinted at above - is characterized by Divine Pity, Infinite mercy, and a profound Tenderness [cf. Jr 31:20]. Therefore, along-side the typical accents of **spousal affection**, there also is always present the **maternal sentiments**. At the same time, however, these sublime human feelings and loving choices, are surpassed for the simple reason that God - different from what might happen to any woman - will never forget His beloved people [cf. is 49:15; Ho 11:8]. Israel is, and will always be the preferred plant [cf. Is 5:7], the Chosen Vine [cf. Jr 2:21] - the wife married in God's 'youth' [cf. Is 54:6]. The Beloved who is always sought [cf. Is 62:12]. For these reasons, God commits Himself each time to giving over to His people the grace and the capacity to love Him, continuously renewing the Covenant - and even doing so, by promising to establish

with Him a New Covenant [cf. Jr 31:31-34; Ezk 36]. It thus happens that the re-interpretation of the **Divine Covenant** touches to the depths, the resounding chord of reciprocity: this assumes even more sublime beauty in this context: ***I will be your God, and you will be My People*** - a much repeated 'antiphon' [cf. Ex 6:7; Jr 31:33; Ezk 36:28]. This is the Promise toward which the hope of the Chosen People is incessantly reaching.

b. Hoseah: in the first three chapters of the work attributed to this Prophet, there may be found the account of his marriage to a prostitute, by the name of Gomer: the account in its realism, is likewise **symbolic**, and thus enters into what some experts call the literary genre of 'prophetic actions' common among the Prophets, such as Jr and Ezk. At the center and the high point of this, there may be found that passage where there are described, with poetic tones of sublime excellence, the sin committed by Israel, and the Love that God continually nourished for her [cf. **Ho 2:4-25**].

The sin committed by Israel consists in having rendered cult to the Canaanite divinities: it is defined as *prostitution* and *adultery* [cf. Ho 2:4]. This is all the more serious in so far as it is accompanied by ingratitude. Israel has not only forgotten the benefits already received by God faithfully throughout their history, but they even came to consider them rather as something that came to them as a gift received from their lovers [cf. Ho 2:14], and not from God, their Spouse. And what is even more inadmissible, however, is the fact that having decided to follow their 'lovers', the People turned their backs on God [cf. Ho 2:15].

For His part, though, God is not forgetful of His People: He certainly would not let them go undisturbed forever. He decided to begin all over again: in the background, the inspired authors once more brought up the glorious time of the Exodus, for that that idyllic time in the desert. As in those 'good old days', the merciful God once more intervenes, and will deliver His People from their present slavery to the false gods. In this case, the loving and merciful Spouse will forgive all and take from His poor wife's shoulders the oppressive yoke brought to them by idol-worship [cf. 2:16-20]. It will come to bear in that day, the oracle of the Lord, you will call Him: My Husband, and you will no longer call Me: My Master. I will take from their mouths the names of Baal, as they will not be remembered any longer [cf. 2:18-19].

Even though He is the Lord God Almighty, He presents Himself to the People with the attitude of a **Spouse**, Who wants only to be loved and recognized as their Only God, to Whom they should bind themselves in a total and definitive manner. Therefore, His liberating intervention that He decided on by Himself also has the effect of an **interior renewal**: He will do all this in such a way that from the hearts of this wavering People there will totally disappear the name of Baal, and all his idols.

The **Covenant of Nuptial Love and Mercy** will be renewed, beginning this way: it will start again as a kind of *engagement*, a prelude to that indissoluble and definitive binding which will be sanctioned as a *bona fide* marriage. Furthermore, according to the Ritual in use at that time, God will present to His beloved **Spouse** those gifts which will allow Israel to live in fidelity: these are gifts which pertain to **interior holiness**. The Prophet teaches us, therefore, that the **spousal love** of God has the power of **transforming** the hearts of His beloved, because He conquers her love and binds this poor People definitively to Himself: ***I will make you My Spouse for ever, I will espouse you in justice and right, in benevolence and in love, I will engage you to Me in fidelity and you will come to know the Lord*** [cf. 2:21-22]. The future tense of these verbs stands in designating a promise which will be filled by God in the future – an unknown future toward which the chosen people will never cease to turn its gaze, full of hope.

In the meantime, God invites His Chosen People to live with Him in a relationship which is quite something other than one that would demand humiliating subjection toward a harsh Task-Master, a hard Land-owner, one who would impose a most despotic regime. This is the humiliating lot of which the People already has had some experience, in their following by following after the false gods, under the name of Baal. God, on the other hand, offers this sinful people a relationship based on love, which guarantees Israel, then, in the last analysis, the dignity of the Chosen people. I will sow this People once more in the country and I will love the Unloved; I will say to 'No-People-of Mine', ***You are My People!*** And this lowly People will be able to see: ***And You are My God!*** [cf. Ho 2:25].

c. **Jeremiah:** his teaching is along the same lines, continuing that of Hoseah, contributing at the same time to have increase the theological value of the **loving Nuptial Symbol** that Hoseah had inaugurated under divine inspiration. *I remember the affection of your youth, the love of your bridal days; you followed Me through the wilderness, though a land unsown...* [cf. Jr 2:2]: these are gripping expressions that bring quite clearly to light just what precisely is the focal point of the message given by the Prophet. In truth, that which is striking in Jeremiah's prophecy is the sentiment of delusion which should accompany the criticisms directed by God to this guilty people, that they had broken the Covenant on their own, which God Himself had initiated [cf. **Jr 2-3:1:4.**] *But, like a woman betraying her lover, the House of Israel has betrayed Me...* [cf. Jr 3:20].

Inserted here in this case, in the historical-theological framework of the Exodus generation – as this was seen as the period of engagement, of that spontaneous love, full of enthusiasm which moved Israel to follow God with all docility that was fitting [cf. Jr 2:2-3]. These criticisms lay open once more very clearly that relationship of Cause and effect between sin and idolatry, understood as

prostitution, and the consequent slavery – this so weakened the vital bond with God that eventually it sapped life out of that privileged relationship. From this fact, it would be quite clear how culpable is Israel's stupidity! Having allowed themselves to be deceived by lifeless idols means that the People gave evidence of their gravely harmful lack of wisdom: *...Since My People have committed a double crime: they have abandoned Me, the foundation of Living Water, only to dig cisterns for themselves, leaky cisterns that hold no water...* [cf. Jr 2:13].

God had bestowed on Israel the gift of freedom, but Israel preferred to serve the idols which held them captive and thus rendered the weakened People deaf to every appeal! *...You said: Who cares! – For I am in love with strangers, and they are the ones I follow!* [cf. Jr 2:25]. In these words there is described in an incisive manner the hard-headedness that blinds one's heart which has allowed itself to be seduced by idols, **whatever nature these may have**: in this way, the *adultery* is complete, because it springs from a heart contaminated by idolatry [cf. Jr 2:22-24] - and this leads to a very easy forgetting of the One who truly loves His People. Thus, a most unlikely and inadmissible reality develops: *Does a girl forget her ornaments, a bride her sash? And yet, My People have forgotten Me, for days beyond number...* [cf. 2:32] *...But like a woman betraying her Lover, the House of Israel has betrayed Me – the oracle of the Lord – A noise is heard on the bare heights; the weeping and entreaty of the sons of Israel, because they have gone so utterly astray, and forgotten Yahweh their God...* [3:20-21].

Despite all this, God does not give up inviting His People to conversion, and to await their return. He is disposed to embrace His chosen one anew, even if Israel has conducted itself, much like a woman who is married and turns to another man [cf. 3:1]. The Lord hopes for her to convert toward Him [cf. **3:1:1-4:4**]. This message is rendered even more incisive by the appeal which God makes to the Prophet himself not to get married, nor to have any children: His love is eternal, and for this reason, by this symbol and real celibacy, Jeremiah and Israel should espouse another – as the Lord will not espouse any other People. His persevering fidelity moves Him to seek without ceasing the Love of His People, to lessen the distance that infidelity produced and to heal the wounds that this has produced [cf. **Jr 30:10-22**]. Therefore, as always, this is His declaration of fidelity – expressed also through the sentiment of **Mercy** - which inevitably infuses new life and new Hope: I have loved you with an everlasting love, and so am constant in My affection for you. I build you once more, virgin of Israel.. [cf. **Jr 30:3-4**].

d. Ezechiel: in this 'major' Prophet, we have an allegorical poem, based on the **Nuptial Theme**, in which he – the **Prophet-Priest** - denounces the sins of Judah [cf. **Ezk 16:1-62**]. Still another time, as in the prophetic passages examined above, the **Covenant of Merciful Love** established on Sinai is re-thought and descried

as a **Marriage Pact** [cf. vv. 1-14]: God chose Israel as His Wife: I will draw up a Covenant with you, says the Lord god, and you will become Mine! [v. 8]. He had bestowed on her an incomparable beauty and had raised her up to a dignity of royal rank: you will become ever more beautiful, and you will even become queen [cf. v. 13].

And still, one more time, the beloved Wife allows herself to be seduced by the wiles of idols, always a fascination of the human heart, due to their multiplicity of forms through which they seduce the human heart. Israel becomes ungrateful, and unfaithful beyond all imagining: she simply turns her back on her roots and where she came from [cf. v. 43]. She has withdrawn from the agreement she made in the **Marital Pact**, and stained herself repeatedly and obstinately with the sin of prostitution, to the point of degradation of perversion, that is a horror beyond which any loving husband should ever be reduced: the Lord claims plaintively that He had made His spouse different from others. But, this is her response: ... *In your whoring, you have done the exact opposite from other women; no one was running after you, so you went out and paid them; they did not pay you, since your behavior was so outrageous...*[cf. Ezk 16:34]. God's reaction can only be described as that of any husband, profoundly wounded by the betrayal and enkindled by His righteous jealousy. His beloved chosen Spouse had disdained the oath that she had made and violated her Covenant [cf. v. 59]. The will have to undergo punishment, humiliation and shame [cf. v. 35-59]. However, it will not always be this way! God will grant anew His pardon and will renew His Promise of a **New Everlasting Covenant** [cf. vv. 60-63]: ...*I will remember the Covenant that I made with you when you were a girl, and Will conclude a Covenant with you that shall last forever!* [cf. v. 60].

This Promise finds its particular *explicitation* in the Oracle transmitted in c. 36, which announces the return from exile and the consequent change of situation from which the People will be the unique beneficiaries. The Wife, in fact, will be washed anew with pure water, and will be purified from all her iniquities: she will receive as a gift a **new heart** and a **new spirit**, as Psalm 51 prays for. Thus, she will no longer be unfaithful. Thus renewed and sanctified interiorally, she might be able to be docile before her Lord and Husband. From this stance, she will come to enjoy peace and security, in that union sanctioned by the Pact of the **Covenant of Mercy** [cf. vv. 16-36]: I will place My Spirit within you, and I will make you live according to My statutes, and have you observe and put into practice My laws. You will dwell in the land that I have given to your fathers; *you will be My people and I will be your God...*[cf. Ezk 36:28; 37:23].

e. **Isaiah:** with Deutero [II-] Isaiah, there became ever more solid the hope in a future that would be truly new and full of joy. This hope was profiled along the

lines of a promise of a **New Covenant**, bound to the announcement of the **Messianic Nuptials**.

The Oracles of this Prophet, addressed to his People still enslaved in Babylon, are oriented above all toward Hope and Joy. The end of the exile is not far. God pardons, renews, gives fecundity and life [cf. Is 49:14-21; 54:1-10]. He forgets the sin and invites Jerusalem to forget the terribly sinful past and rather, to exult with all their strength. The Merciful God is disposed to take once more to Himself the wife that had been abandoned, but only for a certain time, but she was never totally rejected. He guarantees to her a numerous descendancy and declares to her, in moving tones, His unbridled love for her. His is a love that is condensed in His role as **Almighty Creator** that made Him **Israel's Spouse** by His own choice, and their **Merciful Redeemer** [cf. 54:5]. How consoling, therefore, are the words which he directs toward her! - ... *Yes, like a forsaken wife, distressed in spirit, Yahweh calls you back. Does a man cast off the wife of his youth? Says your God. I did forsake you for a brief moment, but with great love will I take you back. In excess of anger, for a moment I hid My face from you. But with everlasting love I have taken pity on you, says Yahweh, your Redeemer..* [cf. Is 54:6-8].

This magnificent statement leads the careful reader to understand even better the unfathomable depth of the love that God nourishes for that people whom He has created for Himself. He does not succeed in remaining in delusion and bitterness, all of this was 'but for an instant!' The love which binds Him to the beloved is too intense and He cannot resist to stay far from her for too much time. Therefore, He does not place any delays in renewing once more the commitment taken with the Pact of **His Nuptial Covenant of Mercy**: this idea was enunciated in the last two verses of the passage, with referring back to the oath sworn to Noah, and with the declaration that His divine fidelity and love are beyond collapse.

With **III-Is [56-66]**, the theme of Joy reaches its climax: joy is uncontainable [cf. 62:3-5]. In fact, not only does God lead the Prophet to rejoice fully – and he exults for the salvation already received, and compares his own joy to that of a Spouse who places upon her head the diadem, a spouse who puts on her jewels [cf. 61:10]. But, beyond this – which is more than remarkable – Jerusalem itself will be a reason for Divine rejoicing. He will join Himself forever to this People: ... *Like a young man marrying a virgin, so will the One Who built you wed you, and as the bridegroom rejoices in the bride, so will your God rejoice in you...!* [cf. Is 62:5].

Jerusalem is described here as a **Spouse** on the day of Her wedding: the People has finally returned from Exile, and has taken up His dwelling in the house which the Husband had prepared for her. Once more will there be rings on her fingers, the gift of her 'architect, Maker, God Himself. She will no longer be like the abandoned wife, at the mercy of any passer-by. She is once more the Virginal Spouse who attracts the

Lord Himself to her. She is irresistible to her Divine Spouse and that, therefore, she will be much sought after by Him: *And you shall be called: 'the Sought-after', 'City-not-forsaken!'* [cf. 62:12].

2. Canticle of Canticles: also the so-called 'Writings' – among which **the Song of Songs** is outstanding, as are the Psalms – offer a considerable contribution to the theology of **Spousal Love**. Thus, in the panorama of this complex literature, in its multiple literary genres, which draws to itself the **Nuptial Theme**, we find in the very first place the Canticle of Canticles, i.e., **that Song *par excellence***, the supreme and most beautiful of all the Canticles. This unusual composition is a collection of love poems, with a complex literary structure loosely held together, and composed in the Post-exilic Period, which inter-weaves the reality of the union of a man and a woman, celebrated in its very varied vicissitudes. This whole work is held together by the over-riding theme which alludes, and repeatedly refers back to the loving bond between god and His People. In order to appreciate the heights and the beauty of the loving lyric, this general outline might serve anyone who would take the time to read these inspired Chapters:

a. The Meeting and the Repose [cf. Ct 1:5-2:7]: in their first dialogue, the two Lovers exalt the beauty of the other and the powerful attraction they have for each other. This description is inspired by those regulations in use among Semitic peoples and flows with an uninterrupted flood of symbols, emotions and loving accents, which becomes almost overwhelming. Hers is a seductive beauty, enchanting. This natural beauty with which the intended bride is endowed, is much embellished by jewelry that she is wearing, as well as the very powerful perfumes she has on. Among these sweet odors is that of nard, a perfume of a most penetrating odor, and one that is very costly. The conversation between the two lovers is most interesting: along with the complements that they bestow on each other through comparisons that come both from the animal and well as the plant world, there are uses made of these that present a tenderness that is both intense and delicate. The comparisons made are endowed also with possessive adjectives, with which there is given force to a declared mutual belonging and reciprocal self-giving. In this context there appears for the first time a very important vocabulary, which will then return 33 times: ***My beloved, My loved one!*** [cf. Ct 1:13]. This denotes in the original language a truly passionate intimacy, full of tenderness and sublime delicacy.

At a given point this intimacy is evoked by the much loved intended bride-to-be, with these words: *He has taken me to His banquet hall and the banner He raises over me is love...* [cf. 2:4]. On that occasion, she had the good fortune of tasting still another time the strong and inebriating taste of love – symbolized by wine, a symbol that is already present in the Prologue [cf. Ct 1:2, 4] – to which she is entirely

abandoned, allowing herself to be conquered by love still another time. Immediately following this, she confesses that she is love-sick! She feels weak because of the love: this is a 'malady' from which she would not want to be cured. It can be treated, but never taken away. In fact, if she asks to be assisted and nourished, she does this because she needs to be invigorated, to have sufficient energies in order to remain always united to her Husband, to find refuge and repose in His arms: *...Feed me with raisin cakes, restore me with applies, for I am sick with love. His left arm is under my head, His right embraces me...* [cf. 2:4-5].

This lyrical poem comes to a close, then, with this scene of trusting abandonment, described in matrimonial imagery, with a **nuptial embrace**. Upon this falls and dominates the dream of restoration, which bears with itself and diffuses all about a certain silence, repose and peace. There is heard only the voice of the spouse, Who then turns to the accompanying choir: *... I charge you, Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles, the hinds of the field, not to stir My love, nor rouse it, until it please to awake...* [cf. 2:7].

The Husband lovingly contemplates His sleeping Spouse, observes her intensely, He fills His heart and His eyes, keeping His gaze fixed upon her. He is happy in her mere presence, and enjoys so much holding His Beloved in His arms, as she entrusts herself totally to His embrace. Therefore, He hastens to ask the Daughters of Jerusalem to keep silence. He does not want His beloved intended Bride to be disturbed. He does not want them to raise her from her dreams. If they did, He would no longer be able to continue to enjoy her contact, without having to be concerned about the time which passes. Everything seems to come to a halt when there pervades that quiet produced by sleep. Time itself seems to stop.

b. The Visit and the Quest [Sgs 2:8-3:5]: what may be the second poem – according to some interpreters - is modulated on the inter-twining between the visits between the Beloved Couple, and their Quest for each other: in the first instance, the Husband to be is on center stage, as he returns, arrives with the **new spring-time [he Pasch?]**. In the second scene, the Wife-to-be is seen after having delayed a bit in responding to the invitation addressed to her by her Man, puts herself on His trail after His departure, and will not give up her quest for her Lord, until she finds Him.

The Husband returns, He arrives with the **new spring-time [Passover?]**. When He is missing, it is as though life itself were missing: but, the long wait, comparable to the harsh **spiritual winter, something like a certain dying**, which arises because of the sadness that His **absence** brings with it – has now passed. The intended Bride can finally see Him once more and can again hear His voice. This is a Voice which caresses her with praise, and attracts her by having dance before her eyes further joys. Other moments of inebriating love are promised to her. The sound of His voice makes her

tremble. With a joy that seems to close off her throat by emotion and almost impedes her from speaking, exclaims: ... *I hear my Beloved. See how he comes, leaping on the mountains, bounding over the hills. My Beloved is like a gazelle, like a young stag. See where He stands behind our wall. He looks in at the window, He peers through the lattice...* [cf. Sgs 2:8-9].

The woman speaks standing in her room: she can see without being seen. With her eyes riveted on her Man who is approaching, she follows His every step and notes His every movement: she accompanies with her gaze, being very attentive to His rapid and graceful approach which He employs on His way to their date. And she already enjoys a foretaste of the emotions that will invade her when He will indeed when He will be close to her. Her Man comes ever closer with agility and assurance. He knows the way well and also the agreed-upon place: how many times has He come there to call on her! ... *He stands behind **OUR wall!*** This great sense of familiarity, and this intense delicacy are brought more and more to the fore by the possessive adjectives: such as **OUR wall!** The looks about, and notices all: somewhat blinded by the sun, He strives to make out the Woman He loves, as she is still in the shadows that reigns in her room" ... *My Beloved lifts His voice, and He says to me: Come, then, My love, My lovely one, come!. The **winter** is now past...* [cf. Sgs 2:10, f.]. The Woman lives on the first floor – she is the one to whom any visitor must speak, and her Beloved addresses her.

Come, then, My love! This charming invitation challenges one to fix careful attention on the film unfolding before us. The woman at this time is still at home. She is somewhat in the shadows and it is *before the dawn wind arises, before the shadows flee* [cf. Sgs 2:17]. Further particulars are given: the **winter** is over and the cold rains have ceased [cf. 2:11]. To draw her out, the Husband-to-be describes the scenery outside, by offering an enchanting description of the great out of doors - the whole country-side has been transformed, transfigured, by the touch of the Creator into a delightful Paradise, Garden of Delights. The **winter** with its long nights and cold mornings is gone now, and nature has been transformed in the Garden of Eden. In the long journey this loving Man has followed to the very door step of his Beloved all of nature has been re-animated – vegetation everywhere has come to life, one can hear the happy chirping of all kinds of birds, especially that of the turtle-dove. The invitation is to take deep breaths of the fresh spring air, which has brought new life to the meadow, and the perfume of the fresh flowers can be felt everywhere [cf. 2:12-13]. The Fiance' wishes that His beloved would come outside into this enchanting spectacle – that she, too, would come out into this beautiful wonder, and be enveloped by the **New Spring-time**, and that they could both enjoy the spectacle together. The **New Spring-time**, the time of the **Pasch**, is the best time to meet – and it is the time of the year when God and His Beloved first met. Both have waited for this moment with much patience – and especially the Fiance'. Therefore, He insists: ...

*The fig tree is forming its first figs and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance. Come, then, My love, My lovely one, come! My Dove hiding in the **clefts of the Rock** [for some: **the Wounds of Jesus Christ**], in the coverts of the cliff, show Me your face, let Me hear your voice – for your voice is sweet and your face is beautiful!* [cf. 2:13-14]. The Husband-to-be calls His intended: **My Dove!** A term invoking endearment, tenderness, affection, delicacy, fidelity.

Surveying this whole scene, one that is so marked with affection, the loving Husband-to-be tries to convince His beloved to come out of her house, compared now to the clefts in the Rock, the coverts of the cliff. These are places of great secrecy, intimacy, and accessible only to lovers. Such places are way up high, beyond the gaze of those really not interested in an authentically loving manner. The comparison makes some allusion to a gesture that some see as typically feminine: the woman pulls back, she is shy: almost withdraws. She does not let herself be seen, she does not speak: and she does not yet give in to her loved one's invitation to come out. However, all this *coterie* simply increases her Man's desire to be with her. And she knows this.

The loving Fiance' seeks in every possible manner to catch her gaze, to have her eyes look at the beautiful scene in which He is immersed, and then to offer His gentle words of endearment to draw her to follow Him. At the same time, however, he notices deeply within Himself a certain upsetment: the fear that something, or someone, might come to disturb such a pure and wholesome love, that these would come to damage, or impede their date. He fears this danger, to which he alludes by the mention of the foxes which come out and devastate the plush vineyard, already in flower [cf. 2:15]. In response, the woman answers with a stupendous phrase, intensely emotional and pregnant with passionate love: **My Beloved is for me, and I for Him!** - almost a **Nuptial Formula** - He pastures the flock among the lilies [cf. 2:16; cf. also 6:3; 7:11]. This **Marriage Formula** is repeated many times by the loving woman in the course of this Love Poem, and the words mean what they say: **a reciprocal belonging, a mutual and total self-giving.** This Formula is the sublime synthesis – and the goal of every believer - of the entire message of the whole Canticle – and the purpose of the spiritual life.

It is dawn when the woman finally responds: the long **Dark Night** is over – the **Spiritual Winter** has subsided. The light of the **New Day of the Lord** has arrived, to put to flight the deep shadows of the night. The Woman has accepted the loving invitation addressed to her so affectionately by her Beloved and He makes clear to her where to meet Him: Before the dawn-wind rises, before the shadows flee return like a young stag on **the Mountains of the Covenant** [cf. Sgs 2:17, f.]. They will meet there, in a place full of sweet odors of perfume shed by the beautiful plants and flowers, and share their time before the shadows of the **Dark Night** return. The

sweet-smelling pathway is the only directions offered, but a way well known by the couple.

Then, with utmost abruptness – without any warning and without any logical passing over from one spot to the next – so often the poetic style – the scene changes completely. From the setting of this beautiful sun-lit day, with its flood of brilliant light and fascinating colors and odors, there falls very suddenly the Dark Night accompanied by the Darkness and Silence. In place of a pleasant date for the loving couple, that seemed so imminent and nearly at hand, to enjoy the festive spring-time apparel of the country-side, there now come solitude and sadness caused by absence. The woman, in fact turns over in her bed, in the vain effort to obtain some sleep in her restlessness: she is not able to fall asleep, for the simple reason that her much anticipated Beloved now is far from her, the love of her soul: ... *On my bed, at night, I sought Him, Whom my heart loves I sought, but did not find Him...!* [cf. Sgs 3:1]. From this moment on, the poet begins to describe the states of mind from which she is afflicted that flood her mind, coming one after another, and there is often the inter-weaving of the two verbs: **to seek** and **to find**¹⁷. Thus, the anguish caused by the **absence** of her Beloved gives way soon to the sensation of sheer **emptiness**, which in the meantime has been taking hold of her. She does not spend a great deal of time in such unproductiveness, but she decisively makes up her mind and makes a truly bold commitment. She decides to leave the safety of her room in the middle of the **Dark Night**, not paying heed to the inherent dangers, and she set out **looking for** her Beloved, until she succeeds in finding Him.

At long last, after many harsh vicissitudes, the tension is dissolved: her joy, that can no longer be contained, explodes. What has happened is that finally, she is able to embrace to herself the Beloved of her heart. After so long, there has arrived that much awaited moment that their date may begin and that they both might enjoy the much desired intimacy: the woman chooses a place that is quite familiar and pervaded throughout with a warm and vibrant love, a secure refuge which guarantees her peace: ... *I held Him fast, nor would I let Him go till I had brought Him into my mother's House, into the room of her who conceived me.* [cf. Sgs 3:4]. Serenity and peace now take over in this hour of happiness, symbolized by the gentle sleep that follows. This time, too, the Beloved asks that her sleep not be disturbed [cf. 2:7; 3:5]: is there anyone who would not want to spend the longest possible time in such inebriating happiness which such love brings with it?

c. The Exaltation of the Woman: in this beautiful Canticle, there abound passages in which the Beloved describes in exultant tones the beauty and loving nature of His Beloved. She appears to Him to be extraordinarily enchanting and

¹⁷ cf. Associazione Biblica Italiana, *Quaerere Deum. Atti della XXV Settimana Biblica*. Brescia: Paideia 1980; cf. also Parola, Spirito e Vita. Quaderni di Lettura Biblica 35, *Cercare Dio* 1997.

lovable. In the unusual passage [cf. Ct 4:1-17], He paints a picture of His Beloved, framing her within an exclamation full of unbridled admiration. He opens by saying: ... *How beautiful you are, My love!* - and then concludes with these words: ... *You are wholly beautiful, My love, and without a blemish...* [4:7].

When this passage is attentively examined [along with others of the same type: 1:9-11, 15; 2:2; 6:4-12; 7:1-10], the reader comes to the realization almost immediately that when one is in love, creativity is almost without boundaries. By placing in evidence her real beauty, this provides the opportunity to manifest those sentiments which give form and substance to love. These are in fact intense and vibrant emotions which the woman excites deep within Him. Thus, the Intended Husband is conquered forever by her who overwhelms Him just with a glance, which He declares with touching openness: she has stolen My heart, My Sister, My Spouse, she has won me over just with one of her glances, with just a single pearly of her necklace [cf. 4:9; 6:5, a]. The look of a much beloved person is what conquers Him. From her eyes, flashes a ray of light which suddenly bursts forth as a luminous ray that shines forth from a most precious pearl. Indeed, love and light are intimately connected among themselves. Love is luminous because it is transmitted and communicates itself with that same immediacy, intensity and efficacy as does the light.

The Beloved now experiences being almost a prisoner of His loved one: He is subjugated by her, and submitted to her. He is ready for all, just so that He will never lose her. With a single glance she accomplishes wonders! Her captivating and seductive power of her eyes, through which love speaks and strikes even more than by any other means. There is good reason for the classical Latin translation of the so-called *Vulgate* : ***vulnerasti cor meum – You have wounded My Heart!*** He asks her to turn away her loving gaze, for her eyes hold Him captive! [cf. 6:5a]. The exclamations that the Beloved uses here to give voice to His overwhelming admiration for her beauty, which is at the same time most fascinating and devoid of any blemishes. The most intense expressions of His love are included in a few verses in which His ecstatic admiration is accompanied by a covering of reverential fear: *You are as beautiful as Tizrah, fair as Jerusalem* , terrible as an army with banners... [cf. 6:4, 10].

Such an impressive beauty can only bring joy to a man: *How beautiful you are, how charming, My love, My delight!* [cf. 7:7]. This beloved woman satisfies Him in every way [cf. 7:9]. Their mutual love is shared and makes Him enjoy her love in expressions that are so strong that they procure for him a happiness far superior to any inebriation that could be brought by wine to the taste, or any penetrating perfume might bring to the smell [cf. 4:10]. How could He not want her forever? *She is an enclosed garden, My sister, My bride, a sealed foundation!* [cf. 4:12]. These two

adjectives attributed to the Garden and the foundation, or source of refreshing waters, indicate the integrity and fidelity of the woman.

The image of the running stream, or of the well, assure a steady supply of refreshing cleansing waters, and new life for the meadows, is much appreciated: *...A fountain that makes the gardens fertile, well of living water, streams flowing down from Lebanon.* [cf. 4:15]. From the very fact that the beloved wife is compared to a luxuriously flourishing garden and to an inexhaustible source of living water there is drawn the conclusion that the Husband intends to bring out her qualities: in the first place, His Beloved is for him an oasis in the harsh desert of life, in which He can always find refuge, restoration; and secondly, she is the font of New Life with him, she is fecund.

...My Dove is unique, Mine unique and perfect. She is the darling of her Mother, the favorite of the one who bore her. [cf. 6:9]. This beloved Spouse is the beloved woman, the most perfect, one who knows no substitute, the unforgettable. The poet places two models side by side: for any mother, her child is the most beautiful in the world – and for a man in love, his woman is always the most splendid, the most beloved, she is unique in all the world. Love in its strongest form and most sublime expressions is monogamous and total.

She is **unique**, the **Dove**, the **perfect** one: these images placed one after the other come to signify the primacy and the dignity recognized in the beloved Spouse-to-be, and in a most exclusive manner. This is a relationship of love that is so exclusive that it becomes also complete, in the sense that it brings to the fore the experience of all the loving sentiments which characterize inter-personal relationships: His beloved woman is also His sister, His girl friend. In comparison to all other women [cf. 6:8], she surpasses them by far: There simply is no other who could compare with her. There simply do not exist that many beautiful and fascinating women – His beloved remains ‘unique’ in the best sense of that word. Love implies a choice which has its own reasons and logic in the beloved person, retained as one for whom there simply is no substitute, and she is simply beyond compare. Love leads the Husband-to-be to look upon His Intended in a different way than that which all others – who are not in love with her - may look upon her. In the last analysis, the poet wants it understood that love looks exclusively at the person of the beloved: true affection notices that which one is, not which one might have, or might obtain for another. Otherwise, this would only be selfishness, masquerading as love ¹⁸.

¹⁸ Cf. also Juan G. Ariintero, OP, *The song of Songs. A Mystical Exposition.* Cincinnati: Dominicans 1974; Blaise Arminjon, SJ, *The Cantata of Love. A Verse by Verse reading of the ‘Song of Songs’* San Francisco: Ignatius 1988..

3. **The Psalms:** of which two merit special attention 19 and 45.

- **Ps 19:** is a hymn which passes from the praise of God because of His great work in creation [vv. 2-7] – then on to His marvelous Gift of the Law [vv. 8-14]. The text is beautifully put together with the rich symbolism of the sun, the nuptial theme, military and athletic imagery as well, Some refer to this as the biblical Canticle of the Sun [vv. 5c-7]. The sun gets up from its nuptial bed each morning, dashes across the heavens all day – bringing light everywhere – comparable to the Torah.

- **Ps 45:** this is a nuptial *carmen*, and seems have as its theme the Royal Enthronement. The king is being praised in idealistic terms [vv. 2-10] – he is handsome, eloquent, fair, ideal qualities for government. The second part describes the woman of His choice [vv. 11-16] – she will be the Queen Mother – and is being asked to leave her father's house [like Abraham [cf. Gn 12: 1, ff.] – and to set out on a kind of Exodus journey through life. This is a Messianic Psalm of the Lord God, espoused to His people¹⁹.

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The New Testament

4. **Jesus of Nazareth: the Spouse of the Messianic Era: the Four Gospel Traditions:** on this rich OT background there may now be taken up the study of Jesus' own Self-designation as **Messiah-Spouse**. This begins perhaps with the Synoptic saying on the lips of Jesus Himself [cf. Mk 2:19-20; Mt 9:15; Lk 5:34-35]. The theme will conclude with the miracle accomplished by Jesus, at the wedding in Cana of Galilee [cf. Jn 2].

a. **Jesus' Self-designation as the Messiah-Spouse [cf. Mt 9:14, 17, par.]:** our premise here might also serve as a kind of conclusion]: on the basis of results acquired by monographic studies dedicated to this discussion, by commentators on the Synoptic Gospels, there are some conclusions based on different exegetes. These present a somewhat different picture than in the time of Joachim Jeremias – as today it is held that there do exist sufficient reasons to maintain the authenticity of the Synoptic statement regarding the **Spouse** Who is indeed present [cf. Mk 2:19-20, par.]. Today it is often affirmed that Jesus did indeed attribute to Himself the role of **Messiah-Spouse**. This conclusion is further supported, among other motives, by two factors which have a particular weight in the Messianic preaching and activity of Jesus Himself: His recourse to the image of **Nuptials** in order to describe the Advent of the messianic time of Salvation which He inaugurated. His recourse to this theme in His passion and violent death, which he made in passing, but clearly, with His

¹⁹ cf. Luis Alonso Schokel, *I nomi dell'amore. Simboli matrimoniali nella bibbia*. Edizioni Piemme 1997.

words on the **Spouse** Who will be taken away, contained in the second part of the Synoptic *loghion* :

... Then John's disciples came to Him and said: Why is it that we, and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not? Jesus replied: 'Surely the Bridegroom's attendants would never think of mourning as long as the Bridegroom is still with them? But the time will come for the Bridegroom to be taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece unshrunk cloth on to an old cloak, because the patch pulls away from the cloak and the tear gets worse. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; if they do, the skins burst, the wine runs out, and the skins are lost. No; they put new wine into fresh skins and both are preserved... [cf. Mt 9:14-17, par.].

In addition to the information already noted just above, which in late Judaism, the title of **Spouse** was never applied to the Messiah, there is not to be overlooked that other factor which regards the Messianic interpretation of Ps 45 made in the Targum, which speaks of the King-Messiah [vv. 3-10] and then speaks of God as the King of this world [vv. 14-16]. Even if this paraphrase is of the talmudic times, probably the theme was already known in NT times, from the moment that the Document to the Hebrews uses the Messianic transposition of the Psalm [cf. 1:8-9]. In the Messianic reading of Ps 45, present in Jewish circles there might be a justifying link to the transposition of the prerogative of Spouse, as applied to Jesus, made by the first Christian generation. This would obviously, of course, have to be based on a tradition that would go back to Jesus Himself.

Having presupposed the historical authenticity of Jesus' Self-designation as the **Messiah-Spouse**, the reflection which follows is to be inscribed within the context that unfolds in the comparison between the **Reign of God** and the **Nuptial Feast**. This comparison allows the framing of the service that Jesus offers as **Messianic Spouse** from two different angles:

- on the one hand, He, in the strength of His identity as the **Messiah-Savior**, full of the Holy Spirit, and as son of the Heavenly Father, He is also the **Spouse** for whom God organizes the **Marriage Festival** - and, as Messiah, it is He Himself Who invites the people to the **Nuptial Banquet**. To this Feast, however, one can participate only under determined conditions, because this celebration inaugurates and implies a **new life**, that which coincides with the becoming of disciples of Jesus, united to Him by faith and love [cf. Mt 22:1-14; Jn 2:1-11];
- then, on the other hand, Jesus is the **awaited Spouse**: the Marriage festival has already been prepared, and those invited have to make themselves ready for whenever He might arrive, in order to be able to enter with Him to the **nuptials** [cf. Mt 25:1-13].

There follows from this there has to be given the just emphasis to the tension between the certainty that the Spouse is already present, and that He has declared Himself to His Spouse and the expectancy of his return coincides with His *Parousia*. This tension, while it appears in perfect harmony with the fact that the reign of God, which has been set up by Jesus, appears as a reality that is both present and future. This respects also the practice for the celebration of nuptials which – in general terms – was followed throughout Palestine in the times of Jesus, and to which the authors of the four gospels refer, as also does the apostle Paul [cf. 2 Co 11:2]. This practice implied two well distinguished stages, separated by some time:

- the official engagement which would sanction in fact, the bond between the two contracting parties. In this, the woman already become a 'spouse';
- and the effective celebration of the Nuptials which signed the beginning of the stable living together between the husband and wife, with the festive entering of the wife into the home of her husband. He would have gone to her house, in order to bring her back with him for their definitive life together.

b. In the Context of the Relationship between the *Reign of God* and the *Nuptial Banquet* : making use of the information provided by the Evangelists, Jesus partook of a number of meals together with publicans and sinners. Rather, it is He Himself Who would remember the accusation addressed against Him by His adversaries. They depicted Him, in disdainful tones, as one who ate and drank, a friend of publicans and sinners [cf. Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34]. This was done when He would find fault with the people – His own generation – for their incredulity shown in His regard [cf. Mt 11:16-19]. This incredulity was accompanied by their rejection of Him. However, to refuse Jesus Christ in a conscious manner, means not to accept God's invitation to enter into His Reign, which is now close at hand – in fact, it is so close that it is actually definitively present in Jesus Christ and by means of Him [cf. Mk 1:15]. Thus, in the unfolding of His Mission, to which He dedicated Himself during the time of His earthly life there interwove the offering of salvation – which is the gift of the Reign of God – and the refusal put up by many who had actually been chosen by God, and who, for this reason, were the very first ones chosen – by the very fact, they were sinners.

The practice of sitting down to table together with publicans and sinners is simply part of the logic of the **salvific finality** inherent in that mission realized by Jesus, according to the Father's Will and in the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, this **convivial union** expresses in a tangible manner the **salvific communion** with God, to whom Jesus introduces all those who, sitting down to table with him, have the occasion and the grace, to enter into contact with the infinite **Mercy of God**, and thus, to receive the pardon of all their sins. It is a matter of that **Mercy** which God puts at the disposal of publicans and sinners through Jesus Christ and precisely

whenever these would accept Him with benevolence. This leads to the malicious criticism: *this One receives sinners and eats with them!* This is the accusation of the Scribes and Pharisees – and it is in this context that Luke introduces his famous three parables of Mercy and Pardon [cf. Lk 15:1, ff.].

Instead, Jesus has come – i.e., He was sent by his Heavenly Father – precisely to call sinners to be converted [cf. Mk 2:17, par.]: and there ‘many’ Publicans and sinners who followed Him [cf. Mk 2:15], or who were introduced into whatever place where they could sit down to eat with Him and with His disciples [cf. Mt 9:10] – or, where they could be at table with Him and His disciples [cf. Lk 5:29 – note: here the text mentions a crowd of publicans and other people]. If indeed Jesus has come, if truly He has been sent by God for this purpose, this would mean that He was indeed carrying out precisely the will of God. He did not only come to offer salvation, to open up for sinners the entrance into the Reign of God, offering them pardon for their sins – but, He did all this also to communicate to them the intimate joy with which God Himself ‘rejoices’ whenever anyone, after having received His invitation, allows Himself to be attracted by His Mercy and accepts the invitation to taste the delicious foods and drinks of the **Messianic Banquet** – always the symbol of the future goods of **the Eschatological Banquet** – which he personally had promised through His Prophet Isaiah [cf. Is 25:6, a verse found in the 11th Eucharistic Prayer for the deceased].

If indeed God offers a feast, and rejoices: over a single sinner who is converted more than He does over the 99 just [cf. Lk 15:7, 10] – over a prodigal son, who was considered dead and definitively lost, but who comes home and is restored to life [cf. Lk 15:24, 32] – so, it is admissible to pretend that one would fast precisely in that moment in which He has decided to get the festival started, prepared for all, i.e., to offer final eschatological salvation, that definitive entrance into His reign, inviting all to participate in the **Nuptial Banquet** which is now ready [cf. Mt 22:1-14]. In this regard, there is not to be overlooked the fact that also Luke, in the parallel passage with that of Mt, even though not specifically mentioning the **Nuptial Banquet**, simply speaks of a **Supper** [cf. Lk 14:16-24], but, does not completely ignore the symbol of the **Nuptial Festival**, in so far as a little earlier there is the parable regarding the choice of places [cf. Lk 14:7-11], which is opened significantly with the phrase: *...when you are invited to the **nuptials** by anyone...* [cf. Lk 14:8].

Before moving on to analyze the dispute regarding fasting which supplies Jesus with the occasion of presenting Himself as the **Messianic Spouse**, two conclusions come to the fore that have a determining value:

- on the one hand, it should be kept in mind that when He shares the table together with the publicans and sinners, Jesus brings to fulfillment the salvific meaning which the Judaic tradition often attributed to the **Festive Banquet**,

which was so often seen as a symbol of final salvation. So, it is precisely he Who inaugurates the turning of the times, the beginning of the eschatological era of salvation. It is in this direction that all those passages move and are to be interpreted in which there is brought out the participation in the **Eschatological Banquet**, to which will be admitted all those who will be converted believing in Jesus, and will accept to become His disciples. Thus, after having praised the faith of the Centurion, Jesus says: I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will sit down to table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the reign of the heavens, while the children of the kingdom will be thrust outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and the gnashing of teeth! [cf. Mt 8:11-12]. And then, there have to be kept in mind the narrations of the **Last Supper** and of the **Institution of the Eucharist**: in this regard, it is sufficient for the moment to refer the promise made by Jesus to His disciples reported by Luke: You will be those who have persevered with Me in My trials; and I will prepare a reign for you, as the Father has prepared it for Me, so that you might eat and drink at My table in My reign and you will sit on the throne to judge the twelve tribes of Israel [cf. Lk 22:28-30];

- then, on the other hand - and this is the second conclusion in this regard of some importance - to the symbol of the **Festive Banquet** there is added that of the **Nuptials**, which always are celebrated in a festive climate. Thus, the two symbols are integrated between themselves, and thus the merging symbolic figure is that of the **Nuptial Banquet**, as appears above all from the Gospel of Matthew. Here we find there is one *motif* that unite the two parables between themselves, which have as their theme: one, the **Nuptial Banquet** organized by the King for His Son [cf. Mt 22:1-14] – and the other, the ten Virgins who are charged with going to meet the **Spouse** [cf. Mt 25:1-13]. In both these cases, the Son of the King and the spouse are identified with Jesus Christ, He is the **Messianic and Eschatological Spouse**, Whose return the Church awaits, in order to share together with Him in the final and eternal salvation, which will have all taste the joy of eternal communion with Him, under the two-fold form of the **Festive Banquet** and that of **Spousal Intimacy**.

Along these same lines of thought, the Johannine tradition also moves, which narrates the miracle accomplished by Jesus during the **Nuptial Banquet of Canaan in Galilee** [cf. Jn 2: 1-11]. Since this is the *first* of the signs through which Jesus will unveil His Glory, and therefore, His identity as the Only-begotten Son of God, and His Mission as the revealer of the Father and the Savior of the World – it is well founded to be able to conclude that in the framework of this identity and of this Mission that the title and the role of the Spouse find their full light.

c. **The Spouse who is Present:** the Synoptic *loghion* into which this is inserted is found in the context of the discussion on fasting [cf. Mk 2:18-22; Mt 9:14-17; Lk 5:33-39]. This controversy follows immediately on the account of the meal with the sinners and the publicans in which Jesus participated together with His disciples in the home of Levi/Matthew, and which draws to a close with the two parables on the unshrunk cloth and the new wine [cf. Mk 2:21-22, par.].

The two inclusions are quite illuminating in order to grasp the profound sense – that revealing-salvific sense – of the response given by Jesus to the disciples of John and to the Pharisees, who asked Him why it is that His disciples do not fast, while they scrupulously observe this norm: can the invited guests to the **Nuptials** fast while the **Spouse** is still with them? For as long as the **Spouse** is with them, they cannot fast. But there will come the days in which the **Spouse** will be taken away from them and then they will fast [cf. Mk 2:19-20, par.]. Mt uses an expression which interprets well the strident contrast that would be created between remaining with the **Spouse** and fasting, i.e., there simply would be no festival: can the invited guests to the **Nuptials** be in mourning while the **Spouse** is with them? [cf. Mt 9:15], Luke, for his part, transmits this *loghion* using the form of direct interrogation: can you have the guests invited to the **Nuptials** fast while the **Spouse** is still with them? [cf. Lk 5:34]. The negative response is obvious and there really could be no other: for as long as the **Spouse is present**, this is always the time to celebrate, to sit down at table with Him. And this **Spouse** is Jesus, to Whom the Father has entrusted the reign of God: this is the surprising novelty.

But, following further the theme traced out by this unusual *loghion*, to the **Spouse** who is present there is not yet entrusted the Spouse, the wife – about whom so far, there has been made no mention. Rather, the guests invited to the **Nuptials** are brought up. These are indicated by the words: the bridegroom's attendants [cf. Mk 2:19 a]. The presence of the **Spouse**, though, requires by the situation, the presence also of invited guest: they are the guests of the **Nuptial Banquet**, those who ought to enter into the banquet hall and sit down at table with the **Spouse**. These have been invited into the reign of God, and, in fact, have already entered, from the very moment that they have accepted to follow after Jesus, to adhere to Him, to recognize the role and the prerogatives as the Messiah-Savior, and the Son of God.

How could they fast? How could they not celebrate the Festival with him which is organized precisely because of Him? If they should fast, as the disciples of John and the Pharisees would do at such a moment, and were actually doing in that moment [cf. Mk 2:18], this would show that they really had not been welcomed, that they had not understood that Jesus is not only a Prophet, or a Teacher, but He is the much awaited messiah, the Savior sent by God to inaugurate His reign on earth. So, in that moment. To fast would have meant that one had not yet entered into any

relationship with Jesus, that they had not yet become heirs of the reign of heaven. In their case, though, the truth is exactly the opposite, as is evident from the fact that immediately before this discussion on fasting, the disciples would have participated in the meal with the sinners which Jesus had eaten in the house of Levi, the publican who had accepted His invitation to follow after Him.

The time for fasting indeed will come: Jesus declares this explicitly, announcing before hand in a veiled sort of way, His own Passion, designated as the time in which the **Spouse will be taken away** from the disciples, through an implicit allusion to the sorrowful lot reserved for the Suffering Servant of Yahweh [cf. Is 53:7]. From that moment on, the disciples will not enjoy further His physical presence. This does not mean, however, that the fasting practiced by the Church during the time of His earthly pilgrimage ought to be understood and explained as the expression of a sorrow for the absence of the **Spouse**. Rather, this should be understood as one means of considering the struggle and the trials deriving from the testimony which the Church is called to give to her Lord, while awaiting with confidence His glorious return. Now, though, with Jesus present – i.e., during the time of His earthly sojourn - the disciples are invited to ‘eat’ with Him, to celebrate with him, to enjoy the happiness that He brings, preparing the entrance into the Reign of God through His gestures and words replete with tenderness – a tenderness of solidarity and of friendship, of oblation and of service - which incarnate and reveal the paternal tenderness of the heavenly father and His **Omnipotent Mercy**.

The parable on the old and the new confirms and broadens the considerations already brought forward, in so far as it enables the reader to understand that in the last analysis, the teaching, the activity of Jesus – in a single word, His **Mission** and His **Person** – are incompatible, irreconcilable with the Judaic Laws and traditions. Also when, as in the case of the disciples of John the Baptist, whom Matthew has come directly upon the scene [cf. Mt 9:15], the observance of the Law is brought to a higher level. The novelty brought by Jesus is something totally different, even with respect to that introduced by John with his reform. So, there is taken into consideration that all that which proceeds from Jesus and is received from him cannot be certainly adapted to the Judaic religious system: an action of this kind would have only harmful consequences. The difference between Jesus and Judaism is quite marked here. Now – with the Advent and the Mission of Jesus - is as a disposition for all that which is needed to participate in the festival of the reign of God: the Spouse, the **new clothing**, to which the piece of **unshrunk cloth**, the **new wine** allude.

From this, there is deduced that the novelty brought by Jesus is to be thought of in terms of pure gratuity: the Gift of salvation is made by God by means of Jesus Christ – rather, it is Jesus Himself, Who is the Christ and the son of god [cf. Mk 1:1].

Therefore, in order to enter into the reign of God, in order to participate in the **Nuptial Festival** organized by the King for His Son [cf. Mt 22:1-14], it is indispensable to put on the **New Garment**, which means, in substance, faith in Jesus Christ and the unconditional acceptance of His Mission. For this, the invited guest who is without the nuptial garment cannot remain in the Banquet hall: and this persons knows this well, so much so that he is rendered mute before the question that is addressed to him by the King [cf. Mt 22:11-12].

However, this incipient faith ought to be accompanied and substantiated by perseverance: it is Jesus himself who asks His disciples that they remain vigilant in their awaiting to enter with Him into the **Festival of the Eschatological Nuptials**. He teaches this explicitly with the Parable of the Ten Virgins who had been invited to the **Wedding** [cf. Mt 25:1-13], attributing to Himself the role of the **Spouse**. All ten of the girls know perfectly well that they were to go to meet the **Spouse**: but, only five of them, the Wise Virgins, were found ready to greet the **Spouse** on his arrival: These are the models to be imitated. Thus, in Mt's Gospel, by two parables, in addition to the identification of Jesus Christ with the **Messianic and Eschatological Spouse**, he directs a clear and distinct invitation to come out to meet Him.

d. **The Nuptial Gift of the Good Wine, Symbol of the Messianic Goods [Jn 2:1-11 – Cana of Galilee]:** the **New Wine**, is also the **Good Wine**, the **Best Wine** that is offered by Jesus in order to honor worthily, in joy, a **Nuptial Festival** that is altogether special: this is the bond that He has come to celebrate with the Church, as the messiah, Who inaugurates the final times of salvation. Being the Only Begotten Son of God, the **Eschatological Revealer** and the **Messiah-Savior**, He is the legitimate **Spouse**, and therefore, has all the rights to take on His Spouse. According to the Evangelist John, it is John the Baptist himself to give testimony of Him first in a veiled sort of way, when he confesses that he personally *is not worthy to loose His sandals* of the One Who is to come [cf. Jn 1:27] - and then, more openly when he is presented as the Bridegroom's Friend. Once the Baptist had made known His arrival – His presence - he is now able to give way to an unbridled joy: whoever possess the wife is the husband – but, the Friend of the Bridegroom, who is presents and hears Him, exults with joy at the voice of the Spouse. Now, this my joy, is complete[cf. Jn 3:29]. Under this profile, the miracle worked by Jesus at Cana of Galilee [cf. Jn 2:1-11], since this is he first and the beginning of other 'signs' which He will accomplish after this, in order to manifest His glory and to lead to faith in Him [cf. Jn 2:11]. The Baptist assumes, according to the 4th Gospel, a Christological significance that is quite precise. In fact, the **Nuptial Context** and the **Wine** are two signs that converge in suggesting the perspective of the **New Covenant** in which there are communicated the fullness of salvific goods through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Considering now more closely some of the details of the narrative, there is noted above all that in order to comprehend how extraordinary is the joy experienced by anyone who will drink this 'good' wine. Each believer should realize that it is a matter of a gift that is totally unexpected. In fact, on the basis of the observation of the Head Waiter – or, maybe more precisely, the banquet manager – all usually serve the good wine first, and when people have been drinking a while, then there is served that wine which is of less quality than the former [cf. Jn 2:10]. Besides, Jesus works the miracle behind the concerned and discreet intervention of His own Mother, who had noticed that the young couple did not have any more wine to offer the guests [cf. Jn 2:3]. Certainly, regarding this lack of wine, He had a different view than that of His Mother. She may be thinking directly of the lack of the material wine – while His mind is more on what this drink signifies along the lines of His own Mission as Eschatological Revealer dominated now by the perspective of His 'Hour' [cf. Jn 2:4], which coincides with His Passion and resurrection.

What has this to do with you, Woman? My Hour has not yet come! [cf. Jn 2:4] –these are the words with which He responds to her, and with which He does not intend to offer a refusal to her legitimate concerns. Rather, though, His intention goes further: to give evidence of a delicate attention and His full availability to meet her request. *What is this to Me and to you, Woman?* - this would be a kind of literal translation of the first part of His response, which is generally explained in the sense just noted above, a sense that is confirmed and broadened according to the second part of the phrase: *My Hour has not yet come!* And this is true because this will strike only with the Pasch. However, He already knows precisely what He is going to do and to act as the Eschatological revealer of his Heavenly Father – and He is the Savior of the World, and this represents the **beginning** of the manifestation of His Glory. This brings forward the time of the **New and Eternal Covenant**, beginning from that 'first' sign which then is the key to the reading to be adopted for all the other miracles. Jesus begins to unveil the mystery of his person: this unveiling will be **progressive**, and implies that all those who follow Him – His Mother and His Disciples – are disposed to initiate that pathway as Believers, and this will draw to its culmination only with the **Pasch**.

Thus, solicited by her Son, the Mother – who also is here a figure of the People of Israel, as is brought to the fore by Him calling her *Woman*, as Jesus addresses her. There needs to be placed on the first level the faith of each one, giving then the disposition to obey, and she invites the servants at table to follow this recommendation of His: **Do whatever He will tell you!** [cf. Jn 2:5]. Assuming the attitude of one who is disposed to be subjected to the word and to the will of Jesus, she gives every proof of being the authentic, perfect believer, who obeys God in all, and for all. Thus, in this occasion she begins to offer her material mediation and at the same time, she is present among the disciples, as the First Disciple of her Divine

Son, as that *Woman* destined to become the model and the mother of the New People of God, the Church. The Church, then, is already presented in the final verse, that is most significant – in that the Gospel mentions in this order: the Mother of Jesus, His brothers and the disciples.

There comes to the forefront here, therefore, that novelty which distinguishes the Person of Jesus Christ: He is the Messiah-Savior, He is the Spouse Who gives in abundance the salvific goods of the messianic era, designated by the wine obtained through the transformation of the 6 jars of water, perhaps the symbol of the Old Law, the Old Covenant, the Six days of Creation. In fact, the Law was given by means of Moses, and grace and truth come by means of Jesus Christ [cf. Jn 1:17].

The **Nuptials of Cana in Galilee** constitute the fundamental symbol for this passage. The Patristic exegesis had already seen in Jesus Christ the genuine **Spouse of the New Nuptials**. This is then confirmed by modern exegesis in so far as on the narrative level, one has the impression that Jesus is the one who ‘serves’ here as **Spouse of the Nuptials**, working in different points of the text of the ‘transpositions.’ This identification is possible, we believe, only keeping in mind that the Mother of Jesus is the personification of the Community of Israel, both ancient and new, and remembering the fact that after the ‘sign’ of Cana, His Mother is constituted fully a part of the special disciples around Him, a kind of permanent gathering. The interpretation of this short parable of the Friend of the Spouse confirms that with the presence of Jesus Christ, there has arrived the time for the **eschatological Nuptials** of God and His People. Jesus is the Spouse who has come to be united with His spouse, the Church.

5. Jesus’ GIFT OF SELF on the Cross of Calvary unveils His Spousal Love: Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world: He has taken upon Himself and has conquered, has annulled once and for all the sin and death and thus has given us life anew. He has justified us and has reconciled us definitively with god [cf. Rm 4:24-25]. All this, however, is a work of love and can only be understood in the light of His **Oblative Love**, which consists in His **Total Self-dedication/donation**, realized in the Holy Spirit, and in an absolutely free. Gratuitous and immeasurably generous manner.

This is a love which reveals and communicates, at one and the same time, the infinite capacity of disposition which gives us the mark and the capacity for the manner of loving, typical to the Heavenly Father [cf. Rm 5:1-11; 2 Co 5:18-21; Ga 2:20; Ep 2:4-7; 5:2, 25-27; 1 Jn 2:2; 4:9-11]. As such, this love is designated by the NT authors with a verb, derived from the substantive from the well-known word *agape* which in Latin has so often been translated respectively as *diligere*, *caritas*, *dilectio*. *Agape* is the proper name for Divine Love, suggested, revealed and founded by and on the earthy story of Jesus Christ, culminating in the Pasch and especially by and on His death on the Cross: *No one has greater love than this: than to give one’s life for*

one's friends! [cf. Jn 15:13]. In truth, by this, we have all known love: He has given His life for us all, and therefore, we ought to give our lives for our brothers and sisters [cf. 1 Jn 3:16].

In developing the reflection on the **Gift of Life** achieved by Jesus Christ on the Cross, the reflection unfolds in the context and in the light of what the NT authors say regarding the theme **commitment, handing over**, and at the same time, by concentrating attention on some essential aspects. In this sense, at the center of the reflection there is found the truth that only the event of the Cross reveals without equivocation in an absolutely determining manner, in precisely what consists the love of God towards human beings.

For this reason – but only beginning with the event of the Cross which in its aspect of **Paschal Sacrifice** offered for the salvation of the world, there has been anticipated and prefigured by Jesus during His **Last Supper**, through the institution of the **Eucharist** - it is legitimate and well founded to speak of the **Spousal Character** inhering the love of the Son of God made man.

a. **The Gift of Life as a Sign and Supreme Proof of the Greater Love** : Mt's account of the Passion of the Lord opens with this verse: *It will be Passover, you know, in two days' time and the son of Man will be handed over to be crucified...!* [cf. Mt 26:2]. Here there is found the *crucial* verb, **handed over** – used already in the predictions on the passion pronounced by Jesus [cf. Mt 17:22; 20:18-19, par.] – which refers directly to certain human factors which enter into the scene here, and return from time to time, as responsible for the death of Jesus. Judas with his betrayal supplied the high priests, the scribes and the ancients of the People the propitious occasion to capture Jesus: it is surprising to note how many times the evangelists speak of this gesture of his. Among other aspects, Judas is presented in the official list of the 'Twelve' as the disciple who betrayed the lord Jesus [cf. Mt 10:4, par.] Next come the religious authorities of the People of Israel, who, after having condemned Jesus to death, bring Him before Pontius Pilate and do this in a way – by arousing the crowds - that He be condemned to capital punishment. The Roman Procurator, finally, who makes the fatal decision to put Jesus to death and hands Him over to the soldiers so that they might crucify Him [cf. Mt 27:26].

But, the story of the **handing over** is not exhausted in these movements: Other protagonists enter onto the scene: Jesus and God. It is their comportment which impresses on the language of the **handing over** the true revealing and salvific meaning.

In that which pertains to the action accomplished by Jesus Himself, reference needs to be made to His consciousness and His will of **totally giving over His life in obedience to the Father** for the salvation of the world. It is also necessary to reflect

on all those passages in which the NT authors call attention to His absolutely gratuitous love, disinterested and generous which is at the basis of this **total Gift of Himself** consumed on the Cross. Paul will confess: The son of Man has loved me and has **given Himself up for me!** [cf. Ga 2:20 – cf. also 2 Co 5:14; Ep 5:2, 25; 1 Jn 3:16; Ap 1:5]. In the final analysis, there must be kept in mind that it is through the sacrifice of one's own life offered freely and out of love that Jesus accomplishes the gesture which includes within itself, and unveils all the revealing and redeeming significance inherent in His Mission received directly, personally from His Father. Now, this meaning has been expressed by Him with that linguistic code which is totally original with Him – which is coherent with His identity as the Eternal Son of God, and which coincides with His **total dedication** to the advantage of His Disciples – and then, beginning with them in behalf of all men and women, both by His obedient love and His filial love for the Father. Before the festival of the Pasch, Jesus, knowing that His Hour had come to pass over from this world to the Father, after having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end [cf. Jn 13:1]. It is in the Hour of Glorification and of exaltation that His love-*agape*' towards His disciples reaches its height, as for its intensity and efficacy. He, in fact, had **emptied Himself** completely [cf. Ph 2:6], and gave totally of Himself and all Himself, without measure. As a Good Shepherd, He offered His life for His disciples [cf. Jn10:14-15].

Having recourse to loving obedience and to **oblative love**, exercised by Jesus, one comes to understand in faith and according to the faith, that that Jesus Crucified, precisely as Crucified, offers Himself to the world as the Living Icon of God and of His paternal Love: For this, My Father loves me: because I offer My life, then to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I offer it by Myself, since I have the power to offer it and the power to take it up again once more. This command I have received from My father [cf. Jn 10:17-18; cf. Ga 1:4]. The Son of man, in fact, did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His own life in ransom for the many [cf. Mk 10:45, par.; cf. 1 Tm 2:6; Tt 2:14].

For what pertains to the Father's role in all this, John writes, having Jesus speak directly: God has so loved the world that **He gave up His only begotten Son**, so that whoever believes in Him might not die, but would have eternal life [cf. Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:9-10]. In order to receive entirely the full depth of this phrase, one should refer to those verses which precede it, where Jesus Himself alludes explicitly to His death, presenting it with the language of elevation/exaltation, presented under the symbol of the Bronze Serpent raised up by Moses in the desert [cf. Jn 3:14-15]. Thus the death of Jesus on the Cross – which is rethought by the 4th evangelist as the event that is being manifested, together with His Messianic Royalty, also the divine glory which pertains to the Crucified Lord in His quality as the Only Begotten Son of the Father – is presented from the outset as that event which contains in itself and unveils that immeasurable love of God for the world.

From his part, the Apostle Paul teaches that God did not spare His own Son, but **offered Him up for us** [cf. Rm 8:32]. And the Epistle to the Ephesians adds: God, rich in Mercy, for the great love with which He has loved us, as we were dead in sin, has made us live anew with Christ: by grace You have been saved [cf. Ep 2:4-5].

These texts – as the entire Theology of the Cross contained in the various NT traditions – teach that the initiative, the decision of **giving oneself for us, offering oneself to God as a sweet-smelling sacrifice** [cf. Ep 5:2] – taken by Jesus before His own death, is to be considered always in connection with the Heavenly Father's initiative and decision. This initiative and this decision are founded **on the Theology of the Sending of the Son** into this world by means of the Holy Spirit. These are found in those passages where there is taught that the Passion of Jesus was part of the Father's Plan, handed down and carefully attested to in the Scriptures [cf. 1 Co 15:3-4]. In this second case, recourse is made, among other things, to the so-called 'divine passives': these are verbs in and locutions with which there is alluded to a explicit and direct will of God: You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets! Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter His glory? [cf. Lk 24:25, f.] – the Risen One proclaimed to the two disciples of Emmaus. And in the announcing of the *kerygma* to the Jews, immediately after the Pentecost Event, Peter declares that Jesus of Nazareth had undergone the condemnation and the death of the Cross, according to the pre-established design and the foreknowledge of God [cf. Ac 2:23].

Furthermore, looking at the Crucified Jesus who with an eternal Spirit **offered Himself** without stain to God [cf. Heb 9:14] – and Who, dying on the Cross, **handed Himself over**, and thus gives, pours out the Spirit, Who had cooperated with him remaining totally concentrated within His own Person, of His messianic Mission and of His earthly sojourn, He also cooperated in His redemptive sacrifice, inspiring it, having sustained and sealed His **Filial Obedience**, His **sacrificial and oblation love**. In other words, if Jesus in His quality of the only genuine Priest, has completed on the Cross **the oblation of himself**, Who had redeemed the world from sin – once and for all, in the fullness of time, He appeared to annul sin through the **sacrifice of Himself** [cf. Heb 9:26] – that is due also to the action which the Holy Spirit had accomplished in him. Therefore, as Pope John II teaches, there is held present that the Holy Spirit acted in a special way in this **absolute Self-giving of the Son of Man**, in order to transform suffering into Redemptive Love²⁰.

If the **Paschal sacrifice** of His life consummated on the Cross is considered to be the decisive act with which **He gave His life for the Church**, with which he had the Church come to the fore as His **Spouse** [indicating 'choice'] and as His **Body** [indicating union], and celebrated with her the **Spiritual Nuptials**, this is due to the

²⁰ Cf. *Dominum et Vivificantem*, # 40 – in: EV 10/548.

fact that precisely in that Hour, He manifested and realized in full, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, the intrinsic redemptive and vivifying efficacy which inheres to His love. Therefore, as is noted above all in the Letter to the Ephesians when He speaks of the *Great Mystery*, with regard to Jesus Christ and the Church [cf. 5:23-32], the center of the reflection on the **Spousal Relationship** that Jesus Christ establishes with the Church, His Body, is constituted by the excess of charity, which is the reason of being of the event of the Incarnation, that culminated in His death on the Cross and in His resurrection. And you, husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and has **given Himself up** for her, in order to render her holy [cf. Ep 5:25-26].

b. The Body Given and the Wine Poured Out: the Sacrifice which establishes the New and Everlasting Covenant: both the Synoptic and Pauline accounts of the Institution of the Eucharist, as well as Jesus' Discourse on the Bread of Life and the account of the washing of the feet noted by John, all these bring out the clear will of Jesus Christ to **hand Himself over**, as a decision that He took in full liberty and out of love in facing His death. At the same time, they present the redemptive and salvific value of this **Sacrificial Dedication**, as an explicit clarification of the meaning which He Himself has given regarding His own death. This truth stands out all the more through the contrast created by the announcement of the betrayal of Judas and of Peter's denial made by Jesus during the last Supper, which was celebrated in a liturgical atmosphere of the Hebrew Paschal Supper.

Passing directly to a comprehensive reading of those gestures completed by Jesus over the Bread and the Chalice, and the interpretative words which accompany them, it emerges clearly that above all the *soma*, the Body, as well as the Blood, designate the **Whole Person of Jesus**: the **Body** implies his Person in His entirety; the **Blood** is that through which the action of His death was achieved. In the second place, with regard to the Bread, there is brought out that while the Markan tradition, coming originally from Jerusalem, or from Caesarea, and the followed by Matthew, reports only the declaration: *this is My Body!* [cf. Mk 14:22; Mt 26:26] – the Antiochian tradition is followed more by Luke and Paul, also inserts also the **sacrificial** destination. There is added this significant phrase: *which is given up for you!* [cf. Lk 22:19]. – *which is for you!* [cf. 1 Co 11:24]. For that which pertains to the Chalice, was made to circulate by Jesus among His disciples, and both the traditions bring together the **blood poured out 'for the many'** [cf. Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24 – here there is an allusion to the 4th canticle of the Suffering servant of Yahweh, Is 53:10, 12]. This was all done *for you*, [cf. Lk 22:20], with the effect which follows from this, i.e., the realization, the gift of the **New and Everlasting Covenant**. While only Mt explains the redemptive efficacy of all this: for the forgiveness of sins! [cf. Mt 26:28]. In both cases, the prepositions used here; *For* – cf. Mk 14:24; Lk 22:19-20; 1 Co 11:24 – *in the*

place of, in behalf of – cf. Mt 26:28. These lead logically to think of the solidarity of Jesus according to the paradigm and the fecundity of **oblative love**.

The context of the reflection that has unfolded here could also be further broadened with taking into consideration those numerous passages in which there is present the terminology of the *Body* and the *Blood* now interpreted in a **sacrificial** and **expiatory** sense. We will reserve here at least hint at some texts, taken prevalently from the Epistolary Literature, which come close to the theme here pondered.

In Rm 7:4; Col 1:22, the word *Body* indicates precisely the Body of Jesus as handed over, sacrificed on the Cross in behalf of humanity. In Col 1:22, the Body of Jesus Christ offered unto death in order to procure reconciliation [cf. 1:20], is clearly distinguished by the Church, which is the Body of the glorified Lord [cf. 1:18]. The passage of 1 P 2:24 – which pertains to the Christological, Baptismal Hymn [cf. vv. 21-25], of liturgical style, and indeed perhaps is a hymn – contains an allusion to Is 53:12: **He has taken upon Himself our sins**. Rather, this other expression: **...His Body on the Cross** [cf. Heb 10:5-10] are details added by the Author, who brings out the redemptive meaning of the Cross. Finally, on the basis of Hebrews 10, the bodily nature assumed by Jesus Christ, His concrete human and worldly existence are for Him, is confined to a time, the condition, the place and the form of the exercise of a loving obedience which has brought about the salvation of the entire world. And it is precisely for that will that we have been sanctified, by means of **the offering of the Body of Jesus Christ, made once and for all** [cf. Heb 5:10]. In this regard, there should be noted that in the area of Hebrews, the author attributes to Jesus Christ the words of Ps 40:7-9, having re-read it as a prophecy regarding the **sacrificial death** which makes visible in a perfect manner, His loving obedience to His Heavenly Father.

Along this same stretch of interpretation, there is also that other thematic *motif*, concentrated on His Most Precious **Blood**, connected intimately with the idea of **Life**. Jesus did not spare Himself in anything: He purchased us, He ransomed us, at a very dear price [cf. 1 Co 6:20; 7:23]. This was not at an corruptible price, like silver or gold... but, with His **most Precious Blood**, as the Lamb without defect and without stain [cf. 1 P 1:18-20; cf. Ac 20:28; Rv 5:9]. It is His Blood on the Cross [cf. Col 1:20] that has procured for the world the remission of its sins, its purification, its sanctification [cf. Heb 9_10; Ep 1:7; Rv 1:5], the universal reconciliation of human beings with God and among themselves [cf. Col 1:20; Ep 2:13, 16]: in one word, **Justification** [cf. Rm 5:9].

And finally, with making reference to the Discourse on the **Bread of Life**, noted by Jn, he makes explicit the virtual content of the words of the Last Supper, bringing out in bold relief all its consequences. He shows the in all its salvific weight the **Self-giving** offered by Jesus, always within the theme of **life, living**. In

addressing His disciples, the Lord confirms the Advent accomplished in the promise contained in the phrase that opens the clearly Eucharistic, or sacramental section of His discourse:

I am the living Bread descended from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he/she will live forever, and the Bread that I will give is My flesh for the life of the world... [cf. Jn 6:51].

In fact, from the sentences which compose the response to the objection formulated by the by-standers [cf. Jn 6:53-58], there is understood with clarity that to receive as a gift the promised eternal life, it is necessary to eat His flesh and to drink His Blood. The Eucharistic celebration, in truth, comports and feeds the reciprocal immanence between the Lord Jesus and His disciples. Therefore, it is in this vital communion that there is realized the Covenant promoted by God for the messianic time. This teaching becomes definitively clarified and confirmed with the further concluding declaration:... anyone who eats of Me will live for Me... Whoever eats this Bread will live forever...! [cf. Jn 6:57=59]. The two-fold expression in this Eucharistic-Sacramental framework is now substituted with eating, receiving Jesus as food and drink. In this manner, the body and blood are clearly identified with Jesus Christ Himself, the Son and the envoy of the Heavenly Father.

6. The Church: the Spouse of Christ in the Pauline Letters: there are many images with which the Church is designated in the Pauline *corpus* : each one of them brings out a specific aspect, but there is a reality that seems to encompass all of these, and it is the experience of an *interpersonal relationship* that involves the entire Christian experience as one of ***communion and participation of life*** with Jesus Christ and among His members. On this horizon the image of **Spouse** stands out – beyond showing efficaciously **the definitive interpersonal relationship** between the Church and the Lord Jesus Christ, above all if this is read in relationship with the image of the Body and with the role of Jesus Christ as the Head of the Body, this is revealed particularly adapted to describe the tension, typical of Christian eschatology – between the ‘already’ of present communion in the Lord, with the ‘not yet’ of the fullness and the definitive nature awaited for the day of the *Parousia* [cf. 2 Co 11;2; Ep 5:21-33 – especially 25-32].

a. The Church, as the Promised Spouse of Jesus Christ [cf. 1 Co 11:3]: the eschatological tension to which reference has been made here, particularly through 2 Co 11:2: I experience for you a kind of **divine jealousy** , having promised you to one Spouse, in order to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. Here, the Apostle Paul, referring to the Hebrew ritual of marriage, presents himself as **the Friend of the Spouse** who has the duty of providing that the community at Corinth, which had been reserved in a definitive manner for Christ and pertains, therefore, only to Him, that this people might arrive at that wonderful day when there will be celebrated

their Espousals, and the People will begin to dwell always with its Spouse, having preserved integral its own fidelity. So, just as the responsibility is up to him to present the People to its Spouse, he vigorously exhorts the Christian community of all times to live in *chastity*, i.e., in that exclusive fidelity, toward its Lord. This is a fidelity which consists also in maintaining integral the faith in the Gospel already preached by the Apostle, without in any way, betraying His first Advent, without letting themselves be seduced by false preachers, who aim at deviating this People from simplicity and from purity in the presence of Jesus Christ [cf. 2 Co 11:2-6].

b. The Spousal relationship of Christ with the Church, His Body [cf. Ep 5:21-33]: this passages pertains to the literary genre of *domestic parenesis*, and contains an entire series of exhortations directed to married couples on the basis of theological motivation that is quite precise: the **spousal relationship** between Jesus Christ and the Church. In this, the rather terse eschatological tension will be tempered, yet without ever totally disappearing, in so far as the attention is directed toward the **nuptial bond** which, in the present, unites Jesus Christ to the Church. This bond – which concerns not only a particular community, as in the case of 2 Co 11:2 – but, the universal Church – had been brought into by Jesus through His own sacrifice carried out on the Cross. With this, He has demonstrated the immense gratuity which characterizes His love for the Church: ***Christ so loved the Church that He gave up Himself for her*** [cf. 5:25]. Having thus chosen her as His own **Spouse**, He has insured her, by paying the terrible price due - the so called Hebraic *mohar* - and this price coincides with the total **Gift of Self**. Consequently, through His own death, He has purified her and sanctified her: and now, the efficacy of His death that has happened once and for all, acts in the same time when Baptism is celebrated [cf. 5:26].

There is, however, even more. The Lord Jesus has not entrusted His Spouse to some friend, or other – or to some intermediary: rather, it is He Himself Who has conducted her and conducts her every day, to Himself. It is He Himself Who makes her appear as His Church, all glorious, without stain, or blemish of any kind, but only holy and immaculate [cf. 5:27]. And He Himself will bring to term this task on the day of His Second Coming. The possessive adjective which is found in the expressions ‘His Church’, means just how clear this is in the mind of the author that certainty that Jesus Christ has united to himself in an indissoluble manner the Church and considers her to be totally His own. Therefore, He dedicates to her every possible cure, and provides for her in everything [cf. 5:28-30].

This second aspect of the **Nuptial Relationship** is founded in the doctrine of the Church as the **Body of Christ** to which reference is made in 5:29-30. This doctrine, spelled out in v. 23 c, reads thus: Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, He Who is the Savior of His body – may be noted also in other passages of the same

Epistle [[cf. Ep 1:22-23; 2:18; 3:6; 4:4, 15-26]. Furthermore, it is to be understood within and in the light of all the Pauline idea relative to his image of the **Body of Christ**, which represents the most mature fruit of NT eschatological thought, and which expresses in an explicit manner the relationship with Jesus Christ. This idea does not appear in this image, at least immediately, in the images of 'People of God', 'Building of God', 'Reign of God'.

The Church does remain in the NT the 'People of God', but this is a People constituted anew in Jesus Christ and upon Christ. His new and most particular form is designated in the most fortuitous manner as the **Body of Christ** – with this concept it is permitted to study in the best of manners the totality, the articulation, the foundation and end, and the life and growth of the Church.

Therefore, all the communities merit to be called *the Churches of Christ* [cf. Rm 16:16], or 'the Churches of God in Jesus Christ' [cf. 1 Th 2:14; cf. Ga 1:22]. Along general lines, it is said that in attributing to the Christian community the image of 'body', the Apostle follows several orientations:

- he compares it to the human body [cf. Rm 12:4-8; 1 Co 12:12-30; Ep 4:1-17] - he assigns to Christ the service of Head of this Body [cf. Ep 1:22; 4:15-16; Col 1:18; 2:19];
- secondly, if Rm and 1 Co place the theme especially in the light of the intimate belonging, union, that immanence that is shared between Jesus Christ and His Church – the so called 'Deutro-Pauline' compositions, such as Ep and Col, these documents attribute to Christ the title of Head, while insisting on the distinction between Him and the Body.
- Husband of the Bride, and her Lord.

Jesus Christ, as Mediator, exercises the two-fold service of Lord and Font of Life for His Body, the Church. These are the two principal meanings of the Christological title, **kephale**. In some verses, Jesus Christ is the One who stands at the Head of this Body: He is the Lord, the Dominator, of all the heavenly and earthly powers, the Sovereign Who governs the entire creation. This universal supremacy and primacy is exercised by Him in a very special manner, over the Church, and in behalf of the Church [cf. Col 1:18; 2:10; Ep 1:20-23]. And then, in other verses, Jesus Christ is for the entire Church, the Source of all Grace, of that divine life, which flows uninterruptedly from him, and is expanded throughout the whole Body, sustains it, allows it to grow [cf. Col 2:19; Ep 4:15-16].

The Church owes to Jesus Christ her entire existence: with regard to Ep 2:15, there may be found the sole case in the entire NT in which Jesus is presented as the author in the first person of a creation, the Church, that of the only New Person,

formed by the two Peoples reconciled by Him. The Church is further described with the embellishment of sublimely expressive images, as a **construction which grows**, [cf. Ep 2:21], **a body which is built up in Charity** [cf. Ep 4:16]. This idea, but scarcely touched on, finds its confirmation in the definition of the Church as that *fullness* of Jesus Christ. The Church is His Body, the fullness of Him that is realized entirely in all things [cf. Ep 1:12; cf. also Col 1:19; 2:10]. This verse is understood as follows: Christ fulfills the Church completely with Himself and with his redemptive grace – the Church is totally endowed by him, and in her perfection, He suffices for her.

The sense of the whole phrase, then, is to define the Church, make further clarifications on the word *Body*. Even if Jesus Christ has been constituted Head over all things, He nevertheless has a most special relationship with the Church. He is in a position of transcendence with regard both to the cosmos, as well as to the Church – but, only with the Church is He also in a situation of a certain immanence. Only the Church is the privileged environment of His most warm and vivifying presence, i.e., only the Church is His Body and His fullness: the cosmos has been entrusted to Him, but the Church has been created by Him [cf. 2:15]. There is, however, absent every idea of separation, or worse, opposition, contrast, between Himself and the two poles: Jesus, rather, is their common denominator, and that means that outside the Church there is not immediately hell, but there is always Jesus Christ, even if in a more reduced and partial identity. Verse 23 implies rather the demand of a new witness, since the Church is called to be proposed to the world as the fullness of Grace and as the Body called to constant, harmonious growth [cf. 2:7-16 a; 3:10; 4:12-13].

Along the lines of these remarks referring to the meaning of the Christological title of ‘Head of the Body’, we return now briefly to the description of the communion between Jesus Christ and the Church, fulfilling the theme of a **Spousal Relationship** inserted in support of the whole passage [cf. Ep 5:21-33].

In vv. 23-24, the title of Head attributed to Jesus Christ has the sense of *Lord* : and to Him, there is due by divine law, total submission. The attribution of the title is justified by referring back to His soteriological service: He is the Savior of His Body [v. 23; cf. also Ep 4:12; 5:30]. Rather, it is the latter title here which explains the former! As we have seen, it is in His salvific action completed with the total **Gift of Himself** that there takes form and is entirely manifested the love that He nourishes for His Church: in fact, He does this purifying her from sin, and renders her holy and immaculate and thus He has predisposed her for nuptial union [cf. vv. 25-27; 5:2]. Finally, in vv. 29-30, where it is said that Jesus Christ nourishes and cares for His Church, to which every baptized persons belongs as a *member*, and this enriches the present idea in the second acceptance of the term, **kephale’**, i.e., that of vital Principle of the entire Body [cf. 4:6].

In the final analysis, the teaching of Ep 5:21-33 allows the attentive reader to gather in the evidence of the character of reciprocity which inheres to the relationship between Christ and the Church, designated by the paradigm of the *Body*. In truth, the communion which is evoked places the subjects one before the other in a certain irrevocability of mutual belonging. In emphasizing this conclusion, it helps to go back to a contribution for the deepening which is offered here, from taking into consideration a very relevant factor of Pauline spirituality: the effect of communion with Jesus Christ stated in the text Ga 2:20 would have no other real bearing if the Church, and her every member, were not rendered available by the Holy Spirit to allow themselves to be loved and possessed by Jesus Christ, in the manner described by the **Spousal Paradigm**. The use of this **spousal Paradigm** – it is worthwhile to repeat this – implies and guarantees mutual union, reciprocal giving, as is drawn from the citation of Gn 2:24 [***This is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife and they become one body!***], in the background throughout Ep 5:31. This receives a new sense in the following verse: ***This is a great mystery: I say this with reference to Christ and the Church***.

Communion with Jesus Christ would not have any real bearing, then, if He did not unite Himself the Church as His *Body* the individual believers as His own *members*. He, in fact, in the strength of redemptive efficacy which He inserts within His own **Paschal Sacrifice**, has made of the Church an exclusive property of His own [cf. 1 Co 6:15-20] – this makes of it an entity which belongs now intrinsically, indissolubly to His Person – this means, of course, the image of **Body!** – *and without this, he would not be **God with us!***

7. The Nuptials of the Lamb in the Apocalypse: the Book of the Ap inserts the application to the Church the two-fold imagery of both **engaged and spouse** of the Lamb within the perspective that goes from this present moment, during which the Church is being called to commit herself even to **Martyrdom** in fidelity to her Lord, by practicing the following of Christ in a **radically evangelical** manner – to the Eschatological Future when she will share with him the victory which he will win over all the hostile powers. While she is waiting to celebrate the **Eternal Nuptials**, the Church is to prepare herself with the witness, with the absolute incarnated fidelity of the Martyrs, and with prayer, invoking together the Holy Spirit and sustained by him, the coming of her Spouse, the Lord Jesus Christ [cf. Rv 22:17]. This is presented preferentially under the metaphor of the Immolated Lamb Who now triumphs and reigns as the divine and regal Messiah.

Therefore, in order to gather in all the doctrinal implications contained in the texts which speak of the **Eschatological Nuptials**, it is indispensable to refer to the ample doctrinal context constituted by the **Christology of the Lamb**. This metaphor, which is the most important Christological metaphor employed by the author, it

results applied to the three stages of the salvific existence and service offered by Jesus: he is the Lamb, immolated in the past – He is the Lamb Who today sits on the Throne of God and is the Lamb of the **Eschatological Nuptials**.

The **Nuptials of the Lamb** with His Spouse, the Church, who is now ready are explicitly announced in the course of the doxology contained in 19:1-8, and precisely in the second part [vv. 5-8], where they form the point of arrival of the entire Salvation History. With good reason the Angel says to the Seer: Write: Blessed are those invited to the Nuptial Banquet of the Lamb! [cf. 19:9]. Together with the celestial assembly there seems to be co-involved in this also the terrestrial liturgy, which proclaims: Alleluiah! The Lord, our God, the Omnipotent, has taken possession of His reign. Let us rejoice and exult, let us render glory unto Him, because the Nuptials of the Lamb has arrived: His Spouse is ready, they have given her a garment of pure resplendent linen! [cf. 19:6-8]. This garment of resplendent linen which the Church puts on is the **Wedding Dress** which she herself has provided to prepare herself beforehand. At the same time, though, on the eschatological level, she receives it as a gift of God. It symbolizes the good deeds of the saints [cf. v. 8], i.e., those works realized by Christians during the unfolding of salvation History and which in addition to pertaining to them to the point of expressing their personality. They also have a positive influence on the development of history itself, and they exercise a rectifying acting in the face of evil. These good deeds, however are also and above all the effect of the interventions in history realized by God and by the Lamb.

The **Nuptial Theme** is then taken up again in the concluding section [cf. 21:1-22:5]: more than just the description of the nuptials, though, there is found here also the description - inspired by a vision – of the three specific components of the event. These are:

- the scene, represented by the created universe entirely renewed [cf. 21:1-8];
- the Spouse, figured as the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, as a woman now ready for her husband [cf. 21:9-27];
- the restoration of the Paradise Lost, which bears within itself three gifts:
 - the flow of living water, which runs down from the throne of God and the Lamb;
 - the Tree of Life;
 - and the revocation of all condemnation [cf. 22:1-5].

Running through the entire section, one would have the occasion to admire a prophetic vision in which dominate uncontested the typical themes of an eschatology **already** realized. In fact, along side the work of renewal brought to term by God and

by the Lamb, there are placed both the extraordinary beauty – i.e., the holiness – with which the Bride is adorned and which she will enjoy forever together with the intimate communion with God and with the Lamb. Finally, there is given a foretaste of the fullness of that eternal happiness which shines through every page. The Seer, furthermore, has the clear realization that all that which he contemplates is the divine work. In a particular manner, the engaged, the **Spouse of the Lamb** [cf. 21:9] has a celestial origin: I saw also the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, from God, ready as a spouse adorned for her husband [21:2]. This origin states, then, that she participates in the transcendence of God, and all is in accord with God, and is very close to Him. The new Jerusalem, the city beloved of God forever [cf. 20:9], is the worthy spouse whom God has prepared for His Son, Jesus Christ. He has indeed endowed her, embellished her, with the splendor of His own glory.

In the last analysis, the author contemplates and invites all to contemplate in these **Eschatological Nuptials** between the immolated and glorified Lamb and the Church, the fulfillment and the celebration of the new and eternal Covenant, which, because of the **Paschal Self-giving** of the Lord Jesus Christ, will assume forever the physiognomy of that communion of love in that perfect reciprocity and in a mutual immanence willed by God. Thus, there is noted this declaration: This is the dwelling of God with humanity. He will live among them and they will be His People and He will be God with them [cf. Rv 21:3].

In the meantime, the Church – as each believer who hears the prophetic words of the book [cf. Rv 22:18] – we do not cease to invoke, together with the Spirit, and sustained by His force, the coming of the Lord Jesus, coinciding with his *Parousia*: The Spirit and the Spouse say: Come! And those who listen repeat: Come! [cf. Rv 22:17] And this is the only prayer, the sole invocation that the NT places on the lips of the Church. But, there is also noted that the Spirit has to be mentioned first: it is He Who inspires and favors the prayer of invocation in so far as – He is the Spirit of Prophecy [cf. Rv 19:10] – He assists, comforts and continuously guides the Church in the midst of the hostilities and the persecutions that should be confronted because of the testimony rendered to the Lord Jesus Christ. Meanwhile the Church nourishes within herself, together with the Word of Jesus and the **Spousal Love**, also the certainty of His glorious return and of her participation in His final victory. Having presupposed this ample framework of reference, there is understood ever better the value of the invitation which the Lord Jesus has repeated several times: Whoever has ears to hear, let him listen to that which the Spirit is saying to the Churches [cf. Rv 2:7 par.]. From her part, each time that she invokes the *Parousia* of the Lord, the engaged one, the Spouse of the Lamb [cf. 21:9], does nothing other than obey the desires and the suggestions of the Holy Spirit. Indeed the prayer of the Church and in the Church happens always in the Holy Spirit [cf. Gd 20].

The invocation does not remain unheard: opportunely, the Book of the Apocalypse draws to a conclusion with the promise of the Lord. Made more than once earlier [cf. 2:5, 16; 3:11; 22:7. 12], it is repeated now for the last time, in a solemn manner: Whoever hears these things says; Yes, I will come soon! [cf. 22:20]. In their turn the Church and each believer express their own assent uniting together the Profession of faith and Prayer: amen. Come, Lord Jesus! [cf. Rv 22:20].

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CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION IN A SPOUSAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction:

[1] The re-reading of the Mystery of the Incarnation as a spousal act and union – a re-reading, of course, that is conducted in an analogical key - arose in the Patristic context of the early Church. There it is found prevalently in the context and in the theme of reflections regarding both the divine maternity of Mary, as well as in that of the union between Jesus Christ and the Church, with Whom there is found a real unity. This line of interpretation has been inherited and re-proposed without substantial variations, especially during the Middle Ages. And there will be found traces of it in the successive centuries. While not every testimony through the long centuries of the life of the Church will be presented here, the emphasis in this Chapter will be from the Patristic Age, and that of the Middle Ages.

[2] After a presentation, from which emerge already the merits and also the limits which accompany a theological-allegorical interpretation of this kind, the Mystery of the Incarnation is taken in consideration from under the aspect of its 'virginal' character, i.e., with a rather precise attention being to the Divine Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In this case – given the abundant and rich Marian literature which flourished in the space of two millennia of history – attention is reserved above all to the comparison between **the virginal womb of Mary** and the **Nuptial Chamber**. Then, space is provided for that support coming first from commentaries on John's Gospel, then from Commentaries on the Canticle of Canticles, including some of this of a homiletic nature. Among the works pertaining to this second group, a special spot is reserved for the Sermons of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. This treatment rests upon a doctrinal point which would also serve the bond of union for the following Chapter, in so far as it leads the believer to contemplate that love without limit for His Spouse, as the ultimate reason for the Incarnation of the Son of God. Having contemplated Him in this aspect of His loving condescension and very humble and obedient lowering of Himself, this reaches its culmination in His Paschal Mystery.

[3] In the course of this exposition, there will be frequent references to Scripture: in addition to those NT passages which make explicit reference to Jesus Christ as **Spouse** and to the Church as His **Bride**, there will also be some particularly significant texts from OT literature. In these cases, there will be noticed above all the Creation Account of male and female, the Prophetic passages of spousal content, and Psalms 19 & 45. Thus the occasion will be offered to evaluate closer at hand the results of the *typological interpretation* of the OT, conducted in a Christological key.

1. **Human Nature as the Spouse of the Son of God**: among the first significant interventions in this theme there should be mentioned that of **Tertullian** [born toward the half of the 2nd century, and died around 230 or 240]. In his work *De Resurrectione*, he presents the Incarnation as a **marriage** between the Spirit – Who designates the divine nature of Jesus Christ – and the human body. It is one manner to explain that, through the Incarnation, the Word of God ‘vests Himself’ in the flesh and thus there takes place a co-penetration between the two natures, which both preserve intact their own property.

Then, too, **Novatian**, who lived in the IIIrd century, brings up again the idea of the *flesh as spouse* in a passage on his ground-breaking work on the Trinity. In this, he describes the Incarnation according to the two-fold plan of descent and ascent, and he states that the Word of God has descended from heaven to the human body as a Spouse [*tamquam sponsus ad carnem*]. After the resurrection, the Word has ascended with the flesh, His Spouse, to where from whence He had descended without flesh. Thus, he receives that glory for which He has clearly shown Himself to be God, given that there is revealed that He had possessed prior to the creation of the world.

In the desire to supply a somewhat comprehensive presentation of this theme, it should be said that the human nature assumed by the Word is figured – obviously, we are dealing here with comparisons – as an immaculate bride whom He wished to unite to Himself forever through the work of the Holy Spirit. At times, it is specified even a bit further, by comparing the term **spouse** with the human soul of Jesus Christ, as is read, for example in the Commentary on the Song of Songs written by **Apponius**, of whom reflection will be made further on – or, in the work on the Incarnation, composed by the monk, **St. John Cassian**.

Given these slants on the presentation, it needs to be noted as well that the maternal role exercised by **Mary** is also seen under this **spousal perspective**: her fertile, virginal womb is fecundated by the Holy Spirit, and serves as the **Bridal Chamber** where the Word of God unites Himself with human nature. Furthermore, there is not lacking reference to the father: of Him it is stated that He has sent His Son into this world because He has arranged for Him His **Marriage** with humanity – or, rather, He has chosen for Him, from all eternity, the **Church as His Spouse**.

The union of the Divine Person of the Word of God with the human nature assumed by Him, is thought of, then, in analogy with a **spousal union**. This constitutes also the premise and the foundation in order to illustrate the relationship which He has established with the **Church, His Spouse**. It is not by accident that **Gn 2:24** is chosen, particularly its final phrase: **...the two will be one flesh!** These words are cited often as a Prophecy which illumines and confirms the above indicated relationship in its character of the bond of a unique love, one that is exclusive and

indissoluble, which places in being an intimate and fecund communion. In this sense, the Incarnation constitutes the presupposition and the condition of all possibility for the loving union of the Son of God with all human beings and with each one of them, a union which implies the liberation from sin, the sanctification and the divinization, which procures the gift of the Holy Spirit and the incorporation to Him through entrance into the Church. There results thus even better the soteriological thrust with which there is treated the theme in question: the word of God has become Man, in order to make His 'own', for every His Spouse – that entire humanity created by Him together with the Father and the Holy Spirit – that pertains to Him for ever and of which He alone is the legitimate **Spouse**. Thus, He has ransomed it forever from the slavery to sin and has rendered humanity pure, holy and immaculate.

One of the greatest Doctors of the Church, St. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo [354-430], has lucidly synthesized the essential traits of this above noted theme in his Commentary on 1 Jn. After having applied to the event of the Incarnation of the word of God the words of Ps 19:6, he adds: the womb of the Virgin was His **Nuptial Room**, since it is there that there were united Husband and wife, the word and the flesh. Since it is written: ***And the two will be one flesh;*** and also the Lord says in the Gospel: ***Therefore, they are not two, but one flesh only.*** Very opportunely does Isaiah remember that these two are one sole being. In speaking in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Prophet states: *He placed on my head a crown as on His bride and has enriched me with an ornament as His Spouse.* Here, as is seen, it is One alone who speaks and declares Himself to be Husband and Wife with humanity, since they are no longer two but one single flesh. And this happens because ***the Word has become flesh and has dwelt among us.*** The Church is united to that flesh and we have the **total Christ**, Head and member.

As has been more fully noted above, the reading of the Incarnation in a spusal key arose and became mature prevalently in the workshops of the Patristic and Medieval literature. However, there are significant indications and traces of it to some extent also in the authors of subsequent ages. A few examples will be offered here:

Juan Maldonado, who lived in the 16th century, and belonged to the so-called 'golden age of Catholic exegesis', in commenting upon the Parable of those invited to the Wedding Feast in Mt, says that the son of the king is certainly the figure of Jesus Christ, to Whom the NT often attributes the title **Spouse**, while the **Wife**, the **Bride**, is identified by the authors of the Patristic age – either with the **soul**, or with the **Church**. In his judgment the second application here is that which is the more probable, also because of the teachings contained in the Book of revelations and in

the Pauline Letters. Regarding the time for the Marriage Festival, there are registered – still among the Patristic authors – two opinions:

- some, on the basis of what is learned from the Parable of the Ten Virgins and from Rv 9:9 – they have this coincide with the **final resurrection** and the **Second Coming** of Jesus Christ;
- others, though, hold that the Nuptials are celebrated when the Son of God became Man, and then, in fact, united Himself to **the Church as His Spouse**.

Maldonado said that both interpretations were acceptable, and concludes: believers are invited to both nuptials: to the first, so that they might come to become part of the Church and where they will be nourished by the Word of God; and the invitation has gone out to those future Nuptials, so that they might be saved and might eat and drink at the table of Jesus Christ in the Reign of God.

The French theologian, **L. Thomassin**, lived in the 17th century and he inserted the **Spousal Analogy** into the theme of a more profound treatise on the Hypostatic Union. In particular, after having remembered that many writers in the ancient Church have attributed to the Word the service and the name of **Spouse**, and to humanity, to which is attributed the name **Bride**. He immediately adds to this view that others, on the contrary, fearing the danger that there might be insinuated ever so subtly here the error of two persons in Jesus Christ, have assigned the role of **Bride**, only to the *Church* – and that of **Spouse** to Jesus Christ, God and man.

Beyond any doubt, the most substantial support in this matter comes from the theological output of the great theologian, **M.J. Schebeen** [1835-1888]. In his major work, In his *Mystery of Christianity*, which appeared for the first time in 1865, and which offers a synthesis of dogmatic theology in the light of the idea of *mystery*, the great German theologian offers a certain space to the **Spousal theme**. The space that he gave is rather considerable, above all because the theme is recalled in a pertinent and punctual manner in the appropriate dogmatic tracts.

Illustrating the economy of the Mystery of the Incarnation, Schebeen places the relationship of the Man-God with the human race as the foundation and presupposition of the full incorporation and union with Him. Human beings obtain this only through the faith, Baptism and the Eucharist, which make them members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church, and therefore, also members of Christ, in the strict sense. The above mentioned relationship, however, is based on the event of the Incarnation – of the Hypostatic Union – and therefore, derives from this. In fact, uniting to Himself a single human nature – a member of the human race – and by making Himself subject to it, as its bearer and possessor, the Son of God has united to Himself, by means of this and in this one member, all the others, in virtue also of the

intimate and solid union of that single member with all the others. Now, a comparison, to which some of the early Fathers of the Church and ecclesiastical Writers have recourse to in order to explain the union of the Word with His human nature, is that of the union between man and woman in matrimony: this comparison, however, has been used with a certain caution, both because it may not upset the clarity regarding the Hypostatic Union, and also because also Nestorius had made use of this in order to sustain his error. On the basis of this comparison – Schebeen proceeds - the Fathers of the Church have affirmed that the **Word of God has become espoused with the entire human race**.

The womb of Mary was changed into a **Bridal Chamber**, and there the human nature has celebrated its ineffable espousals with Him, and having been accepted by Him through the first exemplary, was united to Him. This explanation of the corporal union between the Man-God and human beings, in addition to being entirely in conformity with the Scriptures and the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, also has the advantage of bringing out very clearly the form and the significance of the union of the race with its second Head, i.e., the Heavenly Adam, in antithesis with the union with its first head, i.e., the earthly Adam.

A union of this kind – which is stronger and more intimate than that of the earthly Adam - ought to be explained, according to the author, having recourse not only, and not even primarily, to the analogy of the relationship between a man and a woman in matrimony – but, in that analogy of the union which existed between Adam and Eve, in so far as the woman has been formed from the rib of the man and has been destined for him.

It is within this precise doctrinal horizon that the **Spousal Symbolism** is extended and applied to the framework of the doctrine of grace and of Ecclesiology. In the first case, the argument proceeds with a rigorous referring back to the Mission of the Holy Spirit: as the Agent of the sanctification of the human soul in which He indwells, He renders the soul the **Spouse of God**, unites her to the Son of God as sister and spouse, and to the Father as daughter. In the second case, there is entered into contact with a solid reflection on the communion of the Church with Jesus Christ as her Head and her spouse, developed from the point of view of the participation in that **total Gift of Himself** which Jesus Christ makes in the Eucharist and in the divinizing and transfiguring action developed by the Holy Spirit.

2. Human Nature as the *pure, holy and immaculate Spouse*: the Mystery of the Virginal Incarnation: the ‘flesh’ which the Son of God unites to Himself as His Spouse, receiving it from His Mother, Mary, full of grace and of the Holy Spirit, a virgin, immaculate and all holy in her spirit as in her body, is *pure, holy and immaculate*. And this is what the Church has become when He has taken her as His Spouse, after having purified and healed her, freeing her of sin, the seed of death,

which had rendered the human race deformed and dirty. Thus, He unites to Himself a spouse to whom He has granted the gift of both virginity and fecundity: fecund virginity and virginal maternity are therefore two means through which the Church realizes and lives the spousal union with her Lord.

Within this broad doctrinal background there are recognizable two separate trajectory themes which lead to sound profitably the bond between the Mystery of the Incarnation – with careful attention given to the immaculate body of the Son of God – and the virginity of the Mother of God. To begin with the Patristic period, in fact, there are numerous authors who, in placing in evidence the innocence and uncontaminated purity of the human nature assumed by the Word through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, are referred back directly to the Virgin Mary and to her fullness of grace, which rendered her a perfectly holy creature and exempt of every sin. This first trajectory comes to cross with that which leads the believer to contemplate the consubstantiality of the Son of God with the human nature united by Him to Himself, as the consubstantiality with the Mother, Who generated Him as a Man by the work of the Holy Spirit, from whom Jesus has taken on His immaculate flesh, created by Him together with the Holy Spirit.

The first path leads to the image of **Nuptial Chamber** applied to the virginal womb of the other of God, and image that is located between the metaphors taken from symbolic and Marian language, and which pertains to the descriptive and interpretative register of the Divine maternity. Other similar images are, for example, **Throne, Palace, Dwelling Place, Ark of the Covenant, Tabernacle of the Most High**. We find others in the work entitled *The Embellishment of the Spiritual Nuptials*, by Jan van Ruysbroeck [1293-1381] written around the year 1340. The Flemish mystic dedicates the Prologue of his first book to the active life, and here, referring to Mt 25:6, he resumes in a very dense passage certain motives, that are quite current in the **Spousal Christology** pondered in a Trinitarian and Mariological key.

When God saw that the moment had come and the sufferings of His beloved had filled Him with compassion, He sent His only Begotten Son onto this earth, in a rich palace and in a glorious temple, the bosom of the Virgin Mary. There, the Son of God espoused His Intended, our human nature, and united it to His own Person by means of the most pure blood of the Elect Virgin. The Priest who presided over these Nuptials was the Holy Spirit; the Angel Gabriel was its messenger, and the glorious Virgin gave her consent. Thus, Jesus Christ, our faithful Spouse, united Himself to our human nature; He visited us on our land of exile, and taught us in a celestial manner with perfect fidelity.

The second avenue of approach takes up certain treatises of the Patristic literature consecrated to the state of the virginal life and leads, among other ideas, to the recognition of the Incarnate Word as the author and model of virginity.

a. **The Virginal Womb of Mary is the Bridal Chamber of these Nuptials:**

Testimonies of the First Millennium

Among the more important contributions which proceed from the West, there should be noted without doubt that offered by St. Augustine. As to what pertains to the general theme, his teaching revolves around these ideas: the union of the Word with human flesh took place in the **Bridal Chamber**, which is the virginal womb of Mary, and this union is the foundation of the union with the Church, which has been loved by the Word, even though it is still in some disarray – but, she has always been loved precisely because He had chosen to purify her from sin through His own death, in order to bestow on her that beauty – i.e., the holiness and virginity – which rendered her a worthy Bride. Therefore, moved by **Mercy**, He became man, and this Mercy permitted the esteem of all her intimate beauty, even though His Passion suffered for us all made Him appear deform!

Furthermore, it is helpful to take note that for the Bishop of Hippo the titles of Husband and Wife are applied to matrimony that is unfolding, still developing: all the rituals have been completed over the course of history, except that *leading her into His own home*, the definitive introduction of the Bride into the home of the Spouse. This final act will take place on the day of His *Parousia*, and so the expectancy on the part of the Church, is destined to last for a long time. Nonetheless, the indissoluble union has already begun, by the very fact that precisely Jesus Christ is the Head, and the Church is the Body, and both form the **Christus Totus**, the total Christ. In the meantime, the Church ought to conserve intact her spiritual virginity, committing herself to maintain a faith that is integral, a solid hope and a sincere charity [cf. also Jn 3:29; 2 Co 11:2] and at the same time, she be fecund, spiritually generating her children. In this, there come together the examples of the Mother of her Spouse and her Lord and the Church is, too, both mother and virgin. Mary brought into this world physically the Head of this Body. The Church in her turn generates spiritually the members of that body. In both cases, the virginity does not hinder fecundity. In both situations, the fecundity does not remove virginity.

An efficacious synthesis of this teaching just presented here is also offered by the Bishop of Hippo in the context of his exposition of **Ps 45**. With reference to the Lord Jesus, Augustine says among much else: He sings this song: let us rejoice in these Nuptials, and we will together with those who celebrate the Nuptials, all who are invited to the Marriage celebration. And among the same invited guests is the Bride. In fact, the Bride is the **Church**, the **Bride of Christ**. It is that nuptial union

between the Word and the flesh: the Nuptial Chamber of this union is the womb of the Virgin. In fact, the flesh itself is united to the Word. Therefore, it is said: *they are no longer two, but one flesh*. The Church is drawn from the human race, so that the Head of the Church is the same flesh united to the Word, and the other believers are the members of that Head. Do you wish indeed to see who is coming to the Nuptials? *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God!*

And in another context, citing **Ps 19:6**, the great Father and Doctor of the Church states: *And he like a Spouse coming out from the nuptial chamber*: in fact, He has espoused human flesh. His Nuptial Chamber was the virginal womb – there, He united to Himself the Church so that she might fulfill that which was stated before: *And they will be two in one flesh!*

Another great master who established a kind of ‘school’ that lasted through the successive generations, above all in the area of spiritual theology, is **St. Gregory the Great**. In a Homily he preached on the parable of those invited to the Nuptials, noted in Mt 22:1-13, the great Pontiff teaches that between the Son of God and human nature they were predisposed by God the Father, bringing out thereby, among much else, the solid doctrine regarding the Hypostatic Union:

God, the Father, disposed the Nuptials for His Son when He willed that this Son of His would be united to our human nature in the womb of the Virgin and that God, before the centuries, became Man at the end of the ages. However, just as this union occurs between two persons, let there be far from our minds the idea that the Person of the Man-God and our redeemer Jesus Christ might derive from the union of two persons. We affirm that He exists by two natures and in two natures, but we reject as a perversion the belief that He is composed of two persons. We can, therefore, say openly and with assurance that the Father disposed the Nuptials for His Royal Son when He united to Him the Holy Church – and therefore, the Psalmist writes: *In the sun he has placed his tent and he is like a Spouse who comes out from his Nuptial Chamber*. God, in the Incarnation, came out as a Spouse from His Nuptial Chamber because He came from the uncorrupted womb of the Virgin to unite the Church to Himself.

Leafing through the many writings of countless Fathers and Ecclesiastical Writers, it seems at first sight that the comparison between the womb of the Virgin Mary and the **Nuptial Bed** is a central theme, or *motif* that is frequently repeated and that as such, it has also entered into the **Liturgical** texts. For example, **St. Peter Chrysologus** [Bishop of Ravenna, 380-ca.450], employed a variety of images to designate the virginal womb, and among these there is also that of the Nuptial and Virginal Chamber, where there took place in inexpressible joining of the divinity and the humanity.

Proclus, Bishop of Constantinople, who lived in the 5th century, in exalting the sublime dignity and the incomparable greatness of the Mother of God, adds, among so many other motives, also the fact that she alone ineffably received Him Whom the entire creation with fear and trembling sings His praises. Further on, He adds that Mary is venerated because she became Mother, handmaid, **Cloud**, **Bridal Chamber** and **Ark** of the Lord: **Mother**: she brought forth in fact the One Who wanted to be born. **Handmaid**: confessed nature, preached grace. **Cloud**: in fact, she conceived by the Holy Spirit, she who brought forth without corruption. **Nuptial Chamber**: in her, in fact dwelt the Word of God as in a Nuptial Chamber. **Ark**: not so much because contained the Law, but because she had borne in her womb the Legislator.

In many other authors as well there is noted that this comparison is based also on the allegorical interpretation of **Ct 3:7**, which speaks of the lattice of Solomon. This, in the *Life of Mary*, composed by **Maximus the Confessor** [579/580-662] it is read that David and the other Prophets had already spoken of the Virgin Mary, pre-announcing her, among other images, as the Bridal Chamber of the Lord around which the 60 champions stand guard, i.e., the words of the Sacred Scriptures and the Doctors.

In his turn, **Tarasius**, the Patriarch of Constantinople [730-806], in the course of a homily dedicated to the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, he places on the lips of the mother Anna, who addresses Zechariah these moving words: Receive, o Zechariah, this one who is holy and immaculate: receive, o priest, the unsullied nuptial bed of the Word... And Zechariah responds weaving the praises of Mary with an lengthy series of OT citations, among which we read the following: You are the Daughter of David: the Daughter of the King is all splendor, jewels and garments of gold is your vesture [cf. Ps 44:14]; you are the bejeweled litter of Solomon, surrounded by 60 champions [cf. Ct 3:7], with the trumpets they intone, addressed to God, the melodies of the Divine Scriptures.

There should be noted also a passage from **St. John Damascene** [650-750], where he exalts the Mother of God with the title **Nuptial Chamber of the Spirit**. This whole abbreviated presentation of the first millennium is concluded here with a passage taken from the *Panegyric Discourse on the Most Blessed Virgin Mary*, composed by the Armenian Monk, **Gregory of Narek** [950-1010]. He admits that it is not easy to find words to praise as would be fitting, the Blessed Mother of God. He writes: In her body she became the dwelling place of the Invisible, the Palace of the magnificent, the tabernacle of the Lord, the Tent of the Divinity, the Chalice for the incorruptible banquet, the Sanctuary of purity, the *Sacrarium* of chastity, the Archetype of Virginity, the Model of the blessed life, the indissoluble Nuptial Chamber of the Eternal Spouse, the prescribed Seat of the uncreated Divinity... How great is the mystery that is accomplished in you, a most Blessed Lady! If the Prophets,

through their prophecies, as though by a partial birth, were called the ‘fathers of Israel’, of how much praise should you not be meritoriously be worthy, you who in the most pure Nuptial Chamber of your womb has rendered corporally visible the very Word of God, equal in substance with God the Father ²¹.

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Testimonies of the Second Millennium

The first example is taken from the Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles composed by the Benedictine Abbot, **Rupert of Deutz** [1075-1129]. In this work – which was realized giving of preference a Marian interpretation - we find a very rich text which refers and comments on Ct 3:7-8: we thus find the bringing together of the litter of Solomon and the womb of the Virgin Mary had by now become of current usage. The author addresses himself directly to the Mother of God – according to the style adopted in the entire comment – and connecting itself to Ps 19:6: what is the bed of the authentic and truly peaceful King Solomon, who has realized peace between us and God, if not that in which the divine nature joined human nature to Itself? And what is this bed, if not your virginal womb, o beloved of the Most Loved? There, in fact, the divinity of the Word of God, the Word which is God, had presented Himself, and united to Himself inseparably, in the unity of the Person, the human nature drawn from your flesh. And this is the Spouse, i.e., God Who assumed our flesh together with a rational soul, the Spouse – I repeat - i.e., Jesus Christ, God and Man, as we sing in the Psalm, *ad He, like a Spouse, comes out from the nuptial room.*

St. Bernard of Clairvaux ²² – who is also known as the Marian Doctor - I 1125, wrote a work in homiletic style, entitled *Praises to the Virgin Mother*. This constitutes beyond any doubt a milestone in the unfolding of his Mariological thought. Articulated in four Homilies which go through point by point the episode of the Annunciation, as this is presented by St. Luke. This reflection of ‘the last of the Fathers’ acquires from its opening lines a very intense spirituality, with special praise directed toward the union between humility and virginity in Mary: fecundity exalts her humility, and her bringing to birth consecrates her virginity. With the following Homily the Abbot of Clairvaux – after having placed as a premise that there was no other birth that would be fitting for the son of God other than that from a virgin, as, in the same manner, to this specially blessed Virgin no other maternity was fully

²¹ There should not be overlooked the all time classic of this period: cf. Origen, *Homelies sur le Cantique des Cantiques.*, Sources Chretiennes 37 bis. Paris: du Cerf 1966; cf. also *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques.* Livres I-II. Sources Chretiennes 375. Vol. I. Paris: du Cerf 1991; Vol II Livres III-IV. Sources Chretiennes 376. Paris: du Cerf 1992.

²² Cf. the great classic: St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs.* Vol. I-IV, Sermons 1-86. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications 1980.

fitting for her other than a divine birth. From this, the great Abbot draws the due consequences for that which concerns the Christological foundation for her virginity and of that unique humility which so embellishes the Mother of God:

Therefore, the Creator of humanity, in order to become man, had to be born into the human race. Thus, it was necessary to choose among all women, rather, He had to create a uniquely special woman, one that he would know for Himself that she would be pleasing to Him. Thus, He chose that she should be a virgin, in order that she, the immaculate one, would generate the Immaculate Son, He Who would have to wash the sins of all. He wanted her also humble, in order that from her would be generated the One Who was meek and humble of heart, He Who would have to manifest within Himself the model of these virtues, the model necessary for all, and salvific for more than all.

There follows from this that her virginity and humility had been given to Mary so that she would be fully holy, respectively in both body and soul. After having clarified this principle, St. Bernard addresses himself to women so that they might draw near to this virginal Nuptial Chamber, and that they might enter this holy room of their sister, to hear that which the Angel announces to Mary. This praise reaches then a tone of vibrant intensity with the pressing invitation addressed to the Virgin, so that she might receive in her womb the Son of God: you will give birth to God and from God you will conceive! Thus Bernard explains this unique woman – and he adds in his final Homily – interpreting with real insight the words of the angel: Because the Holy One Who will be born of you, will be called the Son of God [cf. Lk 1:35]. He observes in this regard that there was not any other term that was more proper and worthy in order to call the extraordinary being, this magnificent being, this venerable Being that in being born of the most pure flesh of the Virgin who was to be united, with her soul, to the Only Begotten son of the Father.

The metaphor that lies under all these reflections noted so far, is then developed in the most varied and rich symbolic panorama employed by **St. Anthony of Padua** [1195-1231] in his Sermons. After having dilucidated the allegorical significance of the Temple of Jerusalem which Solomon had constructed, which figures at one and the same time, **the virginal womb of Mary, the faithful soul** and the **heavenly Jerusalem**, the evangelical Doctor stops to speak of these three species of Nuptials: of **union, justification** and **glorification** – taking his inspiration from the parable of the Nuptials as presented by Matthew. The first type of Nuptials had been celebrated in that time which had been the Blessed Virgin Mary, precisely when the Son of God took on human nature as His Bride in order to eliminate that disharmony rampant at the time between human beings and God. And in order to conclude this Marriage there intervened many intermediaries and brides-maids with insistent prayers, and only with great difficulty could it be obtained. Finally, the

Father agreed and sent His only Son, who, in the Bridal Chamber of the Blessed Virgin, united to Himself our human nature, and then the Father celebrated the Nuptials of His Son.

The Bridal Chamber of the glorious Virgin is embellished with a two-fold cleanness: that of the soul and that of the body. Thus – in the school of the great Fathers of the Church and of some of the great Masters of his own time – **St. Anthony of Padua** wrote very intense pages regarding virginity of both mind and body, through which Mary conceived the Son of God. In his judgment, virginity of the mind, based on humility, is the first cause of corporal virginity, and both of these together are the proximate and almost natural condition of Christ's immaculate being. It is indeed well worth the effort to reflect on a few of the more significant expressions with which the great Doctor of the Church explains the relationship between the 'flesh' of the Mother and the 'flesh' of her Divine Son, Jesus Christ. In his sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, there is read his comments on **Is 7:15**: therefore, when the *Emmanuel* came, the one whom the Virgin conceived and brought forth, He did not eat cheese, but butter, because he did not assume corrupted flesh and one subject to vice, but He took on the most pure flesh of the flesh of the most pure Virgin.

The Saint was both acute and versatile in his use of allegory – as is easily noted from one of his Mariological Sermons – the Evangelical Doctor sees in the bee and the honey-comb, of which **Si 11:3** speaks, a certain figuration respectively of the Virgin Mary and of her Son, Jesus, presented by her into the Temple and offered to God the Father: in the comb there are both honey and wax, and in the Baby Jesus there are both the divinity and humanity. *Natural History* tells us that good honey comes from new wax, and that the good honey has the color of gold. The new wax is the flesh of Christ, taken from the immaculate flesh of the Glorious Virgin: in her, there is the honey of the divinity, indicated by the gold.

Also **St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio** [1217-1274] teaches that Mary has conceived the Son of God in the Bridal Chamber of her heart and body, and that her virginal womb is the place where the Nuptials had been celebrated between the divine and human natures. For example, in the unfolding of a sermon on the Nativity of the Lord - which he delivered based on **Ps 19:6** – the Seraphic Doctor, after having explained that the Virgin Mary had been rendered by the Holy Spirit that pure Tabernacle, most beautiful and spacious, where the Word had set up His dwelling. The saint adds that He, once He came forth as Spouse from His Bridal Chamber, He became also the Spouse of the **soul**, of the **Church** and of **human nature**. And he adds further clarifications: to come forth as Spouse from his Bridal Chamber means that within the virginal womb of Mary, human nature was joined with the Word of

God in the unity of Person, so that the Bride is united to the Spouse with an individual love.

Lastly, space and expression should be given to the penetrating thought of **St. Catherine of Siena** [1347-1380], proclaimed a 'Doctoress' of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970. When we contemplate one of her most beautiful prayers, where contemplation of the Passion of the Son of God is totally imbued with that affection of love of which the soul of the Dominican Saint is so embellished. During her intimate colloquy with God, Catherine places to herself the question on how she could know unequivocally divine charity. The response that she received is but one: it is uniquely from the Incarnation of the Son of God, in Whom there stand out in the supreme grade the divine greatness, condescendance, and Mercy, and from which has flowed the salvation of the world. The favorable time of grace, then, came when the great Doctor of the World appeared, i.e., Your Only Begotten son – when the Spouse was joined to His Bride, i.e., the divinity in the Word joined to our humanity and of this union, Mary served as the means, who clothed You, the eternal Spouse of her humanity.

However in the structure of Catherine's teaching, the Incarnation and the Passion are intimately joined together: therefore, with the Blood poured out on the Cross, in order to redeem the world from sin that the Son of God, made man, has shown how immeasurable are the Divine Mercy and Largesse, towards the soul, His Bride.

Masses honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary

During the Marian Year of 1987, there officially entered into use the translations of the ***Masses of the Virgin Mary*** : a veritable collection of formularies, established in accord with the Liturgical Year.

It is worth noting one more time that as the praying of the Preface of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, God has signed in the Virgin Mary, preserved from every stain of original sin and without blemish, the beginning of the Church, Spouse of Christ without stain and without blemish, resplendent with beauty. There are many texts to choose from, but here are two which hint directly at the symbol of the Nuptial Chamber.

The Preface of the Mass dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the support and defense of our faith, after the introduction which unites together the privilege of the Immaculate Conception and that of the assumption into heaven – thus embracing in one sole glance the entire matter of Mary and the marvels of love and of grace achieved in her by God – proclaims, with an implicit allusion to Ps 19:6-7: You have

placed in her, intact and always the virgin, the marvelous Nuptial Chamber, from whom Christ has proceeded as Light of the Nations and Spouse of the Church.

With the Collect of the Mass, which under the title of ‘the Mother of Beautiful Love’, the Virgin Mary is exalted for her holiness, reflection of the divine beauty, there is placed the accent on her beauty in the virginal giving birth. It is stated in fact that the Father, God of Eternal Wisdom and Infinite Love, has brought forth from the most pure Nuptial Chamber of Mary, the Spouse of the Church, His Son Jesus Christ, Whom the Church proclaims is the most beautiful of the sons of men and women.

b. The Immaculate Body of the Son of God in Patristic Studies: the Bishop of Olimpius in Licia, **Methodius**, who died a martyr at the end of the persecution of Diocletian, that raged under Maximinus Daia [311-312], wrote a treatise on Virginity, that unfolded in the form of a dialogue and was known as a *Symposium*. In more than one occasion there is provided a solid Christological foundation to the exhortations directed at the consecrated virgins. From the very first comments, he invites all to honor and to imitate the virginity of the Lord, Who is the truth and Light, because in His coming into this world, He has conserved His own flesh for the reparation of all uncleanness and has given virginity as an embellishment. Much further on, then, he proposes as a second metaphorical meaning to be attributed to **Ct 6:9** – in addition to the ecclesiological interpretation of that passage, also this other one: the intended Bride is the immaculate flesh of the Lord, Who has descended down here, distancing Himself from the glory of the Father, in order to be united to this, in an embrace full of total interest, in making Himself man... Yes, this flesh, and only this, has been discovered, so to speak to be intact and immaculate. Its embellishment, which is justice, and its beauty surpass all the others to such a point that no one could be able even to approach its virtue and to be compared with it, not even among those who have achieved the most sublime point in God’s favor: thus, this flesh alone has been considered worthy to participate in the Reign of the Only Son through matrimony and union with Him.

According to **Gregory of Nyssa** [335/340-394], one of the three Cappadocian fathers [his brother Basil, and another Gregory] God is the archetype of virginity - which shines forth from among the angels and as in other human beings in so far as there is a share in his - by the very fact that the Pure and Incorruptible being is, together with the beautiful and the Good, one of His essential attributes. But, it is typical of the thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa to present the idea of a virginal generation within God: the Son is born of Divine Virginity, because His eternal generation is pure and bereft of passion. It is, furthermore, this ‘Trinitarian Virginity’ which gives meaning to all Christian virginity: in fact, the Son of God through His Incarnation in the womb of Mary immaculate, has introduced virginity into this world, which had been hidden and compromised by the sin of man.

In a particular manner, St. Gregory teaches that our Lord Jesus Christ, the font of all incorruptibility, has come into this world without ever having need of the conjugal act to show, with the character of His Incarnation, the grand mystery due to the fact that the presence and the advent of God into this world can be found worthy of a welcome only in that purity which cannot be realized in an adequate measure, unless He would estrange Himself from all of the passions of the flesh. That which was physically verified in Mary immaculate when the fullness of the divinity is resplendent in Jesus Christ through her virginity, is repeated also in every soul which remains virginal following reason, even if the Lord is no longer materially present.

In exhorting the consecrated virgins to follow their divine Spouse, the Lord Jesus, everywhere He goes, and therefore, to allow oneself to be guided by Him, the Immaculate and conquering lamb, to the feeding grounds of the heavenly joys, **St. Augustine** teaches them that it is through virginity of heart and of the flesh that they arrive at following Him in an efficacious manner. However – in his judgment – to follow Him means to imitate Him: now, to the virgins there is proposed to imitate also His virginity of body. This reference to the **Christological** foundation of virginity, enunciated with placing in relief that also the flesh of the Lamb is virginal – is then also supported by the **Mariological** foundation, so that both of these aspects shed light one upon the other. In fact, Augustine affirms that the Lamb has conserved, also after His glorification precisely that which he did not take away from His Mother in His conception and birth from here – namely, her virginity.

In like manner, **St. Ambrose** [Bishop of Milan, 339-397] established his own 'school.' His thought on virginity – distributed in more than one work, where we see flow together abundantly the Patristic tradition which preceded him – it is based on the concept of the Immaculate Son of God, Whose flesh had not seen corruption, and Whose divinity had not known contamination. The Immaculate Body of Jesus Christ has a two-fold relationship with Virginity: it is the fruit of the virginity – His immaculate flesh depends on the immaculate being of the virgin who generated Him – but, He is also the author and the paradigm of all virginity. And it is with His Incarnation that the Word of God has brought on earth His virginity, which is a type of life comparable to that of the Angels. In fact, having recourse to the metaphor of the **espousals** in order to designate the Incarnation, the Bishop of Milan sustains the following: after the Lord had come in this body, had joined the divinity and the human body, without the least stain of impure contamination, then there was developed in the human bodies a heavenly manner of living life, which was then diffused throughout the world.

Jesus Christ, Who is the Spouse of a Virgin, the Church, presents Himself thus as the Spouse of virginal chastity, in the sense that chastity, as Spouse, pertains to him, and not viceversa. He in His Body refers to His Mother, in the power of the

Father, as the only-begotten on earth, the only – begotten in heaven, God from God, Son of a virgin. This is Ambrose's idea, offered with an expression that refers back to the consubstantiality of the Son also with his Mother.

The thought expressed up to this point returns with new emphases in other writings. Among these there merits to be mentioned that entitled *The Education of the Virgin*, for the extraordinary pages which illustrate and exalt the divine maternity of the Virgin Mary. There are a few passages that are more noteworthy, such as: not even the flesh of Jesus Christ was the fruit of an operation: in order for the Virgin Mary to conceive him, the grace of the divine will drew from all that is of flesh in him, from the Virgin with the unusual and new mystery of the Incarnation, without any help from the male seed, and in her there were formed the members of a New Adam, an Immaculate Man.

Therefore, the birth of God from a virgin is the most eminent proof of the greatness which Consecrated Virginité enjoys: the only-Begotten Son of God could not find a manner of generation of his own flesh any more pure than to consecrate His own dwelling place the womb of a heavenly virgin, in which there would be the sanctuary of the immaculate chastity and the Temple of God.

3. The Contribution of the Gospel of John: in more than one commentary on the 4th Gospel, composed during the Patristic and Medieval periods, there are found examples of an exegesis in an allegorical-spousal key, applied to the miracle achieved by Jesus Christ at Cana of Galilee [cf. 2:1-11] – as well as the declaration of Christ the Spouse, made by St. John the Baptist [cf. 3:29]. Of the many important comments, it is necessary to offer a brief selection:

a. Patristic Commentaries: the first work to which reference here is made as to that of **St. Cyril**, Bishop of Alexandria [370/380-344], who had produced a rather rich and profound Commentary from the doctrinal point of view, giving space also to an allegorical exegesis. In the specific case of the Nuptials of Cana, after having briefly exposed the fact, he then explained its meaning in his view: the Word of God, therefore, had descended from heaven, as He Himself says in another place, so that as a husband, uniting Himself to human nature, He might convince it to receive in its bosom the spiritual seeds of Wisdom. Humanity is called, as is obvious, for this, a Bride, while the savior is called its Spouse: thus, the divine Scripture, by analogy with our reality, extends the meaning of the word, in order to make understood a more sublime truth.

Thus, the 'third day', mentioned is the day of the Nuptials, means to indicate the final times, predicted already in **Ho 6:1-3** and coinciding with the event of the Incarnation and of the Resurrection of the Son of God. While the locality, situated in Galilee, makes one think of the Church of the Gentiles, which differently from the

Synagogue had received with great joy its celestial Spouse, Who had procured for it a wine that was much better than what preceded it – i.e., the evangelical doctrine, which is more excellent than the ancient law.

The same basic idea regarding Spiritual Nuptials between the Lord Jesus and human nature returns in commenting on Jn 3:29/ St. John the Baptist, who presents Jesus as the Spouse and as the Head of the celebration, in which he assigns to himself the role of head waiter, servant and attendant to the Groom. He declares: I preached not only that the Messiah would come, but I see Him already present and I hear with my own ears His voice. You, then, as most wise disciples, since you see that humanity, espoused to Jesus Christ, run to Him, and you will see there that the human nature that was abandoned and taken from His love, returns to Him, by means of holy Baptism, to that spiritual union. Thus, you ought not to support only hesitatingly that it runs not to me but to the spirit Spouse. Thus, this was effectively just and more convincing.

For the balance of the Western Fathers the wisdom of Augustine stands out. In truth, it is he who reminds the Church, at the beginning of a homily of his dedicated to the episode of the Nuptials of Cana, the indispensable role of Wisdom which comes from the faith in the Lord Jesus, without which one could not come to the spiritual understanding of the miracle narrated by the Evangelist. In making this recollection, the Doctor of Hippo aims, among other things, at placing his listeners on guard from the errors of the heretics – the Docetists and the Donatists – who corrupt the virginity of the Bride of Christ, i.e., the faith of the Church. For this purpose he cites the text **2 Co 11:2-3** which furnishes him, among other factors, the occasion to reflect on the spousal love of Jesus, calling upon the redemptive effectiveness of His death on the Cross, with which he sacrificed Himself for her who would become His Bride after the resurrection, and to whom he had given as a pledge the Holy Spirit, but whom He had already united to Himself in the womb of the Virgin.

Having clarified this, he then adds: the Word in fact is the Spouse and human flesh is the Bride. And both of these are but one sole Son of God, Who is at the same time, the Son of Man. The womb of the Virgin Mary is the Nuptial Chamber where he became Head of the Church, and from which He came forth as Spouse who comes forth from His Bridal Chamber, according to that prophecy of sacred Scripture: He is like the Spouse who comes from His nuptial tent, exultant like a champion running His course. He comes forward as spouse from the Nuptial Room, and invited, makes His way to the nuptials. Having been invited, He makes His way to the nuptials, He who had come to the Wedding Feasts in this world: The Spouse of the nuptials of Cana, in fact, to whom it was said: *You have kept the good wine until now!* He represented the Person of the Lord. Christ, in fact, had conserved until that moment the good wine, i.e., His Gospel.

His presence fills the precursor with joy. He, as the Friend of the Spouse, shows himself rightfully jealous, not for himself, but for His Bride: he wants the Church to belong uniquely to His Lord. In the same tenor is the jealousy manifested by Paul in 2 Co 11:2-3. Thus citation again the words of the Apostle, Augustine seizes the occasion to exhort still one more time his faithful of Hippo to maintain intact their own fidelity to the Divine Spouse, Who, in the Hour of His Passion, has left to His Church, as the Nuptial Gift, both charity and humility symbolized by the tunic that the soldiers left intact.

b. A Few Comments from the Middle Ages: with the **Venerable Bede** [672/673-735], the Church has contact with one of the greatest theologians of the Middle Ages. In a Homily dedicated to Jn 2:1-11, he takes up and exposes, on the basis of Ps 19:6-7 and of the *saying* regarding the spouse already present [cf. Mt 9:15], a doctrine that by his time was already traditional. He wrote that Christ is the Spouse, and His Bride is the Church – the children of the Spouse and of the Nuptials are one by one all His faithful: the time of the Nuptials is the time in which, in virtue of the Mystery of the Incarnation, He has united to Himself the Church. It is certainly not by chance but in grace of a precise mystery, He has come to the Nuptials celebrated on earth according to the flesh, the One who has come from heaven to earth in order to unite to Himself the Church with a spiritual love, Whose Nuptial Chamber was the womb of His unsullied Mother, in Whom God joined human nature to Himself, and from which He came forth as the Spouse in order to unite Himself to the Church.

Another witness comes from the Commentary drawn up by Rupert of Deutz, who declared explicitly that he wanted to draw on the beauty of the spiritual meaning already within the episode of the Marriage celebrated at Cana of Galilee. To tell the truth, we find here the same ideas contained in the passage of the Canticle of canticles reported above. In his view, the event of the Incarnation – symbolized also by these Nuptials - had been pre-announced by the Prophets and prefigured in the story of the patriarchs, for whom it is of Christ that Ps 19:6 speaks. And he adds that the event had taken place in the Bridal Chamber of the Virginal Womb, where the Spirit had united Himself to the Bride, where the Creator had united Himself to His creature completing thus a gesture of sublime dignity.

In going through the 13th Century, the Church was blessed with two celebrated masters: St. Albert the Great [the Universal Doctor] and St. Thomas Aquinas [the Angelic Doctor].

The allegorical interpretation which **St. Albert the Great** [1193-1280] gives to Jn 2:1-11 is constructed on three levels:

- the first refers to the nuptials between God and humanity, and these were celebrated in the union of the two natures and which stand as the foundation of our faith. As for this first explanation, the author cites explicitly Mt 22:2 and says that the nuptials arranged by the King took place precisely when he had joined the human nature to that divine nature of His Son in the unity of His Divine Person. Thus, the two – both God and man – have become **one sole flesh**, and therefore, it can be legitimately affirmed, as is taught **by Col 2:9** that in Christ there dwells corporally all the fullness of the divinity.
- the second is constituted by the Nuptials that take place thanks to the loving union between **the Holy Spirit and the created spirit**, the human soul [mystical marriage];
- and the third refers to the **eschatological nuptials**, when the faithful soul will enter into the Bridal Chamber of the Spirit, being immersed in the secret of the heavenly light. As for this third explanation. St. Albert the Great has recourse to the comparison of the water transformed into wine in order to make more fervently appreciated the passage from the insipid consolations of this earth to the eternal beatitude which is enjoyed in communion with God.

From his part, **St. Thomas Aquinas** [1225-1274] worked out a mystical reading of the Johannine pericope, weaving together various biblical passages. Having as his premise that by these nuptials, there should be understood the union between Jesus Christ and the Church, according to the statement in Ep 5:32. St. Thomas wrote: this matrimony had its beginning in the virginal womb, when God the Father united human nature to His Son, in the unity of His Person. Therefore, the virginal womb had served as the Bridal Chamber in which this union took place, according to what is read in Ps 19:6: In the sun, he placed his tent. Of these nuptials Mt 22:2 also speaks: *The Reign of God is like a king who prepared a Nuptial Banquet for His Son*, and this took place when God the father joined the human nature to His Word in the virginal womb. This matrimony was then rendered public, when the Church was united to Him through the faith, according to what is stated in Ho 2:20: *I will make you My spouse in fidelity*, etc. Concerning these Nuptials, it is stated in the Ap 19:9; *Blessed are those invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb*. Finally this matrimony will be realized definitively when the Bride, which is the Church, will be introduced into the nuptial chamber of the Spouse, i.e., into the Heavenly Glory²³.

4. The Patristic Commentaries on the Song of Songs : ...Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth... [cf. Ct 1:2]: the Canticle opens with these words, full of healthy desire pronounced by the Woman. These words have given access, beginning with Origen, to allegorical interpretations of sublime spiritual profile:

²³ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *In Jo.*, c. II, lectio I, 338.

placed on the mouth first the Church, and then of the individual soul, they came to be understood as addressed, either to the Father in reference to His own Son, the Incarnate Word – or, addressed directly to the Incarnate Word, from Whom kisses are implored and received. On the meaning of kisses, the story of the Commentaries on the Song of Songs offers a differentiated series of options that go from the word and from the illuminating realization that the Word communicates with His Incarnation – to the Gift of the Holy Spirit ²⁴. In this reflection, after offering some information pertaining to the interpretation of the **Incarnation** as a **Nuptial Union**, there are presented here two allegorical re-readings of the ‘kisses’, while that **Pneumatological** interpretation is a study apart.

a. Recalling the Incarnation: the first Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles, which has come down to us, is generally attributed to **Hyppolitus**, an oriental who lived between the end of the IInd Century, and the beginning of the IIIrd. He seems to have been a Bishop of a Church of Asia Minor. His explanation embraces however, only a part of the Biblical Book as we have it: he arrives only to **Ct 3:8**.

The exegesis that unfolds throughout this Commentary, in which there may be noted with some evidence a certain homiletic style. It pertains to the typological genre, on the basis of which the OT plays the role of event and of providing the text that prophetically announces, prefigures and prepares for the NT, in which all finds its fulfillment. In this regard the same author defines his own explanation with the expression *similitudo typorum*, or ‘typological similitude’. Consequently, the Spouse is defined with Jesus Christ, while the Bride is identified at times with the local Church, at times with the Universal Church – **but, never with the individual believer**.

The central theme is thus constituted by the Mystery of the Salvific Economy centered on the Word of God, a Mystery which is thought over again as sub-divided into various stages: the Word is in the Father; He has come forth from the Heart and from the Mouth of the Father; He achieves the work of Creation together with the Father; he acts in our world through the Word of the Prophets; He takes on human flesh; He pours forth His divinity from His human flesh, consumed on the Cross; He has risen, and diffuses His life throughout the Church.

He offers his own commentary on Ct 2:8, which reads: ... *I hear my Love. See how He comes, leaping on the mountains, bounding over the hills...* For Hyppolitus, this is the disposition of New Grace. What grandiose mysteries these are! In what does this ‘leaping over the hills’ consist for the Word of God? He has descended from heaven into the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary; from this holy womb He has leaped up onto the Wood of the Cross, and from the Wood of the Cross to the

²⁴ Cf. A. Solignac, *Osculum*, in: *DSP* 11, 1012-1026.

inferos, and from there He has leaped onto the earth with this earthly flesh. What a new resurrection! Successively, He has leaped from earth up to heaven where he sits now at the right hand of the Father – and lastly, He will descend on earth to mete out the final retribution!

With **Gregory of Elvira**, who was a Spanish Bishop, who died after 392, contact is made with the most ancient Latin Commentary on Canticles which has come down to us. It was written toward the mid-way point of the 4th century. The text is sub-divided into five books and it reaches **Ct 3:4**, and offers substantially a reading conducted in an essentially **ecclesiological** perspective. The event of the Incarnation is re-thought under the perspective of **Nuptials**, precisely in the light of **Ph 2:7-8**. However, while the Nuptial perspective leads the author to say that human flesh and the soul are the **Bride** that the Son of the God has taken and united to Himself. For this, the author refers to the Christological Hymn contained in Ph 2 and this allows him to give adequately value to the price that Jesus Christ has paid in order to give life to the Church, in which He would then have found a welcome and a repose. Consequently, he insists as much on the redemptive action unfolded by Christ in behalf of sinful humanity through His expiatory sacrifice and His blood shed on the cross – as he insists on the fact that the Redeemer has formed the Church, drawing her from among the gentiles and united her to Himself as His Body and His Flesh, i.e., as His pure and Immaculate Bride.

Along these lines as traced out here, there has to be inserted also the contribution of a certain **Apponius**, a monk of vast erudition, who lived in northern Italy, or perhaps around Rome, who composed between 420-430 a very rich Commentary on the Cantic of Canticles, subdivided into 12 chapters of unequal length. With a method of exegesis that is typically allegorical, Apponius sustains that the Incarnation of the Word of God should be retained, in absolute manner, as the first nuptial union. He teaches this already at the beginning of the First Book, where he reminds the reader that the Holy Spirit attests in many passages of sacred Scripture that the Word of God, moved by an infinite love, calls human nature with the names of ‘Sister’, ‘Daughter’ and ‘Bride.’ Successively, in a passage that is important for its clarity of thought, applies to the soul of Christ the words, *My dove is My only one, perfect and mine...* [cf. Ct 6:9], with whom the Spouse manifests all His preferential love for His beloved: It is she, in so far as she is the head of all the holy souls, is united to the word of God not by adoption, nor only by a certain time, but corporally, who has become one with Him, while conserving His own nature, avoiding all the deeds of sin, who is exempt of all malice, precisely she who is His dove and His perfect one...

b. The Kisses of the Incarnate Word: in addition to his Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles, Origen has left us also his **Homilies on Canticles**, as has been noted: these were delivered, without doubt, sometime after 245, and therefore, later than the great Commentary – which have come down to us in the translation offered by St. Jerome, in 383. In the first of the two Homilies - offering us a glimpse into his own spiritual experience – the author at a certain point, asks himself, thinking of the Spouse: if He would indeed deign to come also to my soul which has become His Spouse, which ought to be beautiful in order to draw Him to itself from heaven, in order to make Him descend on earth so that He might come to His beloved, with what beauty should it not be adorned, with what love should it not burn, so that He might address those words what He would say to His Bride.

Having entered into this atmosphere, charged with desire, it would be helpful now to follow the thematic traces described in his Commentary. Here there may be found above all the Church which implores the Father of her Spouse and beseeches Him that He might send Him to her so that she might finally listen directly to Him, and no longer by means of the angels or the Prophets: these are indeed the *kisses* that Christ has given to His Church, so that at His arrival, He, present in the flesh, has addressed to her words of faith, love and peace. Immediately after the Soul has entered into the scene, the soul wants to be penetrated with the mysteries of the knowledge and of the wisdom with which the Spirit is full. The soul prays that its pure and virginal mind be illuminated by the presence and by the light of the Word of God. Here the kisses signify all those illuminations with which He reveals to His Bride all that is unknown and obscure, inundating her intellect and sentiments with His light.

This interpretation worked out in some detail by Origen was then adopted later by other authors such as Gregory of Elvira, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Ambrose, Nile of Ancyra, Philo of Carpasia, and in the Middle Ages, especially by St. Bernard.

With his 15 Homilies on the Canticle of Canticles – which examine the biblical text up until Ct 6:9 – **St. Gregory of Nyssa** has left for the Church a text which contains an enormous value, both for its depth of thought, as well as for its wealth of doctrine. Through the spiritual teaching developed in these Homilies and leaning heavily on Neo-Platonic teachings, St. Gregory of Nyssa puts to work, on every direction, the allegorical method, relating to a secondary role the literal sense. His concern and his intention, in fact, are entirely absorbed by the desire of instructing the believer: each one is exhorted to withdraw himself from earthly and carnal passions, to pursue salvation through the love which unites to God and therefore, to run at high speed toward perfection.

Among the central themes of the Christology prospected in then 15 Homilies, there emerge the following:

- the emphasis given to the love as the motive for the Incarnation,
- the worth and the revealing finality inherent in the manifestation of the Word of God in the flesh,
- the condescendence from these placed in act by adapting itself to the limited capacities of human nature, in order to be rendered accessible, visible and comprehensible,
- the recourse given to the criterion of the coincidence of the opposites in order to delineate the difference of the two natures, the human and the divine, in the unity of the one Person.

Finally, the Incarnation is seen also as the intervention with which the Word of God has responded to the desire expressed by His Bride to see Him and to listen to him in a direct manner: And the desire of seeing the God in the flesh takes her over, so that the Logos becomes flesh and God is manifested in the flesh, and proposes to our ears the divine words which announce to those who are worthy of it, of eternal beatitude.

The theme of 'desire' passes from start to finish through the treatise composed by St. Gregory of Nyssa. It is the desire, in fact, that moves the soul to see insistently the words of the Spouse which are spirit and life. The soul yearns to approach Jesus Christ, the Source of the Spiritual Life, in order to unite herself to Him and thus to be able to attain from Him, from His mouth those kisses, i. e., the words that fill the mouth of the one who is alert for them, and these purify her from every stain. Thus, the kiss becomes the symbol of that mystical contact with God and with the Word of of Whom the soul could never be satiated.

The Monk, **Nile of Ancyra**, who lived between the end of the 4th century and the beginnings of the 5th, is the Author of the most complete ancient Commentary on the Canticle of canticles, in the Greek language that has come down to us. It is a matter of a work that is eminently exegetical; Nile is cognizant that the reading of the Bible, composed with accuracy, nourishes the spirit and opens the path to contemplation. Strong in the basic principle that Scripture is best taught and interpreted by Scripture, it re-discovers and reproduces in the Canticle of canticles the entire Salvation History, the center of which is concentrated on Jesus Christ and His Passion. However, the Nuptial Union described by him presents both the event of the Incarnation – from his point of view, the perfect soul of the Word of God is united to the human Body - as well as the enjoyment of the promised good which will be completed on the day of the *Parousia*.

Having kept in mind that the work is organized around two central themes: the quest for contemplation and the affirmation of the divinity of Jesus Christ in the

events of His Passion and Resurrection, there is comprehended well how the soul and the Church are both the destinaries as well as the protagonists under the figure of the **Bride**. The first – and Nile thinks above all of the Monk – is exhorted continuously to proceed without delay on the path of perfection, consisting in the practice of the virtues, in the scope of enjoying loving communion with God through contemplation. The second – and Nile refers expressly here to the Church of the Nations, that formed by all those who have passed over from idolatry, interpreted as prostitution, to faith and therefore to the **nuptial** union with Jesus Christ – is committed to defend the orthodoxy of the Faith in Jesus Christ against the errors of the heretics, while he does not neglect to find fault with the Synagogue for its incredulity before the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is absolutely comprehensible, therefore, to grasp the reason why the Church addresses herself insistently to God, Who had predestined her to union with His Word chosen for her as her unique and legitimate Spouse, and being by now tired of waiting, declares that she would like to move beyond engagement to marriage, in order to enjoy fully the kisses of her spouse, i.e., to be inebriated by her contact with the words of His teaching, which seduce all those who are willing to be instructed by them.

5. St. Bernard of Clairvaux : his 86 Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles written by him, during a period of time between July of 1135 until almost the vigil of his death, occupy a most important place in the history of Christian literature and of the spiritual doctrine of the Church. They are considered beyond any doubt as one of the most important Latin works of the Middle Ages.

Both in the manner of exposing the biblical text, as well as the manner of actual composition, the Abbot of Clairvaux – who commented only on the first two chapters of the biblical book, having stopped at Ct 3:1 – makes use of the rules of the exegesis in vogue in the Middle Ages. It is based on the structure of the four senses that can be noted in Sacred Scripture: the literal, or historical; the moral; allegorical; and anagogical, or mystical. Nonetheless, the interest above all is on the moral and spiritual sense, so that the end result presents veritable and proper treatises of the moral and spiritual life, where, among other things, there abound those practical counsels and where there are not lacking brilliant pages of an intense mystical spirit. These beautiful passages lead one to admire the sublimity of his own spiritual and contemplative life, concentrated on the loving and **spousal** relationship with the Word of God and nourished continuously by the action of the Holy Spirit of Love²⁵.

²⁵ Cf. Sources Chretiennes. 414, Introduction, pp. 21-57.

a. **The Contemplation of the ‘Sweet Secrets of the Spouse’:** from the overall study of the sermons there is clearly comprehended that the great Abbot was indeed a Master, attaining also to the depths of his own spiritual life. However, he made no effort to incite the Monks who would have listened to these to encourage them to seek assiduously for that loving union with the Spouse, the Word. They too, would have to make their own direct experience of Him, by abandoning themselves completely to love, allowing themselves to be taken over and invaded entirely by the ardent love that He nourished for the Church.

Bernard wanted to teach the **Soul-Bride** how each person should conduct himself towards the **Word-Spouse**. For this reason – being faithful to the responsibility that was incumbent upon him as Abbot - he poured forth at times words of consolation, inter-mingled with words of exhortation. Therefore, he can be seen inviting insistently his listeners, as his readers, to imitate the Soul-Bride who never ceases to desire and to seek the Word-Spouse, Who allows her to experience the sweet odor of His perfumes, and this is verified when He had been made for us Wisdom, Justice, Sanctification and Redemption: this final perfume – and it is good to take note of it - becomes all the more permeating especially through **the memory of His Passion**. However, after having experienced the inebriating perfumes spread about by the Word, the Bride invokes Him so that He might continue to attract her to Himself, and until He would introduce her into His Nuptial Chamber.

Now, this Nuptial Chamber symbolizes all that is attained through contemplation, thanks to which there might be investigated the sweet secrets of the Spouse. And it happens, day after day, that the soul that has fallen in love, learns that there is not for her any greater advantage than that which comes to her from glorying in the Cross of the Lord [cf. Ga 6:14]. Bernard leads us to emphasize that the shame of the Cross results as pleasing to the person who is not ungrateful to the Crucified. Thus, the soul being hidden in the Healing Wounds of her Lord, learns to recognize and to admire the features of that beauty – which derives to Him from His divine nature – which shine through and is veiled by His condition as the humbled, disdained and Crucified Servant, taken on by him out of love. While the soul notices growing within, in an irresistible manner, the will of loving the Spouse-Love: the love of the Spouse – rather the Spouse who is Love - does not anything in exchange other than love and fidelity. And it is therefore consented to her who is loved, to exchange this love. How would it ever be possible not to love the Bride, the Bride of love. And would it be possible not to love, Love itself?

b. **The Sapiential Knowledge of the Word-Spouse in the Kenotic Incarnation:** from his very first Sermon, Bernard advises the reader that the Canticle can be taught only by the unction of the Spirit, and can be grasped only with experience. Therefore, the Songs can be listened to, and comprehended solely by the

two lovers: she who is by now ready to sing His praises, i.e., the Bride - to be identified with the believing, committed soul who has become suitable for the nuptials with the heavenly Spouse – and He to Whom she sings, this is the spouse, the Word of God made man.

And it is in this atmosphere of love, that is so intense and warm, permeated by the contemplative experience, which is developed and matures the sapiential knowledge of Jesus Christ crucified [cf. 1 Co 2:2]. Such knowledge represents the heart and the pulp of the reflection on the event of the Incarnation, worked out then in a soteriological key, beginning with a precise and much insisted upon attention to those components of renunciation, self-emptying, abasement and humiliation which are delineated in that Hymn handed down to us by the Letter to the Philippians [cf. **Ph 2:6-11**].

The Allegorical Interpretation of the Kisses

The Mystery of the Incarnation enters directly in the very first comments dedicated to the initial words of the Canticles: *Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth...* [cf. Ct 1:2]. The Abbot of Clairvaux returns more than once to these words: the 'kiss', in fact, is a multi-splendored symbol, with many nuances.

The first interpretation that is encountered is rather usual and refers to the living and efficacious Word given by the Lord Jesus – this Word is beyond doubt an infusion of joys, a revelation of secrets, a certain mixture that is both admirable, and in some way, also indiscreet, of the light that comes from on high and of the illumined mind. This means to be kissed with those kisses of His mouth. If one thinks, though, of the kiss planted right on the mouth, this, then, is justly understood as a prerogative, a privilege, that the Word of God reserves exclusively for the human nature assumed by Him. Lastly, the kiss that results between the coming together between the one who kisses and the one who is kissed is the marvelous union, in the Person of the Incarnate Word, between the divine nature and the human nature. However He, Who is both God and true Man, is the mediator between God and humanity.

Bernard proposes then a further interpretation,, this time drawing on his own Book of Experience, i.e., on his own spiritual life. The loving adherence of His Bride for Him represents in this case the conclusion of the itinerary towards the perfection which is unraveled progressively in three stages, figured by three separate cases. It begins with **the kiss of the Savior's feet** at which each one must ask first of all for the forgiveness of one's sins, in imitation of the Penitent Woman [cf. Lk 7:36-50]. And once one stands up, the next **kiss is for the hand of the Lord**: this gesture means that after having given pardon, the Lord grants also the strength and the grace to conduct a virtuous life. Only when one reaches this phase can one aspire to, figured by a more

sublime goal **the kiss on the mouth**: finally, one these other graces have been obtained through many prayers and tears, then we can dare perhaps to raise our heads toward His glorious mouth, not only to contemplate it, but – and I say this with fear and trembling - in order to kiss it. Since Christ the Lord is the Spirit standing before our faces, and we adhere to Him with a sacred kiss, thanks to His bending toward us, and we come to form with **Him one sole spirit**.

Finally, the doctrine exposed in the Sermons grants the reader also a stupendous explanation in a pneumatological key, that will be presented in the back-drop of other studies.

He emptied Himself, assuming the Condition of the Servant [cf. Ph 2:7].

How could any committed believer remain indifferent when one reflects on the manner in which the omnipotent and merciful Lord has achieved our redemption and when its fruit can already be enjoyed? This manner has been constituted in the self-emptying and annihilation of self – and the fruit of all this consists in being full of Him. To meditate on the fruit is already the germ of holy Hope. To meditate on the manner is the spark of supreme love. Hence, the Disciple who loves the Lord, while he might feel moved to render Him thanks with all one's heart, and ought to exercise oneself in reflecting attentively and devoutly on the manner of the redemption. Considering, in fact, just how profound had been that humiliation undergone by the son of God – a humiliation that reached even to the point of His terrible death on the Cross [cf. Ph 2:8] – as well as the shame and the sufferings endured by him voluntarily, one would take into account one more time that the savior took on all this out of love, and to pour out on humanity His superabundant Mercy. Furthermore the disciple will also learn better to avoid the terrible vice of ingratitude and to recognize that each one is indebted to a great love to be offered toward our Lord and Creator.

Thus, with this lesson brought out, rather efficaciously, the immeasurable love of the Redeemer, a love which super-abounds with His Condescendence and Mercy, St. Bernard teaches his monks how every measurement and calculation of that love due to our Lord Jesus Christ should be put aside, and one's whole life should be permeated with gratitude. In reflecting on this argument, one notes easily that this contains in substance the response to the question on why the Son of God had wished to save us through His Cross, by paying such a burdensome and painful price. Having presupposed this orientation which is both doctrinal and spiritual, it is more simple to follow the thematic trace designed by the numerous references to Ph 2:7, present in the pages of his sermons. Here only two or three of them will be offered:

...Your Name is an oil poured out... [cf. Ct 1:2]: in interpreting the praise which the Bride directs toward her Spouse, comparing His name to an inebriating perfume, or perfumed oil, St. Bernard draws first of all the reader's attention on the immense Mercy that the Redeemer has demonstrated toward His Church, when He chose her with preference and in the place of the old Synagogue. The Church, which believes in the Crucified Word, which has torn away, by His death, the veil of the letter which kills [cf. 2 Co 3:17], even within the heart of Christ: and having finally become His Bride, she can enjoy the embraces so long desired, and while one is being drawn closer to Him and embraces Him, the Church becomes anointed by Him with the oil of exultation.

A little bit further on, the author stops to exalt the 'name' of salvation. After having placed in relief the universal extension and efficacy of His redemptive Passion, which has healed humanity from all sin, he exclaims: How precious is this Name and how humble. It is humble, but salutary. If it were not humble, it would not be poured out on me; if it were not salutary, it would not have ransomed me. From the moment that I am a participant in His Name, I am also of His inheritance. I am Christian, a brother of Jesus Christ. And there should be no wonder if the Name of the Spouse has been poured out, from the very moment that He has been. In fact, he emptied Himself, assuming the condition of a slave. Therefore, He Himself says: I am poured out like water!' There has been poured out the fullness of the divinity, dwelling corporally on earth, so that all of us, who have a body vowed toward death, we might be participants of that fullness and thus, filled by that odor the bearer of life, we can also say: *Your Name is wine poured out..!*

The other example that has been chosen is from Sermon 42 which contains a very effective exhortation on fraternal correction and on how that is to be accepted. The attitude required of the Monk, logically, is that bearing on humility, which is compared to the nard of the Bride who exhales and spreads about her perfume in the place where the King is resting [cf. Ct 1:12]. And Bernard teaches that he prefers voluntary humility, which is suggested, sustained and inflamed by Charity, even if he warns each one not to forget not to ignore the other, that aroused by the light of the truth which illumines the conscience and enables it to have a precise understanding of itself. This preference noted above is motivated by the example offered by the Lord, Who humbled Himself out of love for us. He, in fact, made Himself humble of His own will, all the while knowing that He was all the greater and teaches thereby to practice above all that humility which is suggested by the affection of the heart, which proceeds from the will. *Learn from Me, for I am meek and humble of heart!* [cf. Mt 11:29].

6. The Measureless Love for the Spouse as One of the Motives for the Incarnation: in becoming man, the Son of God manifested His **Oblative Love** and His **Unitive Efficacy** in His love beyond measure for humanity and the Church, His Bride, which flows forth from eternity from His 'heart.' His Bride attracts Him to herself in an irresistible manner – He has done all that is within Him in order to conquer her and to unite her to Himself forever. In this regard, it is good to keep in mind that not a few mystical authors have applied to the Lord Jesus the words that the man in love as featured in the canticle of canticles directs toward His beloved, in offering great praise to her physical beauty: ... *You ravish My heart, y sister, My promised Bride, you ravish My heart, with a single one of your glances, with a single link of your necklace...*! [cf. Ct 4:9]. The Latin Vulgate offers great insight: ***Vulnerasti cor meum! – You have wounded My heart!***

a. Fundamental Perspectives: The Word of God, Jesus Christ, out of His super-abundant love, made Himself what we are, to make of us that He is Himself! – this is the teaching of **St. Irenaeus**, Bishop of Lyons [130-202]. His challenge was to refute those heresies that developed in Gnosticism, and He offers the invitation to follow the Lord Jesus, His only sure Master. On his part, **Origen** in explaining the controversy on divorce [cf. Mt 19:1-9], opens up a parenthesis dedicated to the **spousal union** between Jesus Christ and the Church, within which he inserts the affirmation that the Word of God became flesh and has come to dwell among us, out of love for Jesus Christ, His Bride, in order to unite Himself to her, and to form thus together with her, who is His Body, one sole flesh! And this union is indissoluble: in fact, nothing and no one could ever separate the Church from the love of Jesus Christ.

Love has incarnated among men the Divine Spouse – recalls the author of the **Legend of St. Clare**, who attributes these words to **St. Francis**, who was instructing the young Clare on the sweetness of her Nuptials with Christ. **Richard Rolle**, who was one of the greater English mystics of the 14th century, who spent his life as a hermit, writes in his beautiful work, ***The Chant of Love*** – certainly it is because of the immense love that from all eternity inflamed him that the King of kings has assumed our human nature, in which he suffered every kind of bitterness by the hand of the wicked. However, He had been content with suffering for us, since he wished to inflame our hearts to love in the most ardent manner. He accepted to suffer for a certain time in order to be loved eternally by His chosen ones.

In this brief review of writers, there could not be overlooked the voice of one from the Eastern world: **Nicholas Cabasilas**, was a theologian and Byzantine mystic, who lived in the 14th century. He offers this most extraordinary insight: the love that God has for human beings **emptied** Him: God does not invite the servant He loves while remaining in His place, but He Himself has descended to seek Him. Bring rich,

He comes to the dwelling of the poor man, and in presenting Himself He declares directly His love and seeks a love like it in return. When first rejected, He does not withdraw, even in the face of insolence He does not become angry; when rejected He stands at the door and does His all in order to show Himself as a genuine Lover; martyred, He supports it all, and dies!

Therefore, in order to give us the experience of His great love and to show that He loves us with a love without limit, He invents His own **self-emptying**. He even accepts supporting the incommensurate suffering of His Passion. Certainly, being the Risen Lord, He now has a spiritual body, but – Cabasilas continues – giving proof of an intuitive sensibility rendered illuminating and burning with the fire of love – he wished to conserve **His Glorious Wounds** out of love for humanity whom He chose to love. The reason for this being is that by the means of His **Glorious Wounds** he rediscovered the ones who had been lost, and with these **Wounds**, He has conquered the object of His love.

To reflect on this love of the Son of God which reached the level of ‘excess’ with His death on the Cross, means, on the one hand, to take note, one more time, that all this remains eternally paradoxical to the mind that is not able to offer an exhaustive explanation of it all. And it is true that neither will there ever be able to be any such explanation, precisely due to the fact that the love manifested by the son of God is incommensurate and is beyond any human understanding. Then, on the other hand, this is a challenge to learn to listen to the reasons of the heart: when one allows himself to be conquered and gives in to that love which the Divine Spouse nourishes for him, when one allows himself to be united to Him by the Holy Spirit, then the believer acquires a direct and immediate knowledge of that love which begins to open up to him as perfectly motivated. As a result of these facts, such surprising love is totally convincing, even though it will never cease giving rise within the recipient of surprise, marvel and even stupor.

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And this is the lesson that is received by approaching the literary patrimony which has been left to the Church as a precious inheritance – it is a gift of inestimable value, as this has come down to us from the Fathers of the Church, from so many Masters/ Mistresses of the spiritual life and doctrine, as well as from the magnificent choir of gifted men and women who have contributed – and still contribute to enrich the inexhaustible thread of this mystical experience. Their works, their teaching and their example will offer to us a guide during this journey. As a summary of this section, there may be considered the great Franciscan Poet: some of his strophes containing this thought are indeed most elevating.

b. The Writings of Jacapone da Todi [1230-1306]: composed a magnificent work called his *Laudarium*. In this, the gifted author shows the extraordinary event of the Incarnation of the Son of God, culminating in His death on the Cross, describing it in poetic form, its truth and meaning it offered the Author: *...To that love, which has come, in naked flesh to offer Himself – let us go now to offer praise, and song with much honor!*

Out of love for man, God became man, submitting Himself to the laws of love: loving, intimate, spousal union with human nature is the ultimate motive that inspired the son of God to make Himself like us. This is a motive that appears immediately as beyond all measure: love has no measure and it does not calculate, precisely because for God, the measure of love is humanity – and in return, for humanity, the measure of love is God. In particular, in penetrating to the depths the implications of this loving, direct and immediate relationship between God and humanity, Jacapone places insistently under scrutiny the factor that consents to understand more clearly its dynamism. This factor can be stated in the discovery of the humanity of God which, in the modality of a suffering death, He reveals Himself as Love. What results from this reading is that in the last analysis, God is completely converted toward humanity, in Jesus Christ, in His loving and suffering Passion, He renders homage to His Lord. The Gospel account of the passion that culminates in the death on the Cross, thus appears to the Poet as the most concrete modality chosen by the son of God in order to show His love for humanity: *...As I have shown to you, when I became incarnate – for you, I lived as a pilgrim, consumed on the Cross...!*

Profoundly moved and overcome by this love, Jacapone does not cease to celebrate the immense loving desire which burns in the heart of Jesus Christ. And He repeatedly asks His Bride to love Him in return. In fact, he cannot accept, nor even support being abandoned, forgotten, or neglected:

... O Christ, omnipotent, where have You been sent? Why do You so poorly wend Your pilgrim way? I have taken a Bride, to whom I have given My heart, with jewels I embellished her, to honor her for Myself...tell My Spouse that I have to come back; this painful death really does not make me suffer; for her I wish to die, I am so much in love...!

So, because of this divine love beyond measure, according to these teachings of the Praise of God in His Mysteries, it is discovered that it is God Himself to give glory to the Man and to proclaim Him in His conjoined humanity –divinity as God from God!. Therefore, humanity should accept this invitation to Spousal Union which is being offered by Christ the Lord, by recognizing and accepting with gratitude that the Lord did not want any other Bride but humanity, that creature drawn into being from nothing, but who now has an infinite value. Hence, he ought to take cognizance each day more and more that the place where this encounter of spousal love is

realized is that chosen by the Spouse with His Incarnation: i.e., this earthly world, this life in its creaturely condition, this history signed forever by the wonders of salvation. Therefore, the Lorfd does not hold back in asking for love repeatedly:

... I beg of you, give Me love, Bride, it is love that I seek; there is nothing else that I am looking for, other than to find Love. Love gives Me no relief, everything is being taken off Me, it powerfully binds Me, it does not cease inflaming Me; therefore, begin by loving, Bride, so dear to Me; I have purchased you at high price, to give anything else has not value...!

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CHAPTER III

THE REDEMPITIVE PASSION IN A SPOUSAL PERSPECTIVE: THE STIGMATA AND THE ESPOUSALS

Introduction:

[1] As St. Augustine teaches in his usual magisterial fashion, the Church is born from **the Pierced Side of the Crucified Spouse**. While Jesus 'slept' on the Cross, His sleep of real death, the Roman soldier opened up His side, from which flowed blood and water, the Symbol of the Sacraments of **Baptism** and the **Eucharist**, with which the Church was formed and became definitively the immaculate spouse of the lamb of God, Who has liberated the world from sin [cf. Jn 19:31-37].

[2] The Evangelist has used a significant verb here, according to Augustine: he does not write 'struck', or 'wounded' His side, or something similar. He said: the soldier **opened** the side of Christ, was if it were the door of life, from which flowed the Sacraments of the Church, without which one does not enter that life which is the genuine life. Always in order to pre-announce this mystery, the first woman was formed from the side of the first man who was sleeping, and she was called 'Life' and the 'Mother of the Loving'. Beyond any doubt, this was the announcement of a great good – before the great evil of prevarication. Here, the second Adam, inclined His head, and slept on the Cross, so that thus with the blood and water which flowed from His side, His **Bride** might be formed. O special death, through whom the dead re-discover life! What could be more pure than this blood? What could be more salutary than this wound...?

[3] This doctrine, marvelously synthesized by the great Bishop of Hippo then became common to the authors of the patristic period. Re-proposed in the later times ²⁶, this furnished among other supports, a foundation for the theology and the worship dedicated to the **Sacred Heart of Jesus**. With regard to this theology and this worship, in the Encyclical, **Haurietis Aquas** [1956], issued by Pope Pius XII, teaches us that in the Heart of the Savior we can both admire and meditate on the symbol and the synthesis of the Mystery of our Redemption. Adoring the most sacred Heart of Jesus, in this and through it, we adore both the uncreated love of the Divine Word, as well as His human love with all His other affections and virtues, in that both of these moved our Redeemer to immolate Himself for us and for the whole Church, His **Bride**, as is learned from Ep 5:25-27, He, Who intercedes continuously for us [cf. Heb 7:25], shows to the Father His living heart wounded by love, much more deeply than He had been, after he was already dead, by the blow of the lance of the Roman

²⁶ Cf. SC 5; LG 3

Soldier. Hence, His most sacred side was opened so that through the visible wound, we might see the ponder the invisible wound of His love.

[4] An interesting re-call of this doctrine just developed may be found also in the Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*²⁷, in which the Pope remembers and emphasizes the truth that the presbyterate is called to be the living image of Jesus Christ, head, Shepherd and Spouse of the Church, to which each one is configured in the strength of his **sacramental consecration**. Therefore, the interior virtue which animates and guides his spiritual life is **pastoral charity** infused by the Holy Spirit, the content of which is **the total gift of oneself** to the Church, in the image of Jesus Christ:

...Christ's gift of Himself to His Church, the fruit of His love is described in terms of that **unique gift of self** made by the bridegroom to the bride, as the sacred texts often suggest. Jesus is the true **Bridegroom** Who offers the Church the wine of salvation [cf. Jn 2:11]...The Church is indeed the body in which Christ the Head is present and active, but she is also the **Bride** who proceeds like a new Eve from the open side of the Redeemer on the Cross.

Hence, Christ stands 'before' the Church and 'nourishes and cherishes her' [Ep 5:29], **giving His life for her**. The priest is called to be the living image of Jesus Christ, the Spouse of the Church. Of course he will always remain a member of the community as a believer alongside his other brothers and sisters who have been called by the Spirit, but in virtue of his configuration to Christ, the Head and Shepherd, the priest stands in this **spousal relationship** with regard to the community...In his spiritual life, the priest is called to live out Christ's **spousal love** toward the Church his Bride. Therefore, the priest's life ought to radiate this **spousal character**, which demands that he be a witness to Christ's **spousal love**, and thus be capable of loving people with a heart which is new, generous and pure – with genuine self-detachment, with full, constant and faithful dedication and at the same time with a kind of 'divine jealousy' [cf. 2 Co 11:2] – and even with a kind of maternal tenderness, capable of bearing 'the pangs of birth' until 'Christ be formed' in the faithful [cf. Ga 4:19].

[5] The material assembled here is derived from a reading of the fonts conducted in research: one characteristic that stands out, in this case, is the preference given to the Commentaries on the *Canticle of Canticles*, and on the works of those mystics whose loving attitude is noted for a marked emphasis on the **Nuptial Theme**. This present reflection will unfold with some annotations on the Passion as the wealth and glory of the Church, taken from the Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles by Origen. Immediately following this, some reflection will be dedicated to a theme that serves then as a kind of axis upon which revolves the entire treatise: the excess of charity of **the Crucified Spouse**, object of contemplative reflection and loving

²⁷ Pope John Paul II, Ap. Ex., *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, March 25, 1992, # 22 c & d, *passim*.

compassion. Continuing on this line of approach, the third paragraph leads to an immersion into the meditation of a few salient points of the **Mystery of the Cross**, brought together as a comment on the oft-quoted biblical passage: ... *by His wounds ours are healed...* [cf. 1 P 2:25]. The next to last reflection is then reserved to the comparison between the Cross of the Lord Jesus and the Nuptial Bed, upon which the **Soul-Bride** wishes to repose, desirous of sharing totally in the sufferings undergone out of love by its Lord. This exposition will then draw to a close with the strong invitation to place oneself once more in the **School of the Imitation, Following of the Crucified and Risen Spouse** – **abandoning oneself docilely to the actions of the Holy Spirit**

ΩΩΩ

1. The Redemptive Passion of Jesus Christ, the Wealth and Glory of the Church: the intended Bride asks her beloved: ... *Tell me, then, sweetheart, where will you lead your flock to graze, where will you rest at noon...?* [cf. Ct 1:7]. This is the hottest part of the day, noon, and this offers Origen the point of departure to mention the **sacrificial oblation** of Himself and for the redemption of humanity offered by Jesus Christ on the Cross, as a Paschal Oblation, presented to the Almighty at the sixth hour, as the Evangelists tell us. Likewise, the allegorical reading of this statement pronounced by the Spouse: *the winter is now over, and the rains have ceased...* [cf. Ct 2:11], leads the reflective believer to see there the indication of the Paschal season: Jesus suffered when the winter had passed and the rains were over and up until that time in which the Lord suffered, there were rains on the earth.

The hinges bearing on the doctrine regarding the Passion of the Lord is discernible throughout Origen's Commentary on the *Canticle of Canticles* – and the emphasis throughout is constituted by **the Redemptive Efficacy of Jesus' Death** on the Cross, and His Resurrection [cf. Rm 4:25]. To this, there is likewise connected the theme given to the **Divine Mercy** as the sole reason for the **Kenotic Incarnation**. In this perspective, it would seem to any careful student of these texts that Origen's recourse to **Ph 2:6-8; 2 Co 8:9** must not be overlooked, even though this last text is only quoted specifically once. The culmination of this teaching is found precisely in that part dedicated to Ct 2:6: his left hand under my head and his right arm embraces me, says the Bride. However, in order to grasp the spiritual meaning of all this, beyond the corporal imagery of the words, have to go to Pr 3:13, 16, where there are found these words; ... *in her right hand is length of days; in her left hand, riches and honor...*

The Church has no other riches, nor any other glory than that received as a gift from the Word of God, when He made Himself poor, in order to enrich His Bride by means of His poverty [cf. 2 Co 8:9] – i.e., when He had healed her of her sins, by submitting Himself willingly to His Passion. Therefore, faith in the Passion of Christ

constitutes the richness and the glory of the Church, which are contained in her left hand. Origen retained that this is how one should understand the left hand of the Word of God, since He has providentially worked out both the first, as well as by means of the Incarnation. Therefore, the providential activity of the Word of God prior to the Incarnation may be called His left hand. Therefore, it is said that He has in his left hand riches and glory: in fact, with the Incarnation He sought riches and glory, i.e., the salvation of all peoples. Instead, in His right, there is length of life, indicating certainly eternity for which 'in the Beginning the Word was with God'!

Having presented this clarification, there follows now another theme of a given importance: the myrrh as the symbol of Jesus' Death. There is to be pointed out primarily that the first hint at the death of Christ is found relatively early, precisely in that point in which Origen places in relationship the phrase: *the odor of your perfumes is superior to all aromas!* [cf. Ct 1:3 a] – with the text Ex 30:22, ff., which reports the indications given in order to make that perfumed oil with which it was customary to anoint the High Priest. Among the four ingredients that compose the perfume and which make up the Incarnation of the Word, there is found also that myrrh, which was the symbol of His death, which He underwent both as Pontiff for His People, as well as Spouse for His Bride.

This same concept returns in the course of his Commentary on Ct 1:13, where the Beloved is compared to a sachet of myrrh that reposes on the breast of His Intended. In this case, too, the concept is inserted into a reflection on the Incarnation conducted in the light of Ph 2:6-8. In particular, there recurs also the combination of Mi 2:12; Ps 44:9, and Origen states that from the garments of the Word of God, which are doctrine of wisdom, there is noted the myrrh, a sign of death assumed in behalf of the human race. The drop of perfume indicates, though – as has been hinted – the servile form that He has deigned to assume, after having been emptied of the external form of God.

Finally, having made Himself flesh, He accepted the despoilment inherent in the Incarnation and the condition of Servant which is derived from this, having been moved uniquely by His **Divine Mercy**. The Word of God, after having exuded the perfume of His Name on earth, diffuses now the fragrance of His perfumes into souls whom He draws after himself and whom He receives lovingly. Now, to breathe in these perfumes is the equivalent of knowing the motive of His coming, the cause of His redemption and of His Passion, His love, moved by all this for the salvation of all. Immortal, He assumed death even on the Cross.

2. The Excess of Charity of the Crucified Spouse: the argument to be exposed in this paragraph has as its basis and recurring motif the vivid memory of the oblative love of the Son of God made man: the sacrifice of life offered by Him on the Cross constitutes in fact the decisive act, through which He gave His life for the Church,

made it come forth as His **Bride** [indicating choice] and His **Body** [indicating union with the Head]. The response given to the Bride who wishes to repose between the arms of her Beloved puts together both contemplation and compassion, to which a heart in love has no other real choice, other than abandoning itself.

The testimonies that will be proposed in this reflection that follows transmit the voice of the **Church-Bride** which resounds through, and in the voices of so many individuals who have had the joy and the grace to experiment, and to narrate to others, the marvelous event on the spousal union with the Crucified Spouse, the Lord of Glory. But, before giving space to these voices, let us listen to the voice of the Liturgy. The Syro-Oriental tradition offers some expressions that are truly lyrical: 'Let us adore, o Lord, Your Holy Cross: by it, Salvation has come to the humanity, through it the Church has been ransomed and engaged to the Heavenly Spouse.' – 'O Heavenly Spouse, as the dowry and wedding gift You have poured out Your Precious Blood for Your Church!'

a. **Philo of Carpasia:** the doctrine on the birth of the Church from the Pierced Side of the Crucified Jesus returns many times in the course of the Commentary on the Canticle of canticles, written by Philo, Bishop of Carpasia in Cyprus, who lived between the end of the 4th, and the beginning of the 5th centuries.

The whole work is constructed, in a certain sense, on this one motif. Even though at first glance this work does indeed appear quite modest, keeping in mind also the lack of genuine originality of the interpretations constructed according to the use of the allegorical method - yet, after any attentive reading of the work, it just has to be appreciated. This is so above all because of its sincere, moving and constant attention to Jesus Christ, Whose presence is so alive and diffused as to be discovered behind every image and word of the *Canticle*. The Spouse, therefore, is Jesus Christ and the Bride is the Church: this application, had by this time. Become 'traditional' for the most part, dominates the entire Commentary and is quite effectively developed in a spiritual key, with recourse to the OT considered as a Prophecy and preparation for the NT. There are, therefore, frequent and incisive contacts presented between the personalities and the citations belonging to both Testaments. This is a clear indication of a knowledge of the biblical text that is both profound and efficacious, in the use that the author has made of these.

The Passion of Jesus Christ that culminated in His death suffered on the Cross enters into the scene already in the first insights presented in the Commentary, precisely in the context of the reflections which accompany the ardent request formulated by the Bride: *kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!* [cf. Ct 1:2]. There is brought out repeatedly the necessity of explaining in a spiritual key the deeper meaning of these 'kisses' – in fact, this ardent request is aroused in the Bride, the Church, through the Holy Spirit, Who nourishes in her the desire to enjoy the love of

the Lord with which he chose her. Philo constructs his own insights around the theme of Spiritual Marriage between Jesus Christ and His Church. These Nuptials, for him, had their beginning precisely on the Cross, when the Church was formed from the wounded Side of Jesus Christ, opened by the lance. Thereafter the Church was incorporated and united to Him with an indissoluble bond.

Given this interpretation, it is all the more logical that the bread and water which came out of the side of Jesus Christ are interpreted in a redemptive and sacramental key. Precisely, the Blood refers to the redemptive power inherent in the death, and the water becomes the figure of Baptism which is presented as the Bath of Purification and Regeneration and that, among other insights, it is thought of also as the Nuptial sacrament, in so far as it gives beginning to Spiritual Marriage, and therefore, to that loving union between the believer and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In detail, by combining together the Creation account of Man and Woman with Ep 5:25, 31-32, and the mention of the Pierced Side which is found in Jn 19:31-37, the author says: Since water and blood flowed from the side of Jesus Christ in death, if it were not for the fact that he was accomplishing this great and wondrous mystery, in the sense that, while Adam slept, God took one of his ribs and formed a wife for him – in similar manner, in taking water and blood from the side of Christ, Who had died for us all, with these He re-built up for Himself His Church, With the water that flowed from His flesh, she was purified and adorned for Him. With the blood that flowed from His side she was redeemed and joined to Him. And then it was with the Spirit that she was able to be perfectly united to His divinity.

It becomes clear, then, that the *kisses* ardently sought by the Church are identified with this Nuptial and loving Bond through which Jesus Christ unites her to Himself forever. On this path that is traced out with recourse to Nuptial Typology, the author inserts also a reference to the **Eucharist**. This reference is quite opportune: this allows therefore, the attentive reader to comprehend the Gift of Self which Jesus Christ makes to His Church during the Eucharistic celebration – compared to a Nuptial Banquet - as a consequence and as a seal of that spousal union that makes of the two one sole and inviolable flesh. However, this reference to the Eucharist is all the more interesting in that it brings to the fore a certain hint, even fleeting but most insightful, to the exchange of nuptial gifts between Jesus Christ and the Church which accompanies the event of the incarnation.

Philo writes that the Son of God assumed from the Church all that humanity, from which he was vested, and gave to her in His turn, His own Sacred Flesh, so that she might continue to receive Him in His Communion. In fact, He says: take and eat: this is indeed My Body –and again, take and drink: this indeed is My Blood! And thus it happens that they become two in one flesh that is incorruptible, in His

indescribable unity, in indissoluble charity, in incomprehensible glory, in an indivisible unity. This, then, is love – this is the kiss of Christ.

It should further be noted that this entire argument is inserted with an **eschatological** atmosphere and perspective: it could not be otherwise from the moment that the NT, also as the spiritual experience lived day by day, makes one understand ever more clearly that our fatherland is in heaven, the Apostle Paul teaches us [cf. Ph 3:20]. The Church, therefore, is invited to live keeping her face fixed on the day of the Parousia:

Jesus Christ vested you in heaven, and you are re-vested of Him in your soul, even it seems that you are still on earth. However, the Spouse will receive you fully in heaven, when He will come to give you the Resurrection and to reinvigorate all the sleeping members; then you will be conducted to the heavenly nuptial chambers with the Divine Son, your Spouse and with the Omnipotent Father Himself you will enjoy forever the ineffable banquets. Then, when the spiritual nuptials, there will be condemned all the unruly desires of the flesh: then there will be opened the eternal banquets to unbreakable bonds, i.e, for all your members. They will be blessed because those who will conserve without stain the vesture of these nuptials, which is Baptism: these beyond any doubt with the Spouse and the Bride in the sight of the Omnipotent Father will taste those ineffable and eternal delights.

As was noted at the beginning, the doctrine on the birth of the Church from the Pierced Side of the Crucified Jesus exposed above, returns then frequently in the course of this Commentary. Even if the considerations made from time to time do not present any novelty or original developments, with regard to what has already been noted, nonetheless, from time to time, three are nuances and emphases that contain a certain interest, which should not be over looked. There is, for example a verse in which the Bride compares the Beloved to a sachet of myrrh [cf. Ct 1:13], the Bishop of Carpasia re-reads this as a reference back to the water and blood that flowed from the side of the Crucified Christ and has the Bride say, among other things: with the water and the blood which distilled from His side, He became for me my Spouse - and I, His Bride: with the Blood that flowed from his side, through which she was redeemed and rendered similar to Him – with the water through which, flowing forth from his flesh, I was baptized and purified for Him – with the Spirit, then, through which I was completely united to His divinity.

Another passage using Ct 3:11 finds the poet inviting the Daughters of Sion to go forth and to admire King Solomon who had put on the crown with which his mother had crowned him on his wedding day. With the customary recourse to the allegorical method, Philo sees in King Solomon, the Prince of Peace, the Lord Jesus Christ Who had been crowned with thorns by the Synagogue during the days of His Passion. These are the days of His **Espousals**: then in fact, He espoused the holy

Church, when He hung from the Cross as the Prophet Hoseah put it: *and I will espouse you to Myself in fidelity and you will come to know the Lord!*

In a third place, in praising the beauty with which the Spouse is adorned, the woman stops to describe minutely its embellishments [cf. Ct 5:10-16]. The phrase: ... *His hands are golden, rounded, set with jewels of Tarshish...* [cf. v. 14] makes one think of Jesus extended on the Cross, and with His hands pierced with nails. The arms of the Crucified Lord are the wings under which the Church finds her refuge and protection: now the divine scripture clearly and most openly indicates the position of the nails of the Cross of the Lord: when the Lord extended His hands on the Cross, then they became exposed set for the nails; with gold, then, because they were sinless; furthermore, the expression full of jewels of Tarshish manifests prophetically the conversion of the Gentiles; in fact, Tarshish really means 'conversion.' Thus, therefore, Jesus by extending His hands on the Cross, this Holy Church coming from the Gentiles, is converted to the spouse, saying: I will hope in the protection of your wings – and again: In the shadow of Your wings, protect Me!

Lastly, with an intuition that is truly remarkable, Philo takes his inspiration from one of the final comments that the author of this lyrical Nuptials places on the mouth of the Bride [cf. Ct 8:1], in order to invite the Church to contemplating the fact that she has *kissed* her Spouse, through the Cross, thus receiving as a gift, the purification of one's sins: since outside of Jerusalem, they crucified the Lord and through the Cross the Church kissed the One Whom she saw crucified outside, in order to be liberated from sin, says: Meeting you outside, I will kiss you, and surely you will not reject me. O what a wonder! It is as though He had said: since I give you the kiss of the spiritual mystery, which is without fault and clean of all vice of material stain, I will appear for this reason even more wondrously to all the saints!

b. Nilo of Ancyra: after having mentioned, in connection with Ct 1:5 – *I am black, but lovely...!* - the Nuptial Bath of Baptism, which purifies one from every fault and prepares one for the Spiritual Nuptials with Jesus Christ – this is the rite that was celebrated during the Paschal Vigil. Nilo profited in particular by the blackness contained in Ct 1:6, to go on then to speak about the Passion and the Death of the Lord Jesus. DO not notice that I am black, since the sun has tanned me – says the protagonist in Canticles: now it is the Church redeemed by Jesus Christ Who addresses Himself to the daughters of the synagogue, and she humbles herself for having denied Him and put Him to death. Thus, comparing death on the Cross to the setting of the sun, which leaves space for the darkness of the evening. From this, Nilo observes: towards mid-day, having been nailed to the Cross, after having been rejected by the ungrateful Synagogue, the Spouse inclined His head, and through this movement He turned away from one and directed His eyes toward the other, the Church.

The 'other' – i.e., the other Bride - is the Church of the Nations, the first-fruits of which was the Good Thief who was repentant, and came to believe in Jesus Christ: therefore, his soul becomes the cushion upon which Jesus reclined His head in order to find rest during the sleep of His death. At this point, the Monk of Ancyra, with his analysis finalized to reach that hidden treasure which is the Spirit in the biblical text, exhorts the reader to remain solid in the faith and in love for the Crucified Christ - scandal for the Jews and stupidity for the pagan [cf. 1 Co 1:23]. He encourages each to hold close to Him, the Spouse, to imitate in this the Bride of the Canticles, who attributes to her Beloved the perfumed odor proceeding from the nard and immediately afterwards compares Him to a sachet of myrrh reposing on her breast [cf. Ct 1:12-13]. The nard symbolizes the miracles and the benefits achieved by Jesus, and the myrrh refers back to the Passion and the infamy of the Cross, the events in which He concentrated in His own Body, as though within a small sack, the inactive power of His divinity. Having suggested this interpretation, Nilo immediately points out that while it is easy to believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ by pausing to consider His many miracles and benefits – and this is the type of common faith – it is rather very difficult to believe in Him in His unfolding Passion: this is a reality for the few, perhaps only for the perfect soul.

Only such a person indeed is able to comprehend and to digest that which is hidden in the event of the Cross: the Divinity of the Word, Which then comes manifest in the event of the resurrection. With a difference from the incredulous Jews and even from the Apostles who had doubted because of the disorientation into which the scandal of the Cross had made them fall, the perfect soul remains solid in the faith concerning the Divinity of the Crucified Christ. This happens both because such a person is capable of seeing beyond those sorrowful events which instead had so upset all others, who had retained Jesus to be a mere man. And this her contemplative capacity brings such a person to reach forward without any hesitation toward the glory of the resurrection.

Insisting in his polemic against the heretics and above all against the Arians, Nilo repeatedly refers back to the genuine Spouse of Christ who alone knows how to grasp exactly the truth which pertains to Him, she knows how to distinguish with perception and balance, according to the faith, between the divine dignity attested to by His miracles and His human weakness, attested to particularly in His sufferings. Without confusing these, but also with contrasting the one against the other, as happens on the other hand to anyone who erroneously thinks that the second eliminates the first. This her understanding places in relief still more the exalted beauty of the Spouse together with the purity and simplicity of any one of His glances: How beautiful you are, My friend, you beautiful! Your eyes are like doves! [cf. Ct 1:15]. Nilo concludes these considerations as follows: only the perfect soul is able to comprehend spiritually the events without judging anything of what had

happened on the basis of a common evaluation: she has known how to conserve in this regard to each one of these two moments, without falsifying its implications, her primary conviction remains that Jesus is indeed God: she was able to contrast on the plate of the scales of incredulity the Deposit of faith, and had not permitted that there be any wavering back and forth between the two, but having weighed with all its weight the plate on the part of a right judgment. This firmly impeded the certainty of her will to remain suspended in an equivocal discernment.

The real Bride has known how to believe ahead of time and immediately, looking upon her Crucified Lord, to that which would have been manifested later in the Hour of the Resurrection. She knew how to believe in that bunch of grapes nailed to the Cross, from which once it was crushed, it would then pour forth the precious Wine, i.e., that fertile Blood and this would moisten the barren soil of hearts, the world so needy of salvation. She was able to contemplate with a prophetic gaze the Wine that would flow from the vineyard in flower – and render witness through her faith to the One who had been nailed on the Cross, confessing His divinity which comes from on high. She had imagined in the Passion, His impassability, and in death, the Resurrection. For all these reasons the perfect soul has both the right and the joy to be introduced into His Wine Cellar [cf. Ct 2:4]. And if the Precious Wine represents the Word, the Wine Cellar represents the Father, given that the Word dwells in a stable manner within Him.

Keeping in mind this argumentation that Nilo has developed thus far, it might be clearly understood that when he set himself to comment on Ct 3:11, which reflects on the Wedding day of King Solomon, one can by now affirm with some foundation that Jesus Christ has celebrated His Nuptials with the Church precisely on the day in which He underwent death on the wood of the Cross, and this for Him, had been a day of immense joy: the day of Christ's Wedding, a day of joy for His heart, had been His day on the cross, when He took his Bride to Himself, the Church of the Nations, who had been given to him a long time before as He intended, through the efforts of the Prophets.

c. **Machtilde of Magdeburg:** all those who want to grasp her writings have to read them nine times! This challenge is placed by this mystic in the opening lines of her book, *The Light flowing from the Divinity*, and lead to the understanding, from the very outset, that this writing requires, in order for it to be assimilated, a repeated frequency. Among the paths followed by this eminent representative of **Mystical Nuptials**, one that is designed by, and with the metaphor of the **Wound of Love**, which enkindles always the Heart of God and that of His Only-begotten Son.

Her path begins with the journey of the soul, which struck so profoundly by love so badly that it cannot be healed, and one arrives quite quickly at the point of receiving all from God. He receives any such person in his Divine Heart which burns

with eternal and immutable love for her, and thus, the two embrace one another in love. And while this intimate and ecstatic union is being enjoyed, the soul perceives how it is so that God is sick in His love for such souls, as He has always been, since He in His desire, does not increase, nor diminish. This perception – which of itself is already the fruition of such love - is expressed and modulated with a variety of accents and a richness of such metaphors as to lead to the clear intuition that loving union with God, experienced by Mechtilde, had reached indeed sublime levels. One such exemplary passage among many would be this one: O God, You pour Yourself out in Your gift! O God, Who flows forth in Your love! O God, You burn in the yearning of love! O God, You fuse union with Your beloved! O God, You repose on my breast! Without You, I can no longer exist!

While she is quite conscious of being the object of the loving desires of God, the beloved Bride, there runs through the pages of her work the certainty of being at one and the same time both the **Bride of the Trinity** and the **Bride of the Second Person of the Trinity**. For her, the moment in which the Redeemer became a Spouse coincides with His Incarnation, which took place in the flower of the Chosen Handmaid, the Virgin Mary. Admiring then this extraordinary event and after having described the loving experience with which she had been given to Him as His bride, there is the realization that this event is then read backward to the very beginning of all creation, because this was already motivated by His love: And just where did our redeemer become a Spouse? In the jubilation of the Most Blessed trinity: since God could no longer remain close within Himself, He created the soul and gave Himself to her with great love.

This same idea returns further on, enshrined in the unfolding of the dialogue between the three Divine Persons, which – in the ‘vision’ of Mechtilde, and she recurs often to the literary genre of ‘dialogue’ - proceeds and motivates the creation of the angels and humanity. To the Son, Who invites the formation of humanity similar to Himself and who promises to love all eternally, even if he can foresee great suffering, the Father responds affirmatively, declaring: I wish to create for Myself a Bride who will greet Me with her mouth and will wound Me with her look. Then indeed there will be love! The Holy Spirit then said to the Father: Yes, dear Father, the Bride I will bring You in the Bridal Chamber!

The Heart of Jesus the savior bears from always this wound provoked by his love for the human race. There is no wonder then that this wound – made fully visible in the course of His passion – would remain impressed in his glorified Body even after the resurrection. And even more, this will be so even through the day of Judgment, i.e., up through that moment when the redemption of the human race will be brought to its term. Then, and only then, the Sweet Wounds will be healed, and will be seen in joy, and even of a lovable color, those sweet scars of love which will never

disappear. Conquered by the certainty that the Lord Jesus did His all to reveal and to communicate His infinite love to human beings, Machtilde never tired in praising Him and thanking Him. Thus, in the web of praises that the two lovers exchanged with one another, there is found a declaration placed on the lips of the soul, which strikes the reader even now with its lucid and incisive style which summarizes better all that Mechtilde succeeds in expressing with the metaphor of **sickness** provoked by love: O Lord, You are always love-sick for me, and You have shown this clearly with Yourself, You have written me in your Book of the Divinity, You have depicted me in Your pure humanity, You have grafted me into the holy Wound of Your heart in order not to forget me, and in Your hands, in order to distribute graces to me, and in Your feet, in order not to separate yourself ever from me. Come now, Most Beloved, permit me to anoint You!

Expressions such as these, that are so vibrant and alive, plunge their roots into a loving union fed incessantly by contemplative and fervent prayer, to which – according to Mechtilde – it is necessary to dedicate at least one hour a day. It is during prayer, in fact, that there is received the visit from the eternal God, the Lord Jesus, Who wishes to enter into the narrow nuptial bed of a soul rejoicing in love. Because He is so profoundly wounded by His love for having for more than 30 years renounced all that was the most pleasing to Him, in order then to embrace His Chosen One, and to hold her in his bare arms. In this, the Lord Jesus has realized what He had desired from all eternity. Mechtilde would listen to this with indescribable joy to the words with which her Beloved makes known to her all of His ardent, eternal and loving desire, that she might understand and discover one more time that it had been Him to infuse within her the desire to love Him, Whose depths she had not known and now He does not want her to resist. He tells her: I have desired you before the world began. I desire you and you desire Me. When two ardent desires met, then there is perfect love.

d. Blessed Henry Suso, OP: [1295-1366], declared 'Blessed' by the Church, is considered as the greatest mystic of the Passion of the Lord in the Medieval German scene. He wrote a *Booklet on Eternal Wisdom*, in which he develops with truly lofty tones inspired of the language of courtesans, on the loving imitation of the Crucified Jesus. Through an impassioned and moving dialogue between himself, the servant, and the Eternal Wisdom identified prevalently with Jesus the Incarnate and Crucified Word, it gradually takes on the form of a loving relationship with clearly spousal overtones. The servant feels that he is being called and committed to favor and further in everything and for everything, the will of his Lord, which is supremely challenging him to the loving imitation of His life and His Passion, so rich in love. In fact, to the servant who yearns to experience this unfathomable love and to find peace in Him, Jesus indicates His master way to follow: If, then you wish to contemplate Me in My uncreated divinity, you must learn to

know Me and to love Me in My suffering humanity, since this is the most rapid pathway towards eternal beatitude. My unfathomable love is shown in the great bitterness of My Passion, as the sun is shown in its splendor, so the beautiful rose in its perfume, and the powerful fire in its ardent heat. Listen, then, devoutly, with how much love I have suffered for you.

From this fervent contemplation of the Passion of His tender Lord, which is translated then in the active participation in His sufferings, the beloved learns to bear these with firmness, and His martyrdom accepted with the love of a tender maternal heart. Only thus does one arrive at knowing Him gradually, together with His unfathomable love, as well as His ineffable Mercy, His clear divinity, His accepting humanity, fraternal fidelity and spousal tenderness. From maternal sentiment the treatise passes, without any bond of continuity, to what of a spousal tenderness: the passage is completed in the moment in which Blessed Suso laments over the unhappiness caused by the separation from his beloved Lord, caused in him by sin. Alas, poor spouse, who happy I was near to my Spouse, and I never realized it! The response given by the Eternal Wisdom assumes the lucid and moving tone of a meditation on the infinite Mercy and Tenderness shown by the Son of God through His redemptive Incarnation: presenting Him with the sweet names of Bother and Spouse, He turns toward His afflicted and contrite servant to say to him: Wash yourself in My blood full of love, the color of the roses, lift up your head, open your eyes, and have courage! Take upon yourself the pledge of total reconciliation the wedding ring and put it on your finger, put on your first garments, shows for your feet, and the lovable name: be called by Bride and be that in reality!

In this invitation, there is described the gift of the Wedding Agreement sanctioned by the Lord Jesus with His Passion: the disciple is now conquered by this supreme and irrefutable proof of love, which, washing from every fault and overcoming all reticence, creates the availability for the **full and free gift of self** in order to receive in one's own heart, and to bear impressed on one's own memory the signs of the Passion, which are signs of love. Therefore, there breaks forth totally on its own, an ardent confession: O Lord, one hour without you is like a whole year, a day far from you is like a thousand years for a heart which loves ... Oh You, splendid vision of all the saints, how happy is anyone who is worthy to unite himself to you in a sweet espousals!

This contemplative meditation reaches its culmination in the 6th Chapter, when the servant and the Eternal Wisdom declare their mutual love: and there are truly sublime pages on the love and the beauty of the so loved Lord.! Two brief citations will assist in experiencing the level of this spiritual message. The better one knows You, the more will he love You; the more one becomes intimate with You the more lovable does he discover You to be! Overcome with emotion, the servants of all ages

will come to express themselves after this mystical experience. And the Lord responds to him with a promise: All that you might experience in time from My sweet love, compared with the love of all eternity, is like a drop of water in comparison to the wide sea!

Among all arguments taken up in the following chapters, there is one that particularly draws one's attention: it is that which brings out the importance of the meditation on the Passion suffered by the Lord. After having brought out the value of temporal suffering, which consists essentially in rendering the believer similar to the Crucified Jesus, and in bringing him to enter into constant amiability with Him, the author teaches that assiduous contemplation on the lovable passion, makes of a simple man an eminent master, one who is wise and wealthy in knowledge. Such contemplation generates compassion, which in its turn generates conformity to Jesus Christ. A conformity which implies the participation in the abandonment suffered by Jesus on the Cross, and therefore, the availability to do in everything and for all the will of God. As such, this availability receives an adequate support from the filial entrustment to the most holy Virgin, the Queen of Heaven, and the Mediatrix, and from the impassioned meditation on the sufferings that she has suffered. And this instruction draws to a close with an invitation addressed by the Lord Jesus: You see, your cross is assimilated into my wretched Cross and nobly is completed in it. You **ought to close yourself lovingly within My open side, in My Heart wounded out of love, and to seek your dwelling and repose there**: thus, I wish to purify you with living water and embellish you with the rose, with my blood the color of roses. I wish to bind Myself to you and to unite you to Myself forever! These are indeed sublime words, comparable to a band of light projected on the Mystical Nuptials which are celebrated on the Cross!

e. **St. John of the Cross:** [1542-1591]; in order to draw to a conclusion the reflections of this section, there is no better way than to take up the teaching of the outstanding Spanish Mystic and Doctor of the Church. In this connection, among the highlights of his teaching, in his ***Spiritual Canticle***, particularly Strophes 22-23.

The first of these two reads thus: when the Bride had entered into the pleasant closed garden, she reposed at her leisure, her head inclined on the sweet arms of her Beloved. The reasoning here is concentrated on the spiritual marriage between the soul and the Son of God, her spouse who, according to the authoritative master, is the state of life consequent to spiritual engagement. It implies the total transformation into the Beloved, the mutual possession and the loving union into one sole spirit and finally, into the divinization of the soul. Immediately afterwards there follows the note in Strophe 23, where it is read in the sublime state of Spiritual Marriage, the Divine Spouse confides to His faithful Bride His secrets and renders her a sharer in His works. Especially, is there unveiled the sweet mysteries of His

Incarnation and the paths of human redemption, which is among the most sublime works of God and therefore, the most delectable for the soul. There is thus prepared the explanation of Strophe 23, immersed in the Mystery of the Cross. Like an apple under the branches, you have been placed there by me, there to place your hand, and there healed where your Mother was violated.

The apple is the figure of the Wood of the Cross: now, it is with His death on the Cross that the Son of God has redeemed human nature, therefore espousing it and consequently, with every soul to which on the Cross He gives the grace and pledges for such a purpose. And a bit further on, the great Mystic clarifies his thought a bit more: the **espousals made on the Cross** is not that of which we are now speaking, since that has been accomplished once and for all and in it God has given to the soul the first grace, which is granted to each and everyone in Baptism. The present then unfolds along the path of perfection and is verified gradually according to its various degrees.

From this clarification there is concluded that the Mystery of the Cross, in its redemptive power, is placed certainly as the foundation of every grace of Spousal Union which binds the Son of God to the members of the Church, His Body and His Bride. To see all the more clearly, the doctrine here exposed contains an explanation that is quite instructive. Among the two marriage actions- that of a general character, and that more particular - there is a fundamental continuity, but also a difference. The difference is here: that sublime grace which spiritual marriage is, is realized only gradually, in conformity to the process and the progress of the soul in that **exclusive and oblation love** for the Beloved, which is the essence of perfection.

3. By His Wounds ours are healed! [cf. 1 P 2:25]: through the Gift of life, the Son of God has rendered visible and enjoyable, in all its fullness and efficacy, His love for humanity whom He has wished to take as His Bride. The symbols are manifold present in the *Canticle of Canticles* which offer the inspiration to shed light on the soteriological value of Jesus' death on the Cross: the Name of the Spouse is compared a sweet smelling perfume [cf. Ct 1:12]; the sachet of myrrh, the cluster of henna flowers, taken as the image of the Spouse [cf. Ct 1:13-14]; the clefts in the rock into which the Bride is invited to take refuge [cf. Ct 2:13-14] – which make one contemplate the **Savior's Wounds**.

a. The Perfumed Ointment flowing from the Savior's Cross

- **Hyppolitus:** the first witness relative to this theme is contained in this author's Commentary on the *Canticle of Canticles*. One of the salient motives which guide the interpretation of Hyppolitus – who owed very much to the allegorical model - is the comparison made between Jesus Christ and the perfumed ointment which is a symbol that recurs often in *Canticles*, beginning with the opening phrase: *Your Name*

is as an oil poured out... [cf. Ct 1:3]. With even more precision, it needs to be kept in mind that Hyppolitus pays great attention to the allegorical function assigned to the jar in which the perfume is contained. There are two applications which merit greater attention.

The **first** is the following: how the jar full of sweet-smelling oil diffuses its aroma all around itself when it is opened up, so the world was able to enjoy the aroma of which the Word was full, Who stood in the heart of the Father, only after He had sent His most Beloved Son into this world. Then, when the jar of joy was opened, i.e., the mouth of the Father, the One Word came forth from Him, departing from Him, He descended by means of the Holy Spirit and filled the entire universe with His perfume.

The **second** application is joined to the phrase: *My nard yields its perfume!* [cf. Ct 1:12]. By reason of the body that He assumed., moved by charity, Jesus Christ Himself is compared to the jar containing the perfumed oil. However, this vase was destined to be broken, precisely to be tread under foot and crushed as is down with grapes. On this base, connecting between themselves the two symbolic elements of the vase full of perfume and of grapes ready for the harvest, Hyppolitus succeeds in putting together a sublime suggestive reflection on the death on the Cross suffered by Jesus Christ and its redemptive efficacy.

In fact, in illustrating immediately afterwards the phrase pronounced by the woman: *My love is a cluster of henna flowers among the vines in En-Gedi.* [cf. Ct 1:14] – brings to mind that in En-Gedi, in order to support and hold up the vines, the practice was to support them on the trees from which there would be extracted a perfumed balsam. This premise furnished him with the logical basis to compose the following text: When the text reads: My love is among the vines of En-Gedi, he teaches us this: saying 'My Beloved is in the vineyard of En-Gedi, He teaches us this: the One Who suffered on the wood was powerful, and being pierced in His side while He was still on the wood, He emitted an aroma like that of balsam; as the Word became diffused from His mouth, so the Christ effused His aroma. Consider however, my dear ones, that He will not effuse His aroma until the fruit will be on the wood, bound to the vine and until that time they will not be pressed. But in that instant in which He is cut with the lance, immediately, He lets forth a tear; in fact, Christ wept also over His People, since He did not have the power to diffuse the aroma over them and to come to their aid in a manifest manner. In fact, He was wounded while He was attached to the wood that was found in the vineyard, so that He might be able to manifest to us the good odor of the ointment...

Thus, through the Incarnation that He brought to the point of making Himself small, poor and humble for us, even to the point of dying on the Cross, the Wood has given and has diffused with abundance over human beings the good aroma of the

ointment, in order to draw the definitively from earth to heaven. And the aroma diffused about by him became identified by Hyppolitus both with His divine power, as well as with His evangelizing Word. Therefore, as the honey is to be preferred to all the other trees of the forest because it is the more perfumed - this is the reason for which the Intended Bride calls Him her Beloved [cf. Ct 2:3] – at the same time, Christ ought to be listened to and received as the greatest Prophet of all the other prophets. Being attached to the wood of the Cross He diffused the aroma as does honey.

- **Gregory of Elvira**: his most suggestive reflections are found in his Third Book of his Commentary on the *Canticles*, in the margin of the verse *my nard yields its perfume* [cf. Ct 1:12]. After having recalled that nard is an oil mixed in with wood, and that it has therapeutic effects and emanates a fragrant odor, Gregory proceeds in these terms: the nard designates the grace of chrism obtained by the power of the Cross, through which the Lord places at the disposal of believers the good odor of His conscience, according to what the Apostle says: We are the good odor of Jesus Christ; and therefore, my nard, i.e., the gift of chrism made up with the Passion of the Cross, there has been effused upon us His perfume.

In order to understand to what the grace of the chrism refers to that is mentioned here, it is necessary to return to his preceding books, and above all, to the first one, where he speaks precisely of the Messianic anointing that Jesus received from the Holy Spirit.. this anointing surpasses by far, in quality, all the anointing practiced under the regime of the old Covenant. In fact, the ‘synagogue’ – as Gregory expresses himself here – possessed an anointing deriving from the sweet-smelling ointments, while the anointing of Jesus Christ proceeds from the sweetness and from the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and is the only perfect one. Moreover, only the grace of the Name of the One Who is the true Christ, from Whom there flows the perfume of His knowledge, there has been diffused on all the believers and over the entire world, as there is noted above from 2 Co 2:14-15: ... *their minds were closed... the same veil remains over their minds regarding the reading of the OT...*

Within this horizon, he finds space also for the explanation proposed by another symbol of aroma, that of the cluster of henna flowers in the vineyards of En-Gedi [cf. Ct 1:14]. Gregory sees in this geographical locality the support to confess, on the basis of Mt 4:15- 17 [...*land of Zebulun! Land of Naphtali... the people that lived in darkness has seen a great light...!*] - the universality of salvation brought to bear by Jesus Christ. He, then, is identified with the cluster of flowers of henna for two reasons: because He contains in Himself man believers in the image of the cluster which is formed of many grains – and then also because once He is crushed on the venerable wood of the Cross, He would have shed His Blood through the harvest

of the Passion not only for the Jews, but also for all peoples and for the nations that would ever come to believe in Him.

From this point on throughout the rest of the third book, there are found different references to the various aspects of Christ's Passion. For example, the passage of Ct 1:16-17 [... *How beautiful you are, My love... the beams of our house are cedar trees..*] – this offers in the first place, the inspiration to contrast the beauty to the glory achieved with the resurrection, and the humiliation and the dishonor suffered with death on the Cross. Instead, the shadowed bed becomes the symbol of the sepulcher where the Lord lied sleeping from the sleep of the Passion, and covered over by the shadow of death. A little further on, we read that the shade projected by the apple tree under which the Bride sought refuge [cf. Ct 2:3] recalls the Passion. And by association of images, the tasty fruit produced by the tree figure the hope of the resurrection from the dead founded on the resurrection of the Lord. Finally, the wine-cellar mentioned in Ct 2:4 refers back to the sacrament, or to the mystery of the Passion, which according to the liturgical language of the time, comes to mean the Eucharistic banquet.

- **St. Ambrose of Milan**: how instructive, too, is that explanation worked out by the great Bishop of Milan. Even though he did not compose a true and proper on the *Conticles*, he made broad use of this Nuptial Song throughout his works, and especially in his *Concerning Isaac*, and his *Exposition on Ps 118* - and his *Concerning Virginity*. At the center of all that he taught on the good perfume of the redemption shed by the Crucified Lord there is found faith in the Mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation, clarified and explained also for the purpose of refuting different heresies that had been diffused by the Arians and the Apollinarists. On the basis of the faith one ought to proclaim that the Christ is the Only Begotten son of God, who, having assumed a body and a rational soul, had become true and perfect man in order to save all men and women. And He had done all those inspired solely by love: therefore, St. Ambrose admonishes, if in proclaiming the Passion you do not come to recognize Him Who was suffering, you turn your back on the goodness of the Lord and compromise your salvation. And further ahead, he adds: that which the flesh of the word suffered, or the Word of God, while dwelling in the flesh – it is written, in fact, that Christ suffered in the flesh – certainly this referred to Himself in relationship with the assumption of the body, in order to take upon Himself all our human properties and to re-vest them with His own properties. Precisely, therefore, the flesh suffered according to its nature - but, because of the Passion of the Body the nature of the Word was not changed. As our own resurrection is genuine, so, to, the authentic Passion of Christ is proclaimed in the world.

Hence, the Lord had assumed a body of suffering and He overcome the infirmity of human flesh with the Passion, Death and with his Resurrection – and thus is looked upon as the author of salvation. Consequently, the Cross, too, is accepted as the redemption of the world, and not as the penalty for a crime. In re-thinking on the Passion of the Savior, St. Ambrose underlines among other aspects that it is with the gift of life made on the Cross that the Christ has united to Himself forever human nature, and humanity redeemed by His Blood, sealing thus the Nuptial Pact established with the Incarnation: The Lord Jesus in fact, assuming a body, bound himself with chains of love and not only to our members, and to the sufferings of nature, but even joined Himself to the Cross. And therefore, as a cluster, He reposes in the faith of the Church and in the beauty of a life without stain.

Successively, the words pronounced by the Bride and related in Ct 1:14: the nard of Cyprus is my cousin in the vineyards of En-Gedi – come to suggest that application to the Passion of the Lord which seems to me to be the most significant. St. Ambrose observes that in the vineyards there is a tree which, when it is cut, emits a very sweet-smelling odor. Now, Jesus pierced exuded that perfume of the remission of sins and of redemption. This is the perfumed ointment that comes forth from the innards of His Mercy.

The same application is recalled by the phrase which is found in Ct 2:1, f.: I am a flower of the field and a lily of the valleys, as a lily among the thorns. Christ is compared to a flower of humility: as the flower, even if neglected and trampled underfoot, does not lose its perfume: thus, too, the Lord Jesus on the crucible of the Cross, trampled down, did not surrender. Latched to the Cross, He did not lose Himself, and founded by that piercing of the lance, re-flourished more attractive due to the sacred odor of the blood poured out, himself safe from death and pouring forth on the dead His gift of eternal life.

Furthermore, the passage in which the Bride compares her beloved to an apple tree which produces beautiful and tasty fruits [cf. Ct 2:3], offers to Ambrose the inspiration to take up anew the considerations just presented: Jesus, too, nailed to His Cross, as an apple hanging from the tree, diffused the good odor of human redemption, which overcame the sickening stench of sin and instead diffused the perfume of a drink, the source of life.

Therefore, who ever is crushed down by sin ought to turn his/her glance to Him, crucified and confide in His immense love that He nourishes for humanity. Such a soul ought to seek refuge in the Lord's Cross. His 'flesh', crucified out of love, in fact, is the cot placed in a shady place where the Bride, the Church, knows how to find repose and comfort [cf. Ct 1:16-17]: if luxury has inflamed some among us, give them refuge under the Cross of Christ, on which He remained in order to take upon Himself our sins. If sin has weakened any among us, Jesus will receive these in His

bosom and comforts them with His tender embrace. Therefore, I dare to say that the flesh of Christ is the Bridal Bed of the Church.

- **Apponius:** the first occasion to think of the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross offered to this author from the following words which the Bride addresses to her spouse:....*delicate is the fragrance of your perfume, Your Name is an oil poured out...* [cf. Ct 1:3]. This perfume is the Name of Jesus, which, introduced into a corporeal vase through the event of the Incarnation, once that this vase had been broken by the blows of the nails and the lance, the perfume was spread about everywhere, eliminating the fetid odor coming from the doctrine of the devil.

Another very significant symbol is the great cluster of grapes that the two young explorers had brought to Moses as the sign of the fertility of the Promised Land: the recourse to this episode of Exodus is suggested by Ct 1:14: *My love is a cluster of henna flowers, among the vines of En-Gedi..* And the hanging cluster offers its support to think immediately of Jesus hanging from His Cross, Who has offered Himself for the salvation of the world. However, that which is interesting in Apponius is above all the tie with the sacrament of the Eucharist: this cluster designed perfectly, in figurative manner, the humanity assumed, Christ our Redeemer, who, according to the places, times and cases, has become the nourishment and the drink of the Church through the Sacrament of His Body and His Blood.

b. Cling to Oneself the Crucified Lord: the *Sachet of Myrrh* [cf. Ct 1:13]:....*My love is a sachet of myrrh lying between my breasts..* this is surely one of the more intense symbols, full of emotion and affectivity. There are many who see in this the image of the Lord Jesus, crucified, embraced by the Bride who clings Him to herself with bonds of her ardent desire of her fervent love, accompanied by tenderness, in the certainty that He wishes to find a dwelling place and repose precisely in His heart.

One prime example, with tones of intensity, is noted in Origen's Commentary: the reference here is to the breasts, as has been noted above, to that principal faculty of the heart, thanks to which the Church holds Christ, and the soul holds the Word of God closely and bound by the bonds of her desire. In fact only one who hold tightly within his/her heart the Word of God with all affection, and all one's love, will be able to receive the perfume of His fragrance and all His sweetness.

According to Nilo of Ancyra, the words pronounced by the woman are an unequivocal attestation of her faith in the Passion of the Lord, and at the same time, of that faith in the **kenotic** aspect of His Incarnation, through which He has willingly subjected Himself – through His marvelous con-descendence - to the limitations and to the sufferings of the human condition. However, the comparison with the

Crucified Christ – in so far as it seems - finds an ample application, above all beginning with the medieval period.

The myrrh, a resin with something of a bitter taste and yet with a pleasing aroma, makes one think of the bitterness of the Passion suffered by the Lord for our salvation, as well as of the sweetness of that love with which He has loved us. For William of Saint - Thierry, for example, the Bride is invited to meditate with assiduity on the Passion, so that the faculty of the memory might be impregnated all the more by that perfume that proceeds forth from Him and which corresponds to the charity contained in the sufferings and in the death of the Lord. But, that which the Bride wears is a satchet, in that no human power could support and sustain all the weight of the Passion of the Lord: for one would be simply overwhelmed. So, this satchet is one of delights: it does not weigh one down, but lifts the one up who is wearing it. It consists in remembering piously and thinking over again sweetly on the goodness of the Lord, who has suffered, and for this reason of His suffering and the sweetness of His love. One is called to remember the sacrament of the redemption, the example of humility and the recollection of His charity and the power of His Resurrection.

To any soul who would allow himself to be invaded and possessed by that love which the Spouse nourishes for each one of us, **Bernard of Clairvaux** teaches us to acquire gradually that wisdom of heart which embraces in itself also the Wisdom of the Cross. The heart and the mind conquered by the love of Jesus Christ should not aspire to anything else, because we do not desire nor do we know how to rejoice other than in His love and in his humility. This is my most subtle and interior philosophy, that of knowing Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And so the last of the Fathers continues: I do not seek, as the Bride, where to go to provide repose during the afternoon for the One whom I embrace full of joy while He reposes on my breast. I do not search out where I might feed the lambs during the afternoon for the One Who I contemplate on the Cross as my savior. In the first case, the matter is more sublime – in the second, more sweet: the former is the bread and the latter is the milk which restores the stomach of the little ones and fills the breasts of their mothers: and therefore He will repose on my breast.

It is not by chance that **St. Bonaventure** mentions the passage of Canticles in question in the Prologue of his small work, *The Wood of Life*. The authentic adorer of God and the disciple of Christ who desires to conform himself fully to the crucified savior, ought to be committed to bear the Cross in mind and body, is what the Seraphic doctor teaches, after having cited Ga 2:19. And he clarifies that at the heart of the contemplative meditation there are found the suffering and the love of Jesus seen in their indivisible unity. However, this meditation needs to be conducted with such vivacity of memory, with such sharpness of mind, with such charity proceeding from the will, so that each would be able to repeat these words of the Bride: *My*

Love is a sachet of myrrh, lying between my breasts! This sachet of myrrh – as is read also in the Prologue – is composed of some narrative elements regarding the life, passion and the glorification of Jesus Christ drawn from the planting of the holy Gospel.

It is still from the very fertile field of the Franciscan School that we take the final testimony with which there might be concluded this aspect of the treatise. The text to which reference is being made is the Commentary on the Canticles composed **by John Olivi** [1248-1298] and published in a recent critical edition. Certainly this is not the place to examine deeply the spiritual doctrine worked out by the Franciscan Master: but, there cannot be ignored in any manner, its consistency. And for this, one may note what is read in the conclusive comments of the work. Directing himself to anyone who might have read entirely these pages, enjoying and experiencing the most divine love of the Spouse and of the Bride and the most sweet jubilation of the Canticle of Canticles which was sung at their Nuptials and in their mutual colloquies – the author asks each to remember him in their prayers! He indeed wrote this text, but before having enjoyed all – and firmly hopes to be led one day by the Spouse to the sources of the waters of life [cf. Rv 7:17; Jn 4:13].

Concerning the allegorical interpretation of the myrrh, the author takes his inspiration from the fact that it is an essence of a bitter taste and that conserves bodies from corruption. In his view, reference might be made to the purity of the Spouse and of His Passion, which eliminates all impure affection. The bride who wears of ribbon of myrrh, therefore, figures every person committed to make Christ live in the midst of her meditations and sweet affections, from which flows the milk of her most sublime purity.

c. **To take Refuge in the Healing Wounds of the Savior:** this is theme noted by St. Gaspar Bertoni in one of his early Parish sermons:

... if you wish to see me, look for me in the Wound of the Side of Christ. There I stay, and there it will be easy to find me. You will look for me in vain anywhere else..²⁸

- **Gregory of Nyssa:** St. Gregory explains the request that the Bride directs to her Beloved in order to know where He goes to pasture the flock, as the voice of the soul who wishes to be given a drink, to be nourished and guided by the Lord Jesus, making reference in a direct manner to the side of Jesus Crucified, pierced by the lance. In this circumstance, his reflection assumes the form and the style of a prayer: I will hasten to You, Who are the font, and I will drink a cupful of the divine drink, with

²⁸ Cf. St. Gaspar Bertoni, "Vita Spirituale", Domenica 'in Albis', April 5, 1807, in: *MssB*, 1323-1364; cf. also *PVC*, pp. 289, ff.; cf. also *Symposium Bertonianum – In occasione della solenne canonizzazione del Fondatore degli Stigmatini, S. Gaspare Bertoni*. Roma: 1989, p. 151.

which You offer the thirsty refreshment, pouring out that water that flows from Your wounded side: it was the iron that opened the lips of this vein. The one who drinks of that water becomes himself the font that rushes forward for eternal life. If you pasture me in these places, surely you will allow me rest in the afternoon, when, sleeping by Your side with You in peace, I will find rest in the light that has no shade...

Along these same lines another passage seems to find inspiration, found in the saint's Fourth Homily. The object of the interpretation is still another request advanced by the Bride, who wishes to be restored with apples [cf. Ct 2:5]. These represent the teachings of the Gospel which invite the believer to practice a celestial life. But, it is the Son of God Himself, once He has become man, Who has given the example of how one should conduct himself. Among the conduct suggested, there stands out that attitude borrowed from humility. According to St. Paul's Christological Hymn [cf. Ph 2:5-7], Jesus, of His own free will, wished to participate in our humility and descended on earth to give proof of this unto His own death.

He is that cluster of cyprus in the vineyards of En-Gedi [cf. Ct 1:14] – before the passion, He flowered [which means He put forth the flower], while in the Passion He poured out the Wine, and of this, the soul has become mother. He has healed the wounds of our sins by means of His bruises, He has conquered the power of the enemy with the weakness of the Cross; He has ransomed by His death those who were prisoners of it, by offering Himself to death as the ransom price; He allowed Himself to be the prey of death without every leaving life; He joined to Himself that slavery by remaining at the same time in His full royalty. And through the Cross He has extended His Lordship over the entire world. Thus, having purified and rendered the Church immaculate, He makes the soul whom He loves conform to Himself in so far as He impresses upon her the pure imprint of his arche-typical beauty.

- **Apponius:** A further reflection on the Wounds of the savior is suggested by the invitation that the Spouse addresses to His Intended with these words: *...Come, then, My Beloved, my lovely one, come! My dove, **hiding in the clefts of the Rock, in the coverts of the cliff, show Me your face...*** [cf. Ct 2:13-14]. **Apponius**, finding support in 1 Co 10:4, identifies this Rock with Jesus Christ. From here, he goes on to assign a twofold spiritual meaning to the **Clefts in the Rock**. These openings, these entrances, seem to figure, on first look, all the virtues, the examples and the works of Jesus Christ, together with the recognition of the Undivided Trinity, in which our redemption is to be found. These **clefts** are points of access through which one passes to arrive at the Father, in order to enter into the Reign of heaven, and through which there shines forth on the world the light of Jesus' divinity. In the second place, though, these openings make one think of the Wounds in His hands, feet and side, suffered by Jesus by the Roman soldiers: placed before the Stigmata of the Lord, the Church is invited to make her own profession of faith that the Apostle Thomas did [cf.

In 20:27-28], recognizing the true God in this true man. However, the words: ***My Lord and my God!*** Pronounced by Thomas after having seen the Risen Lord are also a kind of warning especially for the incredulous nation, those who: are being invited to enter into the interior of Jesus Christ, confessing the Son of God, true God and true man. Through these wounds that this people itself, because of its lack of faith, this People had inflicted upon Him with the blows of the nails and the thrust of the lance.

- **St. Bernard of Clairvaux**: the comparison between the clefts in the Rock and the Stigmata of the savior appears in this saint for the first time in the course of his sermon dedicated to the praise which the two Lovers exchange, while they admire the beauty of each other [cf. Ct 1:14-15]. In describing the beauty of which the soul-Bride is adorned, St. Bernard has it consist in the interweaving between innocence and humility. Now, the Beloved Spouse insists above all on humility, which is evident in the eyes of the Bride, compared to those of a Dove [cf. Ct 1:14]: Now, do not walk in grandiose circles, nor in wonders that are greater than you are – rather, imitating the simplicity of the Dove you are content with the more simple realities, building your nest in the clefts of the Rock, dwelling within My Wounds and looking attentively and with pleasure, with the eyes of a Dove, at all that pertains to me, even to the point of contemplating Me in My condition of the Incarnation and in the Passion that I have suffered.

Thus, the soul learns the language used by the Word, i.e., the favor of extending dignity, while she learns to make use of her own language, i.e., the fervor of her devotion: having been overtaken and conquered by loving, she feels herself sustained by her Beloved in order to love Him ever more. Then, she notes increase within her the admiration for the singular and unique beauty of her Spouse which is transparent through his two natures, the divine and human. The beauty of the human nature is resplendent in the Incarnation itself, which brought the Son of God to despoil Himself, to empty Himself of His beauty, which derives to him through His divine nature. In fact, this is the very mystery through which piety shines the more brilliantly, and charity is the more intensely evident, and grace irradiates with all its fullness.

Certainly this is not the only passage in which St. Bernard traces these master lines of an esthetic reading of the event of the redemptive Incarnation. If others of these might be found and, among these, there merits to be taken into consideration that concentrating on the Confession of Faith pronounced by the Roman Centurion after having seen Jesus die [cf. Mk 15:39]. Referring once more to the darkened color of the skin and the beauty of the body noted in Ct 1:5, this spiritual Master applies all this to the person of the Incarnate Word, affirming that the One Who is the most beautiful among the sons of men, made Himself dark in His passion, when He underwent the ignominy of His death on the Cross. However, He supported all this in

order to ransom the Church, His Bride, from sin, and to render her pure, holy and immaculate.

However, whenever one commits himself to meditate on the Passion of his Lord, the committed believer would simply have to notice His beauty: only the unwise, the fool, in fact, persists in judging Him dark and ugly. There becomes then emblematic the Profession of Faith on the part of the Roman Centurion: he has discovered the beauty of the Crucified – i.e., has seen and recognized in Him the Son of God – through having listened to His voice, precisely the Cry of Abandonment. It is through listening that one comes to the faith, as St. Paul taught the Romans [cf. 10:17]. Therefore, St. Bernard stated: Hearing was able to grasp that which had escaped sight. Appearance had deceived the eyes, but the truth penetrated through the ears. The eyes made Him seem weak, repugnant, miserable, condemned to a shameful death, whereas the ears made one discover the beautiful, in His Person, the Son of God. But, He did not appear such to the eyes of the Jews, because their ears were uncircumcised...The Centurion was not circumcised, but his ears were – because simply on hearing Jesus' voice as He was dying, the soldier was able to recognize the Lord of Glory, notwithstanding the many exterior signs of weakness.

The other context in which there is met the above indicated comparison is that described in Ct 2:13-14. According to Scripture, the Rock is synonymous with security, stability, protection and defense. The Lord Jesus is the Rock: His **Wounds** are for the infirm **a stable and sure repose, a powerful and infallible medicine.** Whoever contemplates them with devotion arrives at seeing the son of God Who reconciles the world with His Father, while there is discovered His immense Mercy and most tender compassion: through the wounds of His body, there is rendered manifest the secret of His heart, there appears the great sacrament of Piety and there are unveiled the innards of the Mercy of our God, through which He came to visit us, coming down from on high.

Therefore, to the Bride much in love there remains little else to do other than to accept the invitation of her Savior to dedicate herself with all the devotion of her heart to **the meditation of His Wounds**, and by meditating on them with assiduity, to remain in Him in a stable manner.

- **Juliana of Norwich**: spent her entire existence as a 'recluse', between the second half of the 1300's to the first half of the 1400's. She left a description of her extraordinary experience of the Passion of the Lord which she had in 1373, in her *Book of revelations*, a text which may be classified mid-way between a spiritual autobiography and a theological treatise.

At the very beginning of the Book, Juliana puts forward its argument saying that this is a revelation of love which Jesus Christ, our eternal happiness, has made in 16 visions. On her part, she asks of God three gifts: the memory of the Passion, a physical illness and three wounds, precisely the wound of perfect contrition, the wound of genuine compassion and the wound of an intense desire of God. The three wounds – as she herself will attest further on – are a special grace infused by the Lord Jesus, Who visits His chosen ones precisely through these wounds, from their truly salutary effects. With contrition, we are rendered pure, with compassion we are made ready, with the genuine desire of God, we become worthy. These are the three instruments, in so far as the visionary could grasp, with which all souls reach heaven, those persons, who on earth had sinned and who are then destined for salvation. To reach heaven: life is one and unique, the Lord Jesus Crucified. But, at the same time, Heaven is He Himself. Juliana grasps this by being immersed in the contemplation of His sorrowful death, the object of the 8th revelation: Thus, I learned to choose Jesus as my heaven, precisely while I saw Him in that moment so full of suffering. No other heaven will ever please me, other than that of Jesus, and He will be my Joy when I will arrive.

The meditation on the Passion suffered by the Lord Jesus out of love – a love that is so beyond all measure as to surpass all His sufferings- makes itself ever more intense and overwhelming, so much so that at a certain point Juliana saw her Beloved turn His glance toward His own wounded side, and experienced being drawn and guided toward Him, to take refuge in Him, in order to take on even a greater appreciation of the infinite love with which He had loved her. With joyful visage our good Lord looked at His own side and contemplated it with joy and with His sweet glance He guided the mind of His creature through that same **Wound in His side**. And He showed there a beautiful and delicious place, wide enough to contain all of humanity saved, so that it might repose there in peace and love. And with this, He recalled His most precious Blood and the water that He allowed to flow from His side out of love.

If the material object of the contemplation is the ‘blessed’ heart of the Lord, the formal object is His love united to his joy. ‘Look at how much I love you and at how much I have loved you!’ This is what Jesus states insistently to His beloved, intended, calling her with the sweet name of *Daughter*, and leading her to understand that He had loved her so even before He died for her, as to wish to die for her salvation, to render her eternally happy. ‘My joy is your holiness and your joy is eternal happiness with Me.’ Thus, as is noted from her concluding pages, the finality and the meaning included in the revelations that the Lord Jesus chose to make to His chosen one are summarized in a single word: Love, eternal love, the motive, foundation and purpose of all that God has done and still does for His creatures.

Now, in describing her 10th revelation, Juliana plays the accent on a salient aspect of her vision on which she would then reflect for more than 15 years: the kind of osmosis between love and joy experienced by the Lord Jesus, and which have as their object the supreme good of His creatures. Among other aspects, there is placed in bold relief that these two sentiments are experienced by Juliana in the form of a maternal tenderness, all the more gratifying, with which the Lord Jesus explains in full His service as savior: and 'our Savior is our Mother, and in Him we are continuously generated, and we will never be separated from Him.'

In the last analysis, the **contemplation of the Glorious Wounds of the Savior** comes to be corroborated by the joy and consolation due to a salvific love which transfigures and sublimates the most genuine features of His maternity, as is understood by a most suggestive page from her hand: a mother can caress tenderly to her breast her baby, but our tender Mother, Jesus, can familiarly have us enter into His blessed breast through the sweet wound of His side, and reveal to us there in part, the divinity and the joys of heaven together with the spiritual certainty of eternal happiness. He showed this in the 10th revelation, making me understand with that sweet word when He said: Just look at how much I love you! – while He was contemplating His blessed side, full of joy.

In describing her spiritual activity, Juliana does not explicitly have recourse to spousal language: but, the tenderness, the delicacy, the familiar intimacy, generating one to life – are all elements that might lead one to think immediately to spousal love. Therefore, the reading of her pages becomes one more motive for indicating the importance of the bringing together the term *Daughter* and that of *Bride*, which is attested to by many mystical writers. This implies how indeed the fruition of loving union with the Lord Jesus contains and makes one enjoy an indeed surprising multiplicity of affective sentiments, which embrace all the aspects of authentic love, from friendship to transforming union.

4. The Cross as an Allegory for the Nuptial Bed: this assimilation of the Cross and of the sepulcher of Jesus to the bed where He celebrated the nuptials with the Church and upon which the Bride can repose, is a theme that is frequently met in Patristic literature. In this regard it should be noted that while the Latin Fathers prefer the bringing together this idea with the Cross, the Greek Fathers have also given a symbolic value also to the tomb, as is easy to draw from the documents of Iconography, especially of those presenting the *Nymphios*, Christ as Spouse.

The Western Liturgy, too, contains a trace of these pairings: it is found in that Hymn which opens the Vespers of Holy Week, and precisely in that strophe which sings: *A fertile and glorious tree, embellished with a royal mantle, Bridal Chamber, Throne and Altar for the Body of Christ the Lord* Here, after presenting what

Apponius says in his Commentary on *Canticles*, there will be presented the teaching which is truly wonderful, of Blessed Angela of Foligno.

a. Apponius' Commentary on the *Canticle of Canticles*

The Tomb

Going over the text worked out by Apponius, one encounters the first coming together of the Tomb and the Nuptial Bed in the third Book. It is the Church who speaks, filled with the Spirit of Truth, exalting the beauty which adorns Jesus Christ: 'How beautiful You are, my Beloved, how gracious! And our bed too is covered with sweet branches.' She had the opportunity to know entirely the graciousness of her Spouse when she became united to Him, forming with Him one sole flesh: 'It is in the tomb that they find repose with the Body of Christ, the Church and the Word of the Father Who fills all things – and He is found there everywhere entirely – and that He had taken on a body. In truth, it is only in the strength of the presence of the Word that the flesh has not known corruption during three days and three nights. It is there that under the title of 'bed', there has been celebrated the union between the Son of God and the Church. It is there that the Church has merited to find together with Him the pleasing sleep of the Passion and the Joy of the eternal awakening.'

By now, redeemed by Christ, she rises up securely toward Him, through the desert to offer to Him perfume of myrrh, incense and every aromatic dust [cf. Ct 3:6]. The perfumed of which she is permeated are the virtues and the good works, together with the prayers, in testimony of a right faith – according to Apponius, the myrrh indicates faith in the death which Jesus Christ suffered as true man – and to the knowledge that has been deepened by the most subtle meanings embedded in sacred Scripture.

One who had been a master in the study of the Scriptures is beyond any doubt the Apostle Paul, who knew how to build with his doctrine a delicate and sweet perfume through which he attracted and introduced the Church even to the Nuptial Chamber of the King of heaven, Jesus Christ [cf. 2 Co 11:2]. And among the teachings that have the greater power of attraction, Apponius mentions those regarding the mysteries of Christ's Passion, which are hidden profoundly in the deep divine scriptures. Therefore, after having hinted at the Pauline *kerygma*, regarding the Crucified and Risen Christ, he returns anew on the approach made between the tomb and the nuptial bed taking the occasion from Ct 3:7-8, which describes the lattice, the nuptial bed, of Solomon. In this case, the Apostles and the Doctors offer their hymns to the glorious Nuptials between Jesus Christ and the Church. In these, they magnify the splendor with which the father has exalted this day of glory, this day of redemption of which the Prophet has said: *this is the day that the Lord has made: let us exult and rejoice in it!*' This is the day in which the Christ, after having conducted

the Church to the bed in question, by placing the Mystery of His passion, which united His Body with that of the Bride. In truth even further above, when the Church says to Christ: our bed is flowering – we have said that it is necessary to see there the tomb of Christ our Lord, this bed which has been sprinkled with the aromas of Nicodemus and by Joseph, at the moment of the burial and these aromas had been confected with many flower and with herbs of different kinds.

The Cross

The pairing of the Cross and the Nuptial Bed enters on the horizon when Apponius speaks about the *baldachino* – the palanquin – that King Solomon had constructed out of the wood from Lebanon, and of its parts constructed with very precious materials [cf. Ct 3:9-10]. In his view, it is necessary to see in this, the Cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ, upon which the Jew had placed Him, totally unknowing, that He is the Life of the world. Having made this premise and observed a bit later that in Ct 3:10, the *baldachino* is considered to be a Nuptial Bed, and immediately proposes his Christological reading using also Ps 19:6: the Majesty of the divinity, the Word of the Father, the King of Peace, left from this bed as a Spouse in order to procure believers for His reign. Of Him the Prophet said: He has placed His tent in the sun, and is as a Spouse Who comes out from His nuptial Bed.

This Christological reading is then developed by our author with his usual care and with that sharpness which allows him to attribute to every literary particular a precise theological and spiritual significance. In fact, in every one of the three parts which make up the *baldachino* he sees symbolized each of the three elements of the Person of the Incarnate Word: the body, the human soul and the divinity. The columns of silver lead one to think of His Body, pure from all stain of sin; in the bold of the columns there shines forth the reflection of His glorious soul; finally, the seat of purple is refulgent of His divinity. However, no one who would have the right faith will place in any doubt that these three elements might be found and are found in the *baldachino* of the Cross, without which the divinity would not be injured. Assuming human nature, He gave anew the gift of Paradise which had been withdrawn from humanity by his enemy. This God, Who is Love has extended in the midst of all this, that love, humbling Himself even to the ignominy of the Cross, in order to restore the image of His majesty. He has extended in the midst of all this His love, anticipating the mystery of the resurrection, so that the chosen ones themselves, because of the delay, might not trip over the obstacle if incredulity.

Therefore, on the basis of Ct 3:11, which announces the day of the Royal Nuptials of King Solomon – Apponius concludes that the day in which the Word of the Father died on the Cross, is the day of Victory, of glory, of glory both for Him as well as for believers. This is so because on that day – while he received from the sacrilegious mother, the Synagogue, the crown of thorns – He espoused the Church,

by pouring out His precious Blood, which symbolizes the nuptial ring of which He had given her the gift.

b. St. Angela of Foligno: the spiritual experienced lived by Angela, a Franciscan tertiary, who died in 1309, pertains to that genus of mystical experiences which are most surprising and leave one amazed due to the wonders worked by God, both One and triune, and also for the sublimity of the holiness to which He led her. This experience of hers is narrated in her *Memorial*, written by Fr. Arnaldo, who translated into Latin all that the Blessed woman said to him in her Umbrian dialect. To this text there were then added also the *Instructions*, composed of three types of writings: letters, reports of her mystical experiences and discourses. Due to her acute and fertile capacity of reflection on what the Lord had revealed to her and made her experience, a capacity which does not have equals in a woman of the 13th century, Angela was justly called the ***Teacher of Theologians!***

Among the most luminous traits of her physiognomy there emerges in the very first place the pairing of **Cross/Love**: the loving union with the Crucified Christ is nourished by the assiduous contemplative prayer, offered as she herself teaches, reading in the Book of Life, i.e., in the life of the God-man, Jesus Christ, which had been one of poverty, suffering, disdain and authentic obedience, and in His death on the Cross. And this could not have occurred in any other way.

Gratified by the presence of the trinity and instructed by the Holy Spirit, Angela experienced hearing from Christ words full of vehement love. He calls her often with the sweet titles of *Daughter, Bride, Beloved*: he says to her that He loves her more than any other woman found in the Valley of Spoleto, and wanted her to remain and to repose in Him. And there was added: *I am the One Who was crucified for you, and I hunger and thirst for you, and have shed My blood for you, and that I have loved you so...You have the ring of My love and you have been committed by me never to separate yourself from Me...!* Phrases like this seem full with a loving spirit, which contain discreet allusions to a bond that has all the characteristics of spousal union. Under this aspect, one should note the certain value in having recourse to the metaphor of the 'bed', brought forward more than once by Angela, when she gave utterance to her firm proposal of wishing to share the dolor suffered out of love for her Crucified Beloved, and therefore, to desire to remain forever united to Him. With regard to the proposal nourished by the experience of the presence of Jesus Christ in her soul, Who embraced her with His sweet and at the same time ardent love, much like fire. And she noted that this was not like a fire that burns from time to time, but like a fire of sweet love.

And God Himself explained to her the Mystery of the Cross of His son, making her understand that she ought to place herself to repose on it: because the Cross is your salvation, and your bed, and it ought to be your most beloved, because there

only is your salvation. Illumined and instructed in this manner, Angela discovers ever more that her entire joy is enveloped in this God-man, in suffering. Therefore, she gave every effort to penetrating into the recesses of His intimacy, to find there a place within His wounded side: and these are joys that are impossible to describe or narrate. Not rarely, then, while she would be contemplating the Crucifix, she noted being enkindled within her the flame of love and begins to experience at the same time a great joy: these are reactions caused in her by the embrace with which the Lord embraced to Himself her soul. Thus, bit by bit as she proceeds along her spiritual journey, she experienced a great attraction that was always ever more irresistible, of the Crucified Lord Himself, which came to the point of declaring to her: You are Me and I am you!.

Then, her soul, invaded by joy, broke forth into a Canticle of Praise: I praise You, beloved God, on Your Cross I have made my bed; to embrace it, I found poverty; in another part of the bed, I discovered that suffering united to disdain ... On that same bed – the Blessed Angela continued, responding to the request of clarifications addressed to her by Brother Arnaldo – He was born, lived and died, and since God the Father had loved this bed even before human beings sinned ...therefore, this bed is my bed, because in this bed, i.e., on the Cross of Jesus Christ, which He had even more in His body and soul, I feel that I am situated and placed, and therefore, this is also my bed, and on this bed, I believe I will die and I believe I will be saved by means of it.

Certainly this spiritual experience lived by this great Umbrian Mystic contains other aspects and other traits of notable level. In this direction, having kept in mind the objective theme that orientates this exposition, one cannot help by noting at least in synthesis the content of her next to last Instruction, which describes the essential elements which qualify her spirituality. All revolves around the initial declaration that the uncreated and incarnate God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the supreme and perfect good, is all love and therefore, He loves with His entire being and wills to be loved totally. Hence, He wishes that His children be transformed completely into Him through love.

Of the soul in love there is asked then the duty of tending with all itself to the perfection of perfect love, which consists in dedicating Himself to God and in serving Him because it is He, and not through anything else, like thinking of the reward that one might receive: the path to follow, then, consists in practicing pure, right, fervent and ordered love. Following along this trajectory, the soul passes from one level to another of the love, even to the point of reaching a certain high point, i.e, transforming love: And therefore, the soul in love with this most sweet Beloved, desires to have Him; and in desiring to have Him, embraces Him. And embracing Him, holds Him close to herself, and joins herself with God and God unites Himself to her,

with supreme sweetness of love. And therefore, the power of love transforms the lover into the Beloved, and the Beloved into the lover.

A transformation of this type is the exclusive work of God and this is obtained above all through and with prayer that is devout, pure, humble, continuous and violent. The recourse to contemplative prayer is explicit, and unavoidable. Along with this there is the mention of the Book of Life, i.e., the life of Jesus Christ, while He lived this mortal life, totally occupied with the voluntary choice of poverty, of disdain and suffering. Therefore, the Father instructs His children and only and always through His most beloved Son. Proceeding in this contemplative exercise, the soul in love discovers, thanks to the divine light that flows from the life of Jesus Christ, who alone is the way to follow, through love, toward God and into God. And day after day, He will find through poverty, the eternal riches. Through disdain, the supreme honor and the greatness of glory. Finally, through penance made with great difficulty and with real discomfort, she will possess God, the supreme and eternal good, together with an infinite sweetness and consolation.

At the end of life, when she will be by then ready to enjoy the eternal Nuptials with her Spouse, she – the venerable Bride of Christ – will see her Spouse come to take her as is fitting for a King to take with himself the Bride whom He has loved for so long. And He will bring to her as a gift, the royal vesture, not made of purple, nor of any other precious material, but of that divine light which vests the soul. Thanks to this, Angela will be able finally to see the word of God Who has loved her and will love her forever with immense joy.

5. In the School, and the Sequela of the Crucified Spouse, out of Love: the affective sensibility and contemplative reflection are concentrated with greater intensity on the unmeasured love which moved the Word of God to give His life in order to conquer definitively His Bride for Himself, chosen from always and for always. Beginning from this, the will of following in all the Crucified spouse, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

a. From the Wisdom of Heart to the Wisdom of the Cross: the Lord Jesus, crucified, is the Beloved, the One loved in the heart: this is the ‘truth’, the object of knowledge obtained, before all else and in a permanent manner, by way of experience, thanks to the love that is also cognizance, which makes the Beloved truly known, because it unites to Him and renders one similar to him. This is the ineffable ‘truth’ to which the reflection ought to attain and ought to know how to conduct one.

The Apostle Paul taught this, who, in addressing the Christians of Corinth, says to them: I, too, o brothers, when I came among you, I did not present myself to announce to you the knowledge of God with sublimity of word or of wisdom. I claim to not know anything else among you than Jesus Christ, and Him crucified [cf. 1 Co

2:2]. And the same apostle refers back to the root, to the very source of this wisdom: the participation in the death and in the resurrection of the Lord, the experience of the presence of Jesus Christ in one's own person: *I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. This life in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God,, Who has loved me and has given Himself up for me* [cf. Ga 2:20].

The osmosis between the Wisdom of Heart and the Wisdom of the Cross is, therefore, spontaneous, immediate. The heart of the believer could not aspire to anything other, could not aspire to acquiring some other kind of Wisdom. The Wisdom of Heart is, in the last analysis, that wisdom which flows from the loving knowledge of Jesus Christ which is then infused and nourished by the Holy Spirit, and which comports also the gift of compassion for the Crucified Beloved. For this reason, the soul in love does not desire anything else than to share in His Passion, in order to taste precisely and only that love which has wounded and pierced the Heart of her Lord and which now, flowing without respite from His **Glorious Wounds**, wounds her heart and makes her fall ill, always out of love. The path to reach this love is therefore traced, and is wide open: 'I contemplate the Wounds, the opened gates of heaven. And I can now enter there through five certain places. But how can I reach my God directly? I will pass, through His hands and feet, to His heart of Love!'

The fruitful contemplation of the Crucified, the deep desire to allow oneself to be permeated and transformed entirely out of love for Him, which the Holy Spirit enkindles in the heart, through the memory of his Passion, the enjoyment of the loving union with the Crucified and Risen Spouse, are thus found at the very center of the Christian spiritual experience. . St. Bonaventure had already indicated this with some clarity in his Prologue of the *Itinerary of the Mind to God*, valuing to the utmost, for this reason, the example offered first by the Apostle Paul, and then by St. Francis, the Stigmatic. In order to arrive at the peace of the spirit coinciding with repose in God, it is necessary to hasten along the path represented by the most ardent love for the Crucified: there is no other way if not through that most ardent love for the Crucified, which transformed Paul to this point into Christ, the Apostle who was ravished unto the third heaven, to lead him to say: *I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*. This same love so absorbed the mind of Francis, that this suffered in his flesh, while he, even before his death, bore for two years in his own body the sacred stigmata of the Passion.

However, in hastening along this way, one learns how to dwell in stable manner in the Passion: this is the lesson that is drawn, in substance, from the conclusive chapter on the *Itinerary*. Now, this centrality of relationship with Jesus Christ and, before all, the role which He exercises as the sole Mediator between God and humanity, appear evident even from the reading of the 4th Chapter, which occupies the median position in the very structure of the text, as well as in the logical

organization of the reflection. In these pages – where there is traced out also a brief synthesis of **mystical nuptials** – there is read, among other themes, that the soul, thanks to the contact with Jesus Christ, the Uncreated Word, incarnate and inspired recovers the use of the five spiritual senses. Now, once these senses have recovered, while one sees and listens to its Spouse, while it perceives his odor, tastes and embraces Him, it can sing as the Bride of the *Canticle of canticles*, which was composed in order to be exercised in contemplation according to this fourth grade that no one comprehends, unless the one who receives it, since this grade consists more in the affective experience than in any rational consideration.

Once this ultimate stage of the *Itinerarium* is reached, the reader is invited to place himself at the feet of the Crucified Christ, to interrogate Him and to listen to Him, to learn from him, Who is the Spouse, and only from him, all that pertains to the contemplation and the communion of love with God to which He alone can introduce and lead one. If, then, you ask yourself how these realities occur, ask this rather of grace, not of doctrine; ask desire, not the intellect; it is more the groaning of prayer, and not the yearning to read; He is the spouse more than the Master; He is God, not just man in all this; ask the darkness and not the illumination; not the light, but the fire which totally enflames one and which transfers into God through the anointing which elevate and the most ardent affections. This fire is God and His furnace is in Jerusalem and Jesus Christ enkindles it with the fervor of His most ardent Passion.

Thus, attracted irresistibly by the Lord Jesus, Who said one day: *I, when I will be lifted up from earth, will draw all to Myself!* [cf. Jn 12:32] – the disciple who commits himself to contemplate the ‘Mystery of the Cross’ with the heart enflamed with love, learns to seal the reflection and the quest with the *Amen*, and the ‘thanks be to God!’ These are words which, rendering silent any other expression, allow space and breath only for adoring silence, permeated by prayer. And this prayer brings with itself the loving adherence to the will of the Beloved and a much moved sentiment of recognition and of gratitude for His immense, incomparable love.

b. The Testimony of Hedwig of Anversa: she lived in the 13th century, and made up part of the movement called the *Beguines*. From her Letters, we learn that to stay with Christ on the Cross, to die and to rise up with Him, is the condition to accept in order to allow oneself to be conquered and taken over completely by that love, so desired, which is God. This teaching constitutes the conclusion and the conducting motivation of Letter VI, which offers itself to the attention of the reader as the most direct writing on this matter. According to Hedwig, this is an intrinsic demand for that relationship of love, the will to be always at the noble service of Love, accepting also to suffer for His honor. It is necessary, therefore, to grasp with enthusiasm and total dedication the path of virtue, without ever tiring or allowing oneself to be discouraged: the humble knight, if he looks at the Wounds of his Holy

Lord, should not be concerned with his own wounds! Therefore, the service of love brings with it and implies always the example of Jesus Christ, adapted to the manner of living practiced by him on earth, in the realization that in this loving undertaking of union with God, there are met and interweave two aspects which, according to all appearances, seem incompatible between them: that suffering derived from the great efforts and from trials, as well as the joy that derives from the presence of God to which one abandons himself completely:

If with the divine humanity, you ought to live on this earth with much fatigue and in suffering, with the omnipotent and eternal God, however, you will love and rejoice in the depths, in the deepest part of yourself, in sweet abandonment: the truth of both aspects, however, is in their intimate union. As the humanity of Christ fulfilled on earth the will of the Father, so, you, too, ought to obey both the one and the other, in the unity of Love. Serve humbly under their unique power: before them, be always in such a way that you might follow entirely their will, allowing that they might achieve in you what they will.

Thus, according to Hedwig the Cross that we ought to carry together with the son of God, adhering as He did to the will of God the Father, coincides with all those trials, fatigue and suffering which need to be encountered in order to have and to live that Love, in order to honor them with the practice of virtue, without desiring anything other if not that Love might have its legitimate place within a human being and in all creatures. The Cross, therefore, is that sweet suffering that a person endures for just Love, in the expectancy that Love be manifested definitively in the soul in love and possess it entirely, by uniting oneself for ever in one sole spirit.

c. **The Witness of St. Edith Stein:** she entered Carmel in Cologne in 1933,, where she took the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross – and she suffered death in Auschwitz on August 9, 1942. She was canonized on October 11, 1998. In the Homily he delivered on that occasion, Pope John Paul II stated about her: The mystery of the Cross in the very first place permeated her entire life, even to moving her toward the supreme oblation. As the Bride of the Cross, Sister Teresa Benedicta not only wrote profound pages on the **Wisdom of the Cross**, but followed in depth along the pathway to the **School of the Cross**.

These are words which place in clear light a most relevant trait of her personal profile of holiness: the pairing of **sponsality** and the **Cross**. Formed in the School of St. Teresa of Avila and of St. John of the Cross, the saint wrote pages that are truly sublime on this theme, as appears above all in her posthumous work, ***Scientia Crucis***, which gathers her studies on the great Spanish mystic.

Under the guide of the teaching exposed in his *Spiritual Canticle*, the Carmelite Saint brings out a truth that she considers fundamental: the **Nuptial Bond**

is the most incisive model to which one might have recourse in order to describe the relationship of the soul with God which He foresaw from all eternity as the scope of His creation. Reciprocally, the loving union of God with the soul constitutes the full and perfect realization of the concept of the Nuptial relationship. This union has been realized by the son of God through His Incarnation and the redemption achieved on the Cross: in this regard, there are at least two most significant reflections to note:

- The first is connected with the original plan of God: the soul has been predestined from all eternity to be the Bride of the son of God, participating in the Trinitarian life of the Divinity. And it is precisely in order to espouse His creature that the Eternal Word is vested in His human nature: God and the soul ought to be two in one single flesh.
- The second collects in a conclusive form all the considerations made regarding the symbol of the Bride and the Cross, and comes to close a nodal point regarding the passage from the Old Man to the New Man, through one's participation in the redemptive efficacy of the Passion of the Lord: 'in Conclusion: the Nuptial Union of the soul with God – the end for which it was created – and had been acquired through the Cross, consumed on the Cross and sealed with the Cross for all eternity.

Another intervention of certain weight on this same argument is found in one of her texts written in 1940, and meant probably to be read prior to her renovation of vows. The title she placed on this is already eloquent of itself: **The Nuptials of the Lamb**. Contemplating, using the Apostle John, the Immolated Lamb and the Church, His Bride, the Saint recalls to a certain point that the path to follow in order to arrive at the eschatological Nuptial Banquet passes through the sufferings and the Cross. And this rule holds for all: 'Whoever would like to celebrate the nuptials with the Lamb, must first allow himself to be nailed on the Cross: to this are called all those marked by the Lamb, i.e., all the Baptized, but not all hear this call and obey it.'

There is, however, a called to live a more intimate following of Christ: this is the Call to the religious life. All who receive this call are united to the redeemer, by a stronger spousal bond than might be the rest of the flock of the redeemed.' However, they ought to be cognizant of having chosen as Spouse the Lamb Who had been immolated: therefore, if they wish to enter with Him into glory, have to allow themselves to be nailed to His Cross: 'the nails are the three Vows, and with how much more availability will the soul allow itself to stretch out on the Cross, supporting the blows of the hammer – then so much the more will the intimate union with the Crucified be experienced. Thus, the Crucifixion will become for her a Wedding Feast!

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CHAPTER IV

SPOUSAL UNION WITH THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

Introduction:

[1] The loving and nuptial union with the Lord Jesus Christ qualifies intrinsically the life that every baptized leads according to the Holy Spirit. This provides the motive, and as a consequence, his belonging to the Church, the Bride and Body of Jesus Christ united to Him in the Holy Spirit:

The unity of Christ and the Church, Head and members of one Body, also implies the distinction of the two within a personal relationship. This aspect is often expressed by the image of **Bridegroom and Bride**. The theme of Christ as **Bridegroom** of the Church was prepared for by the Prophets and announced by John the Baptist [cf. Jn 3:29]. The Lord referred to Himself as the **Bridegroom** [cf. Mk 2:19]. The Apostle speaks of the whole Church, of each of the faithful members of His Body, as a **Bride betrothed** [cf. Mt 22:1-14; 25:1-13; 1 Co 6:15-17; 2 Co 11:2]. The Church is the spotless **Bride of the spotless Lamb** [cf. Rv 22:17; Ep 1:4; 5:27]. Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her [cf. Ep 5:25-26]. He has joined her with Himself in an **everlasting Covenant** and never stops caring for her as for His own Body... [cf. Ep 5:29]. **[CCC # 796]**

[2] Founded on the Sacraments of Christian Initiation, and corroborated by participation in the Eucharist, the spousal union with the Lord Jesus Christ is configured as a loving experienced. Marked by a variety of forms, of grades and affective intensity that are both extraordinary and most surprising. Spousal love is one that **unites, is exclusive, oblation, transforming**: it supports the paradox of celibacy and progeny, virginity and fecundity. Lived and experienced through the exercise of the spiritual senses, requires the constant and impassioned quest of the Crucified Lord. In the long pull, this might bring about a certain incurable illness and wound, which though are both beneficial and life-giving. Furthermore, this is the gift, and a truly valuable one, that His disciples need to ask for humbly from the Holy Spirit, in order to follow along with every greater ardor and enthusiasm the pathway of loving and spousal union with him, the Son of God made man, the Crucified Beloved Spouse, the Lord of Glory.

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1. Christian Initiation as the Nuptial Celebration: the purpose of this heading is exclusively that of recalling the believer's attention on the spousal dimension of Christian initiation, which merits to be re-thought and evaluated better, for the importance that this holds in the area of the celebration of the sacraments and the Liturgy. So, the extension is intended to be somewhat limited just to a few significant examples. These examples are treated along the lines of a 'Mystagogical

Catechesis' taken from the Patristic tradition, which has provided a broad sway for the Nuptial aspect of the Christian initiation, as well as from the modern liturgical and magisterial texts ²⁹.

a. Some Significant Examples from the Patristic Tradition:

- **Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem** [315-387]. the exposition begins with his Baptismal Catechesis. He invites those to be baptized to prepare themselves for their encounter with their Spouse, by preparing the Nuptial Garment, i.e., by purifying themselves with penance during the Lenten period, in order to be found clean when they will be invited to the Nuptial Chamber. In fact, the Spouse, in His generosity, calls out to all, without distinction: it will then be up to Him as to who will be admitted to the Mystical Nuptials. These will also be taught that the Church, which they will enter and become a part of her, is the fertile Mother and Bride of the Only Begotten son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

- **St. John Chrysostom**: was born about mid 4th century and died in 407. He speaks to those who are about to be **illuminated** – and **illumination** is one of the names given to Baptism – with the imminent marriage that they are about to contract with the Spouse, the son of God. On His part, in order to unite Himself to His Bride, the Church, He has not hesitated to become man, and to allow Himself to be crucified. Confronting that which is about to happen, the heart is filled with joy: a time of joy and spiritual rejoicing is this present moment: for indeed the days so long hoped for and desired for the spiritual nuptials have arrived...And so, then, as a Bride who is about to be introduced into the sacred nuptial room, we speak also to you, showing you the superabundant wealth of the Spouse and the ineffable goodness which this reveals for you, and to her we point out from what evils she has been liberated and what goods she is about to enjoy.

- **Nile of Ancyra**: in interpreting Baptism as the rite of a **Nuptial Covenant**, the Eastern Fathers have taken their inspiration and motivation from the Semitic ritual of matrimony. This, among other practices, saw to it that the Bride would bathe in order to present herself to the Nuptials in all her beauty. Thus Nilo mentions expressly, in connection with Ct 1:5 [... *I am black, but beautiful...*], the nuptial bath of Baptism and teaches that this purifies one from all sin and prepares the soul for the spiritual nuptials with Jesus Christ.

Having put on the Wedding Garment, which is that holiness procured by the redemptive undertaking realized by the Lord Jesus through His death on the Cross, the Neophytes are admitted to the Eucharistic Banquet: by feeding on the flesh of the

²⁹ Cf. in this regard: Maria del Pilar Rio, *Teología Nupcial del Misterio redentor de Cristo. Estudio en la obra de Odo Casel*. Rome: Appoline Studii 2000

Divine Spouse and drinking His Blood, while they celebrate the union with Him in love, they live in expectancy the tasting of the joy of the **Eschatological Nuptials**.

-Apponius: reasons by making use of the contrast between the faith of the Church, figured by the 'Daughters of Jerusalem', and the incredulity of the Synagogue, figured by the 'Daughters of Sion'. From this he produces in his concluding pages of the 5th Chapter, a meditation of sublime profile from a theological and spiritual point of view. With this, he embraces under a single glance, that coinciding with the Spousal Allegory, the Passion of Christ – the Eucharistic Banquet and the Nuptial Bath. It is worth while to listen to him directly, also because in the connecting of these three moments of the one and the same salvific event, he re-echoes the interpretation of the Christian initiation in the key of Spousal Union: The Daughters of Jerusalem show therefore, to the Daughters of Sion that the day of the Nuptials between the Word, the Son of God, and the Church, is celebrated in the moment of His Passion. The Nuptials, in fact, consist in the gift of the Ring and the kiss. And it is precisely this that the Christ, on the Vigil of His Passion, has bestowed to the Church in the sacrament, in the person of the apostles, through the gift of His Body and Blood. Thus, the present passage recounts now by means of figures just how the prayer was heard, that the Church, at the beginning of *Canticles*, addresses herself to the father of the Spouse, saying: Kiss me with the kisses of His mouth!

Finally, the stupendous Wedding Day is truly for Jesus Christ the day of the joy of His heart [cf. Ct 3:11: *Daughters of Zion, come and see King Solomon, wearing the diadem with which his Mother crowned him on his wedding day, on the day of his heart's joy...*]: He, the immaculate, has united Himself to sinners, for the sake of rendering His Church immaculate, through contact with His Body and Blood. Thus, our Lord, Jesus Christ, after having purified her from every stain of sin by means of the most holy bath of baptism, after having cleansed her with His doctrine from all stain produced by the attraction of heresies, has rendered her totally beautiful. To Him pertain the glory and the dominion for ever. Amen!

- St. Augustine: in the last analysis, as the Bishop of Hippo teaches in masterly manner, every Liturgical Ceremony is a Nuptial festival, a celebration of the Wedding of the Church with the Crucified and Risen Christ. The great Doctor of the Church says this when he explains **1 Jn**, but referring especially to the episode of the disciples of Emmaus and to the Self-revelation made by the Risen Christ through His Word and the Breaking of the Bread, symbol of the Eucharist: Those who in the Church assist at the Liturgical Celebrations, if they participate in them well, become the bride. There is some difference in this from what happens in carnal nuptials, where those who assist are different from the woman who marries. The whole Church, in fact, is the Bride of Jesus Christ, from Whom this flesh takes its beginning and is represented as its First Fruits: in that flesh, the Bride is joined to the Spouse. Justly, He breaks the

Bread, when He wanted to show the reality of his flesh – and justly, the eyes of the Disciples are opened at the sign of the Breaking of the Bread and they would recognize Him.

b. The Witness of Modern Liturgical and Magisterial Texts:

[1] The Liturgy: the texts actually in use in the Liturgy of the Western Church conserve a luminous reflection and a precise echo of the Patristic doctrine. Here only two examples will be presented:

- In the **Preface of Baptism**, the Sacrament of the rebirth comes presented as the **Nuptial Gift** offered by the Crucified Lord, Jesus Christ: ‘from His pierced heart of Your Son You have made flow for us the Nuptial Gift of Baptism, the First Pasch for Believers, the Gate of our Salvation, the Beginning of life in Jesus Christ, Source of the new humanity.’

- And in the Collect Oration of **Holy Thursday**, the new and eternal sacrifice instituted by the Son of God and entrusted by Him to the Church, this is called explicitly the **Nuptial Banquet of His Love**. This title explains the reason for which the prayer concludes with the invocation: we pray that from sharing in so great a mystery, we might attain to the fullness of charity and life.

- **Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary**: there is a reference to the Nuptial Character of the Eucharistic banquet in the Preface of these Masses. The Preface in question pertains to the formulary of ‘**Holy Mary of Cana**’ – in a passage that is most suggestive, the miracle completed by Jesus at the insistent request addressed to Him by his Mother, is celebrated as a sign which anticipates His redemptive death, seen in a Nuptial perspective. Having first stated that the Nuptial Banquet becomes the symbol of the banquet of every day that Jesus Christ prepares for the Church, the text continues: this marvelous sign inaugurates the messianic times: it foretells the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and anticipates the mystical hour in which Jesus Christ, garbed in the vesture of the passion, immolates Himself on the Cross for the Church, His Bride.

[2] Modern Magisterial Documents: this Eucharistic Doctrine just mentioned, finds an authoritative confirmation:

- in **Vatican II, SC 87; 104**: there is emphasized that Jesus Christ unites to Himself and associates to Himself, His most Beloved Bride, in rendering to the Father, a perfect glory in sanctifying humanity. Thus, for example, when the Church prays the Divine Office it is truly the voice of the Bride herself Who is speaking to her Spouse, indeed it is the prayer that Christ, united to His Body, then raises up to His Father. Furthermore, during the Liturgical Year the Church celebrates, with sacred memory, the work of salvation of her Divine Spouse.

in the teaching of Pope John Paul II. In His Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*³⁰ the Holy Father states that with the Institution of the Eucharist: ...we find ourselves at the very heart of the Paschal Mystery, which reveals to the depths the spousal love of God. Jesus Christ is the spouse because He has given Himself: His Body has been 'given', and His Blood has been 'poured out' [cf. Lk 22:19-20]. In this manner, He loved unto the end [cf. Jn 13;1]. The 'sincere gift' contained in the Sacrifice of the Cross, brings to the fore in a definitive manner the spousal meaning of the Love of God. Jesus Christ is the Spouse of the Church, as the Redeemer of the world. The Eucharist is the Sacrament of our Redemption. It is the sacrament of the Spouse, and the Bride. The Eucharist renders present and in a sacramental manner realizes once more the redemptive act of Christ who 'creates' the Church, His Body. With this 'body', Jesus Christ is united as the Spouse with His Bride. All this is contained in the *Letter to the Ephesians*. In the 'great mystery' of Jesus Christ and of the Church, there is introduced the perennial 'unity of the two', constituted from the 'beginning' between man and woman.

- **in his Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini*** :³¹ finally, in her quality as **Beloved Bride**, to whom the Lord has entrusted the Memorial of His Death and Resurrection [cf. SC 47], he places at the center of her life the Sunday Eucharist: in doing this, while she celebrates the Memorial of the Presence of the risen Lord,. She continuously reminds her children of the expectancy of that glorious return of the Divine Spouse at the end of time: this makes of Sunday, the day in which the Church, manifesting more clearly His spousal character, anticipates in some manner the eschatological reality of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

2. Union with God and Nuptial Symbolism: each of the Baptized, as such, is the dwelling place of the Most Holy trinity. It is quite clear, then, that Communion with the Father, by means of the Son, Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit – which implies divinization and transformation of the believer, is often experienced and described in terms of the **Nuptial Bond**:

- **St. Bonaventure** teaches : that no one possesses God if he is not possessed in a very special way by Him. No one possesses, nor is possessed by Him, without loving Him above everything else, and in an incomparable manner, without being loved by Him as the Bride is loved by her spouse; and no one is loved thus without being adopted as a son in order to achieve the eternal inheritance. From this it follows that grace that renders acceptable also renders the soul the temple of God, the Spouse of Christ and the daughter of the Eternal Father. And since this can happen only for the motive of the supreme rendering worthy and condescendence on the part of God, therefore, this does not happen out of some natural disposition, but only in the

³⁰ cf. # 26, August 15, 1988, in *EV* 11/1324.

³¹ Cf. Apostolic Letter, # 37. May 31, 1998

strength of the Gift of Grace infused by God. All this appears with evidence to one who considers how valuable it would be to be a Temple of God, a Child of God, to be indeed united to God in some indissoluble manner and almost a matrimonial union by means of the bond of love and of grace.

- **Mechtilde of Magdebourg**: is considered to be the most representative of that current of Medieval spirituality which is called 'Mystical Nuptials'. In her writing, there is frequently found the affirmation that the soul is the Bride of the Blessed Trinity. Embedded as precious pearls in one splendid *scenario*, from which there pour forth continuously the most neat spousal images and the loving declarations that are the most confidential and involving, these affirmations strike one for the luminous beauty and their convincing application. For example, directing herself to contemplation, the soul puts emphasis on how God had conferred upon her those privileges which placed her in a certain sense even above the Seraphim: Lady Contemplation, you have seen well how the Seraphim are the children of God, and yet they are His servants. But the very least of souls is the Daughter of the Father and sister of the Son, and friend of the Holy Spirit: and in truth, the Spouse of the entire Trinity.

This dignity of hers allowed her to take in hand Jesus Christ, of being nourished by Him, of doing with Him all she wished. For this reason she declares, at the height of her joy: this could never happen to the angels, no matter how high they are over me... What does it mean to me, then, as to what the Angels experience? In other text, she notes that the Bride of God, who was reposing on the closed cot of the Holy, Undivided Trinity, found fault with creatures because her Beloved fled from her while she was resting and reposing in union with Him. She, however, refuses their comfort and repeats that nothing pleases her, and that no one could ever please her, other than God. And she concludes her own diversion with offering praise to the insatiable love that God nourishes for His Creatures: of all things, God has sufficiency, but only with contact with souls he never has enough.

- **Angelo Silesio**: is one more significant witness taken from his master-piece: What joy there must be when God - His Bride/ In the Eternal Word is entrusted, through His Spirit - is the author's exclamation. In another place, there is described a stupendous vision, where, among other realities, there stands out the hint concerning the Eucharistic banquet:

... the Bride is my soul, the Spouse is the Son of God[the Priest, is the Spirit of God, the throne of the Divinity/ This is the place of the nuptials. The wine that made me dizzy' Is the Blood of My Spouse, the food-stuffs/ Are the divine flesh. The alcove, the room, the bed/ Are the bosom of the Father in which we recline.

- **the Carmelite Mystics , Teresa of Jesus ³² and St. John of the Cross ³³**: naturally, the examples and the citations could be continued here. However, it would be fitting to draw this section to a conclusion with a few thoughts of the teaching of these Carmelites. With their uncommon life of prayer and mystical ascent into the loving union with God teach that the experience of spiritual matrimony can achieve, by the divine will, that are heights that are indeed quite elevated, assuming the level of a grace that is certainly not frequent. From their works, there is learned that here on earth it is the supreme state of loving union with the Divine Spouse, but represented however, and always as the pledge of that definitive and beatifying communion which will take place with one's entrance into eternal life. As such, the spiritual marriage is presented as a transforming, or divinizing union, that is almost permanent and definitive, for which the soul has the habitual consciousness of action and of the presence of God in her – in her most intimate depths – while she enjoys, to the extent that this is granted to her, the vision of Him. In this regard it would be good to distinguish between the transforming union and the spiritual matrimony: without doubt, these are two aspects of the same state, but while the first constitutes its ontological aspect, the second constitutes its psychological experience, the habitual perception of the first – but, as such, it is something that is quite rare.

3. Salient Characteristics of the Nuptial Relationship with the Lord Jesus: having presupposed the general doctrine as exposed above, there is now need to deepen the reflection on the loving spousal union with the Lord Jesus, pondering over a few salient characteristics:

a. Unitive and Exclusive: above all, spousal union must have three intrinsic traits: in the sense that it tends of itself to bind, in an indissoluble and faithful pact, the Church and each of the baptized to the Lord Jesus Christ, **in one sole Spirit** [cf. 1 Co 6:17]. Such union implies of itself that the Spouse and the Bride be bound **by one and the same love and by the same will**. Concerning the **exclusive** character, there merits to be noted a very sharp clarification offered by **Hugh of St. Victor** The exclusive love granted by the Divine Spouse to each soul, while it is indeed a privilege, it is not limited only to a few, but is extended to all: it is shared, but not sub-divided; it is common, but at the same time, singular; personal for each one and yet total for each one; it does not diminish, no matter how far it is extended; it is not consumed with the passing of time; it is ancient and yet always new, continuously desirable and pleasing, eternal in its gift and rich in the happiness that it restores, it fulfills and never tires.

³² cf. *Interior Castle*, cc. 2 & 3.

³³ Cf. *Spiritual Canticle* B, strophe 12, 8.

b. **Reciprocity:** this is a second characteristic, both in its receptivity, as well as in its **gift of self**. *My Beloved is for me, and I am for Him!* [cf. Ct 2:16] which the Canticles points out, and this offers to the heart in love of the Lord Jesus, words full of joy and recognition. However, keeping present the line already drawn by the first two characteristics, it needs to be noted – still another time - that the **dedication of oneself** on the part of the Bride-soul is preceded, aroused, and borne to fulfillment by the initiative that the Beloved of one's heart, the Lord Jesus, has assumed and continuously assumes. As has been explained abundantly in the preceding chapters, this initiative coincides with the **self-giving** that is absolutely free and gratuitous, finalized to establish a definitive and Indissoluble Covenant of Love, that the Son of God, made man, has realized to the fullest level of intensity and efficacy. This He has done with the Gift of His life consumed on the Cross, by the will of the Father, and with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it is in the glorious hour of His Passion that having loved His own who were in the world, He has loved them even to the end [cf. Jn 13:1]. Jesus Christ has loved the Church and has given Himself for her, in order to render her holy, purifying her by means of the bath of water, accompanied by His Word, for the sake of making her appear before the Church, all glorious, without stain, nor defect, or anything similar, but holy and immaculate [cf. Ep 5:25-27].

c. **All of Oneself:** keeping in mind this infinite generosity in loving manifested by the Son of God incarnate through the **unconditional gift of Self**, it should be added that for this reason, He placed continuously at the disposition of His Spouse, in the Holy Spirit, **all of Himself**. This happens in a sublime manner in the sacrament of the Eucharist: He has made of Himself a **total spousal gift in the Eucharist**: He has a **spousal gift in the Eucharist** and remains in the tabernacle as the center of **full communion with His Bride**. On her part, His Bride, precisely by participating in the Holy Mystery of his Body and Blood, remains in her Spouse for ever [cf. Jn 6:56]. And thus, she offers to Him **her total self**, offering herself to Him, and by means of Him to the heavenly Father [cf. Heb 7:25], sustained and guided by the Holy Spirit – Who, as the IIIrd Eucharistic Prayer recalls, this makes of her a **continual sacrifice that is most pleasing to Him** [cf. Rm 15:16].

d. **All is in Common Between the Spouse, the Lord – and the Bride, the Church:** this happens, thanks to the reciprocity of the **loving self-giving** that is experienced by both. This is the way it is meant to be between Him and every person who comes to believe in Him, and who comes to love Him. This has been pointed out, as is clear by listening once more to St. Bernard of Clairvaux – who notes that the type of affection that comes to soul-Spouse is that of total love: she, in fact, asks to be 'kissed', and the one who seeks for this kiss, shows thereby that she is in love. Now, we do not have any other words other than that of Spouse and Bride, with which we are able to express the sweet affections that the Word and the Soul

exchange between one another. In fact, they now have everything in common, and between them there does not exist anything that is proper and nothing is extraneous to either. If then, it is said of spouses in a special and principal manner, that they love, it is reasonable that the soul who loves should come to be known with the title **Bride**.

e. **The Initiative**, as is clear, the Primacy, pertains always and only to the Lord Jesus. Now, just as His manner of acting expresses itself and puts in act that service that He renders as both Revealer and Savior. Hence, it would follow clearly from this that His initiative contains within itself intrinsically, also the gift of the response to be given to Him, the Spouse. The response coincides with the exercise of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and reaches its perfection in charity, which is the greatest of charisms, the best way of all [cf. 1 Co 12:31-13:13]. Having presupposed this, it results then illuminating and instructive the reflection that the Abbot of Clairvaux offers in one of his last sermons on the *Canticles*, with which he places the seal on all that he had taught for so many years. He states that when the soul is converted to the Word, she receives the grace **to reform herself** by means of Him, and to **conform herself to Him**. When the soul is conformed to him in charity, when she loves Him in the manner in which He loves her, in that moment the soul becomes His Bride: *such conformity marries the soul to the Word. Therefore, when she perfectly loves, she espouses Him*. There is thus had a **spiritual marriage**, the loving union that makes of the two one sole spirit, because both wish, or do not want, the same things. And indeed such love suffices for itself. Hence, it happens that when she is transformed, He captures all her affections. So, she is the one who loves and she loves and does not know anything else. The Word Himself, Who is justly the object of honor of stupor and wonder, prefers more that she be loved. They are indeed Husband and Wife. What other relationship or union is there sought among spouses, other than that of being loved and of loving. Indeed, as St. Bernard teaches in this sermon, and as can be grasped from his doctrine and from the experience of so many witnesses, masters and mistresses of the spiritual life, sponsality occupies, among the degrees of love, the most sublime place.

f. **An Assimilating, Transforming Union**: as is clear in the writings of St. Bernard, spousal union transforms one, in so far as it produces the assimilation of the lover to the Beloved: in this sense, the first act has been completed by the Son of God through His Incarnation. He has become in everything like unto us – with the exception of sin – so that we might become similar to Him: He has thus placed Himself as the premise, and the condition of possibility so that those who love Him might receive the grace to become **conform** to Him, Crucified AND Risen, through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Under this aspect, there is not needed to add anything else, both because it seems sufficient to ponder the developments already presented by so many sources already placed in evidence in the preceding pages –

and also because the discussion will continue here, and among other studies. However, a few more thoughts will be offered here.

Each Christian has his own experience of the Lord Jesus Christ, the mater of divine model of all perfection, according to the specific vocation that each has received, and the spirituality that accompanies each one. However, in the final analysis, it needs to be kept in mind the common and universal vocation of all to holiness. On her part, the Church knows that she has already attained perfection in the Blessed Virgin Mary, who shines forth as the model of virtue before the entire community of the elect [cf. LG 40]. Therefore, pondering piously of her, and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, the Church penetrates with veneration and with increasing comprehension into the most sublime mystery of the Incarnation and is conformed ever more to her Spouse [cf. LG 65].

g. Ability and Availability: as a result of all this, the Church and every Christian are rendered able and available, by will of the Father and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Who arouses and nourishes this love, to obey Christ the Spouse and Lord, to receive Him and to accept all from him, living in dependence upon Him and live as He did. In the realization that He, in the quality of the Crucified and Risen Lord, as Head, and Spouse of the Church, He is the first-born of many brothers and sisters [cf. Rm 8:29; cf. Col 1:18], who participate of Him and to live of Him. And in the certainty that God, our Father, Who did not spare His own Son, but offered Him up for all of us, He will give us all things with Him [cf. Rm 8:32; Jn 3:16]. For this reason, St. Bonaventure teaches, we are invited to love Him, and having loved Him, to imitate Him.

4. Sponsality, Virginity, Fecundity: from the description above, there may be grasped the motives, on the basis of which spousal love implies and generates, within the Church, and in every Baptized, virginity and fecundity. Both, at the same time, make up part of the interpretative register of the spousal relationship. Both, however, are considered and esteemed as **nuptial** presents. These are precious gifts, of inestimable worth, which the Divine Spouse offers with immense courtesy to His Bride.

The spousal bond with the Lord Jesus implies virginity, because He, having purified and sanctifies His Bride through the gift of His own life, poured out on the Cross, continues to purify her and to sanctify her with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, so that she might be able to live the love in the exclusive belonging to Him and in her complete and total **Self-Giving**. To this virginity, then, there is intimately bound fecundity, in the form of maternity. This applies, in addition to the Church, also for every single person who lives this sponsality, as is learned, for example, from that passage drawn from the introduction to Origen's Commentary on *Canticles*: Rendered already fertile, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Church generates,

through the Spirit, with the preaching and the sacraments of the initiation, new sons and daughters, thus fulfilling her charge, which is incumbent upon her from being the immaculate Bride of the Incarnate word. All that the son of God did and has taught with a view to the reconciliation of this world, we know it only by means of the account of His past actions, but we receive also the effect of these through the efficacy of His present actions. It is He, in fact, Who having been born of a Virgin Mother, through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, fecundates the uncontaminated Church with the same Holy Spirit, so that, through the birth of baptism, there might be generated a innumerable multitude of the children of God.

This reasoning refers back, without any disruption of continuity, to the holiness as the presupposition and the condition for the efficacy of the mission that the Church fulfills in the world in behalf of all human beings: It is the holiness of the Church, the secret font and infallible measure of her apostolic ardent activity and of her missionary thrust. Only in the measure in which the Church, spouse of Jesus Christ, allows herself to be loved by Him and loves Him in return, does she become the fertile Mother in the Holy Spirit.

The Bride, therefore, ought to keep herself chaste, holy, i.e., faithful to her spouse and Lord: holiness consists in the perfection of charity, and love is perfect only when, generating the **Gift of Himself** to the Lord Jesus, becomes unitive and fecund, also in reference to brothers and sisters who make up the Body of Christ, as well is in reference to every other person gathered in as the *neighbor* to be loved. The union with the spouse, in the final analysis, is sustained by an interior state of virginity and purity which permeates, logically, also the sphere of the body. However, at the same time, it arouses, guarantees and increases this interior state: in the last analysis, the purity of heart is identified with the exclusive love for the Beloved. And she is rendered worthy of His chaste embraces and to enjoy the indescribable tenderness that always accompanies His love.

5. The Spiritual Senses: in the light of all that has been said thus far, it seems evident that the experience of loving union with the Divine Spouse involves the entire person: this participates in it, enjoys it and rejoices in it with all oneself and in all oneself, with 'senses' as well as with 'spirit', in one's bodily nature as well as in each one's interiority. Gradually as the spirit progresses and matures in this loving relationship, the human spirit acquires ever more all the concreteness of sense knowledge: under the sanctifying and transforming action of God, this is re-vested and endowed with a multiform perceptive sensibility, which goes back, in an analogical manner, to that produced by the exercise of the corporal senses. At the same time, also the corporal senses – one's total bodily nature - enjoy the abundance of grace which fills the spirit, above all when the person is totally absorbed by and in the transforming union with God, Who dilates and removes all

measure to one's receptive, cognoscitive ability and capacity for enjoyment. There rests here, in substance, the nucleus flowing from the doctrine of the 'spiritual senses', which prove necessary if one wish to sound and appreciate in due fashion that which the loving spousal union with the Lord Jesus is, and implies.

A further notable aspect of this doctrine pondered here is that these 'spiritual senses' are thought of as steps of a stairway, or as various stages of an itinerary, that gradually, lead and introduce into the **experimental knowledge** of the Divine Spouse, which – in its turn - is enriched and takes advantage of all that is perceived by each single sense. Hence, it is important to give attention both to the order in which the spiritual senses are mentioned – and also, and above all, to the function assigned to them. In general, it begins with the sense of sight, then hearing, which together with taste, and even more by this latter, is the most greatly affective and unitive sense. It is through touch, in fact, that the affective power operates union: this brings it about that one enjoys in a completely satisfying manner the loving relationship with the Beloved of one's own heart, realizing that direct, immediate 'contact', which is made up of kisses, embraces and caresses. Hence, one ought to recognize that the spiritual itinerary flowing from the exercise of these 'spiritual senses' reaches its culmination and is fulfilled only when it reaches the sense of touch, which in the last analysis, allows itself to remain and to repose in union with the Beloved, who procures a most beneficial pleasure.

One last consideration to offer is that this spousal love, given its unitive power, produces the transformation of the Lover in the image of her Beloved. This takes place when one comes to the level of being able to enjoy 'spiritual touch.'

The ICON, or the portrait which, perhaps more than many others, brings immediately before one's eyes the bearing and the level of this effect is that of St. Francis of Assisi with his **stigmata**. Recounting this prodigious event in his *Major Legend*, St. Bonaventure says that the Saint received the **stigmata**, ravished in God by the ardor of his seraphic desires and transformed by a tender compassion in the one who wishes to be crucified out of an excess of charity. Now in this *Legend*, in conforming the primacy of touch, there is shown the most perfect realization: Francis, in *touching* God, finds himself *touched* by Him and in the **stigmata** sees upon himself the signs of the divine *touch*. Therefore, the **stigmata** are the sign of **the interior conformation to the crucified** having reached such an excess as to makes its effects visible in his bodily nature. The **stigmata** attest, furthermore, that the use of the spiritual sense of *touch* has reached its supreme level of cognition and enjoyment, achieving also to a *perfect use* in that St. Francis was indeed *touched*, signed in an indelible manner – in the spirit first, and then in his body - by his Crucified beloved, Who has impressed upon him and within him His **own perfect**

image, and thus has fully transformed and conformed the saint to Himself, moved by the immense love that he nourished for His servant.

The prodigy of the **Stigmata** therefore, allows one to grasp in definitive manner that the knowing of God, by means of *touch* and *embraces*, therefore, does not exclude the dominion of one's sense nature, which, indeed, comes to be the conformed, external sign of the interior experience, precisely as the body of St. Francis became the tangible sacrament of the love that he nourished for the Crucified. However, those nails of the flesh that marked his body, induce us to think that the prodigy of Mount Verna not only realize a *fire in the mind*, but also an *excess in the flesh*. The terms 'excite' and 'arouse' with reference to the flesh insinuate precisely the 'excess' of the whole person of Francis, by showing in this manner how even the body, in addition to the spirit, goes out from itself in order to 'arise', and to encounter the Beloved.

6. Mystical 'Sickness' and the Wound of Love: *Kiss me with the kisses of Your mouth!* [cf. Ct 1:2]. These words which open the *Canticle of Canticles* immediately cast a warm and enveloping light on the desire and the joy that fill the heart of the woman in love, who is enjoying the taste that is both sweet and inebriating of that love which her beloved knows how to transmit to her through his kisses and caresses. *Yes, Your kisses are sweeter than wine!* [cf. Ct 1:2]. These are words that bring a gift to anyone who reads them, and meditates on them, in the certain of being lost in love by the Divine Spouse, the Lord Jesus, Who has bound definitively to Himself every person who believes in Him with the most powerful of bonds: an ardent and tender love, which seduces, captures, which unites and attracts.

A love which enkindles desire. This loving desire...! It is truly a vehement force, infused by the Holy Spirit, which rises up in an unstoppable manner from the very depths of one's soul as a river in full flood which overwhelms and drags along with it all that is found in its course towards the Sea. The open Sea where it will go to spend itself in its impetus, where it will find finally the repose - the Sea which accompanies it with out-stretched arms! The Beloved, the much Loved, the Lord Jesus, Who, knowing that He is being sought with faith, and awaited with love, will not delay much in coming!

This is a love that unites, and not only one time, even if it is forever. It unites, but without taking from the Divine spouse the freedom of withdrawing Himself from His Bride, or of distancing Himself, of hiding Himself, in order to keep alive and ever ready in His Bride the yearning, the quest, the expectancy, the oblation and dallying with Him, without any warning or explaining why. In her, this quest and encounter are given precisely without every having a prefixed hour, an established duration, a place to respect at any cost. *Delicate is the fragrance of Your perfume, Your Name is an oil poured out, and that is why the girls love You!* [cf. Ct 1:3 b].

While she remains recollected and hidden in the space of silent and adoring prayer, while she abandons herself to the quiet of contemplation, the Bride breathes in the delicate perfume which the Divine Spouse spreads around her, enabling her thus to taste the joy of His presence. His 'name' is permeated with perfume, more inebriating than any aroma whatsoever: Jesus of Nazareth, my Lord and my God! That Name that is whispered by the lips, caressed with memories, hidden between her arms, protected carefully in the nuptial chamber of the heart. And this love is charged with guarding Him jealously and withdrawing Him from every foreign and indiscreet look.

Along-side the beauty of the Divine, conquered still once more by His love, the heart trembles with expectancy, because it foresees the moment of the encounter is about to arrive: *Draw me in Your footsteps, let us run! The king has brought me into His rooms; You will be our joy and our gladness. He shall praise Your love more than wine; how right it is to love You...!* [cf. Ct 1:4].

Who could resist the Beloved when He seduces, and overcomes with the power of His Love? *He has taken me to his cellar, and the banner over me is His love!* [cf. Ct 2:4]. When the Bride allows herself to be overtaken by the Divine Spouse – Whose heart burns with love for her – the Bride notes that each time that she experiences that sentiment deep within her, during and after their meeting, it is a kind of **illness** that does not give her respite: *..for I am sick with love...!* [cf. Ct 2:5; 5:8].

The allegorical and spiritual interpretation of this verse has given place to a vast gamut of contributions, especially in the line of **wound**³⁴, provoked by love, by the love that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, nourishes for the persons of whom He is in love. And it is when He enkindles in His disciples the desire for Himself that the Lord Jesus **wounds** them. He strikes them with a love that is so vehement, it is one which cannot really be resisted, nor does anyone want to. His voice, His visage, His kisses, His embraces all involve the Bride to her depths, with a kind of fire leaving its traces, there is opened up in the heart of the beloved person a kind of yearning, need, that will never be satisfied again. And the person who is loved experiences that love for her Lord is like a wound and like an *illness*.

To be in love with the Divine Spouse even to the point of not being able to live, to feel well without Him! The wound is deepened and the illness caused by the deepening wound, spreads its contagion to the whole person. This is a salutary wound, **beneficent illness**. These take over the whole person, absorbing her and all her energies and takes hold of all her interests. They bear and diffuse their salvation, eternal life. They provide an experience of beatifying pleasure, that is indescribable,

³⁴ Cf. *Blessure; Tansverberation; Touches* in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*'.

authentic joy...! And the beloved person does not want to belong to anyone, other than Her Lord, Who has made her His own forever: *I passed by near you; I saw that yours was the age for love; I extended my cloak and my cantle over you and I covered your nudity. I made a Covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became Mine...!* [cf. Ezk 16:8].

If there has ever been anyone who has been burnt by such a faithful love for the Word of God, Who, as the Prophet states, has received the sweet *wound* of His chosen arrow, who has been pierced by the loving dart of His knowledge so much so as to pant with the desire for Him, day and night, to such an extent as not being able to say anything else, of not wanting to hear anything else, of not even knowing how to think to desire to yearn for anything other than He, this soul with every reason says: I am wounded with love, and from Him I have received the wound, about which Isaiah says: You have placed me as a chosen arrow and have hidden me in Your container³⁵.

Thus from **Origen** onward, the spiritual interpretation of Ct 2:5 will bring one to investigate ever more on the effects that love produces in the soul of the Bride in love: the comparison with the arrow, that when it is hurled with force and with precision towards its target, it inheres deeply, and provides the argument and a metaphor that is all the more suggestive. **Gregory of Nyssa**, for example, after having stated that the Archer is God Himself, the One who sends forth His chosen arrow, the Only-Begotten God, and after having clarified that the archer penetrates into the soul together with his arrow, because the son and the Father are indeed One. He calls the arrow 'beautiful', and the blow 'sweet'. In fact, the Bride will have scarcely received the wound of love, when the blow of the arrow is transformed into nuptial joy.

For **St. Ambrose**, the preaching of the Passion suffered by the Lord, is the fruit, given by Christ the Spouse to His Bride, which nourishes her and infuses into her a flavorful and sweet taste [cf. Ct 2:3]. Elsewhere, the Bishop of Milan commented further, what fruit could be sweeter to our palate than the remission of sins? This fruit is the only one that gives sustenance and strength to the Church, which rejoices in suffering by that **wound of love** which she has received for having believed in Christ crucified, the Power and the Wisdom of God [cf. 1 Co 1:23-24]. Of this **wound**, the Church is **wounded**, when she proclaims the death of her own Savior, but this is a **wound of love**. Therefore, whoever does not believe, denies it – who loves, recognizes it. It follows from this that the soul in love with Jesus Christ is 'destroyed' out of love for Him [cf. Ct 5:8] – to 'destroy herself' really means to be transported with every aspiration into the desired object. Therefore, the holy soul does not know how to desire that the Spouse, which is Jesus Christ: yearns for Him, desires Him, tends

³⁵ Cf. Origen, *Comm. Ct.*, III, 8, 13.

toward Him with all her strength warms Him in the bosom of her spirit, and is opened up to him and is poured out and fears only in being able to lose Him.

Other writers have placed in bold relief that also the Lord Jesus bars in Himself the **Wound** provoked in Him not only by the unmeasured and eternal love that He experiences for His beloved Bride, but also from the love that she experiences for Him. With regard to this second aspect, **John of the Cross** teaches that the Spouse, seeing the Bride **wounded** by her love and hearing her moans, is **wounded** by the love of her, since between lovers the **wound** of the one is the **wound** of the other and the sentiment they experience is one ³⁶.

Love gives all and asks for all. It could not be otherwise: the Lord Jesus wishes to be loved with all one's heart, with all one's soul, with all one's strength! [cf. Mt 22:37; cf. Dt 6:5 – *Shema, Yisrael!*]. This is an 'illness' which consumes, but yields increase – which brings about discomfort and suffering, but delight in an insatiable way, which finds a truce and repose only in the arms of the Beloved. If a person is **wounded** just once with genuine love, it does not ever really heal, at least from kissing the same mouth which wounded the soul! [Mechtilde].

To spend oneself, to consume oneself for the Lord Jesus in all one's energies, in all one's own affective sensibility, all of one's 'substance'. This means to pour out all that one possesses. ***If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give it to the poor and you will have a treasure in heaven, then come, and follow Me!*** [cf. Mt 19:21]. This is the sublime challenge to propose a bond, in depth, between the practice of poverty and the total dedication to the Lord Jesus lived in the modality of spousal love. Love with all yourself, the One Who with all Himself has given Himself out of love for you – this is what **Clare of Assisi** recommended to her beloved daughter and sister, Agnes of Prague. On his part, **St. Francis of Assisi**, writing to the Friars on the importance of the Holy Mass, and meditating on the truth of the Eucharistic presence addresses to them this exhortation:

... Notice, Friars, the humility of God, and open before Him your hearts; humble yourselves you, too, because he will exalt you. Nothing, then, of yourselves, hold back for yourselves; so that He might receive all of you, He Who gives Himself totally to you.

Do not terms like: 'give yourself', 'dedicate yourself' to the Lord Jesus mean perhaps the not holding anything back for oneself? Does this not imply perhaps that of being **Love-sick**? Is it not perhaps true that one is worth whatever he gives – or, whatever he spends for Him – but, first of all, for what reason and how does one give of himself, for what reason and how were one's forces, faculties, and goods of which

³⁶ Cf. St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle B*, Strophe 13, 9 – a commentary on Ps 42-43.

each may dispose? The reason is it not only for Him, Jesus of Nazareth,, the Only-Begotten Son of God, the Spouse and the Lord of the Church? Is it not perhaps established by his example and by his teaching? Is not the extent of all this self-giving dictated by the difference between the superfluous and the essential, between not wanting to run any risk and the decision to run also the risk of not having anything left over for oneself, in order to provide for one's own needs? The measure, then, is clearly indicated by Jesus Himself when He praises the widow who, in contrast to all the others, has offered the most of all because she has not given just the superfluous, but in her misery she has given all that she had to live! [cf. Lk 21:4].

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CONCLUSION

[1] Overall Balance:

The confession of faith that the Lord Jesus is indeed the **Spouse of the Church** in the Holy Spirit has been the object of these reflections on **Spousal Christology**. Constructed on a solid scriptural foundation, it is a Christology rich in doctrinal content and in the fecund spiritual implications. The systematic procedure adopted in the research and the later elaboration of this reflection has brought about, and shed some light logically, on the inter-action between the *listening*, the *understanding* and the *experience of faith*. However, the most marked characteristic of this method is the importance of the experience of faith as the font and as the place of development of the reflection. Still once more, therefore, and especially in this case, one must insist that the spiritual life and the testimonies of holiness in the Church are a **theological 'place'**, true and proper. In fact, from the documentary material examined in this study, one can deduce easily that the greater support proceeds from the **spiritual** and **mystical literature**, from **Liturgical** texts, from **homilies and mystical teachings**, from **biblical commentaries**, composed from an **allegorical-spiritual style**.

The material used to build up the physiognomy of this **Spousal Christology** has been put together thanks to the investigation conducted in a variety of contexts. In these, the theme is either clearly present, or the more deeply developed. In this regard, attempting to draw up some kind of a balance from the historical point of view and before revisiting the themes already completed in this research, it can be said that after the first flourishing of texts that took place in the Patristic Era, the theme once more experienced a re-flourishing during the Middle Ages. Then, moving ahead in time, even if there were traces of it in other fonts, it continued being present above all the various writings in the literature of a spiritual and mystical bent, especially on the anvil of the biographic and hagiographical testimonies regarding the experience of loving spousal union with the Lord Jesus lived by different individuals.

Actually, as has been pointed out in the Introduction, the theme of the espousals has continued to be the object of rich studies and research that retains much interest for many. However, this spousal theme – for whatever reason – has remained absent for the most part from systematic Christology. For this reason, this present reflection is meant to fill this gap, at least in an initial manner. At the same time a reflection of this nature might indeed lead to recovering and leading reflective believers to appreciate ever more the value that the paradigm of the nuptials bring both to the comprehension of the love which the Lord Jesus nourishes for the Church and for every member of His Body, as far as correspondence to this love is concerned.

From an over-all look at the doctrinal input, there is noted immediately the great leap from the **Incarnation** to the **Redemptive Passion** of the Lord. These two events presented in a spousal perspective once more emphasizes the real necessity of maintaining the relationship between **Christology and Contemplation**. Consequently, this confirms the centrality of the attention always to be given to the humanity of Jesus Christ, understood in a contemplative mode.

In a later reflection, one should note the analogous emphasis given to the role of the Holy Spirit, recovered in particular ways since Vatican II. From the point of view of Revelation, Pneumatology is unveiled as an essential component of Spousal Christology. This will be given its own study. While not every single aspect of Pneumatology can ever be presented in any study of it, this is primarily because the study might follow along the lines of spiritual experiences of some of the great mystics in the history of the Church.

Any reflection on **Pneumatology** would then almost automatically lead to further reflections on **Ecclesiology** – the Church as the Spouse of Christ, only touched on here, almost in passing. This, then, would lead to further reflections in **Sacramentology** – and in particular, there would be need to ponder in depth from the Spousal perspective the sacraments of Initiation, **Baptism and Eucharist [Confirmation...?]**. Thus, this theme permeates so much of the data of Divine revelation, there might emerge the truly central and coordinating role of Christology in the panorama of Dogmatic Theology.

2. The Doctrinal Content more in Depth – Some Possible Avenues of Approach

Considering the whole sphere of biblical literature, from Gn to Rv, there is deduced that the intention of God has always been that of establishing some kind of a relationship, referred to most often as a **Covenant**, with created humanity, of uniting Himself to it and to unite it to Himself, with a bond of indissoluble love for all eternity. This bond finds its spousal symbolism in a re-presentation that is often sublime, noting that the inspired authors who develop the story of this Covenant as it unfolds – beginning with the Prophet **Hoseah**. In making recourse to the symbolism in question, this will reach its high-point in the promise and the subsequent expectancy, from the eschatological nuptials between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Church, announced then in the Apocalypse.

Jesus, Son of God, is the messiah-Spouse Who inaugurates the time of joy for the salvation which is already underway, from the One Who is the Sole mediator [cf. Mt 9:14-17, par.; Jn 2:1-11]. He is the Crucified and Risen Lord Who sends to the Church, His Bride, the **Nuptial Gift** of the Holy Spirit. When He, the Spouse is present, this is the moment to celebrate, to participate in the **Nuptial Banquet** [cf. Mt 22:1-14; Lk 14:16-24], of allowing joy to invade everywhere [cf. Jn 3:29]. On her part, the

Church, as Bride who belongs to him already in a definitive manner [cf. 2 Co 11:2; Ep 5:25-27], is committed, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit [cf. Rv 22:17], to guard integrally her virginity and to can a vigilant watch in her expectancy for the return of the Spouse, in order to be ready to celebrate with Him the eternal nuptials [cf. Mt 25:1-13; Rv 19:5-8; 21:1-27].

In Chapter II, then the reflection was on that developed by certain Patristic authors, who sublimely instructed successive generations, the spousal character inherent in the love that the Lord Jesus nourishes towards the Church can be traced in the various moments of the Salvific Economy that culminates in the Pasch and Pentecost.

In the first place, the Incarnation constitutes the event and the act with which the son of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, has *espoused* - i.e., united to itself forever – the human nature assumed in the womb of the Virgin Mary. This is the beginning and the foundation of the indissoluble union with all human beings and with every single human being. Consequently, this enormous fact serves as the initiation and the foundation of the union with the Church, chosen by him from eternity, as His Bride [indicating free choice] and Body [indicating union] – and that in Him the Church is the Universal Sacrament of salvation.

Having come from the Father and entered into this world ‘for us men and for our salvation’, the Son of God then celebrated definitively the Nuptials with the Church, in the Paschal ‘Hour’. In this regard, it is held present that the sacrifice of life offered on the Cross is usually comprehended – keeping in mind the authors already studied – as the decisive act through which the Lord Jesus has given life to the Church, forming her and uniting her forever to Himself, as His Body and His Bride. This doctrine, which is based, among other places, on the episode of the Piercing of the Side related by Jn [19:31-37], has been worked out also in analogy with the Gn account of the creation of woman, formed with the rib taken from Adam [cf. Gn 2:21-23]. The Church, then, of whom the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, is the first-fruit and the image, appearing as the New Eve. She is the woman, who in relationship with Jesus Christ, the New Adam, is both Virgin and Bride. In relationship to Christians, she is the Mother who generates them in the faith. This fecundity is seen also as a consequence of the vivifying and sanctifying action developed by the Holy Spirit which Christ as Spouse bestows on His Bride.

Lastly, in rising from the dead, the Lord Jesus has come forth as the Spouse from this Nuptial Chamber [cf. Ps 19:6], i.e., from His Redemptive Passion, sealed by His Death on the Cross and has become the Mediator and the Font of the Nuptial Gift of the Church, poured out on the day of Pentecost, and given to all believers in Him. And now He shines forth before the eyes of His Bride as the Immolated Lamb and the Spouse eternally faithful, dressed in a resplendent garment, symbol of the Divine

Glory which pertains to Him as the son of God, glorified by the Father and the Glorifier of the Father. This resplendent vesture – and this detail is not marginal to the revealed message – refers back to that mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels at the moment of the Transfiguration [cf. Mt 17:2, par]. He has now dressed the Church with His own luminous robe – but, the Church waits to enjoy forever the eternal splendor of the glory of her Spouse, when she will have reached the condition of the Heavenly Jerusalem described in the Apocalypse.

Entering more directly into the reflections on the Holy Spirit in this regard, will be put off until another time. However, there can be placed in evidence that the Holy Spirit presides over both the communion and the unity [cf. 2 Co 13:13]. He is, in the Church, and for the Church, the Person-Gift, and the Persona-Love which, cooperating with the Lord Jesus, assures and brings increase to the loving union with him, and in Him, with the Father and with all the members of the ecclesial body [cf. 1 Co 12:13]. Thus, indwelling in the Church as in a Temple, He vivifies her, gives her increase as the Body and the Bride of Christ and helps her to prepare herself worthily for the day of the eschatological nuptials.

He is the Love Who unites and Who opens up to **the attitude of self-giving**, through which each Christian discovers and experiences how to love the Lord Jesus with an oblation thrust and with an undivided heart, in the desire of placing oneself at His disposition and allows oneself to be conquered by Him every day more, touches with the hand just Who the Holy Spirit is and therefore they are the effects of grace which He produces as the Lord Who gives life. Therefore, authentic love communicated by the Holy Spirit Love implies, on the one hand, that dedication accompanied by gratuity – and on the other, the acceptance that leads from intimacy.

A possible outline for an initial reflection on the Holy Spirit could be the following:

The Holy Spirit: Nuptial Gift and Bond of Love

- 1. The Gift of the Holy Spirit in the 4th Gospel**
 - a. The Spirit and Jesus revealing the Father**
 - b. Jesus promises the Spirit: the Paraclete in the Farewell Discourse**
 - c. Jesus glorified by the Spirit**
- 2. Nuptial Kiss and Gift [Ambrose, Bernard, Gertrude]**
- 3. The Holy Spirit as Principle of Loving Communion and Spousal Union**
 - a. The Spirit seals the Communion between Jesus and the Church**
 - b. The Spirit provides the Nuptial Garment of Charity**

c. **The Spirit of the Spouse lights and fans the Flame of Charity**

4. **The Holy Spirit: Principle of Spusal joy**

a. **The Joy of the Spirit**

b. **Jubilation of Heart**

5. **The Spirit and the Spouse say: *Come, Lord Jesus!* [cf. Rv 22:17]³⁷**

Finally, just a few points on those demands that derive from that spousal, loving union of which each Christian can have the experience, according to the initiative and the action of the Holy Spirit, and according to the specific vocation received by each one – to the extent that each participates in the nuptial love between the Lord Jesus and the Church. This truth, affirmed, expressed and sufficiently explained in the course of these reflections, represents one more of the fundamental conclusions upon which should be drawn.

The person who is loved by the Lord Jesus, reaches out to seek His company and to allow himself to be permeated entirely by His love, knows and learns, day after day. That the **total gift of self** is expressed in giving oneself and in entrusting oneself to the Beloved Spouse, the beloved of the heart. One knows and learns further that gratuity brings with it the initiative of willing to love the other, and contemporaneously, leads one to decide, to choose to have oneself loved by the other without reservations and without measure. Thus, the two wills meet and are united to the point of becoming one sole will. And when the person who is in love finds himself reaching out and ready to take the initiative, to accomplish gestures of love for the Spouse, to treat Him with tenderness and to seek Him insistently, there is noted – with great stupor and recognition – that the soul has already been conquered by the Beloved, but also of having conquered Him!. The soul comes to realize that each one is called by the love of the Beloved to love him every day more with an undivided heart, until this is done forever.

Therefore, spousal love – that true and authentic – implies the full acceptance of the other in his own person, in proper intimacy, in each one's vital 'space', in each one's existential environment, in the webs of relationships with other persons, and these are brought forward and become interwoven in the unfolding of each day. To welcome, to extend hospitality to the beloved...! When this takes place, then it is well understood that the *Amen*, and the *Fiat* that one might address to the Lord Jesus can only blossom forth in the progressive experience of the loving union with Him, willed and chosen as the one thing necessary! [cf. Lk 10:42]:

³⁷ Cf. Vincenzo Battaglia, *Il Signore Gesù Cristo, Sposo della Chiesa. Cristiologia e contemplazione*. 2 Bologna: EDB 2001. Indice, p. 216

... Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ – can hardships, or distress, or persecution, or lack of food, and clothing, or threats of violence, as scripture says;

For your sake we are being massacred all day long, treated as sheep to be slaughtered?

No, we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of Him who loved us. For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nothing already in existence and nothing still to come, nor any power, nor the heights nor the depths, nor any created thing whatever, will be able to come between us and the love of god, known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord...[cf. Rm 8:35-39].

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