Commentary on the Song of Songs

Gregory the Great (c. AD 540–604)

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Gregory the Great Commentary on the Song of Songs [Editor's note: The commentary on the Song of Songs translated here appears in Migne's Patrologia Latina under the name of Pope Gregory the Great, but it is a composite medieval text. The brief opening section (prologue through roughly Song 1:8/1:9) is Gregory's authentic but unfinished exposition, delivered orally to a small circle of monks and preserved from notes taken by his notary Claudius; Gregory himself expressed dissatisfaction with the transcript and never revised it to completion. The much longer continuation, which carries the allegorical interpretation through the entire biblical book to 8:14, is the work of the eleventh-century Norman Benedictine Robert of Tombelaine, a monk and hermit who lived in seclusion on the tidal islet of Tombelaine near Mont-Saint-Michel. Medieval copyists, recognizing Robert's profoundly Gregorian style, heavy dependence on the saint's imagery, and monastic spirituality, routinely transmitted the two pieces as a single work under Gregory's far more famous name—an attribution that persisted in manuscripts and early prints. This richly allegorical and tropological reading (the Bride as Church or individual soul, the Bridegroom as Christ) proved influential on later medieval exegesis, including the Glossa Ordinaria, and remains a valuable witness to eleventh-century Benedictine contemplative theology.]

INTRODUCTION. 1. After the human race was expelled from the joys of paradise, coming into this pilgrimage of the present life, it has a heart blind to spiritual understanding. If this blind heart were told in a human voice, "Follow God," or "Love God," as was said to it in the Law, once cast outside and grown cold through the torpor of unbelief, it would not grasp what it heard. Therefore the divine word speaks to the torpid and cold soul through certain enigmas, and from things which it knows, it secretly introduces into it the love which it does not know. 2. For allegory constructs a kind of machine for the soul placed far from God, so that through it the soul may be lifted up to God. Indeed, through the interposition of enigmas, while it recognizes something in the words that is its own, it understands in the meaning of the words what is not its own; and through earthly words it is separated from earth. For by that which it does not shrink from as known, it comes to understand something unknown. For through the things known to us from which allegories are fashioned, divine meanings are clothed, and while we recognize the outer words through familiar things, we arrive at inner understanding.

3. For this is why in this book, which is written as the Song of Songs, words of what seems like bodily love are set down, so that the soul, rubbed back from its torpor through the language of its own familiarity, might grow warm again; and through the words of the love that is below, it is aroused to the love that is above. For in this book kisses are named, breasts are named, cheeks are named, thighs are named; in these words the sacred description is not to be mocked, but rather the greater mercy of God is to be considered. For when He names the members of the body and thus calls us to love, we must note how wonderfully and mercifully He works with us. He who, in order to kindle our heart to the prompting of sacred love, extended Himself even to the words of our shameful love. But where He humbles Himself in speaking, from there He exalts us in understanding; because from the language of this love we learn with what power we should burn with love for the divine.

4. But we must carefully consider this, lest when we hear the words of outward love, we remain at perceiving outward things, and the device that is set up to lift us instead weighs us down all the more, so that we are not lifted up. We must therefore, in these bodily words, in these outward words, seek whatever is interior, and when speaking about the body, we must become as if outside the body. To this wedding of the bridegroom and bride it is necessary to come with an understanding of intimate love, that is, with a wedding garment, lest if we are not clothed with a wedding garment—that is, with a worthy understanding of love—we be driven from this wedding feast into outer darkness, that is, into the blindness of ignorance. We must pass through these words of passion to the power of impassibility. For Sacred Scripture is in its words and meanings as a painting is in its colors and subjects, and exceedingly foolish is he who clings so to the colors of a painting that he does not know the things that are painted. For if we embrace the words that are spoken outwardly and are ignorant of the meanings, we are like those who, not knowing the things depicted, hold only the colors. The letter kills, as it is written, but the spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:6); for the letter covers the spirit just as chaff covers the grain;

but it belongs to beasts of burden to feed on chaff, and to humans to feed on grain. Therefore whoever uses human reason should cast away the chaff of beasts and hasten to eat the grain of the spirit; for this indeed is its usefulness, that the mysteries wrapped in the letter be kept concealed. For hence it is written: ”The wise conceal knowledge” (Prov. 10:14), because indeed spiritual understanding is covered beneath the covering of the letter. Hence again in the same book it is written: ”It is the glory of God to conceal a word” (Prov. 25:2). For to the mind seeking God, God appears all the more gloriously the more subtly and deeply He is searched out, that He may appear. But should we not seek what God conceals in mysteries? We certainly should, for it follows: ”And it is the glory of kings to search out a matter” (ibid.). For those who have already learned to rule their bodies and the movements of the flesh are kings. Therefore the glory of kings is to search out a matter, because it is the praise of those who live well to examine the secrets of God’s commandments. Therefore, hearing words of human interaction, we must be as if beyond human, lest if we hear what is said in a merely human way, we can perceive nothing of divinity from what we ought to hear. Paul desired his disciples to be, as it were, no longer mere men, to whom he said:

”For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not mere men? (1 Cor. 3:3). The Lord, as it were, no longer reckoned His disciples as mere men when He said: ”Who do men say the Son of Man is? (Matt. 16:13). When they had answered with the words of men, He immediately added: ”But who do you say that I am? For when He says ”men” above and then adds ”but you,” He makes a certain distinction between men and the disciples, because by imparting divine things to them He was making them above men, as the Apostle says: ”If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away” (2 Cor. 5:17). And we know that in our resurrection the body is so joined to the spirit that everything that had belonged to suffering is taken up into the power of the spirit. Therefore he who follows God ought to imitate daily his own resurrection, so that just as he will then have nothing subject to suffering in his body, so now he may have nothing subject to suffering in his heart, so that according to the inner man he may already be a new creature, may already trample underfoot whatever has grown old, and in ancient words seek only the power of newness.

5. For Sacred Scripture is indeed a mountain, from which the Lord comes into our hearts for understanding; of which mountain it is said through the prophet: ”God will come from Lebanon, and the Holy One from the shady and dense mountain” (Hab. 3:3). This mountain is both dense in its teachings and shady in its allegories. But it must be known that when the voice of the Lord sounds on the mountain, we are commanded to wash our garments and to be cleansed from every defilement of the flesh, if we hasten to approach the mountain. For it is written that ”if a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned” (Heb. 12:20). For a beast touches the mountain when those given over to irrational impulses draw near to the heights of Sacred Scripture and do not understand it as they ought, but irrationally bend it to the understanding of their own pleasure [perhaps ”will”]. For every absurd person, or one sluggish in understanding, if he is seen near this mountain, is slain by the most severe sentences as if by stones. For this mountain burns, because Sacred Scripture, to be sure, sets on fire with the flame of love the one whom it spiritually fills. Whence it is written: ”Your word is fire-tested” (Ps. 119:140). Whence when certain ones walking on the road heard the words of God, they said: ”Was not our heart burning within us, while he opened to us the Scriptures? (Luke 24:32). Whence it is said through Moses:

”In his right hand a fiery law” (Deut. 33:2). By the left hand of God the wicked are understood, who do not pass over to the right side; the right hand of God represents the elect, who are separated from those on the left. In the right hand of God, therefore, is a fiery law, because in the hearts of the elect, who are to be placed at the right hand, the divine commandments blaze, and they are set aflame with the ardor of charity. Let this fire, therefore, burn away whatever rust and decay is outwardly in us, so that it may offer our mind as a whole burnt offering in the contemplation of God.

6. Nor should it be overlooked that this book is called not the Song, but the Song of Songs; for just as in the Old Testament some things are holy and others the Holy of Holies, some are Sabbaths and others the Sabbath of Sabbaths, so in Sacred Scripture some are Songs and others the Song of Songs. The holy things were those in the Tabernacle and those

carried out in the outer area; the Sabbaths were those celebrated each week; but the Holy of Holies was received with a certain more secret veneration, and the Sabbath of Sabbaths was observed only on its own appointed feasts. So the Song of Songs is a certain secret and solemn interior reality, a mystery that is penetrated through hidden meanings. For if one attends only to the outward words, it is no mystery.

7. It must also be known that in Sacred Scripture there are some Songs of victory, some Songs of exhortation and attestation, some Songs of exultation, some Songs of help, and some Songs of union with God. A Song of victory is what Mary sang after the crossing of the Red Sea, saying: "Let us sing to the Lord, for He has been gloriously honored: the horse and its rider He has cast into the sea" (Exod. 15:1). A Song of exhortation and attestation is what Moses said to the Israelites as they drew near to the promised land: "Attend, O heaven, to what I shall speak; let the earth hear the words from my mouth" (Deut. 32:1). A Song of exultation is what Hannah, having perceived in herself the fecundity of the Church, sang, saying: "My heart has exulted in the Lord" (1 Kings 2:1). Through herself she expressed the figurative fecundity of the Church's offspring, when she says: "The barren woman has borne many, and she who had many children has grown weak" (ibid., 5). A Song of help is what David sang after battle, saying: "I will love You, O Lord, my strength" (Ps. 17:1). But a Song of union with God is that which is sung at the wedding of the bridegroom and bride, that is, the Song of Songs; which is more sublime than all the other Songs inasmuch as it is offered at a wedding of more sublime solemnity. For through those Songs, vices are avoided; through this one, each person is enriched with virtues. Through those, the enemy is guarded against; through this, the Lord is embraced with intimate love.

8. And it should be noted that sometimes the Lord in Sacred Scripture calls Himself Lord, sometimes Father, sometimes Bridegroom. For when He wishes to be feared, He names Himself Lord; when He wishes to be honored, Father; when He wishes to be loved, Bridegroom. He Himself says through the prophet: "If I am Lord, where is My fear? If I am Father, where is My honor? (Malachi 1:6). And again He says: "I have betrothed you to Myself in justice and faith" (Hosea 2:20). Or indeed: "I have remembered the day of your betrothal in the desert" (Jeremiah 2:2). And indeed with God there is no "when" and "when not," but because He first wishes to be feared so that He may be honored, and first to be honored so that one may reach Him, He names Himself Lord on account of fear, Father on account of honor, and Bridegroom on account of love. Through fear let one come to honor, and through His honor let one arrive at love. Therefore, by as much as honor is worthier than fear, so much more does God rejoice to be called Father than Lord; and by as much as love is dearer than honor, so much more does God rejoice to be called Bridegroom than Father. In this book, therefore, the Lord and the Church are named not Lord and handmaid, but Bridegroom and Bride, so that one may serve not fear alone, not reverence alone, but also love, and in these outward words the interior affection may be stirred.

When He names Himself Lord, He indicates that we were created; when He names Himself Father, He indicates that we were adopted; when He names Himself Bridegroom, He

indicates that we are united. But to be united to God is greater than to be created and adopted. In this book, therefore, where He is called Bridegroom, something more sublime is conveyed, since in it the covenant of union is shown. These names are recalled with frequent repetition in the New Testament (because the union of the Word and flesh, of Christ and the Church, has already been accomplished and celebrated). Whence John says, when the Lord was coming: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom" (John 3:29). Whence the same Lord says: "The sons of the bridegroom shall not fast, as long as the bridegroom is with them" (Matthew 9:15). Whence it is said to the Church: "I have betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). Again: "That He might present to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle" (Ephesians 5:27). And again in the Apocalypse of John: "Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Apocalypse 19:9). And again in the same place: "And I saw the bride like a new bride descending from heaven" (Apocalypse 21:2).

9. Nor is it far from a great mystery that this third book of Solomon is placed among his works. For the ancients said there were three orders of life: moral, natural, and contemplative; which the Greeks called ethical, physical, and theoretical. In Proverbs, the moral life is expressed, where it says: "Hear, my son, my wisdom, and incline your ear to my prudence" (Prov. 1:8). In Ecclesiastes, the natural life: for there it is considered that all things tend toward an end, when it says: "Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity" (Eccles. 1:2). In the Song of Songs, the contemplative life is expressed, since in it the coming and sight of the Lord himself is desired; when it is said in the voice of the bridegroom: "Come from Lebanon, come" (Song 4:8). Or indeed he signified the orders and lives of the three patriarchs, namely Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For Abraham held to morality through obedience; Isaac prefigured the natural life by digging wells. For to dig wells in the depths is to search out and examine through natural consideration all things that are below. Jacob held to the contemplative life, for he saw angels ascending and descending. But since natural consideration is not brought to perfection unless morality is first maintained, rightly after Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is placed. And since heavenly contemplation is not perceived unless these fleeting things below are first despised, rightly after Ecclesiastes the Song of Songs is placed. For the first task is to compose one's conduct;

afterward to regard all things that are present as though they were not present; and in the third place, with a purified eye of the heart, to behold the things above and within. Thus through these gradations of the books he made, as it were, a kind of ladder to contemplation, so that while first things are conducted well in the world, afterward even the honorable things of the world may be despised, and finally even the inmost things of God may be beheld. Moreover, the coming of the Lord is awaited in this work generally from the voice of the Church, in such a way that each individual soul may also specifically behold the entrance of God into its own heart, as the arrival of the bridegroom into the bridal chamber.

10. And it must be known that in this book four speaking characters are introduced: namely the bridegroom and the bride, the young maidens with the bride, and the bands of compan-

ions with the bridegroom. For the bride herself is the perfect Church; the bridegroom is the Lord; the young maidens with the bride are souls just beginning and maturing through new zeal; and the companions of the bridegroom are either angels, who often appeared to men coming from him, or certainly all the perfect men in the Church who have learned to proclaim the truth to men. But those who individually are young maidens or companions are, taken all together, the bride, because taken all together they are the Church. Although these three names can also be understood with respect to each individual person. For whoever loves God perfectly is the bride; whoever proclaims the bridegroom is a companion; whoever still as a novice follows the way of the good is a young maiden. We are therefore invited to be the bride; if we cannot yet achieve this, let us be companions; if we have not attained even this, let us at least come to this bridal chamber as young maidens. Since, then, we have said that the bridegroom and the bride are the Lord and the Church, let us, as young maidens or companions, hear the words of the bridegroom, let us hear the words of the bride, and in their speeches let us learn the fervor of love. And so let the holy Church, long awaiting the coming of the Lord, long thirsting for the fountain of life, declare how she longs to see the presence of her bridegroom, how she desires him.

CHAPTER I. (Chapter I, verse 1.) Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.

1. The Lord had sent angels to her, patriarchs and prophets to her, bearing spiritual gifts; but she sought to receive the gifts not through the servants of the bridegroom, but through the bridegroom himself. Let us place before our eyes the entire human race from the beginning of the world to the end of the world, that is, the whole Church, as one bride who had received pledges through spiritual gift by the Law; but nevertheless she sought the presence of her bridegroom, she who says: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." For the holy Church, sighing for the coming of the Mediator of God and men, for the coming of her Redeemer, makes prayer to the Father, that he may send the Son and illuminate her with his presence: so that he may address the same Church no longer through the mouths of the prophets, but with his own mouth. Hence also concerning the same bridegroom it is written in the Gospel, when he sat on the mountain and spoke the words of lofty precepts: "And opening his mouth he said" (Matt. 5:2): as if it were openly said: Then he opened his own mouth, who had previously opened the mouths of the prophets for the exhortation of the Church. But behold, while she sighs, while she seeks him as though absent, she suddenly beholds him present. The grace of our Creator has this quality, that when we speak of him while seeking him, we enjoy his presence. Hence it is written in the Gospel that while Cleophas and another were speaking about him on the road, they deserved to see him present. Therefore, while the holy Church desires the bridegroom who is yet to be incarnate, still absent, she suddenly beholds him present, and adds: (Verse 1.) "For your breasts are better than wine. And the fragrance of your ointments is above all spices."

2. The wine was the knowledge of the Law, the knowledge of the prophets. But when the Lord came, because He wished to preach wisdom through the flesh, He caused it, as it were, to lie hidden in the breasts of the flesh: for what we could by no means grasp in His divinity,

we might recognize in His incarnation. Hence not undeservedly are His breasts praised, because the condescension of His preaching accomplished in our hearts what the teaching of the Law could by no means achieve: for the preaching of the incarnation nourished us before the teaching of the Law did. Let her therefore say: Your breasts are better than wine. Confirming this still further, she adds and says: And the fragrance of your ointments is above all spices. The ointments of the Lord are His virtues; the ointment of the Lord was the Holy Spirit, of whom it is said through the prophet: God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions (Ps. 44:8). With this oil He was anointed when He became incarnate; for He did not first exist as a man and afterward receive the Holy Spirit, but because He became incarnate through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, He was anointed with this same oil when He was created as man. The fragrance of His ointment, therefore, is the sweet scent of the Holy Spirit, who proceeding from Him, remained in Him; the fragrance of His ointments is the sweet scent of the virtues which He worked.

Now the Church had spices, because she had many gifts of the Holy Spirit, which in the house of God, that is, in the congregation of the saints, gave off the aroma of good reputation and announced the sweetness of the future Mediator. But the fragrance of your ointments is above all spices: because the sweet scent of the Bridegroom's virtues, which came about through His incarnation, surpassed the proclamations of the Law, which had been bestowed in advance by the Bridegroom as pledges. For the Church grew in understanding by as much as she merited to be illumined by the grace of a fuller vision. Those spices of the Law were administered through angels; this ointment was given through His presence. But because by the brightness of His presence the goods of the Law, which were believed to be sublime, were surpassed, let it rightly be said: The fragrance of your ointments is above all spices.

3. But what we have said generally about the whole Church, let us now understand specifically about each individual soul. Let us set before our eyes a certain soul clinging to the pursuit of gifts, receiving understanding from the preaching of others, which through divine grace desires to be illuminated itself as well — so that at some point it may also understand by itself, since it considers that it understands nothing except through the words of preachers — and says: 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.' Let him touch me within, that I may know by understanding, and no longer enjoy the voices of preachers, but delight in the touch of interior grace. He was kissing Moses, as it were, with the kiss of his mouth, when he extended understanding to him through the confidence of familiar grace. Whence it is written: 'If there be a prophet, I will speak to him in a dream; but not as to my servant Moses: for I speak to him mouth to mouth' (Num. 12:6). For to speak mouth to mouth is, as it were, to kiss, and to touch the inner understanding with the mind. There follows: (Verse 1.) 'For your breasts are better than wine.'

4. The breasts of God are, as we said before, the condescension of His most humble incarnation. But the wisdom of the world is like a certain wine: for it intoxicates the mind, because it renders it alien to the understanding of humility. Philosophers are intoxicated as if by a certain wine, while they pass through the worldly love of the crowd. Let the Church despise

this wisdom and desire the most humble preaching of the Lord's incarnation (let what nourishes her through the weakness of His flesh please her more than what this world exalts through the pride of false prudence), and let her say: 'Because your breasts are better than wine', that is, the most humble preaching of your incarnation surpasses the veiled wisdom of the world. Whence it is written: 'The weakness of God is stronger than man; and the foolishness of God is wiser than man' (1 Cor. 1:25). But because those wise men of this world sometimes seem to devote themselves to certain virtues (for you may see many of them possessing charity, maintaining gentleness, practicing outward respectability in all things — virtues which they display not to please God but to please men; and for this reason these virtues are not virtues, because they do not seek to please God; yet they have a fragrance in human nostrils, since they produce a good reputation in human judgment) — let these be compared to the true fragrance of our Redeemer, let them be compared to true virtues, and let it be said: 'The fragrance of your ointments surpasses all spices.' That is, the sweet scent of your virtues surpasses every appearance of virtue among the wise of this world, because it transcends their counterfeit images by its truth. Because we said that this which has been stated can be understood in a second sense concerning each individual soul, let us still pursue that same meaning more subtly, if we can, with the Lord's help.

5. Every soul that fears God is already under his yoke, but still far off, because it fears: for each one advances toward God only insofar as he loses the punishment of fear and receives from him the grace of charity. Let us place before our eyes the soul of any of the elect, which is kindled by continual desire into love of the vision of the bridegroom, because what it cannot perfectly perceive in this life, it contemplates his loftiness and is pierced with compunction from that very love; for that very compunction which comes through charity, which is also kindled by desire, is as it were a kind of kiss; for as often as the soul is pierced with compunction in love of him, so often does it kiss God. For there are many who already indeed fear the Lord, who already undertake good works; but they do not yet kiss him, because they are not at all pierced with compunction by love of him. This was well signified at the banquet of the Pharisee, who, when he had received the Lord, and when he disparaged in his heart the woman kissing his feet, heard: "When I entered your house, you gave me no kiss; but she, from the moment she entered, has not ceased to kiss my feet" (Luke 7:44). Everyone who already gives alms, who already devotes himself to good works, as it were receives Christ at a banquet, feeds Christ, who does not cease to sustain him in his members;

but if he is not yet pierced with compunction through love, he does not yet kiss his feet. Therefore the woman who kisses is placed above the host, because he who is pierced with compunction in desire for the Lord by the inward ardor of the mind is placed above the one who gives his outward possessions. And well was it said: "She has not ceased to kiss my feet. For it is not enough to be pierced with compunction once in the love of God and then rest, but compunction ought to exist and to increase; whence the woman is praised because she did not cease to kiss, that is, she did not at all cease to be pierced with compunction. Whence it is said through the prophet: "Appoint a solemn day with frequent observances, even to the horn of the altar" (Psalm 117:27). The solemn day of the Lord is the compunction

of our heart; but then a solemn day is appointed with frequency when one is continually moved to tears for love of him. To which, as if we were to say: "How long shall we do these things? How long shall we be afflicted with tribulations? He immediately added the limit until which this should be done, saying: "Even to the horn of the altar. For the horn of the altar is the exaltation of the interior sacrifice, where, when we shall have arrived, it will no longer be necessary for us to make a solemn day to the Lord from our lamentation.

Therefore let the soul that already desires to be pierced with compunction through love, that already longs to contemplate the vision of its bridegroom, say: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."

6. Or certainly the kiss of his mouth is the very perfection of interior peace, upon reaching which nothing further will remain for us to seek. Hence what follows is also fittingly added: 'For your breasts are better than wine.' For wine is the knowledge of God which we have received while situated in this life; but the breasts of the bridegroom we embrace when we already contemplate him in the eternal homeland through the embrace of his presence. Let her say therefore: 'Your breasts are better than wine.' As if to say: Great indeed is the knowledge which you have bestowed upon me about yourself in this life; great is the wine of your acquaintance, with which you inebriate me; but your breasts are better than wine, because then through direct vision and through the sublimity of contemplation, whatever is now known about you through faith is transcended. 'And the fragrance of your ointments is above all spices'; while she excels by the power of knowledge, the power of chastity, the power of mercy, the power of humility, the power of charity. If the life of the saints did not possess the fragrance of spices from their virtues, Paul would not say: 'We are the good fragrance of Christ to God in every place' (II Cor. 1:15). But far more excellent is that anointing of God to which we are one day to be led; far more excellent is the fragrance of God's ointments than the spices of our virtues.

And even if what we have already received is great, nevertheless what we are to receive from the contemplation of our Creator is far more excellent. Whence let the soul pant and say: 'The fragrance of your ointments is above all spices'; that is, those good things which you prepare through contemplation transcend all these gifts of virtues which you have bestowed in this life. Let us say to this Church, let us say to this soul, so loving, so burning with love for her bridegroom, whence she perceived so great a desire. Whence she apprehended knowledge of his divinity. But behold, she tells whence she could express it: (Verse 2.) 'Your name is oil poured out.'

7. "Ointment poured forth" is divinity incarnate. For if ointment is in a vessel, it gives off less scent, but if it is poured out, the fragrance of the poured ointment spreads far and wide. The name of God, therefore, is ointment poured forth, because from the immensity of His divinity He poured Himself outward into our nature, and from being invisible, He made Himself visible: for if He had not poured Himself out, He would never have become known to us. The ointment poured itself out when He preserved Himself as God and yet presented Himself as man. Concerning this pouring out, Paul says: "Who, being in the form of God,

did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7). What Paul said, "He emptied Himself," Solomon said, "He poured out." Therefore, because the Lord became known to the human race through the humility of the Incarnation, let it be said to Him: "Your name is ointment poured forth." There follows: (Verse 2.) "Therefore the young maidens have loved you."

8. What do we understand by "young maidens" in this passage, if not the souls of the elect renewed through baptism? For the life of sin belongs to the old man, and the life of righteousness to the new. Because, therefore, he poured out his ointment abroad, he made the young maidens burn with love for him; because he presented renewed souls as fragrant with desire for him. Childhood does not yet suit love; old age ceases from love. A child is one who has not yet begun the pursuit of an ardent life; an old man is one who had indeed begun, but has ceased. Therefore, since neither those who have not yet begun burn with love for the Lord, nor those who had begun but have grown cold, setting aside both childhood and old age, the young maidens are said to run — that is, those souls who are in the very fervor of love itself.

9. However, we can understand this in another way. For youth can be referred to weakness. Indeed, the youthful ages are the order of angels, who have been overcome by no frailty, conquered by no weakness. Let it therefore be said: "Your name is oil poured out, therefore the young maidens have loved you;" that is, because through your incarnation you poured out knowledge of yourself outwardly, therefore weak souls are able to love your human nature. For those supreme Powers, as though of youthful age, love you even there where you have not been poured out, because they see you even there where you contain yourself in the state of divinity. You, therefore, who are seen even when not poured out by those highest orders, as by those of youthful age, are poured out outwardly for the sake of men, so that you may also be loved by the young maidens, that is, by weak minds. There follows: (Verse 3.) "Draw me."

10. Everyone who is drawn is drawn against his will, either because he is unable or because he is unwilling. But he who says "Draw me" has something that he wills and something that he does not will [perhaps it should be read "is not able"]. Human nature wills to follow God, but overcome by the habit of weakness, it does not prevail to follow as it ought. Therefore it sees that there is one thing in itself by which it strives, and another thing in itself for which it has no strength, and rightly says: "Draw me." Paul had seen himself as willing yet not able when he said: "With my mind I serve the law of God, but with my flesh the law of sin" (Rom. 7:25); and, "I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind" (ibid., 23). Because, therefore, there is one thing in us that urges us on and another that weighs us down, let us say: "Draw me after you; we will run in the fragrance of your ointments." We run in the fragrance of God's ointments when, breathed upon by His spiritual gifts, we long ardently for the vision of Him.

11. It should be known that in the matter of men following God, sometimes they walk, sometimes they run, sometimes they run vigorously. He who follows tepidly, as it were, walks

after God; he who follows frequently, runs; he who follows perseveringly, runs perfectly. For the heart was immobile for following God, and was unwilling to walk after him, until the coming of the Lord appeared in the world and moved human minds from their insensible standing place. Whence it is written: ”His feet stood still, and the earth was moved” (Hab. 3:5, according to the LXX). Here, however, it is not movement but running that is spoken of, because it is not enough that we follow, unless we also run with desire. But because not even running suffices unless one also runs perfectly, Paul says: ”So run that you may obtain” (1 Cor. 9:24). And some, while they run too much, slip into indiscretion; for they are wise more than is necessary, and they now set themselves before him whom they were following, while they choose their own virtues and set aside the judgments of him whom they were following. Whence it is well that when it was said, ”we will run,” it was prefaced with ”after you. For they run after God who consider his judgments, who prefer his will to their own, and who strive to reach him through worthy action and discernment. Hence the prophet, considering the will of God, says: ”My soul has clung after you” (Ps. 63:9).

Hence it is said to Peter when he gives counsel: ”Get behind me, Satan; for you do not savor the things of God, but the things of men” (Matt. 16:23; Mark 8:33). Because therefore perfect souls behold the judgments of God with the utmost caution, and presume to anticipate them neither through sluggishness nor through indiscreet fervor, it is well said: ”We will run after you in the fragrance of your ointments. For then we run after you, when we both follow by loving and do not anticipate the divine judgments by fearing. (Verse 3. ”The king has brought me into his chamber: we will exult and rejoice in you.”

12. The Church of God is like a kind of royal house; and this house has a gate, has a stairway, has a dining hall, has bedchambers. And everyone within the Church who has faith has already entered the gate of this house; because, just as a gate opens the rest of the house, so faith opens the door to the remaining virtues. Everyone within the Church who has hope has already come to the stairway of the house; for hope elevates the heart, so that it seeks the things above and abandons the things below. Everyone who, placed in this house, has charity walks as if in the dining hall; for charity is broad, which extends even to the love of enemies. Everyone who, placed in the Church, already searches into sublime things, already considers hidden judgments, has as it were entered into the bedchamber. Of the gate of this house someone said: ”Open to me the gates of justice, and having entered through them I will praise the Lord” (Psalm 117:19). Of the ascent of hope he said: ”He has disposed ascents in his heart” (Psalm 83:6). Of the broad dining halls of this house it is said: ”Your commandment is exceedingly broad” (Psalm 118:96). In the broad commandment, charity is specifically designated. Of the king’s bedchamber he was speaking who said: ”My secret is mine” (Isaiah 24:16). And elsewhere: ”I heard secret words which it is not permitted for men to speak” (2 Corinthians 12:4). The first entrance of this house, then, is the gate of faith;

the second advance, the stairway of hope; the third, the breadth of charity; the fourth, now the perfection of charity unto the knowledge of the secrets of God. Because the holy

Church, in her perfect members, that is, in her holy teachers, in those who are already full and rooted in the mysteries of God, has as it were arrived at sublime secrets, and while still placed in this present voice, already penetrates those things. "The king brought me into his bedchamber," she says: for through the prophets, through the apostles, through the teachers, who while placed in this life already penetrated the sublime secrets of that life, the Church had entered into the bedchamber of her king.

13. And it must be carefully noted that he does not say "into the chamber of the bridegroom," but "into the chamber of the king." For by naming the king, he wishes to show the reverence due to secrets, because the more powerful the chamber is, the greater the reverence that must be shown regarding those things into which one enters. Therefore, lest anyone, while coming to know the secrets of God, while searching out hidden judgments, while being raised to the heights of contemplation, become puffed up and slip into pride, it is said that one enters the chamber of the king — that is, of him to whom all the greater reverence must be shown, the more the soul is led to know his secrets. So that each person may profit who, already exalted through grace, has arrived at sublime secrets, let him examine himself, and from that very advancement be more deeply humbled. Hence Ezekiel too, as often as he is led to contemplate sublime things, is called "son of man," as if it were said to him: Consider what you are, and do not be exalted by those things to which you are raised. But it belongs to few in the Church to search out and comprehend these sublime and hidden judgments of God. Nevertheless, when we see that strong men are able to attain such great wisdom as to contemplate the secrets of God in their hearts, let us little ones also have confidence — that at some time we may come to pardon, and at some time to his grace. Hence from the words of the young maidens there follows: (Verse 3.) We will exult and rejoice in you.

14. While the Church, in those who are perfect, enters the chamber of the king, the young maidens promise themselves the hope of exultation; because while the strong attain to the contemplation of sublime things, the weak take hope of pardon for their sins. (Verse 3.) The king brought me into his chamber; we will exult and rejoice in you, remembering your breasts more than wine. The upright love you. 15. This bridegroom has breasts, he who is also called king on account of reverence. He has breasts — holy men clinging to him with their heart. The breasts are fixed in the chest cavity, and by internal nourishment they draw sustenance to those whom they nourish to strength. Holy men, therefore, are the breasts of the bridegroom, because they draw from what is innermost and nourish outwardly. His breasts are the apostles; his breasts are all the preachers of the Church. Wine, as we said above, was in the prophets; wine was in the law. But because greater commandments were given through the apostles than had been given through the prophets, it is rightly now said: "Mindful of your breasts above wine" — because those who can fulfill the things that are commanded in the New Testament without doubt transcend that knowledge of the Law.

16. Yet we can also understand this in another way: "Remembering your breasts above wine." There are many who indeed have the wine of wisdom, but do not have the knowledge of humility. Knowledge puffs these up, because charity does not build them up. But there

are truly many who have the wine of knowledge in such a way that they know how to consider the gifts of doctrine, the gifts of spiritual grace; for the gifts of spiritual grace are like certain breasts on the chest, which subtly minister and nourish through hidden spiritual channels. ”Remembering therefore your breasts above wine”: because those who know how to pursue the gifts of your grace, so that they do not attribute to themselves what they know, but are not puffed up by the same wisdom they have received—they surpass those who are puffed up and carried away by their own wisdom. For it is more to be wise humbly than merely to be wise; for it is not truly to be wise if one is not wise humbly. ”Remembering therefore your breasts above wine”: because those who know how to consider the gifts of spiritual grace transcend those who indeed have knowledge, but do not have recognition of the gifts in their memory. Therefore, to speak plainly: ”Remembering your breasts above wine”: because humility is stronger than knowledge. For wine is the knowledge that intoxicates, while the memory of the breasts is what sobers, what recalls one to the recognition of gifts. ”Remembering your breasts above wine”: because humility conquers the abundance of knowledge.

17. The upright love you: As if he were saying: Those not yet upright still fear. The upright love you: for everyone who does good works out of fear, even if he is upright in his work, is not upright in his desire; for he would wish that what he feared did not exist, and he would not do good works. But whoever does good works out of love is upright both in work and in desire, yet the sweetness of love is hidden from those who fear. Whence it is written: How great is the multitude of your sweetness, O Lord, which you have hidden from those who fear you, and have perfected for those who hope in you (Psalm 30:20). For the sweetness of God is unknown to those who fear God, but becomes known to those who love him. Therefore whoever has striven to be upright through love, his love is perfect, so that he does not fear the judge when he comes, so that whatever he has heard about eternal punishments, he does not dread. Whence also Paul, while awaiting the coming of the judge, while seeking the rewards of eternal life, says: Which God has prepared not only for me, but also for all who love his coming (2 Timothy 4:8). For eternal rewards are prepared by the judge for those who love, because everyone who knows that he does evil works fears the judge when he comes; but whoever is confident in his own works seeks the coming of the judge.

Therefore rewards are prepared for those who await the coming of God and who love his coming; because they do not love the coming of the judge unless they are confident in their own case. Moreover, all certainty, the uprightness of certainty, is in love; and therefore it is rightly said: The upright love you. (Verses 4, 5. I am black but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not consider me because I am dark, for the sun has discolored me.

18. We know that in the beginnings of the Church, when the grace of our Redeemer had been preached, some believed and others did not believe; but those who believed were despised by the unbelievers, and having suffered a kind of persecution, were judged to have departed, as it were, into the way of the Gentiles. Whence the Church in those same persons

cries out against those who were not converted: "I am black, but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem." I am black indeed by your judgment, but beautiful through the illumination of grace. How black? "Like the tents of Kedar." Kedar is interpreted as "darkness"; for Kedar was the second of the lineage of Ishmael, and the tents of Kedar were the tents of Esau. How then black like the tents of Kedar? Because in your sight I have been judged after the likeness of the Gentiles, that is, after the likeness of sinners. How beautiful like the curtain of Solomon? It is reported that when Solomon built the temple, he covered all those vessels of the temple with curtains of skin. But surely the skins of Solomon could be beautiful in the service of the king. But since Solomon is interpreted as "peaceful," let us understand him as the true Solomon; for all souls clinging to God are skins of Solomon, mortifying themselves and returning to the service of the King of peace. I am indeed in judgment like the tents of Kedar, since I am judged to have departed, as it were, into the way of the Gentiles; but according to the truth I am like the curtain of Solomon, because I cling to the service of the King. (Verse 5.) "Do not consider me because I am dark, for the sun has discolored me."

19. He was regarding the sinful woman, that part which had believed in Christ. But let her say: Do not consider me because I am dark, for the sun has discolored me. The sun itself is the Lord; he himself coming discolored me. By his precepts he showed that I was not beautiful under the precepts of the Law. The sun discolors the one whom it touches more closely; so also the Lord, coming, discolored the one whom he touched more strictly through his grace; because the more we draw near to grace, the more we recognize ourselves to be sinners. Let us see Paul coming from Judea, discolored: But if, seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were also found to be sinners (Gal. 2:17). He who found himself a sinner in Christ found himself discolored in the sun. But behold, that part which believed from Judea suffered persecution from the unbelieving Jews, afflicted by many tribulations. Whence follows: (Verse 5) The sons of my mother fought against me.

20. Because the children of the Synagogue who remained in unbelief waged a war of persecution against the faithful of the Synagogue; but while that part which came from the Jews to the faith suffered persecution, it departed to the preaching of the Gentiles. Whence it also follows: (Verse 5.) They made me the keeper in the vineyards; my own vineyard I have not kept.

21. For while those who are in Judea persecute me, they have made me a guardian in the Churches. My own vineyard I have not kept, because I abandoned Judea. Whence Paul also says, whence also the apostles: The word of God had been sent to you; but because you judged yourselves unworthy, behold we go to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46). As if to say: We wish to guard our own vineyard, but because you yourselves have rejected us, you send us over to the guarding of others' vineyards. And so what we have said concerning the Synagogue converted to faith, let us now say concerning the Church called to faith: I am black, but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem. The Church coming from the Gentiles considers the faithful souls which she finds, whom she also calls daughters of Jerusalem. For Jerusalem

is said to mean "vision of peace"; she considers what she has done, what she has become; and she confesses her past faults, lest she be proud; she confesses her present life, lest she be ungrateful, and says: I am black, but beautiful. Black by merit, beautiful by grace; black by her former life, beautiful by the way of life that follows. How black like the tents of Kedar? Kedar—they were the tents of the nations, they were the tents of darkness. And to the nations it was said: You were once darkness, but now light in the Lord (Ephesians 5:8). How beautiful like the curtain of Solomon? For we have been worn down through penance. The flesh, mortified through penance, is brought like a skin into the service of the king. All who afflict themselves through penance make themselves members of Christ. Therefore the members of Christ afflicted through penance are the skins of Solomon, because they become mortified flesh.

22. But behold, there were faithful in Judaea who disdained that the Gentiles should come to the faith; whence they also reproached Peter for having received Cornelius. Whence in the Church of the Gentiles it is added: "Do not consider me because I am dark." Do not despise the heathenism of my unbelief, do not despise my former sins, do not regard what I was. Why? "Because the sun has discolored me." The sun discolors in that upon which it presses more closely and severely. When God holds strict judgment, He, as it were, displays His severity more fully; and He discolors while He shines more brightly, because while He exercises His strictness more subtly, He judges severely. For the sun, as it were, withholds its rays when it considers our works mercifully; it, as it were, displays its power severely when it weighs our works strictly. Let the Church therefore say: I am dark for the same reason I am a sinner, because the sun has discolored me; because when my Creator abandoned me, I fell into error.

23. But O you so afflicted, so forsaken, what have you deserved? What have you obtained as a gift? The sons of my mother fought against me. The sons of the mother are the apostles; for the mother of all is the Jerusalem above. They fought against the Church, while through their preaching they pierced her from unbelief to faith, as if with certain spears. Whence Paul too, as a certain fighter, says: Destroying the counsels of thoughts, and every height that exalts itself against the knowledge of God (II Cor. 10:5). He who destroys a height is certainly a fighter. Therefore these fighters, these sons of mother Jerusalem, conquered the Church from her error, so that they might establish her in righteousness. The sons of my mother fought against me. And what did they do in fighting? They made me a keeper in the vineyards. The vineyards of the Church are the virtues that bear fruit; because while they fight against the vices in me, they drive me out, as it were, from my evil fruitfulness, and they gave me the pursuits of virtues; they made me a keeper in the vineyards, so that they might bring forth fruit. After the conquest, let her say specifically: My own vineyard I have not kept. The vineyard of the Church is the old habit of error, which, when a keeper is appointed over the virtues, abandoned its old habit of error.

24. We have spoken of the Synagogue coming to faith; we have spoken of the Gentile world converted; let us therefore speak generally of the whole Church together, and specifically of

what must be understood concerning each individual soul. Wicked hearers are accustomed not to consider what their teachers are, but what they were. Sound teachers therefore confess to them what they were, and set forth what they are; so that they neither hide themselves as sinners, nor again deny their gifts as if ungrateful. Let the Church therefore say in these words: I am black, but beautiful. Black through myself, beautiful through the gift; I am black from the past, beautiful from what I have been made for the future. How black, how beautiful? Black like the tents of Kedar, beautiful like the curtains of Solomon. And it is not right that anyone should be judged from their past life, and that what one was should be regarded rather than what one is. Whence she adds: Do not consider me that I am dark; because the sun has discolored me. Sometimes in Sacred Scripture, the sun is taken as the excessive heat of earthly desires. Whence then dark? Because the sun has discolored me, and by the burning of earthly love I have been discolored before the bridegroom, that is, I have been made unsightly before the king. (Verse 5.) The sons of my mother have fought against me.

25. In all creation two rational creatures have been made, human and angelic: the angel fell; he persuaded man. For the mother of all creation is the goodness and power of God. We therefore and the Angels, from the fact that we were made as rational beings, have as it were a certain fellowship of brotherhood. But because the angels were made by the same power by which we also were made, who nevertheless as fallen angels wage war against us daily, let her say: The sons of my mother the Church fought against me. Behold, while these rational spirits fight, these spirits, sons of the mother, while they fight against the soul, they make her devote herself to earthly things, occupy herself with secular activities, seek transitory things. Whence she also adds: They made me a keeper in the vineyards; my own vineyard I have not kept. For the vineyards are earthly activities. As if she were to say: in earthly activities they made me a keeper, and my own vineyard, that is, my own soul, I have not kept; my life, my mind I have neglected to guard; because while I was outwardly entangled in the activity of earthly things, I slipped away from inward watchfulness. Many people judge themselves by what is near them, not by what they are. Near them are dignities, near them are outward offices; and while they guard what they have near them, they neglect to guard themselves. Let her therefore say: They made me a keeper in the vineyards; my own vineyard I have not kept; that is, while I serve outward guardianship in the activities of the world, I have lost the care of inward guardianship. But behold, the soul brought back to the grace of her Creator, let her now love, let her now seek where she may find her Redeemer. (Verse 6.) Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou liest down at midday.

26. At midday the sun is more fervent. Everyone who burns in faith burns in the love of desire. This bridegroom who is called below a young stag feeds the greenness of virtues in their heart; in their heart he reclines at midday, in the fervor of charity. Show me, O you whom my soul loves, where you feed, where you lie down at midday. Why she thus seeks where he feeds, where he lies down, she gives the reason for her inquiry. (Verse 6.) Lest I begin to wander after the flocks of your companions.

27. The companions of God are His close friends, just as all who live well are; but many appear to be companions and are not companions. For many teachers, while they were promoting perverse doctrine, seemed indeed to be companions, but turned out to be enemies. While Arius, Sabellius, and Montanus were still teachers, they appeared as if companions; but when they were strictly examined and exposed, they appeared as enemies. And very often faithful souls, while they cling to the word of God, while they love in their teachers that from which they may profit, do not know how to guard against the words of perverse teachers, and fall away through their very mouths. For how many congregations there are that trusted in these companions, and while those men pursued them, they wandered astray through the flocks of companions! Let her therefore say: "Show me where you pasture, where you rest at midday, lest I begin to wander after the flocks of your companions. Show me in whose hearts you truly rest, lest I begin to wander after the flocks of those who seem to be your companions, that is, who are believed to be your close friends and are not. All priests, all teachers are companions of God, as far as appearance goes; but as far as their life is concerned, many are not companions but adversaries. But these very things we have said about heretical masters, we can also say about Catholics who do not act rightly.

For many little faithful ones within the Church desire to live well, wish to hold to a life of uprightness, and observe the life of the priests who are set over them; and when those very priests do not live well, when those who are in charge do not live rightly, those who follow after slip into error. Wherefore the Church, as if speaking in the person of those little and faithful ones, says: "Show me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture, where you rest at midday. Show me the life of those who truly serve you, so that I may know where you pasture — the verdure of virtues — so that I may know where you rest at midday, that is, where you repose in the fervor of charity; lest while I look upon the flocks of your companions, I myself begin to wander, not knowing to whose words and teachings I should entrust myself. For every hearer, every weak one, must carefully consider whose words he ought to believe, whose instruction he ought to follow, whose examples he ought to imitate. And behold, the words of the bridegroom are returned to the bride. (Verse 7. "If you do not know yourself, O beautiful one among women, go forth and follow after the footsteps of the flocks, and pasture your young goats beside the tents of the shepherds."

28. Every soul ought to care for nothing more than to know itself. For he who knows himself, recognizes that he was made in the image of God, and ought not to follow the likeness of beasts, nor dissolve himself either in luxury or in present appetite. Concerning this ignorance it is said elsewhere: 'Man, when he was in honor, did not understand; he was compared to senseless beasts, and became like them' (Psalm 48:13). The footsteps of the flocks are the actions of the peoples, which the more numerous they are, the more entangled, the more perverse they are. Let it therefore be said to the Church: 'If you do not know yourself, O beautiful one among women, go forth, and go after the footsteps of the flocks, and pasture your kids beside the tents of the shepherds.' O you, who were foul through ignorance, and through faith have been made beautiful among the souls of others. This is clearly spoken to the Church of the elect: 'If you do not know yourself"—that is, you

do not know this very thing, that you were made in my image—'go forth', that is, outside. If indeed you do not recognize by whom you were made, go forth and depart; go after the footsteps of the flocks; follow not my examples, but the examples of the peoples, and pasture your kids beside the tents of the shepherds. Our kids are carnal impulses;

our kids are unlawful temptations. 'Go after the footsteps of the flocks'—that is, descend after the footsteps of the peoples—'and pasture your kids'—that is, nourish your carnal impulses, no longer spiritual senses, but carnal impulses. 'Go beside the tents of the shepherds': if you pasture lambs in the tent of the shepherds, you will be pastured—that is, in the teachings of the masters, in the teachings of the Apostles, in the teachings of the prophets. But if you pasture kids, pasture them beside the tents of the shepherds, so that you may be called Christian by faith, and not by works; because you appear to be within through faith, and not within through works. Because behold, you have rebuked, behold, you have reproved (for what do you not say?)—but what have you yourself kindly accomplished? Speak plainly: for there follows: (Verse 8.) 'I have compared you, my love, to my horsemen among the chariots of Pharaoh.'

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.