Discourse 7.-Procilla

Methodius of Olympus (d. c. AD 311)

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Chapter I.-What the True and Seemly Manner of Praising; The Father Greater Than the Son, Not in Substance, But in Order; Virginity the Lily; Faithful Souls and Virgins, the One Bride of the One Christ.

It is not lawful for me to delay, O Arete, after such discourses, seeing that I confide undoubtingly in the manifold wisdom of God, which gives richly and widely to whomsoever it wills. For sailors who have experience of the sea declare that the same wind blows on all who sail; and that different persons, managing their course differently, strive to reach different ports. Some have a fair wind; to others it blows across their course; and yet both easily accomplish their voyage. Now, in the same way, the ”understanding Spirit, holy, one only,” gently breathing down from the treasures of the Father above, giving us all the clear fair wind of knowledge, will suffice to guide the course of our words without offence. And now it is time for me to speak. This, O virgins, is the one true and seemly mode of praising, when he who praises brings forward a witness better than all those who are praised. For thence one may learn with certainty that the commendation is given not from favour, nor of necessity, nor from repute, but in accordance with truth and an unflattering judgment. And so the prophets and apostles, who spoke more fully concerning the Son of God, and assigned to Him a divinity above other men, did not refer their praises of Him to the teaching of angels, but to Him upon whom all authority and power depend.

For it was fitting that He who was greater than all things after the Father, should have the Father, who alone is greater than Himself, as His witness. And so I will not bring forward the praises of virginity from mere human report, but from Him who cares for us, and who

has taken up the whole matter, showing that He is the husbandman of this grace, and a lover of its beauty, and a fitting witness. And this is quite clear, in the Song of Songs, to any one who is willing to see it, where Christ Himself, praising those who are firmly established in virginity, says, "As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters; "comparing the grace of chastity to the lily, on account of its purity and fragrance, and sweetness and joyousness. For chastity is like a spring flower, always softly exhaling immortality from its white petals. Therefore He is not ashamed to confess that He loves the beauty of its prime, in the following words: "Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck. How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices! Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb; honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon. A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse;

a spring shut up, a fountain sealed."

These praises does Christ proclaim to those who have come to the boundaries of virginity, describing them all under the one name of His spouse; for the spouse must be betrothed to the Bridegroom, and called by His name. And, moreover, she must be undefiled and unpolluted, as a garden sealed, in which all the odours of the fragrance of heaven are grown, that Christ alone may come and gather them, blooming with incorporeal seeds. For the Word loves none of the things of the flesh, because He is not of such a nature as to be contented with any of the things which are corruptible, as hands, or face, or feet; but He looks upon and delights in the beauty which is immaterial and spiritual, not touching the beauty of the body.

Chapter II.-The Interpretation of that Passage of the Canticles.

Consider now, O virgins, that, in saying to the bride, "Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse," He shows the clear eye of the understanding, when the inner man has cleansed it and looks more clearly upon the truth. For it is clear to every one that there is a twofold power of sight, the one of the soul, and the other of the body. But the Word does not profess a love for that of the body, but only that of the understanding, saying, "Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck; "which means, By the most lovely sight of thy mind, thou hast urged my heart to love, radiating forth from within the glorious beauty of chastity. Now the chains of the neck are necklaces which are composed of various precious stones; and the souls which take care of the body, place around the outward neck of the flesh this visible ornament to deceive those who behold; but those who live chastely, on the other hand, adorn themselves within with ornaments truly composed of various precious stones, namely, of freedom, of magnanimity, of wisdom, and of love, caring little for those temporal decorations which, like leaves blossoming for an hour, dry up with the changes of the body. For there is seen in man a twofold beauty, of which the Lord accepts that which is within and is immortal, saying, "Thou hast ravished my heart with one chain of thy neck; "meaning to show that He had been drawn to love by the splendour of the inner man shining forth in its glory, even as the Psalmist also testifies, saying, "The King's daughter is all glorious within."

Chapter III.-Virgins Being Martyrs First Among the Companions of Christ.

Let no one suppose that all the remaining company of those who have believed are condemned, thinking that we who are virgins alone shall be led on to attain the promises, not understanding that there shall be tribes and families and orders, according to the analogy of the faith of each. And this Paul, too, sets forth, saying, ”There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. And the Lord does not profess to give the same honours to all; but to some He promises that they shall be numbered in the kingdom of heaven, to others the inheritance of the earth, and to others to see the Father. And here, also, He announces that the order and holy choir of the virgins shall first enter in company with Him into the rest of the new dispensation, as into a bridal chamber. For they were martyrs, not as bearing the pains of the body for a little moment of time, but as enduring them through all their life, not shrinking from truly wrestling in an Olympian contest for the prize of chastity; but resisting the fierce torments of pleasures and fears and griefs, and the other evils of the iniquity of men, they first of all carry off the prize, taking their place in the higher rank of those who receive the promise.

Undoubtedly these are the souls whom the Word calls alone His chosen spouse and His sister, but the rest concubines and virgins and daughters, speaking thus: ”There are threescore queens and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my undefiled, is but one; she is the only one of her mother, she is the choice one of her that bare her: the daughters saw her and blessed her: yea, the queens and the concubines, and they praised her. For there being plainly many daughters of the Church, one alone is the chosen and most precious in her eyes above all, namely, the order of virgins.

Chapter IV.-The Passage Explained; The Queens, the Holy Souls Before the Deluge; The Concubines, the Souls of the Prophets; The Divine Seed for Spiritual Offspring in the Books of the Prophets; The Nuptials of the Word in the Prophets as Though Clandestine. Now if any one should have a doubt about these things, inasmuch as the points are nowhere fully

wrought out, and should still wish more fully to perceive their spiritual significance, namely, what the queens and the concubines and the virgins are, we will say that these may have been spoken concerning those who have been conspicuous for their righteousness from the beginning throughout the progress of time; as of those before the flood, and those after the flood, and so on of those after Christ. The Church, then, is the spouse. The queens are those royal souls before the deluge, who became well-pleasing to God, that is, those about Abel and Seth and Enoch. The concubines those after the flood, namely, those of the prophets, in whom, before the Church was betrothed to the Lord, being united to them after the manner of concubines, He sowed true words in an incorrupt and pure philosophy, so that, conceiving faith, they might bring forth to Him the Spirit of salvation. For such fruits do the souls bring forth with whom Christ has had intercourse, fruits which bear an ever-memorable renown. For if you will look at the books of Moses, or David, or Solomon, or Isaiah, or of the prophets who follow, O virgins, you will see what offspring they have left, for the saving of life, from their intercourse with the Son of God. Hence the Word has with deep perception called the souls of the prophets concubines, because He did not espouse them openly, as He did the Church, having killed for her the fatted calf.

Chapter V.-The Sixty Queens: Why Sixty, and Why Queens; The Excellence of the Saints of the First Age.

In addition to these matters, there is this also to be considered, so that nothing may escape us of things which are necessary, why He said that the queens were sixty, and the concubines eighty, and the virgins so numerous as not to be counted from their multitude, but the spouse one. And first let us speak of the sixty. I imagine that He named under the sixty queens, those who had pleased God from the first-made man in succession to Noah, for this reason, since these had no need of precepts and laws for their salvation, the creation of the world in six days being still recent. For they remembered that in six days God formed the creation, and those things which were made in paradise; and how man, receiving a command not to touch the tree of knowledge, ran aground, the author of evil having led him astray. Thence he gave the symbolical name of sixty queens to those souls who, from the creation of the world, in succession chose God as the object of their love, and were almost, so to speak, the offspring of the first age, and neighbours of the great six days' work, from their having been born, as I said, immediately after the six days. For these had great honour, being associated with the angels, and often seeing God manifested visibly, and not in a dream. For consider what confidence Seth had towards God, and Abel, and Enos, and Enoch, and Methuselah, and Noah, the first lovers of righteousness, and the first of the first-born children who are written in heaven, being thought worthy of the kingdom, as a kind of first-fruits of the plants for salvation, coming out as early fruit to God. And so much may suffice concerning these.

Chapter VI.-The Eighty Concubines, What; The Knowledge of the Incarnation Communicated to the Prophets.

It still remains to speak concerning the concubines. To those who lived after the deluge the knowledge of God was henceforth more remote, and they needed other instruction to ward off the evil, and to be their helper, since idolatry was already creeping in. Therefore God, that the race of man might not be wholly destroyed, through forgetfulness of the things whichwere good, commanded His own Son to reveal to the prophets His own future appearance in the world by the flesh, in which the joy and knowledge of the spiritual eighth day shall be proclaimed, which would bring the remission of sins and the resurrection, and that thereby the passions and corruptions of men would be circumcised. And, therefore, He called by the name of the eighty virgins the list of the prophets from Abraham, on account of the dignity of circumcision, which embraces the number eight, in accordance with which also the law is framed; because they first, before the Church was espoused to the Word, received the divine seed, and foretold the circumcision of the spiritual eighth day.

Chapter VII.-The Virgins, the Righteous Ancients; The Church, the One Only Spouse, More Excellent Than the Others.

Now he calls by the name of virgins, who belong to a countless assembly, those who, being inferior to the better ones, have practised righteousness, and have striven against sin with youthful and noble energy. But of these, neither the queens, nor the concubines, nor the virgins, are compared to the Church. For she is reckoned the perfect and chosen one beyond all these, consisting and composed of all the apostles, the Bride who surpasses all in the beauty of youth and virginity. Therefore, also, she is blessed and praised by all, because she saw and heard freely what those desired to see, even for a little time, and saw not, and to hear, but heard not. For ”blessed,” said our Lord to His disciples, ”are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.” For this reason, then, the prophets count them blessed, and admire them, because the Church was thought worthy to participate in those things which they did not attain to hear or see. For ”there are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my undefiled, is but one.”

Chapter VIII.-The Human Nature of Christ His One Dove.

Can any one now say otherwise than that the Bride is the undefiled flesh of the Lord, for the sake of which He left the Father and came down here, and was joined to it, and, being incarnate, dwelt in it? Therefore He called it figuratively a dove, because that creature is tame and domestic, and readily adapts itself to man's mode of life. For she alone, so to speak, was found spotless and undefiled, and excelling all in the glory and beauty of righteousness, so that none of those who had pleased God most perfectly could stand near to her in a comparison of virtue. And for this reason she was thought worthy to become a partaker of the kingdom of the Only-begotten, being betrothed and united to Him. And in the forty-fourth psalm, the queen who, chosen out of many, stands at the right hand of God, clothed in the golden ornament of virtue, whose beauty the King desired, is, as I said, the undefiled and blessed flesh, which the Word Himself carried into the heavens, and presented at the right hand of God, "wrought about with divers colours," that is, in the pursuits of immortality, which he calls symbolically golden fringes. For since this garment is variegated and woven of various virtues, as chastity, prudence, faith, love, patience, and other good things, which, covering, as they do, the unseemliness of the flesh, adorn man with a golden ornament.

Chapter IX.-The Virgins Immediately After the Queen and Spouse.

Moreover, we must further consider what the Spirit delivers to us in the rest of the psalm, after the enthronization of the manhood assumed by the Word at the right hand of the Father. "The virgins," He says, "that be her fellows shall bear her company, and shall be brought unto thee. With joy and gladness shall they be brought, and shall enter into the King's palace." Now, here the Spirit seems quite plainly to praise virginity, next, as we have explained, to the Bride of the Lord, who promises that the virgins shall approach second to the Almighty with joy and gladness, guarded and escorted by angels. For so lovely and desirable is in truth the glory of virginity, that, next to the Queen, whom the Lord exalts, and presents in sinless glory to the Father, the choir and order of virgins bear her company, assigned to a place second to that of the Bride. Let these efforts of mine to speak to thee, O Arete, concerning chastity, be engraven on a monument.

And Procilla having thus spoken, Thekla said, It is my turn after her to continue the contest; and I rejoice, since I too have the favouring wisdom of words, perceiving that I am, like a harp, inwardly attuned, and prepared to speak with elegance and propriety. Arete. I most willingly hail thy readiness, O Thekla, in which I confide to give me fitting discourse, in accordance with thy powers; since thou wilt yield to none in universal philosophy and instruction, instructed by Paul in what is fitting to say of evangelical and divine doctrine.

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