



Sexuality, Spirituality and the ‘Song of Songs’

– BY CHRISTOPHER PRAMUK –

Only through the body does the way, the ascent to the life of blessedness, lie open to us.
— St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*

THE SONG OF SONGS has long held a privileged place in the mystical theology and monastic tradition of the church. Commentary on this erotically charged, enigmatic love poetry of the Bible runs like a thread from Origen (d. 254) through St. Bernard (d. 1153) and up to St. John of the Cross (d. 1591). In more contemporary figures, too, like the Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton, we find the song like a shimmering veil between the lines of his

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poems and prayers. The regular reader of Merton expects to find even in his prose spontaneous, canticle-like verses of praise, or the dream-like yearning for “one whom my heart loves.”

It is natural to wonder why the Song of Songs has exerted such a powerful pull on celibate Christian monks, and to wonder how its erotic imagery informed the spiritual life. My own curiosity led me to Marvin Pope’s rich commentary in the Anchor Bible series, where one meets a fascinating assembly of personalities. Foremost among these is Origen, a giant of the early church who set the pattern for later tradition by reading the song in Platonic categories, as a spiritual allegory of the marriage of the Word of God (the bridegroom) with the soul of the individual Christian or the church (the bride). Still more captivating is an ancient figure named Jovinian. Pope describes him as a poorly dressed, barefoot monk who incensed the ecclesial establishment in Rome around 390 by preaching a literal interpretation of the Song of Songs in praise and sanctification of sexual activity in marriage. For each the song was a deep well from which to draw.

The Song as a Contemplative Text

Perhaps no interpretation of the Song of Songs has exerted a greater influence on Western Christian spirituality than that of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, whose commentary—86 sermons

composed over a period of 18 years—is rightly revered as the masterpiece of medieval monastic literature. Like many others before and after him, Bernard saw the song as a sublime allegory on the love of God that can be experienced through contemplation. It was the paradigmatic text for monks, because its poetry vividly describes the pursuit that is the basis for the whole program of monastic life: “love’s union” with God, of which the monk may enjoy a sweet foretaste here below.

“Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth!” Bernard requires no less than seven sermons to expand on this opening verse of the song, and to find there an allegory of ascent to the sweetest (indeed, almost sexual) mystical union with Christ the bridegroom, the mediator between the sinner’s soul and the hidden God. Echoing the sensual imagery of the song itself, Bernard provokes the imagination with comparably vivid physical imagery. “How then, should you go?” he asks. “Should you who were recently covered in filth touch the holy lips? Yesterday dragged out of the mire, do you present yourself today to the face of glory? Let your way be by the hand. The hand first touched you and lifts you up.” Bernard invites his hearers to imagine being grasped and bodily lifted out of the mud by the merciful hand of Jesus, and finally drawn to the Lord’s mouth, “which is so divinely beautiful, fearing and trembling, not only to gaze on it, but even to kiss it.”

The affection Bernard conveys for Jesus here is wholly innocent and beautiful, with none of the embarrassment or

homoerotic associations that might give some modern readers pause. Rarely does one find—save, I think, in African-American spirituals—such an unapologetically intimate fixation on the loveliness of the man Jesus. “Even the beauty of angels seems tedious to me. *For my Jesus outshines them so far in his beauty and loveliness.* That is why I ask him, not any other angel or man, to kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.” In monastic spirituality this kind of physical “sense” data is painted on the imagination and translated readily into the “spiritual senses” of affection and desire for God, a restlessness that infuses the whole person. The sensory imagination—what Bernard calls “the book of experience”—opens the door not only to the will and intellect, but to those deep places where we remain a mystery even to ourselves.

Crossing the Cultural Divide

It would be wrongheaded, of course, to expect the monks and theologians of the Middle Ages to find in the Song of Songs the same lessons we might read there today. If one seeks an apologia for the sanctity of marital sexuality in Bernard, or most of the other great figures in the ancient and medieval Christian world (Jovinian notwithstanding), one will be largely disappointed. As the medievalist R. W. Southern pointed out, even the famous love letters of Abélard and Héloïse (ca. 1132-35) are starkly devoid of romance. They are infused, rather, with an ancient

Christian ethos “that spoke to them either of the love of God or the love of virtue, but not yet of the tender courtesy of sexual passion.” Shaped by a culture that taught him to despise and fear his sexual impulses, Abélard “gave way to them; and then he gave way to remorse, guilt, and self-contempt.” Héloïse, too, shared these conflicted attitudes. “In describing the act of sexual intercourse, whether in marriage or otherwise, she too would use the vocabulary of drains and sewage.”

“The book of experience” looks different, to say the least, for Christians today than it did for Abélard, Héloïse and Bernard. Many have asked—with varied intentions, of course, and often through the lens of modern depth psychology—why not sexual passion? Is there something in the Gospel itself that required its ancient adherents, celibate and otherwise, to be so evidently frightened of sexuality? The question is complex and clearly larger than can be answered here, but it is hard to ignore when reading the Song of Songs and its classic commentaries. Why must the song be understood only as an allegory of union with God, or in terms that presume a dichotomy between union with God and sexual union with a beloved? Today the more important question is theological: how to plumb the depths of sexuality through the eyes of God, the divine artist who fashioned it, and where possible to let the mystery be deepened through meditation on Scripture itself.

“Such is my lover, such my friend”

Without diminishing the riches that have been gathered from allegorical readings of the Song of Songs, one may still insist on the value of a more literal reading for Christians today. As at least one monk of ancient days (the wily Jovinian) seemed to understand, the Christian has less to fear and much more to celebrate in the God-given mystery of human sex, rightly and reverently embraced. Surely the marriage bed may be one of the best-kept secrets in the sacramental life of the church, to be ranked among the church’s most sacred objects. Before recoiling from this perhaps surprising statement and draining its force with a thousand qualifications, we ought to think about the thousands of millions of hidden saints who discover some part of their own stumbling sanctity on the bed of marriage.

It is here that many pilgrims meet beauty: the luminous landscape of the lover’s body, the rise of the shoulder blade, the bowl of the navel, the curve of the lips, and myriad other primordial shapes pressing and receiving like the roll and tumble of fecund nature. By sharing with each other this dance of play and joy and gratitude, husband and wife give glory to God by being in that moment precisely who God wants them to be. Here, as Merton might say, “their inscape is their sanctity.” It is on the marriage bed, too, that many pilgrims meet knowledge, the grace of coming to know another deeply and of being known not through heroic effort and applied technique (the Bally Fitness Club approach), but through slow-paced trust, honesty, friendship and grace.

In Christian terms, sexual love is a manifestation of the Incarnation—its goodness attains not just in spite of our sinfulness, but because of it. To say it more personally: it is my wife’s acceptance, affection and sheer delight in me that, perhaps more than any force, set me free from my failings and teach me the gratuitous nature of divine love. Though it does not (and need not) happen every time in a hail of fireworks, somehow when I need it most, “love’s union” between us breaks open a revolutionary new awareness. Behold! Love belongs to me, and I belong to love.

I like to imagine such moments reverberating through the world in a kind of prayerful and poignant protest. Over against the terrifying commodification of sex and of human persons everywhere—extravagant, violent, banal—the sexual love bodied forth by millions of hidden saints expresses a prophetic beauty. Though I cannot number myself in this cloud of witnesses, how else can I interpret the hidden sacrament of love in places like El Salvador, where for over a decade helicopter gunships strafed the night sky and death squads swept through *campesino* villages; or in the Warsaw ghetto, where one imagines the unadorned liturgy of man and woman laying aside clothes marked with the yellow star? It is not mere hyperbole to locate even in the singular marriage bed a powerful symbol of hope and prophecy today.

Deep Waters

Of course, there are important qualifications. Like any created good, the marriage bed can become another tool by which the ego—or the cultural lionization of sexual “experience” as an end in itself—asserts its desire for control, permanence or possession. Because of the power of sex, the marriage bed tragically becomes for many women and men a potent symbol of unfreedom, of imprisonment in various shades of non-love and the incapacity to grant forgiveness. This can happen in one swift and terrible event, or in a thousand small deaths over the course of years, even decades, of dishonesty. The marital bedroom is no safe haven from all the distortions preached about sex by the commodity culture, myths that set us up badly for awkwardness and perceived failure.

But experience has also taught Catholics to be wary of their own myths. Highly idealized notions of “Christian marriage” can be just as illusory and damaging to persons today as idealized perceptions of the celibate life have been in the past. Should we not be able to celebrate the God-given goodness of sex and sexuality (and the vocation to celibacy or the single life) without staking out a dangerous caste system? It was just this kind of question, difficult but crucial to ask, that got Jovinian roundly condemned in the climate of his age as a heretic.

The seriousness of these difficulties, made worse by the cultural wars of our own time, threatens to cloud the waters around sexuality so badly that we lose all confidence in the credibility of the tradition. Above all it must not be forgotten that the Catholic view of sex rests in the

biblical vision of creation itself: “It is very good.” The Song of Songs can help us form ourselves and our children in that tradition. The text, it should be noted, is permeated with cautionary omens: “Do not arouse, do not stir up love before its own time.” Sex, in other words, is not to be trifled with. But such admonitions are framed inside a larger liturgy of anticipation, invitation and playful celebration: “I have taken off my robe, am I then to put it on?” What resonates here so strongly with my own “book of experience” is the poetry of human sexuality at its trembling and joyful best, when love’s desire overflows with the radiance and pleasure of a bountiful God.

If St. Bernard’s account of the spiritual life is anything, it is holistic: “Only through the body does the way, the ascent to the life of blessedness, lie open to us.” This profound intuition, the fruit of an incarnational faith, permits us to welcome in the mystery of sex more than an echo of the final joy of heaven. Especially for those of us whose calling is marriage, meditation on the Song of Songs can nurture both gratitude for the gift of love’s union now and a shimmering hope for the reign of God yet to come. But let us not overlook the prophetic and sign-bearing power of sexual love right now, on this side of history.

The woman and man who delight in each other, though fragile and hidden in the general cosmic dance, lie together in the margins and shine like a silver moon in a dark night sky, their whole being echoing the sublime refrain of the Song of Songs: “Deep waters cannot quench love, nor floods sweep it away.” **A**

