

## **Return to the Subject of Human Love in the Divine Plan**

Pope John Paul II

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GENERAL AUDIENCE OF WEDNESDAY, 23 MAY [1984]

On Wednesday, 23 May, at the general audience held in St Peter's Square, Pope John Paul II resumed his treatment of the topic of human love in the divine plan, a topic that had been set aside in favour of a series of reflections on the Holy Year. Following is a translation of the Holy Father's address.

1. During the Holy Year I postponed the treatment of the theme of human love in the divine plan. I would now like to conclude that topic with some considerations especially about the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, premising some reflections on the Song of Songs and the Book of Tobit. It seems to me that what I intend to explain in the coming weeks constitutes the crowning of what I have illustrated.

The theme of marital love which unites man and woman in a certain sense connects this part of the Bible with the whole tradition of the "great analogy." Through the writings of the prophets, this flows into the New Testament and especially into Ephesians (cf. Eph 5:21-33). I interrupted the explanation of this at the beginning of the Holy Year.

The Song of Songs has become the object of many exegetical studies, commentaries and hypotheses. With regard to its content, apparently "profane," the positions have varied. On the one hand its reading has often been discouraged, and on the other it has been the source from which the greatest mystical writers have drawn. The verses of the Song of Songs have been inserted into the Church's liturgy.(1)

In fact, although the analysis of the text of this book obliges us to situate its content outside the sphere of the great prophetic analogy, it is not possible to detach it from the reality of the original sacrament. It is not possible to reread it except along the lines of what is written in the first chapters of Genesis, as a testimony of the beginning—that beginning which Christ referred to in his decisive conversation with the Pharisees (cf. Mt 19:4).(2) The Song of Songs is certainly found in the wake of that sacrament in which, through the language of the body, the visible sign of man and woman's participation in the covenant of grace and love offered by God to man is constituted. The Song of Songs demonstrates the richness of this language, whose first expression is already found in Genesis 2:23-25.

## **Atmosphere of the Song of Songs**

2. Indeed, the first verses of the Song lead us immediately into the atmosphere of the whole poem, in which the groom and the bride seem to move in the circle traced by the irradiation of love. The words, movements and gestures of the spouses correspond to the interior movement of their hearts. It is possible to understand the language of the body only through the prism of this movement. In that language there comes to pass that discovery which the first man gave expression in front of her who had been created as "a helper like himself" (cf. Gen 2:20, 23). As the biblical text reports, she had been taken from one of his ribs ("rib" seems to also indicate the heart).

This discovery—already analyzed on the basis of Genesis 2—in the Song of Songs is invested with all the richness of the language of human love. What was expressed in the second chapter of Genesis (vv. 23-25) in just a few simple and essential words, is developed here in a full dialogue, or rather in a duet, in which the groom's words are interwoven with the bride's and they complement each other. On seeing the woman created by God, man's first words express wonder and admiration, even more, the sense of fascination (cf. Gn 2:23). And a similar fascination—which is wonder and admiration—runs in fuller form through the verses of the Song of Songs. It runs in a peaceful and homogeneous wave from the beginning to the end of the poem.

### **Mutual admiration**

3. Even a summary analysis of the text of the Song of Songs allows the language of the body to be heard expressing itself in that mutual fascination. The point of departure as well as the point of arrival for this fascination—mutual wonder and admiration—are in fact the bride's femininity and the groom's masculinity, in the direct experience of their visibility. The words of love uttered by both of them are therefore concentrated on the body, not only because in itself it constitutes the source of the mutual fascination. But it is also, and above all, because on the body there lingers directly and immediately that attraction toward the other person, toward the other "I"—female or male—which in the interior impulse of the heart generates love.

In addition, love unleashes a special experience of the beautiful, which focuses on what is visible, but at the same time involves the entire person. The experience of beauty gives rise to satisfaction, which is mutual.

"O most beautiful among women..." (Sg 1:8), the groom says, and the bride's words echo back to him: "I am dark—but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem" (Sg 1:5). The words of the spellbound man are repeated continually. They return in all five stanzas of the poem, and they are echoed in similar expressions of the bride's.

### **Use of metaphors**

4. It is a question here of metaphors that may surprise us today. Many of them were borrowed from the life of shepherds; others seem to indicate the royal status of the groom.<sup>(3)</sup> The analysis of that poetic language is left to the experts. The very fact of adopting the metaphor shows how much, in our case, the language of the body seeks support and corroboration in the whole visible world. This is without doubt a language that is reread at one and the same time with the heart and with the eyes of the groom, in the act of special concentration on the whole female "I" of the bride. This "I" speaks to him through every feminine trait, giving rise to that state of mind that can be defined as fascination, enchantment. This female "I" is expressed almost without words. Nevertheless, the language of the body, expressed wordlessly, finds a rich echo in the groom's words, in his speaking that is full of poetic transport and metaphors, which attest to the experience of beauty, a love of satisfaction. If the metaphors in the Song seek an analogy for this beauty in the various things of the visible world (in this world which is the groom's "own world"), at the same time they seem to indicate the insufficiency of each of these things in particular. "You are all-beautiful, my beloved, and there is no blemish in you" (Sg 4:7):— with this saying, the groom ends his song, leaving all the metaphors, in order to address himself to that sole one through which the language of the body seems to express what is more proper to femininity and the whole of the person.

We will continue the analysis of the Song of Songs at the next general audience.

### **FOOTNOTES**

1) "The Song is therefore to be taken simply for what it manifestly is: a song of human love." This sentence of J. Winandy, O.S.B., expresses the conviction of growing numbers of exegetes (J. Winandy, *Le Cantique des Cantiques, Poém d'amour mué en écrit de Sagesse* [Maredsous: 1960], p. 26).

M. Dubarle adds: "Catholic exegesis, which sometimes refers to the obvious meaning of biblical texts for passages of great dogmatic importance, should not lightly abandon it when it comes to Songs." Referring to the phrase of G. Gerleman, Dubarle continues: "Songs celebrates the love of man and woman without adding any mythological element, but considering it simply on its own level and in its specific nature. There is implicitly, without didactic insistence, the equivalent of the Yahwist faith (since sexual powers had not been placed under the patronage of foreign divinities and had not been attributed to Yahweh himself who appeared as transcending this sphere.) The poem was therefore in tacit harmony with the fundamental convictions of the faith of Israel.

The same open, objective, not expressly religious attitude with regard to physical beauty and sensual love is found in some collections of Yahwist documents. These various similarities show that the small book is not so isolated in the sum total of biblical literature as is sometimes stated (A. M. Dubarle, "Le Cantique des Cantiques dans l'exégèse récente," *Aux grands carrefours de la Révélation et de l'exégèse de l'Ancien Testament*, *Recherches Bibliques VIII* [Louvain: 1967], pp. 149, 151).

2) This evidently does not exclude the possibility of speaking of a *sensus plenior* in the Song of Songs.

See, for example: "Lovers in the ecstasy of love seem to occupy and fill the whole book, as the only protagonists... Therefore, Paul, in reading the words of Genesis, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cling to his wife, and the two shall be made into one' (Eph 5:31), does not deny the real and immediate meaning of the words that refer to human marriage. However, to this first meaning he adds another deeper one with an indirect reference: 'I mean that it refers to Christ and the Church,' confessing that 'this is a great foreshadowing' (Eph 5:32)....

Some readers of the Song of Songs rush to read immediately in its words a disembodied love. They have forgotten the lovers, or have petrified them in fictions, in an intellectual key.... They have multiplied the minute allegorical relations in every sentence, word or image.... This is not the right way. Anyone who does not believe in the human love of the spouses, who must seek forgiveness for the body, does not have the right to be elevated.... With the affirmation of human love instead, it is possible to discover in it the revelation of God. (L. Alonso-Schökel, "Cantico dei Cantici—Introduzione," *La Biblia, Parola di Dio scritti per*

noi. Official text of the Italian Episcopal Conference, Vol. II [Torino: Marietti, 1980], pp. 425-427).

3) To explain the inclusion of a love song in the biblical canon, Jewish exegetes already in the first centuries after Christ saw in the Song of Songs an allegory of Yahweh's love for Israel, or an allegory of the history of the Chosen People, in which this love is manifested, and in the Middle Ages the allegory of divine Wisdom and of man who is in search of it.

Since the early Fathers, Christian exegesis extended such an idea to Christ and the Church (cf. Hippolytus and Origen), or to the individual soul of the Christian (cf. St. Gregory of Nyssa) or to Mary (cf. St. Ambrose) and also to her Immaculate Conception (cf. Richard of St. Victor). St. Bernard saw in the Song of Songs a dialogue of the Word of God with the soul, and this led to St. John of the Cross' concept about mystical marriage.

The only exception in this long tradition was Theodore of Mopsuestia, in the fourth century, who saw in the Song of Songs a poem that celebrated Solomon's human love for Pharaoh's daughter.

Luther, instead, referred the allegory to Solomon and his kingdom. In recent centuries new hypotheses have appeared. Some, for example, consider the Song of Songs as a drama of a bride's fidelity to a shepherd, despite all the temptations, or as a collection of songs used during the popular wedding rites or mythical rituals which reflected the Adonis-Tammuz worship. Finally, there is seen in the Song of Songs the description of a dream, recalling ancient ideas about the significance of dreams and also psychoanalysis.

In the 20th century there has been a return to the more ancient allegorical traditions (cf. Bea), seeing again in the Song of Songs the history of Israel (cf. Jouon, Ricciette), and a developed midrash (as Robert calls it in his commentary, which constitutes a "summary" of the interpretation of Songs).

Nevertheless, at the same time the book has begun to be read in its most evident significance as a poem exalting natural human love (cf. Rowley, Young, Laurin).

Karl Barth was the first to have demonstrated in what way this significance is linked with the biblical context of chapter two of Genesis. Dubarle begins with the premise that a faithful and happy human love reveals to man the attributes of divine love, and Van den Oudenrijn sees in the Song of Songs the antitype of that typical sense that appears in

Eph 5:23. Excluding every allegorical and metaphorical explanation, Murphy stresses that human love, created and blessed by God, can be the theme of an inspired biblical book.

D. Lys notes that the content of the Song of Songs is at the same time sensual and sacred. When one prescind from the second characteristic, the Song comes to be treated as a purely lay erotic composition, and when the first is ignored, one falls into allegorism. Only by putting these two aspects together is it possible to read the book in the right way.

Alongside the works of the above-mentioned authors, and especially with regard to an outline of the history of the exegesis of the Song of Songs, see H. H. Rowley, "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (London: Lutterworth, 1952), pp. 191-233; A. M. Dubarle, *Le Cantique des Cantiques dans l'exégèse de l'Ancien Testament*, *Recherches Bibliques VIII* (Louvain: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967), pp. 139-151; D. Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création—Commentaire de Cantique des Cantiques. Lectio divina 51*. (Paris: Du Cerf, 1968), pp. 31-35; M. H. Pope, "Song of Songs," *Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 113-234.