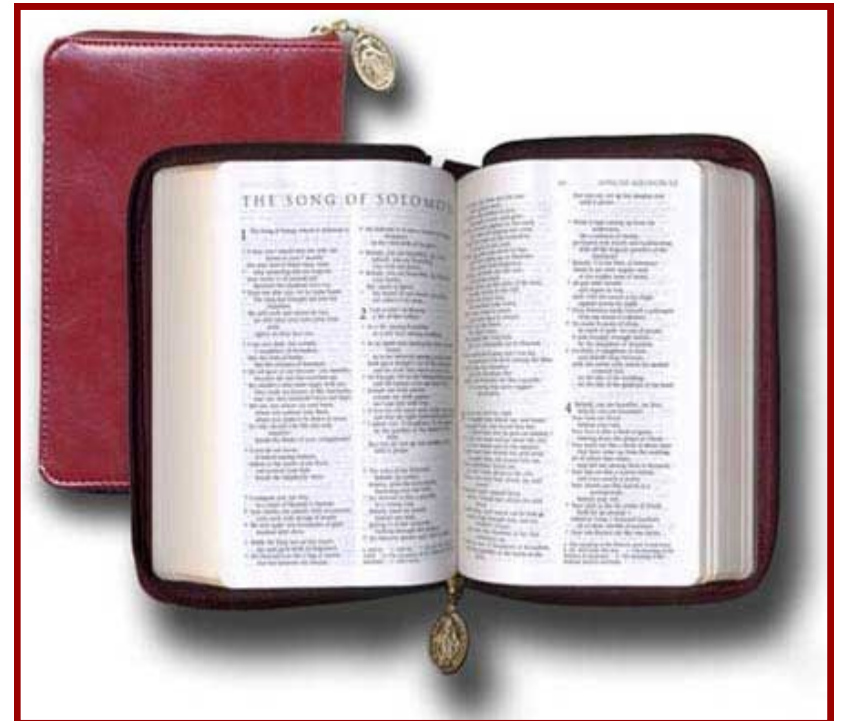




SONG OF SONGS—66

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



HERETICS

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The Song of Songs is the story of the love between God and the soul. God is deeply in love with us, and wills our love in return. This love between the soul and God, which is the most intimate love possible, is expressed in the analogy of the bride (the Church) and the bridegroom (Jesus), where the intimacy of love is especially expressed. Commentary on the Song of Songs is presented by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and takes the form of sermons on the meaning of the various allegories used in the psalms and are presented in the order Saint Bernard composed the commentaries. Introductory comments are made by the Early Church Fathers.

Heretics

I have preached two sermons to you on the same verse, and have a third prepared, if you are not weary of listening. I think it is necessary to preach it. As far as our domestic vine is concerned - which is what you are - I think that in two sermons I have given you sufficient warning to protect you from the wiles of three kinds of foxes, namely flatterers, detractors, and seducers of the spirit, who are skilled and practiced in representing evil in the guise of good. But it is not so with the vineyard of the Lord - that one, I mean, which encompasses the world, of which we are a part - a vine great beyond measure, planted by the Lord, bought with his blood, fertilized by grace and made fruitful by his Spirit. And the more I dwell on our domestic matters, the less use I am in matters of general concern. I am greatly troubled for that vine when I see the multitude of those who would spoil it, the small number of its defenders, and the difficulty of its defense. The reason for this is the subtlety of the attack. For although the Church has always, even from the beginning, had its foxes, they have all been quickly discovered and caught. A heretic would dispute in the open, for the desire for an open victory is the strongest motive of a heretic. Then he would surrender; so those foxes were easily caught. And even if after the truth was established a heretic remained in the darkness of his obduracy, languishing alone in his bonds in outer darkness, even then the fox would be accounted as caught, for the impiety stood condemned, and the impious one was cast out, his life now to be an empty show, bearing no fruit. Henceforward, in the words of the Prophet Hosea, he had dry breasts and a miscarrying womb, for an error publicly refuted does not spring up again, and falsehood revealed does not take root.

8. Have we accomplished anything? I think we have. We have caught the fox, we have unmasked his deception; those false Catholics who have lurked unseen have been disclosed in their true colors as plunderers of the Church. For while he was taking sweet food with me - I mean the Body and the Blood of Christ - while we walked in the house of God as friends, there occurred an opportunity for persuasion, or rather an occasion for perversion, in accordance with the saying of Wisdom: A hypocrite with his mouth destroys his neighbor; but now, following Paul's wisdom, I shall without hesitation reject a heretic after a first and second admonition, knowing that such a man is corrupt, and that I must take care he does not corrupt me also. It is therefore no mean achievement that, in the words of Wisdom, the treacherous shall be taken captive by their lust, and especially those treacherous men who deliberately employ weapons of deception. For they avoid any open conflict and defense. They are indeed a base and uncouth race, unlettered and wholly lacking in courage. In short, they are foxes, and little ones. The points in which we allege they are mistaken are indefensible, and not so much subtle as plausible, and then only to peasant girls and imbeciles, such as are all I have met of this way of thinking. I do not recall having heard anything in all their many statements which made any contribution to knowledge, but only trite sayings well-aimed by heretics of old, yet crushed and exploded by our theologians. It should be said, however - and I will say it - how absurd these statements are. Some of them they have formulated in the course of drawing ill-considered conclusions from discussions between Catholics; some they have produced in arguments with each other; some have been reported to us by a number of them who have returned to the Church. I say this not because I intend to reply to them all - that would be unnecessary - but just so that they may be noticed. But this will be the subject of another sermon, to the praise and glory of the name of the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is above all, God blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 66

**You scandalize the Church;
you are a fox who spoils the vine.**

5. Indeed! when a vine has been spoilt this is a sign that a fox has been there. But the creature is very cunning and conceals his own footprints by some unknown artifice, so that no-one can easily discover how he goes in and out. Though his work is visible, its author is nowhere to be seen; he is completely hidden under the havoc he has caused: In fact, if you question him about his faith, nothing could be more orthodox; if [you question him] as to his way of life, nothing could be more irreproachable; and he proves his words by his deeds. What you see is a man frequenting the church, honoring the clergy, offering his gifts, making his confession, receiving the sacraments. What can be more orthodox. As far as his life and conduct are concerned he harms no-one, distresses no-one, does not set himself above anyone. His face is pale from fasting, he does not eat the bread of idleness, he supports himself with the labor of his hands. Where is your fox now? We had him in our power a moment ago. How has he slipped from our hands? How did he disappear so suddenly? We must go after him, dig him out. By his fruits we shall know him; and certainly spoilt vines point to a fox. Women have left their husbands, and husbands their wives, to join these people. Clerks and priests, young and old, have left their people and their churches, and are to be found there among weavers and their women. Is this not great havoc? Is this not the work of foxes?

6. But they do not all perform these overt actions, or if they do it cannot be proved. How then are we to catch them? Let us return to the question of associating and cohabiting with women, for all of them have some experience of this. 'Now, my good man, who is this woman, and where does she come from? Is she your wife?', 'No,' he says, 'that is forbidden by my vows.' 'Your daughter then?' 'No.' 'What then? Not a sister or niece, or at least related to you by birth or marriage?' 'No, not at all,' 'And how will you preserve your chastity with her here? You can't behave like this. Perhaps you don't know that the Church forbids cohabitation of men and women if they are vowed to celibacy. If you do not wish to cause scandal in the Church, send the woman away. Otherwise that one circumstance will give rise to other suspicions, which may not be proved but will no doubt be thought probable.'

7. 'But,' he says, 'can you show me any passage in the Gospel forbidding this?' 'You have appealed to the Gospel; to the Gospel you shall go. If you obey the Gospel, you will not cause scandal, for the Gospel clearly forbids you to do so. But this is what you are doing, by disobeying the precept of the Church. You had been under suspicion, but now you will be openly censured as one who scorns the Gospel and as an enemy of the Church. 'What is your opinion, brothers? If he remains obdurate, and refuses to obey the Gospel or to assent to the Church's teaching, how can you hesitate? Is it not obvious to you that the trickery is found out and the fox caught? If he does not remove the woman he does not remove the scandal; if he does not remove the scandal when he can remove it, he is clearly disobedient to the Gospel. What is the Church to do but remove the man who will not remove the scandal, unless, like him, she is to be disobedient? For she has this command from the Gospel, not to spare her own eye if it gives offence, or her hand, or her foot, but to pluck it out or cut it off and cast it away from her. 'If he will not listen to the Church,' it says, 'let him be to you as a stranger and a tax collector.'

2. What shall we do with those foxes, the most malicious of all, who would rather inflict injury than win a victory in open fight? How shall they be caught, when they do not even allow themselves to be seen, but prefer to creep about like snakes? The one aim of all heretics has always been to gain renown for the remarkable extent of their knowledge. But this particular heresy is more tainted by malice and subtlety than all the rest, for it feeds upon the destruction of others and is not concerned with its own renown. Instructed, I think, by the examples [of heresies] of old, which could not escape once they were discovered, but were caught right away, it is careful to keep secret the nature of its wickedness. The less suspicion it arouses, the more freedom it is allowed. Then these men have appointed hiding-places for themselves, as it is written: 'They hold fast to their evil purpose.' 'Swear, or thee foresworn, but do not betray the secret.' But at other times they will not consent to swear at all, even in the slightest degree, because of the saying of the Evangelist [Matthew]: 'Swear not at all, neither by heaven nor by earth.' and so on. O foolish and slow of heart, filled with the spirit of the Pharisees, straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel! You may not swear, yet you may be forsworn? Or are both permissible in this one instance? In what passage of the Gospels, not even one iota of which you falsely boast you do not pass over, do you find this exception? Obviously you have superstitious scruples about taking an oath, but in your wickedness you take perjury lightly. What perversity! What was given me as a counsel of perfection, 'Swear not', that is, they observe as minutely as if it were a positive command; but committing perjury, which is forbidden by natural law (which is unchangeable) they dismiss at will as unimportant. 'No,' they say, 'we must not reveal our secret.' As though it were to the glory of God not to reveal teaching. Are they jealous for the glory of God? I think it more likely that they would blush to expose their secret, knowing it to be shameful. For it is said that they practice unspeakable obscenities in private; just so the hinder parts of foxes stink.

3. But I say nothing of what they would deny; let them answer only the direct evidence. Do they take care to follow the Gospel precept not to give what is holy to dogs, or not to cast pearls before swine? When they dismiss everyone within the Church as dogs -and swine, is this not an open admission that they themselves are not within the Church? They consider that their secret, whatever it is, should be kept from everyone, without exception, who does not belong to their sect. Yet although this may be their opinion, they will not admit it, and they run in every direction to avoid discovery; but there will be no escape for them.

Tell me, O man wise beyond propriety and foolish beyond description, that secret which you keep hidden—is it of God or not? If it is, why do you not expose it to his glory? For it is the glory of God to reveal teaching. If it is not, why do you put faith in something not of God, unless you are a heretic? Let them either disclose their secret to the glory of God or else admit that it is not a mystery of God and cease to deny that they are heretics; or at least let them recognize that they are openly hostile to the glory of God, since they refuse to disclose what they know would be to his glory. The truth of Scripture states beyond question: 'It is the glory of kings to conceal a matter, but the glory of God to reveal teaching.' Are you unwilling to reveal it? Then you are unwilling to glory God. But perhaps you do not accept this text? This must be so, for men like you assert that they are the only followers of the true Gospel. Then let them reply to the Gospel. 'What I tell you in the darkness, utter in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.' You cannot remain silent any longer. How long will you keep secret what God commands should be revealed? How long is your gospel to remain hidden? It is your gospel, I suspect, not St Paul's; he declares that his is not hidden: 'If our gospel is a mystery,' he says, 'it is only a mystery to those on the way to perdition.' Take care that it is not you he speaks of, when it is found that your gospel is hidden. Is it not all too clear that you are on the way to perdition? Perhaps you do not even accept St Paul? I have heard that that is true of some of you. Yet you do not all agree about everything, even if you all disagree with us.

4. Yet, if I am not mistaken, you all accept without question the words, the writings, and the traditions of those who lived in the bodily presence of the Savior. Did these men keep their gospel hidden? Were they silent about the weakness of the flesh in God Incarnate, the horror of his death, the degradation of his cross? Indeed their voice goes out through all the world. Where is the apostolic pattern of life of which you boast? They shout their teaching; you whisper; they in public, you in corners; they fly like a cloud, you lurk in the darkness, in holes underground. What likeness do you bear to them? Perhaps the fact that you take women not as traveling companions but as mistresses? Companionship does not lay itself open to suspicion in the same way as living together. Who would entertain dark suspicions about those who raised the dead to life? Go and do likewise, and I will suppose that a man and a woman together are merely resting. Otherwise, you are insolently abrogating to yourself the privilege of those whose sanctity you do not possess. To be always in a woman's company without having carnal knowledge of her - is this not a greater miracle than raising the dead? You cannot perform the lesser feat; do you expect me to believe that you can do the greater? Every day your side touches the girl's side at table, your bed touches hers in your room, your eyes meet hers in conversation, your hands meet hers at work - do you expect to be thought chaste? It may be that you are, but I have my suspicions. To me you are an object of scandal. Take away the cause of scandal, and prove the truth of your boast that you are a follower of the Gospel. Does the Gospel not condemn the man who offends someone within the Church? You scandalize the Church; you are a fox who spoils the vine. Help me, friends, to catch him; better yet, holy angels, you catch him for us. He is very cunning, he is covered with unrighteousness and impiety; he is evidently so small, so subtle, that he can easily deceive the eyes of men. Is he to deceive yours too? It is to you, as companions of the Bridegroom, that these words are addressed. 'Catch us the little foxes.' Do as you are bidden, then; catch this deceptive little fox for me, this little fox which we have long pursued in vain. Teach us, suggest to us how his trickery may be found out. Then the fox will be caught, for a dishonest Catholic does far more harm than an honest heretic. It is not for man to know what is in man, unless he is enlightened for this very purpose by the Spirit of God or guided by angelic activity. What sign will you give us, that this vile heresy may be brought into the open, this heresy which knows so well how to dissemble not only with its tongue but in its life.