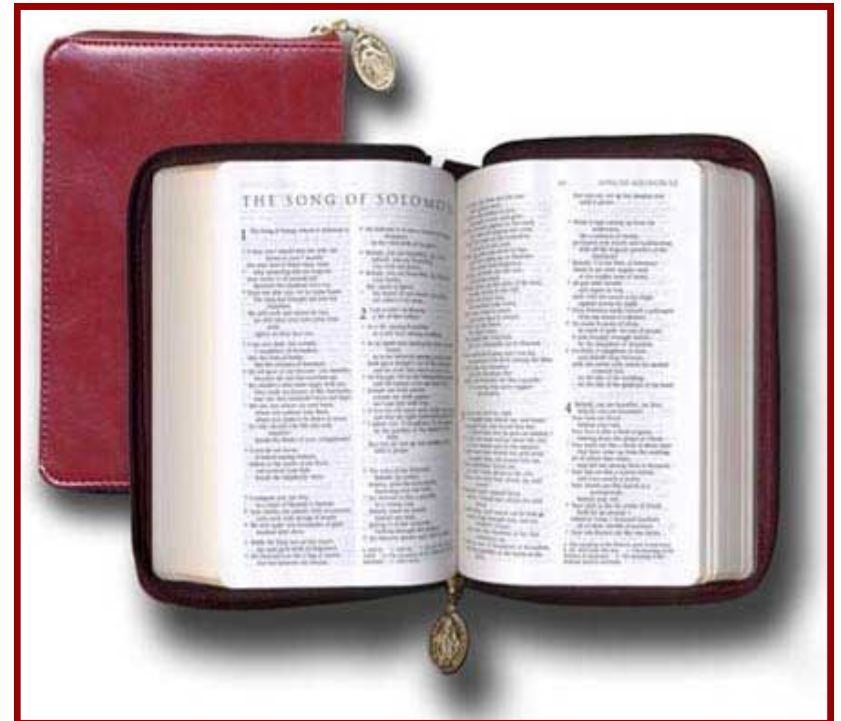




FOR MORE PAMPHLETS ON BOOKS OF THE BIBLE
PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE: www.pamphletstoinspire.com

SONG OF SONGS—24

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***IN THE ROOMS
OF THE KING***

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.

In the Rooms of the King

"The king has brought me into his rooms." This is where the fragrance comes from, this is the goal of our running. She had said that we must run, drawn by that fragrance, but did not specify our destination. So it is to these rooms that we run, drawn by the fragrance that issues from them. The bride's keen senses have been quick to detect it, so eager is she to experience it in all its fullness. But first of all we ought to give thought to the meaning of these rooms. To begin with, let us imagine them to be perfume-laden places within the Bridegroom's quarters, where varied spices breathe their scents, where delights are manifold. The more valuable products of garden and field are consigned for preservation to store-rooms like these. To these therefore people run, at least those who are aglow with the Spirit. The bride runs, so do the maidens; but the one to arrive first is the one whose love is most ardent, because she runs more quickly. On arrival she brook no refusal, not even delay. The door is promptly opened to her as to one of the family, one highly esteemed, loved with a special love, uniquely favored. But what of the maidens? They follow at a distances they are still undeveloped, they can neither run with an energy to match that of the bride, nor achieve the ardor of her desire. Consequently they arrive late and remain outside. But the charity of the bride will not allow her to be indifferent, nor does pride in her accomplishments blind her, as it does so many, and cause her to forget them. On the contrary, she consoles them and exhorts them to be patient, to tolerate calmly both the rebuff and her absence. She tells them how great is her happiness, for the sole reason that they may share in her joy, and be inspired with the confidence that they will not at all be excluded from the favors bestowed on their mother. She is never so bent on her own progress as to overlook their interest, nor desirous of promoting her own welfare at their expense. Though the excellence of her merits puts a barrier between them, it is certain that she is always with them through her love and holy solicitude. She has to be thus conformed to her Bridegroom, who ascended into heaven and yet promised to be with his followers on earth until the end of the world. So too with the bride; however great her progress or the graces with which she is endowed, never, whether in her concern for them, in her forethought or in her love, is she separated from those whom she has begotten through the Gospel, never does her heart forget them.

**The natural goodness lost by pride
is recovered by obedience.....**

2. She speaks to them therefore as follows: "Be happy, be confident: the King has brought me into his bedroom. You may regard yourselves as introduced too. Even though I alone seem to have been introduced, it is not for my sole advantage. Every preferment I enjoy is a joy for you all; the progress that I make is for you, and with you I shall divide all that I shall merit above your measure." Do you wish for unquestionable proof that these words express her intention and her love? Then listen to their answer: "You will be our joy and gladness." "You," they say, "will be our joy and gladness, for we are not yet fit to rejoice in ourselves." And they go on to say: "remembering your breasts," that is: "We persevere quietly until you come, knowing that you will return to us with overflowing breasts. We are confident that then we shall rejoice and be glad," but meanwhile we keep remembering your breasts." By adding: "more than wine," they reveal that because of their imperfection they are still disturbed by the remembrance of carnal desires, designated by the wine, but that these desires are overcome by recalling the abundant sweetness which, experience assures them, flows from those breasts. Now would be a time to speak about these if I had not done so previously. But now see how the maidens anticipate their own reward in that of their mother, how they regard her recompense and enjoyment as their own, how her admission consoles them for the bitterness of their rebuff. They would never have this confidence if they did not accept her as their mother. Here is a point for the ear of those superiors who wish always to inspire fear in their communities and rarely promote their welfare. Learn, you who rule the earth. Learn that you must be mothers to those in your care, not masters; make an effort to arouse the response of love, not that of fear: and should there be occasional need for severity, let it be paternal rather than tyrannical. Show affection as a mother would, correct like a father. Be gentle, avoid harshness, do not resort to blows, expose your breasts: let your bosoms expand with milk, not swell with passion. Why impose in addition your yoke on those whose burdens you ought rather to carry? Why will the young man, bitten by the serpent, shy away from the judgment of the priest, to whom he ought rather to run as to the bosom of a mother? If you are spiritual, instruct him in a spirit of gentleness, not forgetting that you may be tempted yourselves. Otherwise he shall die in his sin, but, says the Lord, "I will hold you responsible for his death." We shall speak of this again.

3. Since the implications of the text are clear from what I have said, let us now try to discover the spiritual meaning of the storerooms. Further on there is mention of a garden and a bedroom, both of which I join to these rooms for the purpose of this present discussion. When examined together the meaning of each becomes clearer. By your leave then, we shall search the Sacred Scriptures for these three things, the garden, the storeroom, the bedroom. The man who thirsts for God eagerly studies and meditates on the inspired word, knowing that there he is certain to find the one for whom he thirsts. Let the garden, then, represent the plain, unadorned, historical sense of Scripture, the storeroom its moral sense, and the bedroom the mystery of divine contemplation.

4. For a start I feel that my comparison of scriptural history to a garden is not unwarranted, for in it we find men of many virtues, like fruitful trees in the garden of the Bridegroom, in the Paradise of God. You may gather samples of their good deeds and good habits as you would apples from trees. Who can doubt that a good man is a tree of God's planting? Listen to what St David says of such a man: "He is like a tree that is planted by a stream of water, yielding its fruit in season, and its leaves never fade." Listen to Jeremiah, speaking to the same effect and almost in similar words: "He is like a tree that is planted by a stream of water that thrusts its roots to the stream: when the heat comes it fears not." Likewise the Prophet: "The virtuous flourish like palm trees and grow as tall as the cedars of Lebanon." Of himself he says: "I, for my part, am like an olive tree growing in the house of God." History therefore is a garden in which we may recognize three divisions. Within its ambit we find the creation, the reconciliation, and the renewal of heaven and earth. Creation is symbolized in the sowing or planting of the garden; reconciliation by the germination of what is sown or planted. For in due course, while the heavens showered from above and the skies rained down the just one, the earth opened for a Savior to spring up, and heaven and earth were reconciled. "For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one," making peace by his blood between all things in heaven and on earth. Renewal however is to take place at the end of the world. Then there will be "a new heaven and a new earth," and the good will be gathered from the midst of the wicked like fruit from a garden, to be set at rest in the storehouse of God. As Scripture says: "In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land raised on high." Here you have the three aspects of time represented by the garden in the historical sense.

17. This sermon has been so protracted that for your memory's sake I must summarize briefly what I have said about the storeroom, the garden, the bedroom. Remember the three divisions of time, three kinds of merit and three rewards. The times are connected with the garden, the merits with the storeroom, the reward with the threefold contemplation of one who seeks the bedroom. I am satisfied that I have said enough about the storeroom. With regard to the garden and bedroom, if I discover new ideas or feel the need to modify what I have already said, I shall inform you in due course. If not, what has been said must suffice, not to be repeated lest I make wearisome what has been spoken for the praise and glory of the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 24

16. O place so truly quiet, so aptly called a bedroom where God is not encountered in angry guise nor distracted as it were by cares, but where his will is proved good and desirable and perfect. This is a vision that charms rather than terrifies; that does not arouse an inquisitive restlessness, but restrains it; that calms rather than wearies the senses. Here one may indeed be at rest. The God of peace pacifies all things, and to gaze on this stillness is to find repose. It is to catch sight of the King who, when the crowds have gone after the day-long hearing of cases in his law-courts, lays aside the burden of responsibility, goes at night to his place, and enters his bedroom with a few companions whom he welcomes to the intimacy of his private suite. He is all the more secure the more secluded his place of rest, all the more at ease when his placid gaze sees about him none but well-loved friends. If it should ever happen to one of you to be enraptured and hidden away in this secret place, this sanctuary of God, safe from the call and concern of the greedy senses, from the pangs of care, the guilt of sin and the obsessive fancies of the imagination so much more difficult to hold at bay -- such a man, when he returns to us again, may well boast and tell us: "The King has brought me into his bedroom." Whether this be the same room that makes the bride so jubilant I do not dare to affirm. But it is a bedroom, the bedroom of the King, and of the three that I have described in the three visions, it is the only place where peace reigns. As was clearly shown, in the first there is but a modicum of quiet, in the second none; for in the first God's glorious appearance fires our curiosity to explore deeper truths, and in the second the terror he inspires shatters our weakness. In the third place however, he is neither fearsome nor awe-inspiring, he wills to be found there in the guise of love, calm and peaceful, gracious and meek, filled with mercy for all who gaze on him.

5. In its moral teaching too, three things are to be taken into account, three apartments as it were in the one storeroom. It was for this reason perhaps that she used the plural, rooms, instead of room, since she must have been thinking about these apartments. Later on she glories in being admitted to the wine-room. We therefore, in accord with the advice: "Give occasion to a wise man and he will be still wiser," take occasion from the name given by the Holy Spirit to this room, and give names to the other two: the room of spices and the room of the ointments. Afterwards we shall see the reason for these names. For the moment take note that all these possessions of the Bridegroom are wholesome and sweet: wine, ointments and spices. "Wine," says Scripture, "gladdens the heart of man." We read too that oil gives him a merry countenance, and it is with oil that the various powders are mixed to produce ointments. Spices are useful, not only for the attractive sweetness of their scent, but also for their powers of healing. Rightly then the bride's happiness abounds on being admitted to a place filled to overflowing with such rich graces!

6. But I can give them other names, whose application seems more obvious. Taking them in due order, I name the first room discipline, the second nature, and the third grace. In the first, guided by moral principles, you discover how you are inferior to others, in the second you find the basis for equality, in the third what makes you greater; that is: the grounds for submission, for co-operation, for authority; or if you will: to be subject, to co-exist, to preside. In the first you bear the status of learner, in the second that of companion, in the third that of master. For nature has made all men equal. But since this natural moral gift was corrupted by pride, men became impatient of equal status. Driven by the urge to surpass their fellows, they spared no efforts to achieve this superiority; with an itch for vainglory and prompted by envy, they lived in mutual rivalry. Our primary task is to tame this willfulness of character by submission to discipline in the first room, where the stubborn will, worn down by the hard and prolonged schooling of experienced mentors, is humbled and healed. The natural goodness lost by pride is recovered by obedience, and they learn, as far as in them lies, to live peacefully and sociably with all who share their nature, with all men, no longer through fear of discipline but by the impulse of love. When they pass from here into the room of nature, they discover what is written: "How good, how delightful it is to live together as one like brothers: fine as oil on the head." For when morals are disciplined there comes, as to spices pounded together, the oil of gladness, the good of nature; the resulting ointment is good and sweet. The man who is anointed with it becomes pleasant and temperate, a man without a grudge, who neither swindles nor attacks nor offends another; who never exalts himself nor promotes himself at their expense, but offers his services as generously as he willingly accepts theirs.

7. If you have adequately grasped the characteristics of these two rooms, I think you will admit that I have appropriately named them the spice room and the ointment room. In the former, just as the vigorous pounding with a pestle presses and extracts the strong fragrance of the spices, so the power of authority and strictness of discipline elicit and reveal the natural strength of good morals. In the latter, a sweet refinement arising from innate and ready affection inspires one to serve with courteous promptitude, like the oil which anoints the head and runs down and flows over the whole body when exposed to a little heat. Accordingly, in the storeroom of discipline, the various dried ingredients of the spicy mixtures are stored up, and hence I thought it ought to be called the room of spices. But because the ointments are stored and preserved ready for use in the storeroom of Nature, it is called the room of ointments. With regard to the wine room, I do not think there is any other reason for its name than that the wine of an earnest zeal for the works of love is found there. One who has not been admitted to this room should never take charge of others. This wine should be the inspiring influence in the lives of those who bear authority, such as we find in the Teacher of the Nations, when he said: "Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to fall and I am not indignant?" Your desire is venal if you hanker to rule over others without the will to serve them; your ambition is unprincipled if you would hold men in subjection without concern for their salvation. I have also named this the room of grace; not because a man may enter the other two without the aid of grace, but because grace is especially found here in its fullness. For "love is the fullness of the law" and if you love your brother you have fulfilled the law.

15. But there is a place where God is seen in tranquil rest, where he is neither judge nor Teacher but Bridegroom. To me -- for I do not speak for others -- this is truly the bedroom to which I have sometimes gained happy entrance. Alas! how rare the time, and how short the stay! There one clearly realizes that "the Lord's love for those who fear him lasts forever and forever." It is there that one may happily say: "I am a friend to all who fear you and observe your precepts." God's purpose stands fast, the peace he has planned for those who fear him is without recall. Overlooking their faults and rewarding their good deeds, with a divine deftness he turns to their benefit not only the good they do but even the evil. He alone is happy "whom the Lord accuses of no guilt." There is no one without sin, not even one. "For all have sinned and forfeited God's glory." But "could anyone accuse those that God has chosen?" I ask no further pledge of righteousness if he is on my side whom alone I have offended. If he decrees that a sin is not to be imputed to me, it is as if it never existed. Inability to sin constitutes God's righteousness; God's forgiveness constitutes man's. When I grasped this I understood the truth of the words: "We know that anyone who has been begotten by God does not sin, because a heavenly birth protects him." Heavenly birth is eternal predestination, by which God loved his chosen ones and endowed them with spiritual blessings in his beloved Son before the world was made. Thus appearing before him in his holy place, they would see his power and his glory, and become sharers in the inheritance of the Son to whose image they were to be conformed. I think of such as these as if they had never sinned, because the sins in time do not appear in eternity, for the love of the Father covers a multitude of sins. "Happy is the man whose fault is forgiven, whose sin is blotted out." When I say these words I am suddenly inspired with so great a confidence, filled with such joy, that it surpasses the fear I experienced in the place of horror, that place of the second vision, and I even look upon myself as one of that blessed band. Would that this moment lasted! Again and again visit me, Lord, in your saving mission; let me see the goodness of your chosen, let me rejoice in the joy of your nation.

13. Who will want to rest in such a place when he sees that he, whose judgments are like the mighty deep, only spares and shows mercy to these sinners in this life that he may not do so in eternity? This kind of vision inspires a terror of judgment, not the secure confidence of the bedroom. That place is awe-inspiring, and totally devoid of quiet. I am horror-stricken when suddenly pitched into it, and over and over I think on the words: "What man knows whether he deserves love or hate?" What wonder if I should be stumbling there, I who am but a leaf blown in the wind, a sapless stalk, when even the greatest contemplative confessed his feet were on the point of stumbling. He almost slipped, and said: "I envied the wicked, seeing the peace of sinners." Why should he have felt like this? "They do not suffer as other men do, no human afflictions for them! So pride upholds them." Hence they will not stoop to repentance, and are to be damned for their pride with the proud devil and his angels. Those not involved in the toil of men will be involved in the work of the devil. To them the Judge will say: "Go away from me, you cursed, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." However, that is a place where we find God working, it is nothing less than the house of God and the gate of heaven. In it we learn the fear of God, that his name is holy and terrible; it is the anteroom to glory, for "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

14. Do not be surprised that I have assigned the beginning of wisdom to this place and not to the first. For there we listen to Wisdom as a teacher in a lecture hall, delivering an all-embracing discourse, here we receive it within us; there our minds are enlightened, here our wills are moved to decision. Instruction makes us learned, experience makes us wise. The sun does not warm all those for whom it shines; and so, though Wisdom gives light to many to see what they should do, it does not immediately spur them on to action. To know where great wealth is to be found is not the same as possessing it; it is possession, not knowledge, that makes a man rich. And so with God: to know him is one thing, to fear him is another; nor does knowledge make a man wise, but the fear that motivates him. Would you then call him wise who is puffed up by his own knowledge? Who but the most witless would consider those wise who, "although they knew God, did not honor him as God or give thanks to him"? I share the opinion of the Apostle, who did not hesitate to declare their heart foolish. How truly is the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom, because the soul begins to experience God for the first time when fear of him takes hold of it, not when knowledge enlightens it. You fear God's justice, you fear his power; and so you experience God as just and powerful because fear of him is itself an experience. Experience makes a wise man, as knowledge makes a learned man and wealth a rich man. What then of the place first mentioned? It makes one ready for wisdom. There you are prepared, here you are initiated. The preparation lies in knowing things. But a proud conceit easily follows on this knowledge unless repressed by fear, which is rightly called the beginning of wisdom, because from the beginning it is a barrier to foolishness. In the first place we are set on the way to wisdom, here we enter its doors. But neither here nor there does the contemplative find rest, because there he discovers a busied God, here an angry God. Hence you must not look for the bedroom in these places, one of which resembles a teacher's auditorium, the other a bar of justice.

8. Now that I have given you an explanation of the names, let us see how the rooms differ from each other. To check the petulant, dreamy senses with the fear a superior can inspire, to curb with firm discipline the flesh's immoderate appetites, is by no means as easy or manageable as to live in the harmony of spontaneous affection with our companions; to live agreeably with them at the prompting of the will is different from a life where the rod is the check on manners. No one will maintain that the ability to live sociably and to govern beneficially are of equal importance or demand the same sort of virtue. Hence there are so many living peacefully under a superior who, when freed from their inferior status, are unable to control themselves or refrain from abusing their equals. Lots of men, too, can spend their days uprightly and peacefully among their brothers, but if given authority over them they become not only useless but foolish and unworthy. People of this kind are meant to be content with a moderate measure of goodness, this is their allotted grace from God; they have little need of guidance from a superior but are not themselves capable of leadership. These latter are endowed with a finer character than those previously referred to as devoid of self-control, but leaders blest with competence surpass them both. They qualify to receive what the Lord has promised to those who govern well; that he will place them over all his possessions. Those who exercise authority for the welfare of others are comparatively few, and fewer still those whose power rests in humility. These both are achieved easily by the man of perfect discretion, the mother of the virtues, the man who is drunk with the wine of charity even to contempt for his own good name, to forgetfulness of self and indifference to self-interest. This is the unique and exquisite lesson of the Holy Spirit infused in the wine room. Without the fervor of charity the virtue of discretion is lifeless, and intense fervor goes headlong without the curb of discretion. Praiseworthy the man then who possesses both, the fervor that enlivens discretion, the discretion that regulates fervor. A man in a position of authority ought to be so constituted. But the man whose character I most admire, who has attained supreme success in the way of life I have portrayed, is the man to whom it is given to sprint through or ramble round all these rooms without stumbling, who never contends with his superiors nor envies his equals, who does not fail in concern for his subjects nor use his authority arrogantly. To be obedient to superiors, obliging to one's companions, to attend with kindness to the needs of one's subjects -- these sure marks of perfection I unhesitatingly attribute to the bride. We infer this from the words she speaks: "The king has brought me into his rooms," which show that she was introduced, not to any room in particular but to the whole complex of rooms.

9. Let us at last enter the bedroom. What can be said of it? May I presume that I know all about it? Far from me the pretension that I have experienced so sublime a grace, nor shall I boast of a privilege reserved solely to the fortunate bride. I am more concerned to know myself, as the Greek motto advises, that with the Prophet, "I may know what is wanting to me." However, if I knew nothing at all there is nothing I could say. What I do know I do not begrudge you or withhold from you; what I do not know may "he who teaches men knowledge" supply to you. You remember that I said the bedroom of the King is to be sought in the mystery of divine contemplation. In speaking of the ointments I mentioned that many varieties of them are to be found in the Bridegroom's presence, that all of them are not for everybody's use, but that each one's share differs according to his merits; so too, I feel that the King has not one bedroom only, but several. For he has more than one queen; his concubines are many, his maids beyond counting. And each has her own secret rendezvous with the Bridegroom and says: "My secret to myself, my secret to myself." All do not experience the delight of the Bridegroom's private visit in the same room, the Father has different arrangements for each. For we did not choose him but he chose us and appointed places for us; and in the place of each one's appointment there he is too. Thus one repentant woman was allotted a place at the feet of the Lord Jesus, another -- if she really is another -- found fulfillment for her devotion at his head. Thomas attained to this mystery of grace in the Savior's side, John on his breast, Peter in the Father's bosom, Paul in the third heaven.

10. Who among us can see the difference between these various merits, or rather rewards? But in order to draw attention to what is known to us all, I suggest that the first woman took her rest on the secure ground of humility, the second on the seat of hope, Thomas in firm faith, John in the breadth of charity, Paul in the insights of wisdom, Peter in the light of truth. There are many rooms therefore in the Bridegroom's house; and each, be she queen, or concubine or one of the bevy of maidens, finds there the place and destination suited to her merits until the grace of contemplation allows her to advance further and share in the happiness of her Lord, to explore her Bridegroom's secret charms. Relying on the light it may please him to give me, I shall try to demonstrate this more clearly in its proper place. For the moment it suffices to know that no maiden, or concubine, or even queen, may gain access to the mystery of that bedroom which the Bridegroom reserves solely for her who is his dove, beautiful, perfect and unique. Hence it is not for me to take umbrage if I am not admitted there, especially since I can see that even the bride herself is at times unable to find fulfillment of her desire to know certain secrets. At such times she craves to be shown where he pastures his flock, where he rests it at noon.

11. But I shall tell you how far I have advanced, or imagine I have advanced; and you should not accuse me of boasting, because I reveal it solely in the hope of helping you. The Bridegroom who exercises control over the whole universe, has a special place from which he decrees his laws and formulates plans as guidelines in weight, measure and number for all things created. This is a remote and secret place, but not a place of repose. For although as far as in him lies he arranges all things sweetly -- the emphasis is on arranging and the contemplative who perchance reaches that place is not allowed to rest and be quiet. In a way that is wondrous yet delightful he teases the awe-struck seeker till he reduces him to restlessness. Further on the bride beautifully describes both the delight and the restlessness of this stage of contemplation when she says that though she sleeps her heart is awake. She means that in her sleep she experiences a repose full of sweetest surprise and wondrous peace, but her wakeful heart endures the lassitude of avid desire and laborious effort. Job referred to this when he said: "Lying in bed I wonder, 'When will it be day?' Having risen I think, 'How slowly evening comes!'" Do you gather from these words that a person in pursuit of holiness sometimes finds sweetness bitter and wants to be rid of it, and at other times finds that same bitterness attractive? For he would not have said: "When will it be day?" if that contemplative repose entirely satisfied him; but if it had been entirely displeasing he would not have longed for the quiet of evening. This place then, where complete repose is not attainable, is not the bedroom.

12. There is another place from which God, the just Judge, "so much to be feared for his deeds among mankind," watches ceaselessly with an attention that is rigorous yet hidden, over the world of fallen man. The awe-struck contemplative sees how, in this place, God's just but hidden judgment neither washes away the evil deeds of the wicked nor is placated by their good deeds. He even hardens their hearts lest they should repent, take stock of themselves, and be converted and he would heal them. And he does this in virtue of a certain and eternal decree, all the more frightening from its being unchangeably and eternally determined. The contemplative's fears are intensified if he recalls God's words to the angels as recorded in the Prophet: "Shall we show favor to the wicked?" And when they ask with dismay: "Will he not, then, learn to do justice?" God answers: "No," and gives the reason: "He does evil in the land of the upright, and he will not see the glory of the Lord." Let the clerics, let the ministers of the Church, who are guilty of impious conduct in their benefices, be filled with fear. Discontented with the stipends that ought to suffice them, they sacrilegiously retain the surplus income that is meant for the upkeep of the needy; they are not afraid to squander the sustenance of the poor in pandering to their own pride and luxury. They are guilty of a double wickedness: they pilfer the property of others and prostitute the goods of the Church to serve their lusts and vanities.