

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN WRITERS

THE WORKS OF THE FATHERS IN TRANSLATION

EDITED BY

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ORIGEN

THE SONG OF SONGS COMMENTARY AND HOMILIES

TRANSLATED AND ANNOTATED
BY

R. P. LAWSON

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reprint of the Latin text by Baehrens, appeared recently as Vol. 37 of the series *Sources Chrétiennes*: Dom O. Rousseau, *Origène, Homélie sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris 1954). To my knowledge, the *Commentary* itself has not been translated into a modern language before; though selections taken from here and there have been offered in English by Tollinton,²⁸ in French by Bardy,²⁹ in German by von Balthasar.³⁰

PART ONE

THE COMMENTARY

FROM THE LATIN TRANSLATION BY RUFINUS

PROLOGUE

1. *The Song of Songs a Drama of Mystical Meaning*

It seems to me that this little book is an epithalamium,¹ that is to say, a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the Bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word² of God. And deeply indeed did she love Him, whether we take her as the soul made in His image, or as the Church. But this same Scripture also teaches us what words this august and perfect Bridegroom used in speaking to the soul, or to the Church, who has been joined to Him.³ And in this same little book that bears the title *Song of Songs*, we recognize moreover things that the Bride's companions said, the maidens who go with her, and also some things spoken by the Bridegroom's friends and fellows. For the friends of the Bridegroom also, in their joy at His union with the Bride, have been enabled to say some things—at any rate those that they had heard from the Bridegroom Himself. In the same way we find the Bride speaking not to the Bridegroom only, but also to the maidens; likewise the Bridegroom's words are addressed not to the Bride alone, but also to His friends. And that is what we meant just

now, when we said that the marriage-song was written in dramatic form. For we call a thing a drama, such as the enaction of a story on the stage, when different characters are introduced and the whole structure of the narrative consists in their comings and goings among themselves. And this work contains these things one by one in their own order, and also the whole body of it consists of mystical utterances.

But it behoves us primarily to understand that, just as in childhood we are not affected by the passion of love, so also to those who are at the stage of infancy and childhood in their interior life—to those, that is to say, who are being nourished with milk in Christ, not with strong meat, and are only beginning to *desire the rational milk without guile*⁴—it is not given to grasp the meaning of these sayings. For in the words of the Song of Songs there is that food, of which the Apostle says that *strong meat is for the perfect*; and that food calls for hearers *who by ability have their senses exercised to the discerning of good and evil*.⁵ And indeed, if those whom we have called children were to come on these passages, it may be that they would derive neither profit nor much harm, either from reading the text itself, or from going through the necessary explanations. But if any man who lives only after the flesh should approach it, to such a one the reading of this Scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard and danger. For he, not knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the Divine Scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust!⁶

For this reason, therefore, I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it. For they say that with the Hebrews also care is taken to allow no one even to hold this book in his hands, who has not reached a full and ripe age. And there is another practice too that we have received from them—namely, that all the Scriptures should be delivered to boys by teachers and wise men, while at the same time the four that they call *deuterōseis*⁷—that is to say, the beginning of Genesis, in which the creation of the world is described; the first chapters of Ezechiel, which tell about the cherubim; the end of that same, which contains the building of the Temple; and this book of the Song of Songs—should be reserved for study till the last.

2. The Theme of the Song of Songs

Before we come to consider the things that are written in this book, therefore, it seems to me necessary to say a few things first about love itself, which is the main theme of this Scripture; then about the order of the books of Solomon, among which we find that this one is put third; then about the name of the book itself, why it is entitled *The Song of Songs*; and, lastly, for what apparent reason it is written in dramatic form and, like a story that is acted on the stage, with dialogue between the characters.

Among the Greeks, indeed, many of the sages,⁸ desiring to pursue the search for truth in regard to the nature of love, produced a great variety of writings in this dialogue form, the object of which was to show that the power of love is none other than that which leads the soul from

earth to the lofty heights of heaven, and that the highest beatitude can only be attained under the stimulus of love's desire. Moreover, the disputations on this subject are represented as taking place at meals, between persons whose banquet, I think, consists of words and not of meats. And others also have left us written accounts of certain arts, by which this love might be generated and augmented in the soul. But carnal men have perverted these arts to foster vicious longings and the secrets of sinful love.

You must not be surprised, therefore, if we call the discussion of the nature of love difficult and likely to be dangerous also for ourselves, among whom there are as many inexperienced folk as there are people of the simpler sort; seeing that even among the Greeks, who seem so wise and learned, there have none the less been some who did not understand what was said about love in the sense in which it was written, but took occasion from it to rush into carnal sins and down the steep places of immodesty, either by taking some suggestions and recommendations out of what had been written, as we said above, or else by using what the ancients wrote as a cloak for their own lack of self-control.

Lest, therefore, the like should happen to us, and we too should interpret in a vicious and carnal sense the things the ancients wrote with good and spiritual intent, let us stretch out our hands, alike of body and soul, to God; that the Lord, who *gave the word to them that preach good tidings with great power*,⁹ may by His power bestow the word also on us; so that we, out of these things that have been written, may be able to make clear a wholesome meaning in regard to the name and the nature of love, and one that is apt for the building up of chastity.

In the beginning of the words of Moses, where the

creation of the world is described, we find reference to the making of two men, the first *in the image and likeness of God*, and the second *formed of the slime of the earth*.¹⁰ Paul the Apostle knew this well; and, being possessed of a very clear understanding of the matter, he wrote in his letters more plainly and with greater lucidity that there are in fact two men in every single man. He says, for instance: *For if our outward man is corrupted, yet the inward man is renewed day by day*; and again: *For I am delighted with the law of God according to the inward man*;¹¹ and he makes some other statements of a similar kind. I think, therefore, that no one ought any longer to doubt what Moses wrote in the beginning of Genesis about the making and fashioning of two men, since he sees Paul, who understood what Moses wrote much better than we do, saying that there are two men in every one of us. Of these two men he tells us that the one, namely, the inner man, is renewed from day to day; but the other, that is, the outer, he declares to be corrupted and weakened in all the saints and in such as he was himself. If anything in regard to this matter still seems doubtful to anyone, it will be better explained in the appropriate places. But let us now follow up what we mentioned before about the inner and the outer man.

The* thing we want to demonstrate about these things

* J. A. Cramer, *Catenae Graecorum Patrum in Novum Testamentum* 8 (Oxford 1844) 115 f.:¹² There are certain instances in which the same name is given to things happening to the outer man and to the inner, instances which have analogy with each other. For example, with regard to age, the word 'child' is applied to the outer man, and the child gaining increase of stature grows into the 'youth,' until, being called a man, he becomes a 'father.' Now I use these names on account of what is written by John in the Catholic Epistle, having arranged these three names accordingly. But in a manner synonymous and analogous to the use of these three names as applied to the outer

is that the Divine Scriptures make use of homonyms; that is to say, they use identical terms for describing different things. And they even go so far as to call the members of the outer man by the same names as the parts and dispositions of the inner man; and not only are the same terms employed, but the things themselves are compared with one another. For instance, a person is a child in age according to the inner man, who has in him the power to grow and to be led onward to the age of youth, and thence by successive stages of development to come to the perfect man¹³ and to be made a father. Our own intention, therefore, has been to use such terms as would be in harmony with the language of Sacred Scripture, and in particular with that which was written by John; for he says: *I have written to you, children, because you have known the Father; I have written to you, fathers, because you have known Him who was from the beginning; I have written unto you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.*¹⁴ It is perfectly clear; and I think nobody should doubt that John calls these people children or lads or young men or even fathers according to the soul's age, not the body's. Paul too says somewhere:

man, I would say that a person can similarly be a 'child' in his inner man, however old he might be; the use of the word 'child' as to the outer man is parallel. Even so someone can be a 'youth' according to the hidden man of the heart (1 Peter 3.47), and in the same way one can be a 'man' and a 'father' inwardly. John indeed speaks thus: *I write unto you, little children, because you know the Father; I have written unto you, fathers, because you know Him who is from the beginning; I write unto you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and you have overcome the wicked one* (1 John 2.12-14). It is clear, I think, and consistent with the actual fact, that he means that he is writing these things to those who are spiritually 'children' and 'young men' and 'fathers.' And Paul says somewhere: *I could not speak to you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal; as unto little ones in Christ. I gave you milk to*

*I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto little ones in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not meat.*¹⁵ A little one in Christ is undoubtedly so called after the age of his soul, not after that of his flesh. And finally the same Paul says further: *When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but, when I became a man, I destroyed childish things.*¹⁶ And again on another occasion he says: *Until we all meet . . . unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ:*¹⁷ he knows that those who believe will all meet unto a perfect man and unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ.

So, then, just as these different ages that we have mentioned are denoted by the same words both for the outer man and for the inner, so also will you find the names of the members of the body transferred to those of the soul; or rather the faculties and powers of the soul are to be called its members. We read in Ecclesiastes, therefore: *The eyes of a wise man are in his head;*¹⁸ and again in the Gospel: *He that hath ears to hear, let him hear;*¹⁹ and in the prophets likewise: *The word of the Lord that was made in the hand of Jeremias the prophet,*²⁰ or whoever it happens to be. The passage that says: *Let not thy foot stumble,*²¹ is another instance of the same; so also is: *But my feet were moved a little*

drink, not meat (1 Cor. 3.1 f.). Now the same name is used here for one who in his soul is a little one in Christ, as when the same Paul in another place says: *When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child.* Then, since he did not remain in childhood, he says: *But when I became a man, I put away the things of a child* (1 Cor. 13.11). Similarly I hear him say: *until we all meet . . . unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ,* for he knew that believers all meet unto a perfect man and to measures of mental age (Eph. 4.13). Now just as there are these synonymous and analogous expressions, applicable both to the inner man and the outer man, so you may find the names of the limbs of the body used metaphorically with reference to the soul.

less.²² The womb of the soul also is plainly designated where we read: *Lord, from fear of Thee we have conceived in our womb.*²³ So likewise who is puzzled when it is said that *their throat is an open sepulchre*, and again: *Cast down, O Lord, and divide their tongues*, and also when it is written: *Thou hast broken the teeth of sinners*, and again: *Break Thou the arm of the sinner and of the malignant?*²⁴

But what need is there for me to collect more examples of these things, when the Divine Scriptures are full of any number of evidences? It is perfectly clear that in these passages the names of the members can in no way be applied to the visible body, but must be referred to the parts and powers of the invisible soul. The members have the same names, yes; but the names plainly and without any ambiguity carry meanings proper to the inner, not the outer man. Moreover, this material man, who also is called the outer, has food and drink of like sort with himself—that is to say, corporeal and earthly; but in the same way the spiritual man, who also is called the inner, has for his proper food that *living Bread which came down from heaven*, and drinks of the water that Jesus promises, saying: *Who-soever shall drink of this water, which I will give to him, shall not thirst for ever.*²⁵

The same terms, then, are used throughout for either man; but the essential character of the things is kept distinct, and corruptible things are offered to that which is corruptible, while incorruptible things are set before that which cannot be corrupted. It happens in consequence that certain people of the simpler sort, not knowing how to distinguish and differentiate between the things ascribed in the Divine Scriptures to the inner and outer man respectively, and being deceived by this identity of nomenclature, have applied themselves to certain absurd fables and

silly tales. Thus they even believe that after the resurrection bodily food and drink will be used and taken—food, that is, not only from that True Vine who lives for ever,²⁶ but also from the vines and fruits of the trees about us.²⁷ But concerning these we shall see elsewhere.

Now then, as the foregoing remarks have shown, one person is childless and barren according to the inner man, while another has plenty of offspring. And we notice that the saying: *The barren hath borne seven, and she that hath many children is weakened,*²⁸ is in accord with this; as also is that which is said in the blessings: *There shall not be one among you that is childless or barren.*²⁹ This being so, it follows that, just as there is one love, known as carnal and also known as Cupid by the poets,³⁰ according to which the lover sows in the flesh; so also is there another, a spiritual love, by which the inner man who loves sows in the spirit.³¹ And, to speak more plainly, if anyone still bears the image of the earthy according to the outer man, then he is moved by earthly desire and love; but the desire and love of him who bears the image of the heavenly according to the inner man are heavenly.³² And the soul is moved by heavenly love and longing when, having clearly beheld the beauty and the fairness of the Word of God, it falls deeply in love with His loveliness and receives from the Word Himself a certain dart and wound of love. For this Word is the image and splendour of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation, in whom were all things created that are in heaven and on earth, seen and unseen alike.³³ If, then, a man can so extend his thinking as to ponder and consider the beauty and the grace of all the things that have been created in the Word, the very charm of them will so smite him, the grandeur of their brightness will so pierce him as with a chosen dart—as says the prophet³⁴—that he will

suffer from the dart Himself a saving wound, and will be kindled with the blessed fire of His love.

We must realize also that, just as an illicit and unlawful love may happen to the outer man—as that, for instance, he should love a harlot or adulteress instead of his bride or his wife; so also may the inner man, that is to say, the soul, come to attach its love not to its lawful Bridegroom, who is the Word of God, but to some seducer or adulterer. The prophet Ezechiel plainly states this fact under the same figure, when he brings in Oolla and Ooliba to represent Samaria and Jerusalem corrupted by adulterous love; the actual passage in the prophetic scripture declares this plainly to those who desire a deeper understanding of it.³⁵ And this spiritual love of the soul does flame out, as we have taught, sometimes towards certain spirits of evil, and sometimes towards the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, who is called the faithful Spouse and Husband of the instructed soul, and from whom indeed the Bride derives her title, particularly in this piece of Scripture with which we are now dealing; this, with the Lord's help, we shall explain more fully when we come to expound the actual words of the book.

It seems to me, however, that the Divine Scripture is anxious to avoid the danger of the mention of love becoming an occasion of falling for its readers; and, to that end and for the sake of the weaker ones, it uses a more respectable word for that which the wise men of the world called desire or passion—namely, charity or affection.³⁶ For instance, it says of Isaac: *and he took Rebecca and she became his wife, and he loved (dilexit) her*; and again the Scripture speaks in the same way about Jacob and Rachel: *But Rachel had beautiful eyes and was fair of face, and Jacob loved (dilexit) Rachel and said, 'I will serve thee seven years*

*for Rachel thy younger daughter.'*³⁷ And the unchanged force of this word appears even more plainly in connection with Amnon, who had a passion for (adamavit) his sister Thamar; for it is written: *And it came to pass after this that Absalom the son of David had a sister who was very fair of face, and her name was Thamar, and Amnon the son of David loved (dilexit) her*. The writer has put 'loved' here in place of 'had a passion for.' And Amnon, he says, *was so troubled that he fell sick because of Thamar his sister, for she was a virgin, and Amnon thought it a serious thing to do anything to her*. And a little later, with reference to the outrage that Amnon did to Thamar his sister, the Scripture says thus: *And Amnon would not listen to what she said, but overpowered her and humbled her and slept with her. And Amnon hated her with an exceeding great hatred, for the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love (dilectio) with which he had loved (dilexerat) her.*³⁸

In these places, therefore, and in many others you will find that Divine Scripture avoided the word 'passion' and put 'charity' or 'affection' instead. Occasionally, however, though rarely, it calls the passion of love by its own name, and invites and urges souls to it; as when it says in Proverbs about Wisdom: *Desire her greatly (adama) and she shall preserve thee; encompass her, and she shall exalt thee; honour her, that she may embrace thee.*³⁹ And in the book that is called the Wisdom of Solomon it is written of Wisdom herself: *I became a passionate lover (amator) of her beauty.*⁴⁰ I think that the word for passionate love was used only where there seemed to be no occasion of falling. For who could see anything sensuous or unseemly in the passion for Wisdom, or in a man's professing himself her passionate lover? Whereas had Isaac been spoken of as having a passion for Rebecca or Jacob for Rachel, some

unseemly passion on the part of the saints of God might have been inferred from the words, especially by those who do not know how to rise up from the letter to the spirit. Most clearly, however, even in this our little book of which we are now treating, the appellation of 'passionate love' has been changed into the word 'charity' in the place where it says: *I have adjured you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my Nephew, to tell Him that I have been wounded by charity.*⁴¹ For that is as much as to say: 'I have been smitten through with the dart of His "passionate love."' "

It makes no difference, therefore, whether the Sacred Scriptures speak of love, or of charity, or of affection; except that the word 'charity' is so highly exalted that even God Himself is called Charity, as John says: *Dearly beloved, let us love one another, for charity is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God; but he that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is Charity.*⁴² And although some other time might be more suitable in which to say something about these words that, by way of example, we have cited from John's Epistle, it seems not unreasonable to touch briefly on the matter in this context too. *Let us love one another*, he says, *for charity is of God*; and a little later: *God is Charity.* In saying this, he shows both that God Himself is Charity, and that He who is of God also is Charity. For who is of God, save He who says: *I came forth from God and am come into this world?*⁴³ If God the Father is Charity, and the Son is Charity, the Charity, that Each One is, is one; it follows, therefore, that the Father and the Son are one and the same in every respect. Fittingly, then, is Christ called Charity, just as He is called Wisdom and Power and Justice and Word and Truth.⁴⁴ And that is why the Scripture says that *if charity abideth in you, God*

*abideth in you*⁴⁵—God, that is to say, the Father and the Son, who also come to him who has been perfected in charity, according to the saying of Our Lord and Saviour: *I and my Father will come to him and will make our abode with him.*⁴⁶ ✓

We must understand, therefore, that this Charity, which God is, in whomsoever it exists loves nothing earthly, nothing material, nothing corruptible; for it is against its nature to love anything corruptible, seeing that it is itself the fount of incorruption. For, because God, *who only hath immortality and inhabiteth light inaccessible*,⁴⁷ is Charity, it is charity alone that possesses immortality. And what is immortality, except the life eternal which God promises to give to those who believe in Him, the only true God, and in Jesus Christ, whom He has sent?⁴⁸ And for that reason we are told that the thing which in the first place and before all else is acceptable and pleasing to God, is that a man should love the Lord his God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his powers.⁴⁹ And because God is Charity, and the Son likewise, who is of God, is Charity, He requires in us something like Himself; so that through this charity which is in Christ Jesus, we may be allied to God who is Charity, as it were in a sort of blood relationship through this name of charity; even as he, who was already united to Him, said: *Who shall separate us from the charity of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord?*⁵⁰ 27

This charity, however, reckons all men as neighbours. For on that account the Saviour rebuked someone, who thought that the obligation to behave neighbourly did not apply to a righteous soul in regard to one who was sunk in wickedness; and for that same reason He made up the parable that tells how a certain man fell among robbers, as he was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and blames the priest and the Levite, who passed by when they saw

the man half-dead, but approves the Samaritan who showed mercy. And, by means of the reply of him who raised the question, He affirmed that the Samaritan was the neighbour of the man, and said: *Go, and do thou in like manner.*⁵¹ By nature, indeed, we are all of us neighbours one of another; but by the works of charity a man who has it in his power to do service to another who has not that power, becomes his neighbour. Wherefore also our Saviour became neighbour to us, and when we were lying half-dead from the wounds the robbers had inflicted on us, He did not pass us by.

We must recognize, therefore, that the charity of God is always directed towards God, from whom also it takes its origin, and looks back towards the neighbour, with whom it is in kinship as being similarly created in incorruption. So you must take whatever Scripture says about charity as if it had been said with reference to passionate love, taking no notice of the difference of terms; for the same meaning is conveyed by both. But if anyone should remark that we speak of 'loving' money and harlots and such-like evils, using the same word as that which has obvious reference to charity, you must understand that in such contexts we speak of charity by an improper use,⁵² and not according to its basic sense. To take another example, the word 'God' is used primarily of Him of whom *are all things, and by whom are all things, and in whom are all things*;⁵³ so that it declares plainly the virtue and nature of the Trinity. But by a secondary and so to speak improper usage Scripture describes as gods those to whom the word of God came, as the Saviour affirms in the Gospels.⁵⁴ And the heavenly powers also seem to be called by this name when it is said: *God hath stood in the congregation of gods; and, being in the midst of them, He judgeth gods.*⁵⁵

And by a third usage, false rather than improper, the daemonic gods of the Gentiles are so styled when Scripture says: *All the gods of the Gentiles are devils.*⁵⁶

Thus, then, the name of charity belongs first to God; and for that reason we are bidden to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength—Him, that is, from whom we have the very power of loving. And this command undoubtedly implies that we should also love wisdom and right-doing and piety and truth and all the other virtues; for to love God and to love good things is one and the same thing. In the second place, we are bidden also to love our neighbour as ourselves by a use of the word that is, as it were, derived and secondary. And the third usage is that by which 'loving' money, or pleasure, or anything that is connected with corruption and error, is called charity by a misnomer. So it makes no difference whether we speak of having a passion for God, or of loving Him; and I do not think one could be blamed if one called God Passionate Love (*Amorem*), just as John calls Him Charity (*Caritatem*). Indeed I remember that one of the saints, by name Ignatius, said of Christ: 'My Love (*Amor*) is crucified,'⁵⁷ and I do not consider him worthy of censure on this account. All the same, you must understand that everyone who loves money or any of the things of corruptible substance that the world contains, is debasing the power of charity, which is of God, to earthly and perishable objects, and is misusing the things of God by making them serve purposes that are not His; for God gave the things to men to be used, not to be loved.

We have discussed these matters at some length because we wanted to distinguish more clearly and carefully between the nature of passionate love and that of charity;

lest perhaps, because Scripture says that God is Charity, the charity and love that is of God should be esteemed to be in our every attachment, even to corruptible things. And we have seen that though charity is truly the possession and the gift of God, His work is not always appropriated by men for the things of God and for what God wills.

At the same time we ought to understand also that it is impossible for human nature not to be always feeling the passion of love for something. Everyone who has reached the age that they call puberty loves something, either less rightly when he loves what he should not, or rightly and with profit when he loves what he should love. But some people pervert this faculty of passionate love, which is implanted in the human soul by the Creator's kindness. Either it becomes with them a passion for money and the pursuit of avaricious ends; or they go after glory and become desirous of vainglory; or they chase after harlots and are found the prisoners of wantonness and lewdness; or else they squander the strength of this great good on other things like these. Moreover, when this passion of love is directed on to diverse skills, whether manual crafts or occupations needful only for this present life—the art of wrestling, for example, and track running—or even when it is expended on the study of geometry or music or arithmetic or similar branches of learning, neither in that case does it seem to me to be used laudably. For if that which is good is also laudable—and by that which is good we understand not anything corporeal, but only that which is found first in God and in the powers of the soul—it follows that the only laudable love is that which is directed to God and to the powers of the soul.

And that this is the case is shown by Our Saviour's own

statement when, having been asked by a certain person what was the greatest commandment of all and the first in the Law, He replied: *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with all thy powers; . . . and the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*; and He added: *On these two commandments dependeth the whole Law and the Prophets*, showing thereby that true and perfect love consists in keeping these two, and that the entire Law and Prophets hang on them. And the other injunction: *Thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness*, and whatever other commandment there may be is summed up in the words: *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*.⁵⁸

This will be better explained as follows. Suppose, for instance, that there is a woman with an ardent passion of love for a certain man who longs to be admitted to wedlock with him. Will she not act in all respects and regulate her every movement in a manner designed to please the man she loves, lest maybe, if she acts against his will in something, that excellent man may refuse and scorn her society? Will this woman, whose whole heart and soul and strength are on fire with passionate love for that man, be able to commit adultery, when she well knows that he loves purity? Or murder, when she knows him to be gentle, or theft, seeing she knows him to be pleased with generosity? Or will she covet other people's goods, when all her own desires are absorbed in passionate devotion for that man?

That is the sense in which every commandment is said to be comprised in the perfection of charity, and the strength of the Law and the Prophets to depend on it. Because of this good gift of charity or love, the saints are

neither straitened in tribulation, nor utterly perplexed in doubt, nor do they perish when they are cast down; but *that which is at present momentary and light of their tribulation worketh for them above measure an eternal weight of glory.*⁵⁹ This present tribulation is not described as momentary and light for everyone, but only for Paul and those who resemble him in having *the perfect charity of God in Christ Jesus poured out in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.*⁶⁰

In the same way also it was the love of Rachel that kept the patriarch Jacob from feeling the searing of either heat by day or cold by night through seven long years of toil.⁶¹ So too do I hear Paul himself, enkindled by the power of this love, declare: *Charity beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things; charity never falls.*⁶² There is, therefore, nothing that he who loves perfectly would not endure; but there are many things that we do not endure, simply because we have not got the charity that *endureth all things*. And, if we are impatient under certain burdens, it is because we lack the charity that *beareth all things*. In the struggle that we have to wage with the devil, too, we often fall; undoubtedly because the charity that *never falls* is not in us.

The Scripture before us, therefore, speaks of this love with which the blessed soul is kindled and inflamed towards the Word of God; it sings by the Spirit the song of the marriage whereby the Church is joined and allied to Christ the heavenly Bridegroom, desiring to be united to Him through the Word, so that she may conceive by Him and be saved through this chaste begetting of children, when they—conceived as they are indeed of the seed of the Word of God, and born and brought forth by the spotless Church, or by the soul that seeks nothing bodily, nothing material, but is aflame with the single love of the Word of

God—shall have persevered in faith and holiness with sobriety.⁶³

These are the considerations that have occurred to us thus far regarding the love or charity that is set forth in this marriage-hymn that is the Song of Songs. But we must realize how many things there are that ought to be said about this charity, what great things also about God, since He is Charity Himself. For, as *no one knoweth the Father but the Son, and he to whom it shall please the Son to reveal Him*, so also no one knows Charity except the Son. In the same way also, *no one knoweth the Son*, since He Himself likewise is Charity, *except the Father*. Further and in like manner, because He is called Charity, it is the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father, who alone knows what is in God; just as the spirit of man knows what is in man. Wherefore this *Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth who proceedeth from the Father*, goes about trying to find souls worthy and able to receive the greatness of this charity, that is of God, that He desires to reveal to them.⁶⁴

3. *The Place of the Song of Songs among the Works of Solomon*

Now, therefore, calling upon God the Father, who is Charity, through that same charity that is of Him, let us pass on to discuss the other matters. And let us first investigate the reason why, when the churches of God have adopted three books from Solomon's pen, the Book of Proverbs has been put first, that which is called Ecclesiastes second, while the Song of Songs is found in the third place.⁶⁵ The following are the suggestions that occur to us here.

The branches of learning by means of which men