

SERMON 3

THE KISS OF THE LORD'S FEET, HANDS AND MOUTH

TODAY THE TEXT WE ARE TO STUDY is the book of our own experience. You must therefore turn your attention inwards, each one must take note of his own particular awareness of the things I am about to discuss. I am attempting to discover if any of you has been privileged to say from his heart: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."¹

Those to whom it is given to utter these words sincerely are comparatively few, but any one who has received this mystical kiss from the mouth of Christ at least once, seeks again that intimate experience, and eagerly looks for its frequent renewal. I think that nobody can grasp what it is except the one who receives it. For it is "a hidden manna,"² and only he who eats it still hungers for more.³ It is "a sealed fountain"⁴ to which no stranger has access; only he who drinks still thirsts for more.⁵ Listen to one who has had the experience, how urgently he demands: "Be my savior again, renew my joy."⁶ But a soul like mine, burdened with sins, still subject to carnal passions,⁷ devoid of any knowledge of spiritual delights, may not presume to make such a request, almost totally unacquainted as it is with the joys of the supernatural life.

2. I should like however to point out to persons like this that there is an appropriate place for them on the way of salvation. They

1. Song 1:1.
4. Song 4:12.
7. 2 Tim 3:6.

2. Rev 2:17.
5. Sir 24:29.

3. Sir 24:29.
6. Ps 50:14.

may not rashly aspire to the lips of a most benign Bridegroom, but let them prostrate with me in fear at the feet of a most severe Lord. Like the publican full of misgiving,⁸ they must turn their eyes to the earth rather than up to heaven. Eyes that are accustomed only to darkness will be dazzled by the brightness of the spiritual world,⁹ overpowered by its splendor, repulsed by its peerless radiance and whelmed again in a gloom more dense than before. All you who are conscious of sin, do not regard as unworthy and despicable that position where the holy sinner laid down her sins, and put on the garment of holiness. There the Ethiopian changed her skin,¹⁰ and, cleansed to a new brightness, could confidently and legitimately respond to those who insulted her: "I am black but lovely, daughters of Jerusalem."¹² You may ask what skill enabled her to accomplish this change, or on what grounds did she merit it? I can tell you in a few words. She wept bitterly,¹³ she sighed deeply from her heart, she sobbed with a repentance that shook her very being, till the evil that inflamed her passions was cleansed away. The heavenly physician came with speed to her aid, because "his word runs swiftly."¹⁴ Perhaps you think the Word of God is not a medicine! Surely it is, a medicine strong and pungent, testing the mind and the heart.¹⁵ "The Word of God is something alive and active. It cuts like any double-edged sword but more finely. It can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or the joints from the marrow: it can judge the secret thoughts."¹⁶ It is up to you, wretched sinner, to humble yourself as this happy penitent did so that you may be rid of your wretchedness.¹⁷ Prostrate yourself on the ground, take hold of his feet, soothe them with kisses, sprinkle them with your tears and so wash not them but yourself. Thus you will become one of the "flock of shorn ewes as they come up from the washing."¹⁸ But even then you may not dare to lift up a face suffused with shame and grief, until you hear the sentence: "Your sins are forgiven,"¹⁹ to be

8. Lk 18:13.
11. Ps 118:42.
14. Ps 147:15.
17. Lk 7:37ff.

9. Prov 25:27.
12. Song 1:4.
15. Ps 7:10.
18. Song 4:2.

10. Jer 13:23.
13. Lk 22:62.
16. Heb 4:12.
19. Lk 7:48.

followed by the summons: "Awake, awake, captive daughter of Zion, awake, shake off the dust."²⁰

II. 3. Though you have made a beginning by kissing the feet, you may not presume to rise at once by impulse to the kiss of the mouth; there is a step to be surmounted in between, an intervening kiss on the hand for which I offer the following explanation. If Jesus says to me: "Your sins are forgiven," what will it profit me if I do not cease from sinning; I have taken off my tunic, am I to put it on again?²¹ And if I do, what have I gained; if I soil my feet again after washing them, is the washing of any benefit; Long did I lie in the slough of the marsh,²² filthy with all kinds of vices; if I return to it again I shall be worse than when I first wallowed in it. On top of that I recall that he who healed me said to me as he exercised his mercy: "Now you are well again, be sure not to sin any more, or something worse may happen to you."²³ He, however, who gave me the grace to repent, must also give me the power to persevere, lest by repeating my sins I should end up by being worse than I was before.²⁴ Woe to me then, repentant though I be, if he without whom I can do nothing²⁵ should suddenly withdraw his supporting hand. I really mean nothing; of myself I can achieve neither repentance nor perseverance, and for that reason I pay heed to the Wise Man's advice: "Do not repeat yourself at your prayers."²⁶ The Judge's threat to the tree that did not yield good fruit is another thing that makes me fearful.²⁷ For these various reasons I must confess that I am not entirely satisfied with the first grace by which I am enabled to repent of my sins; I must have the second as well, and so bear fruits that befit repentance,²⁸ that I may not return like the dog to its vomit.²⁹

4. I am now able to see what I must seek for and receive before I may hope to attain to a higher and holier state.³⁰ I do not wish to be suddenly on the heights, my desire is to advance by degrees.

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| 20. Is 52:1-2. | 21. Song 5:3. | 22. Ps 39:3. |
| 23. Jn 5:14. | 24. Lk 11:26. | 25. Jn 15:5. |
| 26. Sir 7:15. | 27. Mt 3:10. | 28. Lk 3:8. |
| 29. Prov 26:11. | 30. Mt 7:8. | |

The impudence of the sinner displeases God as much as the modesty of the penitent gives him pleasure. You will please him more readily if you live within the limits proper to you, and do not set your sights at things beyond you.³¹ It is a long and formidable leap from the foot to the mouth, a manner of approach that is not commendable. Consider for a moment: still tarnished as you are with the dust of sin, would you dare touch those sacred lips? Yesterday you were lifted from the mud, today you wish to encounter the glory of his face? No, his hand must be your guide to that end. First it must cleanse your stains, then it must raise you up. How raise you? By giving you the grace to dare to aspire. You wonder what this may be. I see it as the grace of the beauty of temperance and the fruits that befit repentance,³² the works of the religious man. These are the instruments that will lift you from the dunghill³³ and cause your hopes to soar. On receiving such a grace then, you must kiss his hand, that is, you must give glory to his name, not to yourself.³⁴ First of all you must glorify him because he has forgiven your sins, secondly because he has adorned you with virtues. Otherwise you will need a bold front to face reproaches such as these: "What do you have that was not given to you? And if it was given, how can you boast as though it were not?"³⁵

III. 5. Once you have had this twofold experience of God's benevolence in these two kisses, you need no longer feel abashed in aspiring to a holier intimacy. Growth in grace brings expansion of confidence. You will love with greater ardor, and knock on the door with greater assurance, in order to gain what you perceive to be still wanting to you. "The one who knocks will always have the door opened to him."³⁶ It is my belief that to a person so disposed, God will not refuse that most intimate kiss of all, a mystery of supreme generosity and ineffable sweetness. You have seen the way that we must follow, the order of procedure: first, we cast ourselves at his feet, we weep before the Lord who made us,³⁷

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| 31. Sir 3:22. | 32. Lk 3:8. | 33. Ps 112:7. | 34. Ps 113:9. |
| 35. I Cor 4:7. | 36. Lk 11:10. | 37. Ps 94:6. | |

deploring the evil we have done. Then we reach out for the hand that will lift us up, that will steady our trembling knees.³⁸ And finally, when we shall have obtained these favors through many prayers and tears, we humbly dare to raise our eyes to his mouth, so divinely beautiful, not merely to gaze upon it, but—I say it with fear and trembling—to receive its kiss. “Christ the Lord is a Spirit before our face,”³⁹ and he who is joined to him in a holy kiss⁴⁰ becomes through his good pleasure, one spirit with him.⁴¹

6. To you, Lord Jesus, how truly my heart has said: “My face looks to you. Lord, I do seek your face.”⁴² In the dawn you brought me proof of your love,⁴³ in my first approach to kiss your revered feet you forgave my evil ways as I lay in the dust. With the advancement of the day you gave your servant reason to rejoice⁴⁴ when, in the kiss of the hand, you imparted the grace to live rightly. And now what remains, O good Jesus, except that suffused as I am with the fullness of your light, and while my spirit is fervent, you would graciously bestow on me the kiss of your mouth, and give me unbounded joy in your presence.⁴⁵ Serenely lovable above all others, tell me where will you lead your flock to graze, where will you rest it at noon?⁴⁶ Dear brothers, surely it is wonderful for us to be here,⁴⁷ but the burden of the day calls us elsewhere. These guests, whose arrival has just now been announced to us, compel me to break off rather than to conclude a talk that I enjoy so much. So I go to meet the guests, to make sure that the duty of charity, of which we have been speaking, may not suffer neglect, that we may not hear it said of us: “They do not practice what they preach.”⁴⁸ Do you pray in the meantime that God may accept the homage of my lips⁴⁹ for your spiritual welfare, and for the praise and glory of his name.⁵⁰

38. Is 35:3.

39. Lam 4:20. St Bernard's Latin version seems close to the Greek Septuagint version. It may be from the Itala or some ms no longer available.

40. I Cor 16:20.

41. I Cor 6:17.

42. Ps 26:8.

43. Ps 142:8.

44. Ps 85:4.

45. Ps 15:11.

46. Song 1:6.

47. Lk 9:33.

48. Mt 23:3.

49. Ps 118:108.

50. I Pet 1:7.

SERMON 4

THE KISS OF THE LORD'S FEET, HANDS AND MOUTH

YESTERDAY OUR TALK dealt with three stages of the soul's progress under the figure of the three kisses. You still remember this, I hope, for today I intend to continue that same discussion, according as God in his goodness may provide for one so needy.¹ We said, as you remember, that these kisses were given to the feet, the hand and the mouth, in that order. The first is the sign of a genuine conversion of life, the second is accorded to those making progress, the third is the experience of only a few of the more perfect. The book of Scripture that we have undertaken to expound begins with this last kiss, but I have added the other two in the hope that you will attain a better understanding of the last. I leave it to you to judge whether this was necessary, but I do really think that the very nature of the discourse clearly suggests that they be included. And I should be surprised if you did not see that she who said: “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth,”² wished to make a distinction between the kiss of the mouth and another or several other kisses. It might have been enough for her to have said simply: “Let him kiss me.” Why then should she distinctly and pointedly add: “with the kiss of his mouth,” a usage that is certainly not customary? Is it not that she wished to indicate that this kiss at the summit of love's intimacy is not the sole one? People normally say, do they not: “Kiss me,” or “Give me a kiss”? Nobody adds the words: “with your mouth,” or, “with the kiss of

1. Ps 67:11.

2. Song 1:1.

your mouth." When we wish to kiss somebody, we do not have to state explicitly what we want when we offer our lips to each other. For example, St John's story of Christ's reception of the traitor's kiss simply says: "He kissed him,"³ without adding "with his mouth or with the kiss of his mouth." This is normal procedure then both in speech and in writing. We have here three stages of the soul's growth in love, three stages of its advance toward perfection that are sufficiently known and intelligible to those who have experienced them. There is first the forgiveness of sins, then the grace that follows on good deeds, and finally that contemplative gift by which a kind and beneficent Lord shows himself to the soul with as much clarity as bodily frailty can endure.

2. Perhaps I should here attempt a better explanation of my reason for calling the first two favors kisses. We all know that the kiss is a sign of peace. If what Scripture says is true: "Our iniquities have made a gulf between us and God,"⁴ then peace can be attained only when the intervening gulf is bridged. When therefore we make satisfaction and become reconciled by the re-joining of the cleavage caused by sin, in what better way can I describe the favor we receive than as a kiss of peace? Nor is there a more becoming place for this kiss than at the feet; the amends we make for the pride of our transgressions ought to be humble and diffident.

II. 3. But when God endows us with the more ample grace of a sweet friendship with him, in order to enable us to live with a virtue that is worthy of such a relationship, we tend to raise our heads from the dust with a greater confidence for the purpose of kissing, as is the custom, the hand of our benefactor. It is essential however that we should not make this favor the occasion of self-glorification, we must give the glory to him from whom it comes. For if you glory in yourself rather than in the Lord,⁵ it is your own hand that you kiss, not his, which, according to the words of Job, is the greatest evil and a denial of God.⁶ If therefore, as Scripture suggests, the

3. Mk 14:45.

4. Is 59:2.

5. I Cor 1:31.

6. Job 31:28. See the note on this verse in the *Jerusalem Bible* (hereafter JB) (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), note f, p. 763.

seeking of one's own glory⁷ is like kissing one's own hand, then he who gives glory to God⁸ is quite properly said to be kissing God's hand. We see this to be the case among men. Slaves beg pardon of their offended masters by kissing their feet, and the poor kiss their benefactor's hand when they receive an alms.

III. 4. This poses a problem for you: God is spirit,⁹ his simple substance cannot be considered to have bodily members, so then, you say, show us what you mean by the hands and feet of God; explain to us the kiss of these hands and feet. But if I in turn put a question to my critic about the mouth of God—for, after all, Scripture does speak of the kiss of the mouth—will he tell me that this of course does refer to God? Surely if we attribute a mouth to God we may also attribute hands and feet, for, if he lacks these latter he must lack the former too.

But God has a mouth by which "he teaches men knowledge,"¹⁰ he has a hand with which "he provides for all living creatures,"¹¹ and he has feet for which the earth is a footstool.¹² When the sinners of the earth are converted from their ways, it is in abasement before these feet that they make satisfaction. I allow of course that God does not have these members by his nature, they represent certain modes of our encounter with him. The heartfelt desire to admit one's guilt brings a man down in lowliness before God, as it were to his feet; the heartfelt devotion of a worshiper finds in God renewal and refreshment, the touch, as it were, of his hand; and the delights of contemplation lead on to that ecstatic repose that is the fruit of the kiss of his mouth. Because his providence rules over all, he is all things to all, yet, to speak with accuracy, he is in no way what these things are. If we consider him in himself, his home is in inaccessible light,¹³ his peace is so much greater than we can understand,¹⁴ his wisdom has no bounds,¹⁵ No one can measure his greatness,¹⁶ no man can see him and live.¹⁷ Yet he who by his very

7. Jn 7:18.

10. Ps 93:10.

13. I Tim 6:16.

16. Ps 144:3.

8. Jn 9:24.

11. Ps 135:25.

14. Phil 4:7.

17. Ex 33:20.

9. Jn 4:24.

12. Is 66:1.

15. Ps 146:5.

nature is the principle through whom all creatures spring into being, cannot be far from any of us,¹⁸ since without him all are nothing.¹⁹ More wonderful still, though no one can be more intimately present to us than he, no one is more incomprehensible. For what is more intimate to anything than its own being? And yet, what is more incomprehensible to any of us than the being of all things? Of course when I say that God is the being of all things, I do not wish it to be understood in the sense that he and they are identical, but rather in the sense of the words of Scripture: "All that exists comes from him, all is by him and in him."²⁰ He is the creator, the efficient cause, not the material, of every creature. Such is the way the God whose majesty is so great has decided to be present to his creatures: as the being of all things that are, as the life of all things that live; a light to all those who think, virtue to all who think rightly, and glory to those who prevail in life's battle.

5. In this work of creation, of government, of administration, of imparting motion, of steering toward particular ends, of renewal and strengthening, he has no need of bodily instruments. By his word alone he had made all things, both corporeal and spiritual. Souls have a need for bodies, and bodies in turn a need for senses, if they are to know and influence each other. Not so the omnipotent God, who by the immediate act of his will, and that alone, both creates and governs at his good pleasure. His influence touches whom he wills, as much as he wills, without calling on the aid or service of bodily powers. What possible help could he receive from bodily senses when he decides to take cognizance of the things he brought into being? Nothing has the remotest chance of hiding from him, or of escaping that light of his that penetrates everywhere; sense awareness can never be the medium of his knowledge. Not merely does he know all things without a body's intervention, he also makes himself known to the pure in heart²¹ without the need for recourse to it. I have spoken extensively on this point in order to make it more plain for you, but now pressure of time demands that I come to an end, so we must postpone further discussion till tomorrow.

18. Acts 17:27.

19. Jn 1:3.

20. Rom 11:36.

21. Mt 5:8.

SERMON 5

ON THE FOUR KINDS OF SPIRITS

AS YOU KNOW, SPIRITS CAN BE DIVIDED into classes: that of the animal, that of man, that of the angel, and that of God who created all the others. Each of these, with one exception, needs a body or a body's likeness, either for its own sake or for the sake of others or for both. The exception is he whom every creature, whether corporeal or spiritual, is called on to acknowledge in sentiments like the Psalmist: "You are my God because you have no need of my goods."¹ If we consider the animal we see that its spirit, its life principle, cannot even exist without a body. When the animal dies its soul ceases to live at the same moment that it ceases to impart life. We indeed continue to live after the body's death, but only by means of the body do we gain those merits that lead to a life of blessedness. St Paul sensed this, saying: "The invisible things of God are understood through the things he has made."² All creatures that he has made, creatures that possess a body and are therefore visible, can be understood by our minds only through the body's instrumentality. Therefore our souls have need of a body. Without it we cannot attain to that form of knowledge by which alone we are elevated toward the contemplation of truths essential to happiness. If one of you will object that baptized infants who die before acquiring a knowledge of the

1. Ps 135:2. See JB, Ps 16, note b, p. 797. The modern translations, JB, RSV, etc, do not correspond to the Vulgate as quoted by St Bernard. The Hebrew original is vague.

2. Rom 1:20.

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