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# SONG OF SONGS AND THE CHARISM OF MOTHER THERESA OF CALCUTTA (SONG. 1:5 - 2:17)

## INTRODUCTION

While preaching spiritual retreats to the Sisters Missionaries of Charity in different parts of the world (Athens, Rawalpindi, Kigali, Nairobi, Tirana, Calcutta, etc.) I was looking for inspiration in the biblical Song of Songs, especially as explained by the Fathers of the Church. I discovered a deep spiritual convergence between the charisma of mother Theresa of Calcutta, expressed in the main documents of her Society (*Constitutions* and *Spiritual Directory*), and the tradition of the Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs.

Following the footprints of the Fathers of the Church, I prepared spiritual conferences, based on selected interpretations taken from ancient and medieval writers. Like the great Alexandrian interpreters (Origen, Didymos the Blind, etc.), every passage of Scripture is followed by an explanation. Nevertheless, the consecutive commentaries are subjected to the principle of *akoloutheia*. That means the verses are not independent and separated but in their context, they form an organic unity.

As a lemma for each explanation in our article we use verses of the Song of Songs according to the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition. It was the Biblical translation that Mother Theresa recommended to her sisters. Yet the text of this edition does not contain subtitles for specific pericopes. Therefore, in our article we use the subtitles taken from the New American Bible that seem suitable for dividing our text in smaller units.

At the beginning of every explanation there will be a short note connected with the literal sense of the sentence. That will be followed by some patristic and medieval more-than-literal interpretations that I consider valid and interesting for the modern mentality. Finally, we will have the accommodation of the Biblical text to the ideas expressed by the *Constitutions* and *Spiritual Directory* of the Missionaries of Charity.

## 1. LOVE'S BOAST

*I am very dark, but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon* (Song 1:5). Dark skin was a sign of hard work and low social position. The skin of the Bride is not delicate as the skin of those who live in rich palaces. Yet she is beautiful because her Beloved loves her!<sup>1</sup> The tents symbolize the instability, continuous being on the way; the curtains of Solomon are the external protection of the Temple. They are exposed to wind and rain.

As missionaries we have no fixed and quiet place on earth. The spiritual and apostolic fruitfulness of our Society will depend on our deliberate choice of simple and lowly means in the fulfillment of our mission (*Constitutions*, 6, p.4).

*Do not gaze at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has scorched me* (Song 1:6a). The Fathers said that the Church is dark and beautiful because she is exposed to the rays of the Sun of Justice, Jesus Christ (Hippolitus Romanus, 4,2, p.31; Origen Barbara, 8, p.158), and also because she suffered the heat of persecutions and all kind of distress for the sake of His Name.

We are called to participate in the suffering and death of Jesus. The Cross will be for us as it was for Christ: proof of the greatest love (Jn 15:13). Jesus alone, God made Man, could fully understand the meaning of sin and suffer from it. The force with which Christ was drawn to His Cross, in expiation for the sin of man-

1 The Church is dark, because of our sins, yet love of Christ makes her beautiful (Hippolitus Romanus, 4,1, p.31; Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 1,22, p.38; Philo Carpasii, 10, p.72). Before the coming of Jesus, the gentiles were dark, after His coming they became beautiful because the Sun of Rightousness (Mal 4:2) illuminated them (Gregorius Iliberritanus, 1,25, p.177).

kind, must urge us as Spouses of Jesus Crucified to accept voluntary nailing with Christ on the Cross, in a spirit of love, obedience, and reparation for our own sinfulness and that of the world, especially our poor (*Constitutions*, 160, p.88).

*My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept!* (Song 1:6b). The Bride is pure and innocent yet even her brothers do not understand her love. In spite of all she remains faithful to the One who took possession of her. Her own vineyard is her heart that belongs only to Jesus.

With Jesus our Savior, lamb led to the slaughter (Is 53:7), and with our poor, we will accept cheerfully and in the spirit of faith all the chances He makes especially for us: those of misunderstanding, being looked down on, failure, disgrace, blame, lack of virtue and correction (*Constitutions*, 30, p.18).

## 2. LOVE'S INQUIRY

*Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon* (Song 1:7a). The Bride relies only on her Beloved. She wants to be always with Him, to listen to His voice,<sup>2</sup> to work with him sharing his labor as a shepherd and to rest at His side in the heat of midday. She wants to tell Him: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters" (Ps. 23:1-2; Origen 2, 4, 17-18, p.340). In hope we rely utterly on the omnipotence of Him who said: "Without Me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

Persuaded of our nothingness and with the blessing of obedience, we attempt all things, doubting nothing, for with God all things are possible (Mk 10:27). We will allow the good God to make plans for the future, for yesterday has gone, tomorrow has not yet come and we have only today to make Him known, loved and served. Grateful for the thousands of opportunities Jesus gives us to bring hope into a multitude of lives by our concern for the individual sufferer, we will help our troubled world on the brink of despair to discover a new reason to live or to die with a smile of contentment on its lips (*Constitutions*, 28, p.17-18).

*For why should I be like one who wanders beside the flocks of your companions?* (Song 1:7b). Without her Beloved she feels alone and helpless. She needs only Him, and looks for Him wandering beside the flocks of other shepherds.

<sup>2</sup> According to Gregory of Elvira, the words "tell me" express the desire of the Church to be instructed by Jesus, to listen to the proclamation of the Gospel and the preaching of the name of Jesus by the Apostles (Gregorius Iliberritanus, 2,7, p.182).

With regards to God, our poverty is our humble recognition and acceptance of our sinfulness, helplessness and utter nothingness, and the acknowledgement of our neediness before Him, which expresses itself as hope in Him, as an openness to receive all things from Him as from our Father (*Constitutions*, 51, p.34).

*If you do not know, O fairest among women, follow in the tracks of the flock* (Song 1:8a). Jesus Christ, who is the Way Himself (Jn 14:6), shows us the way and leads us. He calls us to go out of our limitations and follow Him.<sup>3</sup> “Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear: forget your people and your father’s house, and the king will desire your beauty” (Ps. 45, 10-11; Justus Urgellensis, 14, 966C-D). Frequently, the pope Francis invites us to undertake the journey, to set out on the way.<sup>4</sup> In our life, it is connected with the vow of obedience. Our call to obedience is the keen thirst of Jesus, the Word of God, our Teacher to lead us through the direction of the Holy Spirit our Counselor, and our Lady, the Seat of Wisdom our guide, to the experience of the deep secrets of His Heart (*Spiritual Directory*, Section B, 58, p.64).

To follow the tracks of the flock means in the first place to follow the footprints of the Shepherd, Jesus, but also of those who followed Him in a perfect way: The Virgin Mary, the Apostles, the saints that lived throughout the ages, and the footprints of our dearest Mother Teresa. Some Fathers say that we can find the footprints of God in all the creatures that enjoy the gift of Divine Providence (Nilus Ancyrensis, 20, p.176).

Our vow of obedience is our response to the call of Christ. This evangelical counsel, undertaken in the spirit of faith and love in the following of Christ, who was obedient even unto death, obliges submission of our will to lawful Superiors (*Constitutions*, 59, p.39).

*And pasture your kids beside the shepherds’ tents* (Song 1:8b). The Bride is not alone. There is a small flock of kids entrusted to her care. Yet she cannot assist them by herself. She needs the proximity of the shepherds’ tents that ensures safety, pasture and protection.

There are people whom God had entrusted to our care, including the poor people we assist, and those who have asked us for prayer. In a special way in the slums the sisters should find a place where they will gather the poor and little street children, whoever they may be. Their very first concern is to make them clean, feed them, and then teach them, according to syllabus, to prepare them for admission into regular schools.

3 Jesus calls the soul “fairest” because she is on the way, she is progressing and ascending (Origen Sch 2,5,29, p.370).

4 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20; Angelus, 1 December 2013, passim.

On Sundays and days of obligation, the sisters shall gather their own group and take them to the nearest Church (*Constitutions*, 112, p.65). Thus, they will pasture their kids beside the shepherd's tents!

### 3. LOVE'S VISION

*I compare you, my love, to a mare of Pharaoh's chariots* (Song 1:9). The literary context indicates that the reason for such comparison is the beauty of the ornaments of the Bride. However, Jewish and Christian traditions read this verse in relationship to the slavery of Israel in Egypt (Origen Sch, 2, 6, 1, p.382). God has freed His people opening the waters of the Red Sea. Jesus liberated us from the slavery of Satan,<sup>5</sup> sin, and death through His Passion and Resurrection.

Among the poorest of the poor are the people enslaved by addiction – drugs, alcoholism, sex, etc. As Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the mankind, let us follow Him by taking upon ourselves the sufferings of the poor. Our life of penance is the great thirst of Jesus to draw us into His broken and bleeding Heart through the pierced Heart of His Mother to experience His own Passion, Death and Resurrection for the salvation and sanctification of the whole world, especially those who are on the verge of being eternally lost (*Spiritual Directory*, Section B, 160, p.98).

*Your cheeks are comely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels* (Song 1:10). The cheeks of the Bride are adorned with rich earrings, and on her neck there are strings of pearls and gems. She is beautiful, because she listens to the Word of God (ears) and is obedient (neck) to fulfill His will.

Consecrated obedience is the gift of God to us that opens our hearts to listen to His Word spoken through His creatures and to do it joyfully in the spirit of Our Lady – “Be it done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38) – so that the plan God has for the world through us as individuals and as a Society be fulfilled (*Constitutions*, 58, p.38). St. Ambrose says that the yoke of Jesus is sweet if we consider it as an ornament and not as a burden (Mt 11, 29-30; Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 1, 43, p.54).

*We will make you ornaments of gold, studded with silver* (Song 1:11). The Bride has nothing. All her ornaments are gifts of the Beloved. He already gave her strings of jewels and now He wants to give her even more – ornaments made out of precious metals such as gold and silver.<sup>6</sup> Real love finds its expression in generosity. Love is the desire to share everything with the beloved person.

5 Before the announcement of the Gospel, the gentiles were slaves of Satan (Gregorius Iliberritanus, 2,24-26, p.187).

6 Silver may symbolize the gift of the Scripture given to the Church and gold the spiritual understanding of His Word (Origen Sch, 2,8,15-16, p.414-416).

Christ, who being rich became poor and emptied Himself to work out our redemption, calls us to share in His poverty so that we might become rich through His poverty (2 Cor. 8:9; *Constitutions*, 49, p.33).

#### 4. LOVE'S UNION

*While the king was at his table, my nard gave forth its fragrance* (Song 1:12). The King Jesus invites the Church and each one of us to His table where He gives us His Holy Body and Blood as spiritual food and drink. As the answer to His invitation and a natural reaction she gives forth the fragrance of sanctity and of good deeds. "Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."<sup>7</sup>

Holy Mass is the prayer of our day, where Jesus makes our offering with His Church one with His Sacrifice and offers us all to His Father. To make our lives true sacrifice of love, we will consciously and actively enter into the spirit of Eucharistic Sacrifice and offer ourselves with Christ to be broken and given to the poorest of the poor (*Constitutions*, 131, p.74).

*My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts* (Song 1:13). The girls in ancient Israel carried a small sachet filled with myrrh powder in a hidden place between the breasts to avoid unpleasant smell. But myrrh has a special meaning in the Biblical symbolism. The Body of Christ was treated with myrrh at His burial. Hence the ancient tradition of the Church connects this verse with Christ's passion.<sup>8</sup> The Church has the memory of the Lord's passion in her heart, between her breasts.<sup>9</sup> She meditates and proclaims (Justus Urgellensis, 20, 968A) His Passion day and night.

Our community should take its share in the Passion of Jesus and welcome suffering, in any form, as a tremendous force to renew itself and to become more sensitive to the suffering of our poor whom we are called to love and serve as community. When we are lonely or feel unwanted or set aside or misunderstood, let us accept to be willing victims of another sister's limitations, selfishness or lack of thoughtfulness (*Constitutions*, 77, p.50-51). Thus, we may carry in our body the sufferings of Christ (2 Cor. 1:5) and meditate His infinite love even on the cross (Phi. 2:8).

7 Jn 12:3. Origen puts together the two scenes (Origen SCh, 2,9,3-7, p.436-440).

8 Origen Barbara, 14, p.168; Nilus Ancyrensis, 29, p.204; Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 1,45, p.56; Philo Carpasii, 27, p.82.

9 Sometimes the "breasts of the Church" symbolize the Old and New Testament. The Pascal Mystery of Christ is announced by the prophets and fulfilled in New Testament (Philo Carpasii, 28, p.82).

*My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi* (Song 1:14). The oasis of Engedi, at the shore of the Dead Sea, has several springs, many orchards, gardens and palm forests. It is a place of eternal spring. Together with the intense fresh fragrance of henna blossoms it calls to mind the new life, the Resurrection of Christ (Nilus Ancyrensis, 30; p.208). In the tradition of the Church, the Passion of Christ was always contemplated in the light of the Resurrection. Verse 13 should be read together with 14.

Therefore, we must not forget that the aim and the end of our community life is always the Joy of the Resurrection and the new life in Christ and gradually to come to realize the truth of: "Oh! How good and delightful it is to live as sisters all united" (Ps. 34:1), for we do believe in the communion of saints here on earth and in the life to come (*Constitutions*, 77, p.51).

*Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves* (Song 1:15). The dove in the eyes of Christ is the symbol of simplicity, humility and innocence.<sup>10</sup> He said to his disciples: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Mt 10:16). Such is also the way we should labor at the salvation and sanctification of the poorest of the poor, by living the love of God in prayer and action in a life marked by simplicity and humility of the Gospel (*Constitutions*, 5, p.2).

*Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely. Our bed is green* (Song 1:16). As the Church is beautiful in the eyes of Christ, so Christ is beautiful in the eyes of the Church. "You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore, God has blessed you forever" (Ps. 45:2; Justus Urgellensis, 23, 968D).

The bed is the place of special intimacy between the lovers. Jesus expressed the fullness of His love on the Bed of the Cross (Gregorius Iliberritanus, 3, 14, p.196).<sup>11</sup> But this bed is green, because finally it is not a place of death but of Resurrection. Let us open our hearts to the intimacy of His love as Spouses of Jesus Crucified (*Constitutions*, 144, p.78).

*The beams of our house are cedar; our rafters are pine* (Song 1:7). The words and images used in the poem make allusion to the Temple of Jerusalem. In ancient Israel it was a place of God's dwelling among His people.

Our Temple is the Risen Christ (Jn 2:19). His Body is the Church. By baptism, we enter into Him to adore the Father in Spirit and in truth, and so our whole

<sup>10</sup> Also an allusion to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church (Philo Carpasii, 32, p.84). The eyes of a dove enable the Church to grasp the spiritual meaning of the Scripture (Origen SCh, 3,1,4, p.494).

<sup>11</sup> The "green bed" symbolizes the intimate union of Jesus, the Divine Word, with the human soul (Nilus Ancyrensis, 36, p.224).

life is one of worship (*Constitutions*, 129, p.73). We become part of the living Temple of the Church. According to some Fathers the cedars symbolize the steadfast and virtuous Christians while the pines<sup>12</sup> symbolize the wise and merciful (Nilus Ancyrensis, 37, p.228-230).<sup>13</sup>

*I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys* (Song 2:1). The two flowers the Bride mentions to present herself have deep symbolical meaning. The red rose is connected with love and the white lily calls to mind the chastity and the trust in the Divine Providence (Mt 6:28; Nilus Ancyrensis, 41, p.243). The Church loves her Saviour with all her heart and at the same time is pure, “in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). All splendor and beauty of the lily comes from the Lord: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin” (Mt 6:8; Philo Carpasii, 36, p.88).

By the vow of Chastity, we commit ourselves to live a celibate life in the fervour of charity and the perfection of chastity. We are convinced that complete continence is neither impossible nor harmful to human development because, in our maturity and delicacy of our vocation as women, we love Christ with a deep and personal love, expressed in our love for our sisters, our poor and the world in which we live (*Lumen Gentium*, 46; *Constitutions*, 45, p.29).

*As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the maidens* (Song 2:2). To stress the beauty of His Bride, the Beloved compares her to the fruitless thorns and brambles. What a contrast! Delicate lily and sharp brambles! But this is the Church in the middle of the world. She is proclaiming the Gospel to sinners and outcast, to thieves, prostitutes and evildoers. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mk 2:17).

People are hungry for God. We shall go freely in the Name of Jesus to towns and villages all over the world, even amid squalid and dangerous surroundings, with Mary the Immaculate Mother of God, seeking out the spiritually poorest of the poor with God’s tender affection. We shall proclaim to them the Good News of salvation and hope, singing with them His songs, bringing to them His love, peace and joy (*Constitutions*, 119, p.68).

*As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the young men* (Song 2:3a). Another contrast. A fruitful apple tree and fruitless forest trees. Jesus Christ is the tree that brings fruits of salvation, especially thanks to His Cross (Hippolitus Romanus, 18, 2, p.39; Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 2, 11, p.68) and Resurrection.

12 In some translations: cypresses.

13 The cedars may symbolize the prophets and the cypresses the apostles (Philo Carpasii, 34, p.86).

By His Incarnation Jesus entered into a community of sinners, accepting to be both divine and human, spirit and body, with the limitations of space, time, size and change, yet growing in age, wisdom and grace (*Constitutions*, 75, p.49). “He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phi 2:6-7).

*With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste* (Song 2:3b). In the shadow of Christ, we find safety and comfort.<sup>14</sup> Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is the time to sit in His shadow and to taste the sweetness of His presence among us.<sup>15</sup>

One hour of daily adoration before the Blessed Sacrament exposed gives us one more opportunity to sit at His feet in communion with the Lord to whom we belong. We use this time to deepen our faith, love, gratitude and reparation (*Constitutions*, 132, p.74).

*He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love* (Song 2:4). Christ nourishes and cherishes His Church (Eph. 5:29). He brings us to the banqueting house here, on earth, and gives us His Body and Blood as spiritual nourishment. And He is inviting us to the eternal banquet in the house of His Father (Nilus Ancyrensis, 45, p.256).

His love is a visible sign, as the banner that identifies the military unit. By religious consecration, a special dress becomes the sign of our consecrated love for God and the Church. It will express also our dedication to the world’s poor (*Constitutions*, 40, p.26). Our presence on the streets of cities and villages is a visible banner of Christ’s love in the midst of this world.

*Sustain me with raisins; refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love* (Song 2:5). The raisins are made out of vine grapes. This reminds us of the wine that becomes Blood of Christ in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The apples remind us of the apple tree from verse 2:3. The Beloved gives his Bride abundant and delicious nourishment. He is giving us not only the Eucharistic food but strengthens us with many spiritual gifts.<sup>16</sup>

14 Contrary to the shadow of death (Origen Barbara, 19, p.178). The shadow of Christ may symbolize the Holy Scripture (Origen SCh. 3,5,10, p.528-530). The shadow may also symbolize the death of Christ and the fruit (apple) means His resurrection (Gregorius Illyricus, 3,23, p.197).

15 Allusion to the Eucharistic Presence of Jesus (Philo Carpasii, 38, p.88). Jesus gives us also the fruit of the Spirit, that is joy and peace (Nilus Ancyrensis, 44, p.252).

16 According to St. Ambrose these gifts are the spiritual wisdom, similar to the manna from heaven and the Word of God (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 2,16, p.70-72).

We shall have half an hour's spiritual reading daily together, as a community, for the proper nourishment of our minds and spirit, to help us grow in prayer, contemplation and service (*Constitutions*, 135, p.75).

*O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!* (Song 2:6). The left hand of Christ is His love that supports the Church, gives her safety, peace and wisdom. His right hand is His power, that might govern history in a providential way<sup>17</sup>.

We trust in God's tenderest concern for us and His fidelity to His promises in the Gospel, hence we trust in His Divine Providence for all our necessities and those of our poor (*Constitutions*, 23, p.14).

*I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the hinds of the field, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it pleases* (Song 2:7). The love of God needs silence in our souls. Jesus himself is the Lord of our hearts and He knows the right time to awaken love, that it may grow, work, and bring fruits.

Our silence is a joyful and God-centered silence; it demands of us self-denial and plunges us into the deep silence of God where aloneness with God becomes a reality (*Constitutions*, 156, p.85).

## 5. A TRYST IN THE SPRING

*The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills* (Song 2:8). Jesus takes the initiative and comes to us. "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."<sup>18</sup> In every Eucharist He leaps upon the mountains and bounds over the hills to work the miracle of Communion with us. Let us listen to the voice of our Beloved in the Scriptures and welcome Him in His Sacramental Presence.

Humble love and pardon for one another should be our best preparation to receive the gift of Christ's Body in Holy Communion so that, growing in love and union with Him, we may be able to radiate His life through us (*Constitutions*, 131, p.74).

17 There are various interpretations of the passage:

1) The left hand symbolizes the present care of God and the right (in front) his future gifts (Nilus Ancyrensis, 48, p. 260; Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 2,23. p.78; Justus Urgellensis, 32, 970C).

2) The left hand is the first coming of Jesus and the right hand is His second coming (Origen Barbara, 74, p.266-268).

3) The left hand (behind) means the Old Testament, the right hand (in front) is the New Testament (Gregorius Iliberritanus, 3,29, p.198-199).

18 Rom 5:8. The tradition frequently connects this verse with the incarnation of Christ (Hippolitus Romanus, 22,1-2, p.42; Nilus Ancyrensis, 54, p.274; Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 2,32, p.82).

*My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice* (Song 2:9). Jesus comes to us. He is really present in the middle of us, yet his presence is hidden, veiled. Only in the house of the Father shall we see Him face to face. Here, on earth, He is standing behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. He is hidden in His human Body<sup>19</sup>, in the Eucharist, in His Word<sup>20</sup>, in the community of the Church, and in the disguise of the poorest of the poor.

As missionaries of Charity we are called to quench the infinite thirst of Jesus by accepting all suffering, renunciations and even death as means to understand better our special call to love and serve Christ in the distressing disguise of the poor (*Constitutions*, 35, p.23).

*My beloved speaks and says to me: Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away* (Song 2:10). Jesus calls us to come out, to give up our quiet and safe life and to undertake the risk of the mission. This is the call of Jesus to the missionary life, to become carriers of God's love, ready to go in haste like Mary, in search of souls (*Constitutions*, 18, p.10). Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor speaks and says to me: "Arise and come, I thirst".

*For lo, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land* (Song 2:11-12). "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccl. 3:1). God knows the right time for everything and gives us signs to discern it.<sup>21</sup>

Just as the rigorous winter prepares the way for spring, penance prepares us for the sanctity of God, filling us with His vision and love. It makes us more and more sinless and attunes us to the work of the spirit within us, bringing our whole being under the powerful influence of Jesus. It plunges us into the deep contemplation of God (*Spiritual Directory*, Section B, 161a, p.100).

*The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away* (Song 2:13). Every day hard work is part of the life of every man and woman, especially of the poor. They are frequently exploited, not paid, and abused. Jesus submitted Himself to the common

19 Nilus Ancyrensis, 56, p.284; Gregorius Iliberritanus, 4,6, p.200; Justus Urgellensis, 37, 971B.

20 Jesus hidden in the prophecies of the Old Testament (Origen, 3,14,21, p.668; Philo Carpasii, 51, p.96).

21 According to St. Ambrose the winter was the time preceding Christ's coming. He brought us the spiritual summer (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 2,48, p.94). The rain may symbolize the temptations (Philo Carpasii, 54, p.98). The end of rains calls to mind the end of the prophecies of the Old Testament and the arrival of Christ (Origen SCh, 3,14,25, p.670). According to others, the winter is the present time while the spring will be the second coming of Christ and the arrival of His Kingdom (Gregorius Iliberritanus, 4,15, p.202-203; Justus Urgellensis, 40-43, 971D).

law of labor and the common lot of the poor (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 13). In following Him we will labor hard in any and every work assigned to us by our superiors and rejoice when we have the opportunity to do the humble work in society. We will do our own household duties with joy and deliberately choose to live the life of hardship, privation, insecurity and empty-handedness of the life of Jesus and that of the poor. We will not seek any special privileges or treatment for ourselves, but be happy to be treated as one of the poor, ready to be insulted, ill-treated, refused or put to all kinds of inconveniences or falsely blamed. We shall not seek to defend ourselves, but leave it to the Lord to do so for us (*Constitutions*, 53, p.36).

*O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff* (Song 2:14a). The rock symbolizes God. "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer" (2 Sm 22:2). As Jesus Christ was the true God, the clefts or fissures of the rock recall to mind in the tradition of the Church His precious Wounds. We pray: "Withn Thy wounds hide me, let me not be separated from Thee"<sup>22</sup>.

The dove finds protection in the clefts of the rock. The Church and each of us finds the intimacy with God in the glorious Wounds of His Son. We need silence in order to be alone with God, to speak to Him, to listen to Him, to ponder His words deep in our hearts. We need to be alone with God in silence to be renewed and to be transformed. Silence gives us a new outlook on life; In it we are filled with the energy of God Himself that makes us do all things with joy (*Constitutions*, 152, p.83). This divine energy gives us the strength to go out and proclaim His love to the whole world.

*Let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is comely* (Song 2:14b). Jesus wants to listen the voice of His Church and contemplate her face. According to the traditional interpretations this voice sounds in twofold sense: First, when we proclaim the Good News and bear testimony of His love (Hippolitus Romanus, 19, 3, p.39; Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 2, 56, p.100), and, second, in the liturgy, especially as we share in the greatest honor given to Christ's Spouse to sing the praises of God by praying the morning and evening hours daily (*Constitutions*, 133, p.75).

*Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom* (Song 2:15). In the middle of the joyful festival of nature there appear these little foxes that damage the beauty of the vineyards. The vineyards

22 *Intra tua vulnera absconde me, ne permittas me separari a te* (prayer *Anima Christi*, XIV sec. probably pope John XXII).

are our communities and the little foxes are our vices and sins.<sup>23</sup> We should guard against the temptations that break up community. One of these foxes is partiality and selfishness. Another fox is the formation of groups according to race, language, color, education, status. One other little fox is criticism, grumbling, and rash judgement of the actions and motives of others. Or failure to respect another's need for solitude and privacy (*Constitutions*, 76, p.50). Let us catch the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vineyards!

*My beloved is mine, and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies* (Song 2:16). I belong only to my Beloved and He belongs only to me. The most short and explicit confession of love, like the words of Jesus "Abide in me and I in you" (Jn 15:4; Origen Barbara, 30, p.200). The Church belongs only to Jesus and He is her unique husband. He is the Good Shepherd and He leads His flock to the fresh pasture of pure love.<sup>24</sup>

Given within the Church, consecrated chastity witnesses to the reality of that wondrous marriage established by God on this earth, to be fully manifested in the world to come and in which the Church has Christ for her only Spouse (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 607, par. 1). Given on "behalf of the Kingdom" (Mt 19:12) it frees the heart in a unique way and causes it to burn with love for God and mankind (*Constitutions*, 44, p.28). To be reborn with the power of God's own purity and beauty, we must feel the need for a deep, personal love for Jesus (*Constitutions*, 47, p.30).

*Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag upon rugged mountains* (Song 2:17). Especially when shadows of discouragement and troubles come upon our life, we must call to Jesus, our Beloved, to return to us and to be with us, even on the rugged mountains of our despair and sadness.

In times of difficulty we will pray for the faith and the strength to accept and to do the will of God. Above all, we should refrain from all criticism, prejudice or murmuring against Superiors as well as from all servile fear and self-seeking (*Constitutions*, 66, p.42).

23 We should subdue our vices and sins as they are "little" and not allow them to grow (Origen Barbara, 29, p.198; Nilus Ancyrensis, 62, p.308).

24 The fresh pasture Jesus gives to the Church are also the sacraments and the Scripture (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, 2,67, p.108).

## CONCLUSION

The ancient Christian tradition considered the allegorical interpretation of the Bible as an important mean of spiritual formation in the life of the Church. This approach to the Biblical text has been neglected in modern times due to the use of historical-critical methods in the Biblical exegesis. However, it seems that the intuitions of the Fathers of the Church may still be inspiring, especially for certain spiritual actualizations of the Scripture.

In some contexts of the life of the Church, e.g. spiritual retreats, the symbolical and allegorical reading of the Bible can be still fruitful, especially in connection with new spiritualities emerging in modern times. Even more, the access to critical editions of patristic works and the semiotic approach to the Biblical text make possible new understandings that may enrich the living tradition of Biblical interpretation.

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# SONG OF SONGS AND THE CHARISM OF MOTHER THERESA OF CALCUTTA (SONG. 1:5-2:17)

## SUMMARY

The article presents a new and original interpretation of the Song of Songs 1:5-3:11, combining an inspiration taken from the charism of Mother Theresa of Calcutta with the rich ancient and medieval tradition of the more-than-literal explanation of the Biblical text. We conclude that despite the domination of the historical-critical method in Biblical exegesis, a traditional approach to the Scripture can be still inspiring in the life of the Church today.