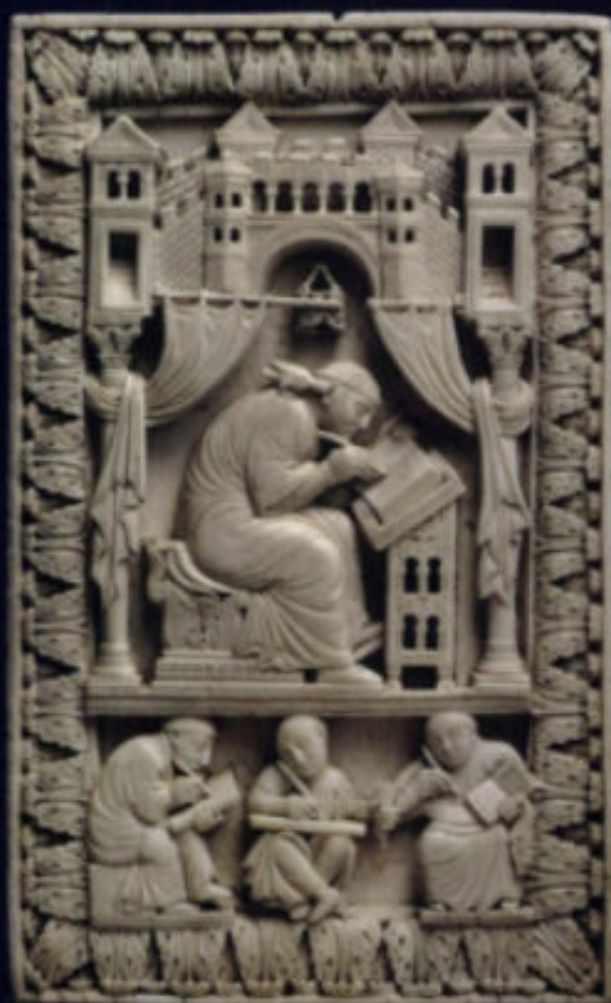


THE CHURCH'S BIBLE

ROBERT LOUIS WILKEN

general editor



The Song of Songs

Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators



Richard A. Norris Jr.

translator and editor

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Prefaces and Title

SEPTUAGINT	VULGATE
1:1 The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.	[The Latin Vulgate does not contain this title verse.]

Every ancient or medieval writer who set out to interpret the Song of Songs in a systematic way produced some sort of introduction or preface to his work. In such introductions, it was customary to say something about the title and the author (given in the first verse of the Septuagint translation), as well as about the place of the Song in the traditional list of Solomon's writings. Even more important, however, was the issue of the subject matter of the Song, and the closely connected question of the use of allegory in its interpretation. The surface or "literal" subject matter of the Song was the love that joins a bride and her betrothed, a sexual longing that the Song celebrates cheerfully. Understood in that way, however, the Song had little to say directly about the relation between God and "us"; and that relation of course defines the basic interest — the agenda — that Jews and Christians alike brought, and bring, to their reading of the Scriptures. Hence the traditional resort to allegory in interpretation of the Song: the love that it celebrates is treated as a figure or analogy for the love between God and the people of God, the Church. Thus in Christian allegory (or anagogy, "leading upward toward a higher meaning") the Bridegroom becomes Christ, the Word or Son of God, and the Bride becomes either the Church or, as Origen was the first to suggest, the individual believer. This suggestion of Origen — that the "spiritual" subject matter of the Song was not only the relation between Christ and the Church but also that between Christ and the individual soul — pretty well shaped the course of Christian interpretation of this book, and the relation between Christ and the soul dominated medieval — which is almost synonymous with "monastic" — interpretation, as the long excerpt below from William of St. Thierry (who was by no means ignorant of Origen's views) demonstrates.

(1) Origen

This little book I take to be an epithalamium, that is, a marriage song, written by Solomon and done in the manner of a drama. He sings it as if he were a bride at her wedding, burning with heavenly desire for her bridegroom, who is the Word of God. For the bride desired him very deeply — whether she be identified as the soul that is made after his image or as the Church. This very same Scripture also teaches us what words this glorious and perfect Bridegroom used when he addressed the soul or Church that has been joined to him. We also discover, from the same little book, which is called *Song of Songs*, what the young companions of the Bride, who are set in her company, had to say, and also the friends and companions of the Bridegroom. . . . And this is the point of what we said above in calling this a marriage song done in the manner of a drama; for something is called a drama — as, for example, a story acted out on a stage — when different characters are introduced, and the plot is carried through as some enter and others depart to various purposes. This writing contains such goings-on, one after another, in its own distinctive order; and at the same time the drama as a whole is put together out of mystical utterances.

But before anything else, we must be aware that, just as children are not moved by the passion of desire, so too people whose inner self is still small and infantile are not admitted to the study of these words — those, I mean, who are being fed with milk in Christ and not with strong meat, and who have only just now started to long for the "pure spiritual milk" (1 Pet. 2:2). For in the words of the *Song of Songs* there is found that food of which the apostle says, "Solid food is for the mature" (Heb. 5:14); and the audience it wants is composed of "those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14) in proportion to their abilities.

As to those little ones of whom we spoke, it may very well be the case that, should they approach these texts, they would neither derive profit from them nor, on the other hand, suffer much harm, whether from a reading of the words or from a review of the things that have to be said for the purpose of expounding them. On the other hand, if a man who is a mere fleshling should approach them, for such a one there would arise no little risk and danger. For anyone who does not know how to listen to the language of erotic desire with chaste ears and a pure mind will pervert what he hears and be turned from the inner self to the outward, from the spirit to the flesh; and he will foster carnal desires within himself, and it will appear to be the case that he is roused and encouraged to carnal lust by the Scriptures.

For this reason, then, I admonish and advise everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not withdrawn from the solicitations of our material nature to renounce entirely the reading of this book and the things said in it. For they say that among the Jews care is taken that no one who has not attained full maturity be allowed so much as to hold this book in his hands. But there is also the following observance that we have taken over from them: the custom, namely, that all the Scriptures are delivered to children by wise teachers, and at the same time that those four writings that they call *deuteroseis* — that is to say, Genesis 1, in which the world's creation is described; the opening chapters of the prophet Ezekiel, which tell about the cherubim; the last

chapter of Ezekiel, which contains the building of the temple; and this book, the Song of Songs — should be held back till last of all.

To me, then, it seems first of all necessary, before we undertake to investigate what is written in this little book, to say something about desire [*erōs*], which is the principal theme of this writing. . . .

Among the Greeks, many of the learned men, wishing to undertake inquiry into the truth about the nature of erotic desire, have produced a variety of writings in the form of dialogues. They attempt to show that it is nothing other than the power of this desire that conducts the soul from earth to the exalted heights of heaven, and that there is no way to attain the highest form of happiness save at the urging of the longing that consists in desire. Furthermore, the discussions of this subject are represented as taking place at meals — between people, I suspect, among whom what went on was a banquet that consisted more in words than in meats. There are others, though, who have left us “how to” writings, with whose help this sort of desire can apparently be elicited or augmented in the soul. But carnal individuals have dragged these skills down to serve vicious desires and the mysteries of illicit desire.

It is no matter for wonder, then, if we say that in our circles too — where there are as many ignorant persons as there are folk of the simpler sort — discussions of the nature of desire are difficult and come close to being dangerous. Among the Greeks, after all, who seem to qualify as wise and learned, there were nevertheless some who did not take what was written in the sense it was intended, but seized the occasion provided by this talk to rush into fleshly lapses and fall down the precipices of immodesty — whether because, as we said above, they gathered guidance and encouragement from what had been written, or because they used the writings of the ancients as a veil for their own intemperate ways.

Lest, then, we too follow the same course, and take words that have been well and spiritually written in a base and fleshly sense, let us lift up our hands, both of body and of soul, to God, so that the Lord . . . may powerfully endow us with his Word, and we may be able, starting from these writings, to make manifest a wholesome understanding of both the name and the nature of desire. . . .

At the beginning of the writings of Moses, where he takes up the creation of the world, we find mention of the creation of two humans, the first of them made “after the image and likeness of God” (Gen. 1:26-27), and the second “fashioned out of the dust of the earth” (Gen. 2:7). Knowing this well, and having a clear grasp of these matters, the apostle Paul in his letters wrote — more straightforwardly and more plainly than Moses — that in each individual person there are two human selves. For see what he says: “If our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed every day” (2 Cor. 4:16); and again, “For I delight in the law of God in my interior self” (Rom. 7:22); and he uses similar language in some other places. For this reason it is my firm opinion that no one nowadays has any business doubting that in the opening section of Genesis Moses wrote of the creation or fashioning of two human beings; for we see Paul, who understood the writings of Moses better than we do, saying that in each individual person there are two human beings. He says that one of these — that is, the interior one — is “being renewed every day,” while he asserts that the other, the “outer,” is, in the saints and in people like Paul

himself, "wasting away" and being enfeebled. If anything relating to this matter seems to anyone to be questionable, it will be more fully explained in the proper places.

At this point, however, let us pursue the matter on account of which we have made mention of the outer and the interior self. For we want, once this distinction is established, to show that the divine Scriptures name the members both of the outer and of the interior self by using homonyms — that is, by using similar names, to the point of employing the very same words both for the members of the outer self and for the parts and motions of that interior self; and that these are likened to each other, not only as regards the names they are called by, but as regards what they actually are. Take an example: a person is a mere child as concerns the interior self if it is possible for that person to grow and to be brought to the age of a youth, and thence attain by successive steps to the "mature man" (Eph. 4:13) and become a father.

Now our intent in using these last designations is that the expressions we employ may concur with the usage of Holy Scripture — with that passage of Scripture, in fact, which was written by John: "I am writing to you, little children, because you have known the Father. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:13-14). It is perfectly apparent, and I am sure no one can doubt, that in this passage John uses the terms "little children," or "youths," or "young men," or even "fathers," not in reference to the age of the body, but to that of the soul. Yes, and Paul too says in one place, "I . . . could not address you as spiritual, but as fleshly, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food" (1 Cor. 3:1-2). It is beyond any doubt that the babe "in Christ" is so named in accordance with the age of its soul, not of its flesh. And finally, this same Paul also says, in another place: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways" (1 Cor. 13:11). Again he says on another occasion, "Until we all come up to . . . the mature man, up to the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). For he knows that all believers will come up "to the mature man" and "to the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ."

Therefore just as, in the case of the expressions we have mentioned, the names of ages are applied, in the very same terms, both to the outer self and to the interior self, so too you will find that the names of members of the body are transferred to those of the soul — or, better, these names are applied to the soul's powers and motions. That is why it is said in Ecclesiastes: "The eyes of the wise man are in his head" (Eccl. 2:14). Likewise in the Gospel: "Let anyone who has ears to hear, hear" (Matt. 13:43). Also in the prophets: "The word of the Lord that came by the hand of the prophet Jeremiah" (Jer. 50:1) — or of whomever you please. Similar is the command, "Let not your foot offend" (cf. Prov. 3:23 with Matt. 18:8), and again, "My feet were moved a little less" (Ps. 72:2 LXX = 73:2). Obviously too the womb of the soul is denoted where it says, "We have conceived in our womb, O Lord, out of thy fear" (Isa. 26:17-18 LXX). . . .

On the basis of this evidence it is apparent that these words for members of the body cannot be made to fit any visible body. They must, on the contrary, be referred to the parts and powers of the invisible soul, for although the terms do indeed refer to parts that are analogous, they openly and unambiguously bear references proper to the inte-

rior, and not to the outer, self. Therefore, there is a food and drink for this material human being — the one that is called “outer self” — that is akin to it: a corporeal and earthly food and drink. By the same token, however, there is also a food proper to that very self that is also called interior — that “living bread,” namely, “that came down from heaven” (John 6:33, 41). It drinks, moreover, of that water which Jesus promised when he said, “Whoever drinks of this water that I give him will never thirst” (John 4:14). So it is, then, that like terms are everywhere predicated of both selves; but in each case the special quality of the entity is preserved in its distinctive character, and corruptible things are provided for the corruptible, but for the incorruptible, incorruptible things are set out.

Hence it happens that some people of the simpler sort cannot distinguish or discriminate between things that the divine Scriptures assign to the interior human being and those that they assign to the outer human being. They are deceived by the similarities of the terms, and they devote themselves to silly myths and empty fictions. Thus, for example, they believe that even after the resurrection corporeal foods will be necessary, and that drink will have to be derived not merely from that “true vine” (John 15:1) which lives forever, but also from vines and from fruit that grows on trees. But we shall see about these matters in another place.

Well then, as we have made clear in the preceding remarks, one individual is without offspring and barren as far as the interior self is concerned, and another is rich in offspring; and we note the following saying that accords with this: “The barren has borne seven, and she who has many children is weakened” (1 Sam. 2:5). One might further add what is said in the blessings: “There will be none among you that is childless and barren” (see Exod. 23:26).

Well, but if this is how things stand, then just as one kind of desire is called fleshly — the desire that the poets call *Cupid*, in accordance with which the person who desires sows “to the flesh”; so too there is a certain spiritual desire, in accordance with which that interior self, the one that desires, sows “to the Spirit” (Gal. 6:8). And to speak more plainly, any who still bear “the image of the earthly humanity” in their outer self are driven by an earthly lust and earthly love; but any who “bear the image of the heavenly humanity” (1 Cor. 15:49) in their interior self are driven by a heavenly lust and love. But the soul is driven by a heavenly desire and lust when it has detected the beauty and comeliness of the Word of God, and has been captivated by him, and at his hand has received a certain dart and wound of desire. For this Word is “the image and shining brightness of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation, in whom all things are created, both things in heaven and things on earth, whether visible or invisible” (Col. 1:15ff.). If, then, one has the mental capacity to hold together in one’s mind and to contemplate the loveliness and grace of all these things that have been created in him, then — struck by the elegant beauty and the magnificent splendor of the things themselves and, as the prophet says, pierced through by “a chosen arrow” (Isa. 49:2) — one will receive from him the wound that is saving and will burn with the blessed fire of the desire of him.

There is another point that we must be aware of. Just as an illicit and unlawful desire may come to the outer self — as when, for example, he desires not his betrothed bride or wife but a harlot or an adulteress; so too it can come about for the interior self — which is to say, the soul — that she desires not her legitimate Betrothed, which we have

identified as the Word of God, but some adulterer or debauchee. So much does the prophet Ezekiel, using this very same figure, declare when he introduces Oholah and Oholibah to stand for Samaria and Jerusalem as corrupted by an adulterous desire (Ezek. 23:4-5); and indeed this very passage of the prophetic writing demonstrates his point for those who want a fuller understanding of the matter. What is more, even the spiritual desire proper to the soul, as we have taught, flames out at some times toward certain spirits of evil, and at others, toward the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. The Word is the faithful Bridegroom and is called the husband of the enlightened soul, and it is on his account that the Bride herself, especially in the scriptural book now before us, is so named.

It seems to me, however, that the divine Scripture, wanting to take care that no moral lapse should come about in its readers because of the word "desire," and having in mind the welfare of weaker readers, assigned the name "delight" or the name "love" [*agapē*] to what, among the wise of this present age, had been called "lust" or "desire" — for example, as when it says of Isaac: "and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her" (Gen. 24:67). . . .

Here, therefore, and in many other passages, you will find that the divine Scripture shunned the term "desire" and instead set down "delight" and "love." Nevertheless, now and then, though rarely, it calls desire by its proper name. It summons souls and spurs them on to desire, as when, in Proverbs, it says concerning Wisdom: "Desire her intensely, and she will preserve you; embrace her, and she will exalt you; respect her, that she may enfold you" (Prov. 4:6, 8). And in the book called The Wisdom of Solomon, it is written concerning Wisdom herself: "I have become a desirer of her beauty" (Wisdom 8:2). I think, though, that the word "desire" is inserted only where there seems to be no occasion of moral lapse. For what that is shameful or liable to passion can anyone discern in the desire for Wisdom, or in someone who professes to be a desirer of Wisdom? On the other hand, if it had said that Isaac desired Rebecca passionately, or that Jacob desired Rachel, some shameful passion could indeed be understood to have affected the holy men of God, and especially by those who have no idea of how to ascend from the letter to the spirit. Obviously, though, in the little book now before us, the word "desire" has been changed to the term "love" in the passage where it says, "I have adjured you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my kinsman, to tell him that I am wounded by love" (5:8) — instead of the possible alternative: "I have been struck by the dart of his desire."

Thus in the divine Scriptures it makes no difference whether it says, "desire" or "love" or "delight," except that God himself is called "love," even as John says: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7-8). And although it may be the business of another occasion to say something about these words we have cited from John's letter for the sake of an example, yet it does not seem out of place to touch briefly on some points from the passage. "Let us love one another," he says, "for love is from God," and then, after a bit, "God is love." In this he shows both that God himself is love and that the one who is "from God" is also love. And who is "from God" if not the one who says, "I came from the Father and have come into this world" (John 16:28)? If God the Father is love, and the Son is love, while the one love and the other are one thing and differ in no respect, it follows that the Father and the Son are

1. Prefaces and Title

one thing and differ in no respect. It is appropriate, therefore, that just as Christ is called Wisdom and Power and Righteousness and Word and Truth, so too he is called Love. That is why Scripture says: "If love abides in us, God abides in us" (1 John 4:12) — God, that is to say, the Father and the Son, who also come to the person who has been perfected in love in accordance with the word of our Lord and Savior when he said, "I and my Father will come to him and will make our dwelling with him" (John 14:23).

It must be understood, then, that this love that God is, no matter in whom it dwells, esteems nothing earthly, nothing material, nothing corruptible; for it is against its nature to have regard for anything corruptible, seeing that it is itself the fount of incorruption. It is love itself that alone has immortality — if indeed "God is love" (1 John 4:8), who "alone has immortality, dwelling in light inaccessible" (1 Tim. 6:16). Moreover, what is immortality if it is not "eternal life," which God promises he will give to those who believe in "the only true God" and his Son "Jesus Christ, whom he has sent" (John 17:3)?

Hence it is said that first of all and before anything else this is agreeable and pleasing to God: that one love the Lord God with all one's heart and with all one's soul and with all one's strength. And since "God is love," and the Son, who is "from God," is love, he seeks within us something like himself, so that by means of this love that is in Christ Jesus, we may be tied in with God as if by a bond of kinship through the name of love, even as he who was already joined to God said, "Who will separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord?" (Rom. 8:35, 39).

This love, moreover, counts every human being as a neighbor. The Lord, after all, censured one man on this very score, a man who held that a righteous soul does not owe the duties of a neighbor to a soul that is entangled in wickedness. For this very reason, moreover, he constructed the parable that tells how a certain man fell among thieves while going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he blames the priest and the Levite who passed him by when they saw him lying half-dead, but he approves of the Samaritan who had compassion; and by the response of the man who had asked the question he established that the Samaritan was a neighbor to the victim, and said, "Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37). For by nature we are neighbors to one another; but by works of love a person who can do good to one who is unable to do so becomes a neighbor. Hence too our Savior became a neighbor to us. He did not pass us by while we were lying half-dead from wounds inflicted by thieves. So it must be understood that love directed to God is always moving toward God, from whom it takes its origin; and it has regard for its neighbor, to whom it is akin as being similarly created in incorruption. Thus, then, take whatever is written concerning love as if it had been said about desire, and do not worry about labels; for the same sense is manifest in both of them.

(2) Gregory the Great

After the human race was expelled from the joys of the Paradise, and it entered upon the pilgrimage of our present life, it was possessed of a heart that was blind to spiritual understanding. If the divine voice said to this blind heart, once for all banished from the Paradise, "Seek God," or "Love God," as is said in the law, the heart would not grasp what

1:2b. The passage thus pictures the people of God waiting for the advent — the incarnation — of the Word, or the soul waiting for the “illuminations and visitations of the Word of God,” or, in the case of Nicholas of Lyra, the people of Israel waiting for God to demonstrate his care for them by signs and deeds. A significant variant on this identification of the Bride is that provided by Rupert of Deutz, who takes the theme of the Song to be the incarnation of the Word and in the figure of the Bride sees the Virgin Mary. The other speakers in this passage might be the “young maidens” of Song 1:3c, whom ancient commentators saw as a sort of chorus of aspiring souls who accompany — or, better, follow — the Bride; to them most interpreters assigned 1:4b and 1:4d-f, for the good enough reason that they seemed to be the only persons mentioned who could be identified with the “we” and “us” of those lines.

These assignments seemed to entail, among other things, that the breasts mentioned in Song 1:2b should be those of the Bridegroom — a thought that, as the medieval *Glossa ordinaria* informs us, and Nicholas of Lyra emphasizes, might be considered paradoxical, since males are not commonly thought or spoken of as having breasts. In ancient or medieval times, however, this interpretation may have seemed somewhat less odd for several reasons. One, of course, was that the Word or Son of God, the Bridegroom, was understood to have a feminine identity in his capacity as the divine Wisdom. Another was the association of breasts with milk and feeding, and the habitual use of food as a figure for nourishment of the soul — that is to say, for wisdom and knowledge (“food for thought,” as it is said). Inevitably, then, mentions of breasts in the Song made these interpreters think of teaching or “illumination” or proclamation of the word, and of the interior transformation wrought by conformity of the human mind with the divine Word and Wisdom, the “image” of God (2 Cor. 4:4; 3:18). Correspondingly, the Bridegroom’s “chamber” (Song 1:4c), where God’s people (or the soul) cohabits with the Word of God, is understood by the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate alike to be a “storeroom” of entrancing and transforming knowledge.

(1) Origen

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.

In conformity with the genre of a plain narrative, a certain bride is introduced on the stage. From her most noble bridegroom she has received the most fitting of gifts for her dowry and her betrothal. Since, however, the bridegroom has delayed his coming for a long time, she is torn by desire for his love, and worn out with moping at home, and busy doing everything possible to assure that one day she will be able to see her bridegroom and enjoy his kisses. . . . Let us then think of how — “lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling . . . , in decent clothing with modesty and sobriety” (1 Tim. 2:8-9), adorned with the most proper of ornaments . . . , but inflamed by desire for her bridegroom and

afflicted with the internal wound of love — she pours out her prayer to God . . . , and thinking of her bridegroom says, **Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.**

These, then, are the things that the plain narrative account contains in its dramatic form. But let us see whether the inner meaning can be adapted in an appropriate way to the same form.

Let it be the Church that desires to be joined with Christ. Notice, however, that “Church” means the assembly of all the saints. This Church is, as it were, a single but collective character that speaks and says, “I have everything; I am filled up with gifts, which I received before my marriage as a dowry and as a mark of my betrothal. For when I was being prepared for marriage with the King’s Son and ‘the Firstborn of all creation’ (Col. 1:15), the holy angels became my servants and ministers, and brought down the law to me as a betrothal gift; for ‘the law’ is said to have been ‘ordained by angels at the hand of a mediator’ (Gal. 3:19). The prophets also ministered to me. It was they and no others who spoke all the words through which they showed me and informed me about the Son of God, to whom they wanted to betroth me. . . . Further still, in order to set me on fire with love of him and desire for him, they made announcement to me in prophetic utterances concerning his coming, and, filled with the Holy Spirit, they proclaimed his innumerable deeds of wonder and his boundless works. They also portrayed his beauty as well as his attractiveness and gentleness, with the result that I was set on fire with an unbearable love for him. Since, however, the present age has almost come to its close, and his presence has not been accorded me, and all I see are his servants ascending and descending to me — for this reason I beseech you, Father of my spouse, and pour out my prayer, that you will look with pity upon this love of mine and send him, so that now he may not speak to me any longer by way of his ministering angels and his prophets, but may come in his very own person and **kiss me with the kisses of his mouth** — may, that is, pour into my mouth the words of his mouth, that I may hear him speaking and see him teaching.”

For the kisses of Christ are those that he bestowed on the Church when in his advent he himself, present in the flesh, spoke to it words of faith and of love and of peace, just as, when sent ahead of time to the bride, Isaiah had promised by saying that “the Lord himself shall save them” (Isa. 33:22), and not a representative or an angel.

As the third point of our exposition, let us introduce the soul. All her zeal is aimed at union and fellowship with the Word of God and at entering upon the mysteries of his wisdom and knowledge — entering, as it were, upon the private chambers of the heavenly Bridegroom. To this soul his gifts have now already been given as its dowry. For just as, where the Church is concerned, the dowry consisted of the books of the Law and the Prophets, so in the case of the soul the law of nature, rational understanding, and freedom of the will are reckoned as its betrothal gifts. Possessed of these gifts as her dowry, the soul may take as her elementary schooling the teaching that derives from her counselors and instructors. But in these she does not find the full and complete satisfaction of her desire and her love. Let her then pray that her pure and virginal mind may be enlightened by the illuminations and visitations of the Word of God. For when, apart from any human or angelic ministry, her mind is filled with divine understandings and thoughts, she has the right to believe that she has received the **kisses** of the Word of God. . . .