

DO NOT HOLD ME: ASCENDING THE LADDER OF LOVE

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“Such an impossible unity of passion and freedom
is really the beginning of heaven on earth.”



Does celibacy, as the Church understands and proposes it, demand the renunciation of the joys of human love in pursuit of other, perhaps greater, forms of human fulfillment—say, contemplative union with God (for those who are more contemplative) or the dedication of oneself to serve the poor and the needy (for those who are more active)? In other words, does the call to give oneself entirely to God, flesh and soul, entail the complete annihilation of the most intense of all human passions (Gregory of Nyssa), namely, human love, understood as man and woman’s natural desire “to beget in the beautiful” (Plato)?

Today, more than ever, the way that we answer this question is critically important. Not only for practical and moral reasons, but because this question is inseparable from another, more profound and fundamental one: Does following Jesus Christ *unreservedly* require the complete renunciation or, even worse, *castration* of one’s (God-given!) *humanity*? Or does it rather bring about our *full flourishing* and *fulfillment*, the display of our

full potential? In order to address this question, I will rely on three main sources. The first is Plato, whose *Symposium* loosely and yet significantly inspires the ascending schema of my argument under the sign of beauty. Second is John the Evangelist, to whom I turn especially in the final sections. Last but not least is Fr. Luigi Giussani, to whom I owe most of what I have learned on the present topic, especially at the existential level.

1. THE CLAIM: VIRGINITY IS A FULLER POSSESSION

Let us begin by referring to Giussani's central idea on the life of virginity. According to Giussani, virginity, rightly understood—that is, as revealed by Christ—is *not only* and not even *primarily* a form of renunciation.¹ On the contrary, virginity is a way of relating to reality that allows for *a fuller possession*, one that is a genuine foretaste of the modality the blessed will enjoy in their relation with things, and especially with people, in the kingdom of heaven.²

Giussani is well aware that he is being provocative when he says that virginity is a form of *possession*. For do we not associate the life of virginity precisely with the opposite of possession, namely a detachment and purification from one's desire to cling to things and people? The answer is obviously yes. In fact, Fr. Giussani's full definition of virginity is not possession simply, but rather *possession in detachment*. By using the word possession, then, Fr. Giussani is not downplaying the importance of ascetical detachment in the spiritual life of the virgin. He is rather highlighting something more important: the end of this detachment and sacrifice, when truly embraced in and for Christ, is not the

1. As will be made clear below, Giussani's provocative language in no way undermines the right sense in which the life of virginity entails and is a form of renunciation, as is consistent with Church teaching.

2. I say *especially* with people because virginity most evidently affects our relationship with people. To be a virgin, in the most basic sense, means to renounce getting married, thereby sacrificing one of the most intense natural desires for another. In Giussani's language, however, virginity is a form of relation to reality that encompasses everything, not only relations with people. For Giussani's doctrine of virginity, see his *Si può vivere così?* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006); *Il tempo e il tempio* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1995); and *Si può veramente vivere così?* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1996).

annihilation of the impetus of love, but rather a different and fuller form of union with that which one loves.

What is love? As Thomas Aquinas teaches, love is a *vis unitiva*, a desire to be one with the beloved.³ The challenge of Fr. Giussani lies in the claim that virginity, which at first glance seems to entail a renunciation of love, is in fact a different and, in some respect, fuller way of becoming one with the beloved, be this beloved a person, flower, star, or bird flying in the sky.

How can one make sense of such a claim? It is important to see, first of all, that the noblest form of possession, at least in the case of human beings, is knowing the truth of something. I can passionately kiss and embrace a glass, but if I do not know it is a glass, I cannot possess it with the same fullness as someone who instead quietly pours some good Brunello and drinks from it. To possess something in a *human* way means first of all to understand what that thing is and then relate to it in full respect of that truth.

This helps us to understand why Giussani's second definition of virginity, *the relating to things according to their truth*, only appears to have nothing to do with sex or chastity.⁴ As a matter of fact, in order genuinely to appreciate something, which is to say, to understand it, one needs to remain at a certain distance and maintain a certain *detachment*. For example, one needs to

3. For a nuanced rereading of Aquinas's doctrine of love, see D. C. Schindler, *Love and the Postmodern Predicament: Rediscovering the Real in Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), especially chapters 2 ("Beauty: The Manifestation of Reality," 31–48) and 5 ("Beauty and Love," 85–116). According to Schindler, there is a certain unresolved tension between two different (and not per se incompatible) understandings of love in Aquinas. According to the first, which is commonly taken to be the main if not the only understanding, love is said to be a passion of the will that has the possession of the good as its end. Here, love is conceived more as a movement toward union than as a form of union in itself (104). But according to the second understanding, which Schindler also sees present in Aquinas, albeit less prominently, love is an act that simultaneously involves *will and intellect*: "for when we love a thing, by desiring it, we apprehend it as belonging to our well being" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 28, a. 1). Understood in this sense, love is already a kind of union between lover and beloved (*ibid.*, ad 2). Schindler, in line with the Platonic tradition, contends that this second understanding of love is intrinsically related to beauty more than to goodness and is both chronologically and ontologically prior.

4. See Luigi Giussani, *What Is Virginity*, unpublished manuscript.

step back from a painting in order to give it the space and time it needs to communicate what it has to say. It is noteworthy that the Russian word for “chastity” or “temperance” is *zelo-mudrie* (cf. the Greek *sophrosyne*), which means integral wisdom or integral knowledge. Without a certain distance and detachment, there can be no full penetration into the depth of things or perception of their wholeness.

2. SAM GAMGEE AND THE STAR

The example of the painting is crucial for a second reason. The goal of a painting is never just to say something—for example, some idea—but rather, to say it in *a beautiful way*, that is, *through a beautiful form*. But what does beauty add to truth? The response to this question is notoriously difficult. For our purposes, I will stick to the most basic and traditional one. Thomas Aquinas says that beauty is *quod visum placet*, which means that what beauty adds to the vision of truth is the element of delight or rejoicing entailed in the vision of the beautiful.⁵ Intriguingly, this is something similar to what Giussani says about virginity: the delight I receive through the beautiful is a delight I receive precisely by my letting it remain in front of me. In the contemplation of beauty, possession and gratuity, enjoyment and detachment mysteriously coincide. The beautiful *becomes mine* only through my act of letting it remain other than me. This is why the kind of response

5. On the relationship between love and beauty, and the multiple reasons why the latter, even more than goodness, should be taken as the proper object of love, see again Schindler, *Love and the Postmodern Predicament*, esp. 107ff. Although I had already completed this paper when I encountered Schindler's book, everything I argue in what follows finds there its most solid (and necessary) speculative foundation. Schindler shows the need for integrating the intrinsic relationship between love and beauty into Aquinas's doctrine of love. “Beauty,” he concludes, “involves a delight simultaneous with apprehension” (108). “It would be hard to accord a genuinely positive value to the element of *distance* in love, a kind of generous respect that stands back from the beloved rather than simply pressing onward on him or her (or it), if love were simply a matter of the appetitive order. . . . When Plato describes the soul's passionate pursuit of beauty in the famous image of the charioteer driving the pair of horses, he sets into relief a kind of twofoldness to the relation: beauty not only stirs the soul on to possession, but *at the very same time* causes the soul to pull back from its pursuit in a state of awe and reverence; beauty inspires to let be in gratitude” (109).

the beautiful spontaneously elicits, at least in its first appearance, is a sort of mysterious coincidence of distancing awe and magnetic attraction, as if our heart instinctively perceives that the only way to enjoy a thing is by generously allowing it to stand at a certain distance.

Dostoevsky was therefore right when he said that beauty will save the world. For if this is what beauty is, then can we not say that beauty, by its very nature, is that quality of being that makes us desire to save and protect it? More than this, is not the experience of beauty in some way a foretaste of salvation itself, that is, of the life of heaven?

But what is heaven like? Answering this new question is no less difficult than explaining what beauty is. What we can say about heaven is this: to be in heaven means to become like God, or to see and love everything in the way God does. How does God love everything? God's love is *gratuitous*, a pure rejoicing in his creature's existence: "And God saw that it was good [*tov*]" (Gn 1), *tov* meaning not only good, but beautiful, or "*good to see*."⁶ Is there not something stunning in God rejoicing at the vision of his works? As if God himself were in wonder before his creature, rejoicing in that there was no longer only God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but also the deer, the eagle, and the tree. It is as though the reason God creates the world is so that he might rejoice in having someone else to gaze upon. In this way, the pieces of the puzzle begin to come together. Beauty, at least in some moments, allows us to share in God's gratuitous love for everything and does so precisely because it makes visible to us the inner dignity of things. I love the flower not because I "get something" from it, but because it is beautiful and therefore deserves to exist.⁷ I love you because you are beautiful, and it *makes me happy* that you exist.

6. It is significant that the Septuagint translates *tov* in Gn 1 with *kalon*. Dionysius's audacious idea that God is somehow "compelled" to create by the beauty of his very creation (see *Divine Names* IV, 13), that is, by the intrinsic attractiveness of the communication of his being to something other than himself, is in this sense more biblical than it is often taken to be. See, once again, Schindler, *Love and the Postmodern Predicament*, 132–37.

7. On this judgment as *the* judgment entailed in any authentic love, see Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 207 et passim.

Nowhere have I found this more powerfully expressed than in my favorite passage of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo and Sam are lost in the very heart of Mordor, surrounded by darkness and desolation. Tired, they lie down:

“Now you go to sleep first, Mr. Frodo,” [Sam] said. “It’s getting dark again.” . . . Frodo sighed and was asleep almost before the words were spoken. Sam struggled with his own weariness, and he took Frodo’s hand; and there he sat silent till deep night fell. Then at last, to keep himself awake, he crawled from the hiding place and looked out. The land seemed full of creaking and cracking and sly noises, but there was no sound of voice or foot. Far above the Ephel Duath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. His song in the tower [when he had overpowered two orcs] had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master’s, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles by Frodo’s side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep.⁸

The epiphany of the star fills Sam with “hope,” but what kind of hope is Tolkien talking about? The narrator himself seems to answer this question: “for like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing.” The hope that fills Sam’s heart “and puts away all fear” seems to be the fruit of his almost subliminal realization that in the end the Shadow will not prevail and the world will be saved.

But is this the full answer? The light of the star does not promise Sam that he and his master Frodo will succeed in their task and return home victorious. In other words, the star does

8. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, vol. 3, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 1206.

not give Sam any assurance that he himself will be *personally* saved. It remains unclear, then, why the vision of the star fills Sam specifically *with hope*. I would like to suggest that the full answer to this question lies in the first word of the sentence: it is the *beauty* of the star that, by smiting his heart, makes hope return to him. Why? I propose that such a gratuitous act of wonder is a foretaste of the presence of salvation, that is, of what to be “there-among-the-stars” means. It is a foretaste, in other words, of heaven, as we suggested above. Sam is imprisoned in the worst place anyone can be, yet he is able at the same time to rejoice in the fact that there is something in the world that is not where he is: “there was light and high beauty forever beyond [evil’s] reach.”⁹ Even more, this gratuitous rejoicing is so pure and overwhelming that “for a moment, his own fate, and even his master’s, ceased to trouble him.” This is the paradoxical power of beauty: it gives me life in the very moment in which it makes me “forget about my life.” In making me rejoice in the beautiful without return, beauty makes me feel that it is precisely the power to rejoice in it in such a way that *is* the return, that is, the gift it gives me “back.” An important corollary follows. On the one hand, it is true that beauty is *useless*, as is often said; beauty does not give anything. On the other hand, however, it is not *unfruitful*. On the contrary, the beautiful bears in me the greatest possible fruit: it transforms me into a generous lover. Even more remarkably, this generosity tends naturally to overflow, as it were, to affect even my way of relating to what is not beautiful.

This is an experience known to many, if not to all: the reading of a touching piece of literature or the listening to a piece of music that for some reason strikes a chord. Such experiences often have a cathartic effect similar to the impact of the star on Sam. They fill our hearts, even if only temporarily, with a sense of reconciliation that allows us to go back to our gray mundane reality and embrace it with a new and more magnanimous freedom: “He crawled back into the brambles

9. I would suggest that this is not the least reason why the contemplation of the immaculate *beauty* of the *Stella Maris*, the *Ever Virgin* Mary, plays such an important part in the life of the pilgrim Church in general, and of the pilgrim believer in particular.

by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep."¹⁰

In this way, Giussani's definition of virginity begins to look less odd than perhaps it did at first—for is not the life of virginity meant to be precisely this, a certain anticipation of heavenly life *in this world*, here and now? The answer is obviously yes. We are often tempted to define virginity in a negative or even juridical sense: the virgin is the one who embraces Jesus' state of life, that is, who does not get married. According to the notion of virginity we are sketching here, however, virginity is not first and foremost a state of life (although it is also that), but rather *a way of seeing and loving* that is nothing less than the full flourishing and supernatural deepening of the kind of experience we are all given to foretaste when struck by a genuine encounter with beauty.

3. ENTERING THE EYES OF CHRIST: WHAT IS VIRGINITY?

Let us put it more clearly: the virgin is the one who is called by God to share in the way that the man who was God, Jesus of Nazareth, gazed at the women he met, at the stars, at the face of John the beloved—at every single creature he was given to look at through his divine and yet fully human (divinely human!) eyes.

How did Christ see and love people? How did he gaze upon the world? Christ saw everything—the flower, the bird, the Samaritan woman, as well as each of his disciples—as a gift of the Father; as coming to him, as it were, out of the bottomless mystery of the Father. Better yet, Jesus saw his disciples as a gift of the Father entrusted to his care, as a gift to be cared for and to give his life for.

This is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in chapter 17 of the gospel of John, the great priestly prayer uttered by

10. As an aside, I would suggest that the experience of Sam in the land of Mordor contains, in a nutshell, the main paradoxical quality of Tolkien's novel as a whole (whether this was the explicit intention of its author or not). Why are millions of readers so fascinated by a fantasy novel, which would seem to have no relation whatsoever to daily life? Is it not because, by savoring its beauty, they are in fact helped to return to their daily life and see it with new eyes?

the Lord right before he goes to die on the Cross. It is as if Jesus opened his heart for a moment and let us glimpse something of the way in which he looked at his disciples and closest friends. I will focus on a single verse: “I have manifested your name to the men *whom you gave to me* out of the world; they were yours, and *you gave them to me*” (Jn 17:6). Out of these profound and difficult words, I want to highlight two phrases. First, “they were yours and you gave them to me.” Twice in a single verse Jesus hammers on this idea. Why this pleonastic insistence? The reason, I would say, is that this expression contains the synthesis of what Jesus saw when he looked at the faces of his disciples. In them, he saw a gift of his Father.

The vision of the Father that Jesus saw in the face of Mary Magdalene—to take a feminine example—in no way diverted his attention from the beauty of her face. On the contrary, this vision served only to intensify infinitely the glory of her face, and thus Jesus’ desire to serve her beauty and make it grow in splendor. We come in this way to the second point: “I have manifested your name to them.” How did Jesus manifest the Father’s name (or person) to his disciples? He himself has provided the answer: “who has seen me, has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). Peter was able to know the Father, not directly, but only in the mirror of Jesus’ eyes, in which Peter saw, inexplicably, as it were, Jesus’ own gratitude for the presence of him, a rude fisherman of Capernaum, at his side. This is what virginity is at its core: the refraction, in and through my eyes, of the eternal Love that wills you to be. It is in this way that virginity is a radiant witness to Love itself (see Jn 14:9, 15:9, etc.).

What was foreshadowed in the natural rejoicing in beauty finds here its greatest fulfillment. The virgin is one who, in looking at a human face, is given to pierce through it and perceive the abyssal mystery concealed within. In this way, one takes a radically new step in the ascent of the ladder of love: a disinterested love born from looking upon a beautiful creature becomes, in Christ, a generous readiness to lay down one’s life for the salvation of each and every creature. Jesus Christ is able to glimpse in even the most disfigured face the radiance of the boundless Love that chose and called this face into being.

An important twofold conclusion follows. First, virginity is more about entering into a new way of seeing and loving

the world—the *whole* world—than it is about renouncing sex (although it is obviously also about that).¹¹ Second, sex becomes a problem only because of the lack of education and attention to what the Fathers of the Church called “spiritual senses,” the new seeing, touching, tasting, hearing, and smelling received on the day of baptism. It is no accident that our contemporary hypersexualized culture is so impoverished in contemplation. The taste for virginity grows together with the experience of silence and contemplation, because prayer, in a Catholic sense, means precisely a stepping back—which is not a movement away from the flesh of faces and things, but the necessary condition for penetrating into their depths, and thus seeing and tasting them more.

4. VIRGINITY AND HUMAN LOVE: AN IMPOSSIBLE MATCH?

We are at this point ready to address directly the problem with which we began. One easy objection to what has been said so far is that the broad understanding of virginity proposed here risks downplaying, if not distorting, the original meaning of the word, which undeniably pertains to the specific relationship between man and woman. The problem is that when one comes to this specific relationship, things obviously become more complicated, for reasons apparent to all: Adam’s natural, spontaneous response to that specific and supreme kind of created beauty that is woman (Gn 1:31, 2:23) seems to be a response not just of contemplative wonder, reverent awe, and care, but also of conjugal, fruitful love.¹² It therefore seems fair

11. It goes without saying that the analogy remains only *an analogy* precisely because Jesus, as the only begotten Son of the Father, receives the world from the Father’s hands primarily as God in eternity “before” (so to speak) he does as man in time, and is, in this sense, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the world’s Creator and Redeemer. The participation of the baptized in this creative and salvific drama is rather only a participation made possible by grace.

12. One could make the case, and with good reasons, that this is analogically true of the beauty of pre-personal creatures. According to Genesis 2:14–15, the trees of the garden have been given Adam to eat and entrusted to his care, so that by his keeping and tilling, he could help them to bear more and more fruit: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of

to say that, in this specific respect, virginity entails renunciation simply.

In response, one might object that the original form of conjugal love has been partially disfigured by the Fall,¹³ so that

Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden.'"

13. Perhaps no one has captured the Fall's ironic effects upon human beauty (especially feminine beauty) better than Dostoevsky. In my view, Mitya's famous "Confession in Verse" (*The Brothers Karamazov*, III, 3) can and should be read as a penetrating "anatomy" of that interior scission that Adam, as *vir*, experiences after the Fall: a division between the ineradicable purity of the original experience of the encounter with feminine beauty, on the one hand, and the dramatic tendency of the soul to "reify" the source of his wonder, on the other. Eve's very comeliness, which more than anything should elevate Adam, drawing out what is best in him, is now also (and sometimes almost simultaneously!) the trigger of the worst and most loveless passions: base sensuality, violence, will to power (cf. Gn 3:16). "Sobs suddenly burst from Mitya's breast. He seized Alyosha's hand. 'My friend, my friend, still fallen, still fallen, even now. There's so terribly much suffering for man on earth, so terribly much grief for him! Don't think I am just a brute of an officer who drinks cognac and goes whoring. No, brother, I hardly think of anything else, of anything but the fallen man, if only I'm not lying now. God keep me from lying, and from praising myself! I think about that man, because I myself am such a man. . . . I keep going and I don't know: have I gotten into stench and shame, or into light and joy? That's the whole trouble, because everything on earth is a riddle. And whenever I happened to sink into the deepest, the very deepest shame of depravity (and that's all I ever happened to do), I always read that poem about Ceres and man [i.e., about the beauty of the earth, the beauty of nature, for which Ceres here stands]. Did it set me right? Never! Because I am a Karamazov. Because when I fall into the abyss, I go straight into it, head down and heels up, and I'm even pleased that I'm falling in just such a humiliating position, and for me I find it beautiful. . . . Beauty is a fearful and terrible thing! Fearful because it's undefinable, and it cannot be defined, because here God gave us only riddles. Here the shores converge, here all contradictions live together. I'm a very uneducated man, brother, but I have thought about it a lot. So terribly many mysteries! Too many riddles oppress man on earth. Solve them if you can Beauty! Besides, I can't bear it that some man, even with a lofty heart and the highest mind, should start from the ideal of the Madonna and end with the ideal of Sodom. It's even more fearful when someone who already has the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not deny the ideal of the Madonna either, and his heart burns with it, verily, verily burns, as in his young, blameless years. No, man is broad, even too broad, I would narrow him down. . . . What's shame for the mind is beauty all over for the heart. Can there be beauty in Sodom? Believe me, for the vast majority of people, that's just where beauty lies—did you know that secret? The terrible thing is that beauty is not only fearful but also mysterious. Here the devil is struggling with God, and the battlefield is the human heart'" (Fyodor Dos-

it is no longer possible to know with precision what the innocent (Gn 2:25) love between man and woman would look like *si Adam non peccasset*.¹⁴ We will see below how important this caveat is for overcoming a simplistic antithesis between conjugal and virginal love. Still, no one will deny, especially after all John Paul II has done to render justice to the goodness of conjugal love,¹⁵ that the call that man and woman perceive in the encounter with one another is still fundamentally the same call that God inscribed in their hearts in the beginning.

It therefore remains an open question: Are conjugal and virginal love simply opposed to each other in a relation of reciprocal exclusion? Where do they stand in relation to the perfection of human love, understood specifically as the love between man and woman? The most obvious answer would seem to be that, if the virgin renounces the joy of human love, he or she does not for this reason repress the energy of his or her eros. He or she rather turns it toward a higher “thou”: Christ himself, the God made flesh.

Today, as always, it remains obviously true that Christ is the “spouse” of every virgin soul in a very special sense.¹⁶ From Origen to Bernard, from Gregory of Nyssa to John of the Cross, all the greatest contemplative souls have found in the Song of Songs, the book of eros par excellence, the most natural companion for nurturing their interior life. Today, however, more than in the past, we are able to appreciate how ambiguous such an idea can be, if not carefully qualified. What about the male virgin? If there is at least one good thing that the sexual revolution has taught us, it is that we should always be suspicious of any

toevsky, *The Brother Karamazov*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky [New York: North Point Press, 1990], 106–108).

14. On this point, see fn. 49 below.

15. See especially John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006) (hereafter cited as *TB*).

16. Here again, between marriage and virginity there is more analogy than antithesis. Christ, as spouse of the Church, is the spouse of every soul, married persons included. Obviously, it is true that the virgin vows herself completely, body and soul, to Christ in a way the married person does not. The resemblance to the marital vow is in this sense objectively superior in virginity, although the interior dedication can be subjectively inferior.

Christian spirituality that takes the ineradicably sexual character of our humanity to be simply irrelevant to our spiritual life. If embracing “the life of perfection” implied the repression or annihilation of such a central dimension of our humanity, then one could and even should feel permitted to ask: what exactly is meant by “perfection” here? If by perfection we mean the fulfillment of all the deepest and most authentic desires of the human heart, then certainly the natural desire that we associate with the sexual difference—namely, to “beget or give birth in the (sexually different) beautiful”—cannot simply be frustrated in a life that is meant to be “perfect.”

Although it is impossible to show here in any detail, it is fascinating to note how the pivotal mediating role of Beatrice, who is Dante’s way to heaven in the *Divine Comedy*, finds its best explanation precisely along the line of reasoning I am proposing here, rather than in any supposed lack of Christocentrism.¹⁷ For lack of space, I limit myself to a few passages from Canto XXXI of the *Purgatorio*. In the first, Dante explicitly couples the final completion of his purgation to the reception of new senses that enable him to perceive the splendor of Beatrice’s *feminine* (!) beauty incomparably more than he did on earth:

17. On the irreducibility of Beatrice to a simple allegory of Revelation-Wisdom-Theology-Grace, see especially the classic essays of Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Studi su Dante*, 8th ed. (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1991), 176–226, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, vol. 2, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 9–104. Perhaps the most powerful response to the one-sided take of the “allegoristic” view is provided by Dante himself in the very finale of *La Vita Nuova*: “After writing this *sonetto* a miraculous vision appeared to me, in which I saw things which made me decide to write nothing more of *this blessed one* until such time as I could treat of her more worthily. And to achieve this I study as much as I can, as she truly knows. So that, if it pleases him by whom all things live, that my life lasts a few years, I hope to write of her what has never been written of any woman. And then may it be pleasing to him who is the Lord of courtesy, that my soul might go to see the glory of its lady, that is of that blessed Beatrice, who gloriously gazes on the face of him *qui est per omnia secula benedictus*: who is blessed throughout all the ages” (trans. A. S. Kline, emphasis added). I would argue, however, that even if one were to reduce Beatrice to an allegory of revelation or theology (see especially Charles Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977]), still my point would partially stand: Why would the *sommo poeta* feel the need to see theology or revelation precisely as a beautiful woman?

Under her veil, beyond the stream, to me
 she appeared to surpass herself of old
 further than she surpassed the rest when she
 Lived here on earth.¹⁸

But there is more. Even when standing in front of the Griffin, who represents the Incarnate Word, Dante still does not look at him directly. *He rather beholds him in the mirror of Beatrice's eyes*, as if he still “needed” the medium of her feminine beauty in order to be able to taste and see the ineffable glory of the Incarnation. What is at work here, I would suggest, is something analogous to the eucharistic mystery. In the same way in which the divine Word can communicate himself only by becoming bread and wine, so as to encounter and satiate man’s inseparably spiritual and physical hunger and thirst, so too he “has to” communicate his glory through the medium of the woman’s beauty if he is to encounter and give rest to the inseparably heavenly and earthly eros of the man Dante:

Said they, “Now don’t be sparing of your view!
 We have placed you before the emeralds¹⁹
 whence Love once drew the shafts that wounded you.”
 A thousand yearnings hotter than flame
 held my eyes to the eyes that gleamed with light
 while gazing on the Griffin all the same.
 As the Sun in a mirror blazing bright,
 so shone the double beast within her eyes,
 now with these lineaments and now with those.
 Consider, Reader, if I gazed in awe
 when the thing in itself stood wholly still,
 while changing [as refracted] in its image.²⁰

18. Dante, *Purgatory*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Random House, 2003), 340–41 (XXXI, 82–84).

19. The eyes of Beatrice.

20. Pensa, lettore, s'io mi maravigliava,	124
quando vedea la cosa in sé star queta,	125
e ne l'idolo suo si trasmutava.	126

I slightly modified the last line of this tenet of Esolen’s otherwise fine translation in order to better capture the subtle eucharistic overtones of the original, in particular, the allusion to transubstantiation. The *cosa* or “thing” (line 125) can only be the Griffin, who remains unmoved and unchanged (*in sé star queta*)—just as the person of Christ does not suffer any change in mak-

While full of wonderment my happy soul
 tasted the food that whets the appetite
 with the first taste that satisfies in full,²¹
 Showing themselves by action to belong
 to a higher tribe, the other three came forth,
 dancing in measure to their angel song.
 “Turn, Beatrice, turn your holy eyes,”
 so did they sing, “unto your faithful one,
 he who has come so far to look at you!
 Do us the grace for grace’s sake, unveil
 your lips to him, that he may finally
 behold the second beauty [that of Christ] you conceal!”²²

The question is whether and to what extent something of the experience described by Dante is already accessible somehow in this life.

Aware that we are dealing with a delicate matter and with a mysterious and supernatural kind of experience—one that presupposes a demanding path of purification and the transformation of one’s senses through faith, hope, and charity²³—I would argue that this kind of experience is in fact part of that “hundredfold” that Christ promises to all those who leave everything to follow him. My thesis, in brief, is this: virginity, understood *stricto sensu* as the sacrifice of the natural impetus to “cling to and beget in the beloved,” is not *only* a renunciation of the fulfillment of such a natural desire, but also, in a paradoxical way, a more sublime form of fulfillment. This argument will be developed in two stages.

In the first stage, I will offer a sketch of the structure of conjugal love, arguing that conjugal love bears within its form a

ing himself present in the eucharistic species—while the “transmutation” (line 126) is the new appearance (*l’idolo*) that Christ’s glory takes by being refracted in and through Beatrice’s eyes.

21. The food imagery, together with the clear allusion to Sir 24:21 (“Eat me, and you will hunger for more; drink me, and you will thirst for more”), reinforces all the more the eucharistic overtones of the whole passage.

22. Dante, *Purgatory*, 343 (XXXI, 115–138).

23. As Dante himself knows well, the entire Canto XXXI of *Purgatory*—arguably the whole *Purgatory* in general—is nothing but a painful baptism, i.e., a process of death and resurrection ordered toward giving Dante new and “virginal” senses, enabling him to perceive the glorious mysteries of the world above, which it is his task to write about.

greater similarity to virginal love than we would typically tend to grant after the Fall. Far from being just a different thing, conjugal love holds the middle position in the ladder of love that leads from Adam's original wonder before the beauty of the created world up to the virginal love proper to the New Adam who is Christ. On the one hand, as the highest form of love in the order of creation (Gn 2), conjugal love constitutes the apex of Adam's original call to "beget in the beautiful." On the other hand, in the order of grace (Eph 5:22), the very same form of love, lifted up and transfigured by the grace Christ gives, becomes the first step of a new ladder, which culminates in the life of virginity.

In the second stage, I will illustrate the sense in which virginal love is more similar to conjugal love in its form and end than is usually recognized. When lived according to its truth, virginal love, no less than married love, can bring about both profound intimacy and fruitfulness—although in a highly paradoxical, and exteriorly invisible, way. To be sure, virginity requires a radical and unambiguous renunciation of binding oneself to any human spouse. In this sense, a real "analogy of proportionality" between marriage and virginity is to be vehemently excluded. However, I will argue that this "renunciation" or "removal"—to use Dionysian categories—is best understood as a removal that points to superabundance rather than to privation, although without denying a certain aspect of genuine renunciation in this life.²⁴

24. I am applying here to the relationship between marriage and the life of virginity the categories developed by Dionysius the Areopagite in his discussion of the relationship between kataphatic and apophatic theology (see especially *Divine Names* VII, 865c–868a; 869c–872b). According to the mysterious author of the *Areopagitica*, it is more perfect to deny than to affirm all the names (attributes) we attribute to God as Cause. However, this "removal" is *perfect* only if it is not taken as a removal according to privation (*aphaeresis kata steresin*). We are not to take this removal as meaning that God does not have the perfection I am denying, simply. In fact, the exact opposite is true: the removal is more perfect only if it is understood anagogically, that is, as pointing to the ineffably super-eminent *presence* in God of that very perfection that I am intellectually "removing" (*aphaeresis kat'hyperochen*). In my view, this Dionysian schema can be of great help in shedding light on the hidden but real analogy that exists between natural marriage and the supernatural fruitfulness of the virgin's way of loving. The denial entailed in virginity is real, and needs to be no less radically "applied" than the denial of divine names in Dionysius's doctrine of the mind's ascent to God. At the same time, it would be wrong to read the removal as pointing to the *rejection*, rather than the *uplifting*, of what is

5. "A GARDEN LOCKED"—"A GARDEN FOUNTAIN": THE VIRGINAL FORM OF CONJUGAL LOVE (I)

Let me begin by suggesting that the key to overcoming a simplistic opposition between virginity and human love is precisely the central concept in the ladder of love we have been building from the start: beauty. To put it bluntly, the difference between human eros and animal sexual attraction is that in human love the trigger of the erotic impulse is never just the sexual difference, but rather the splendor of the other's beauty, a beauty that can be appreciated only in an attitude of distancing contemplation. The biblical book of eros teaches this basic truth unequivocally.²⁵ There is perhaps no more insistent leitmotiv in the Song of Songs than that of lovers who never tire of singing of their beloved's comeliness—a comeliness that is in fact the only cause of their reciprocal attraction.²⁶ In my view, the importance of this apparently banal point cannot be overestimated. Far from being accidental to the awakening of human eros, masculine and feminine beauty, in revealing the priceless dignity of the other person, plays—or at least ought to play—the pivotal role of lifting sexual attraction up into a properly human love, that is, into a desire for union, which is at the same time full of "trembling awe" and loving care for the beloved.²⁷

being "left behind." The sense in which this is applicable to virginal love will be qualified below.

25. See the comments of John Paul II in *TB*, 108:6–8 (554–58).

26. See, for example, Sg 1:5, 8, 10, 15–16; 2:1–2, 13b–14b; 4:1, 7ff.; 5:10ff.; 6:3ff.; 6:12; 7:6. Although it is more frequently the man who praises the woman, the long and important *wasf* of Sg 5:10 is dedicated to the woman's praise of her beloved's beauty. We unfortunately cannot enter into the question of why in Scripture, as well as in all human cultures, beauty seems to be more naturally associated with the feminine than the masculine.

27. This process of *uplifting* has been insightfully described again by Dostoevsky in the two chapters consecrated to Mitya's flight to Mokroe: "And so, in just the time it took him to run home, jealousy had already begun stirring again in his restless heart. Jealousy! . . . It is impossible to imagine all the shame and moral degradation a jealous man can tolerate without the least remorse. And it is not that they are all trite and dirty souls. On the contrary, it is possible to have a lofty heart, to love purely, to be full of self-sacrifice, and at the same time to hide under tables, to bribe the meanest people, and live with the nastiest filth of spying and eavesdropping. . . . Mitya's jealousy disappeared at the sight of Grushenka, and for a moment he became trustful and noble, and even de-

In brief, masculine and feminine beauty, understood in the most proper sense as the external radiance of the personal dignity of the lovable other, adds something substantially human to the meaning of bodily sexual difference. In the very same moment in which beauty elicits the distancing response of admiration, it prepares and enables man and woman to move toward each other in a truly human way, in an attitude of reverence and care for the beloved person. This is why beauty preserves, even in this fallen world, a crucial pedagogical role on the path of human love as it was originally understood. To the eyes of the lover, in one way or another, the beloved is inescapably glorious.²⁸

In order to deepen further the distinctive character of this “erotic wonder” in its similarity and difference from all oth-

spised himself for his bad feelings. *But this meant only that his love for this woman consisted in something much higher than he himself supposed and not in passion alone, not merely in that ‘curve of the body’ he had explained to Alyosha. But when Grushenka disappeared, Mitya at once began again to suspect in her all the baseness and perfidy of betrayal. . . . Mitya’s soul was troubled, very troubled, and though many things now tormented his soul, at this moment his whole being yearned irresistibly for her, for his queen, to whom he was flying in order to look at her for the last time. I will say just one thing: his heart did not argue even for a moment. I shall not be believed, perhaps, if I say that this jealous man did not feel the least jealousy towards this new man, this new rival who had sprung up from nowhere, this ‘officer.’ If some other man had appeared, he would at once have become jealous, and would perhaps again have drenched his terrible hands with blood, but towards this man, ‘her first,’ he felt no jealous hatred as he flew along in his troika, nor even any hostility ‘This is beyond dispute, this is his right and hers; this is her first love, which in five years she has not forgotten; so she has loved only him these five years, and I—what am I doing here? Why am I here, and what for? Step aside, Mitya, make way! And what am I now? It’s all finished now’ And the troika went flying on, ‘devouring space,’ and the closer he came to his goal, the more powerfully the thought of her again, of her alone, took his breath away and drove all the other terrible phantoms from his heart. Oh, he wanted so much to look at her, if only briefly, if only from afar! ‘She is with *him* now, so I will only look at how she is with him, with her former sweetheart, that is all I want.’ And never before had such love for this woman, so fatal for his destiny, risen in his breast, such a new feeling, never experienced before, a feeling unexpected even to himself, tender to the point of prayer, to the point of vanishing before her. ‘And I will vanish!’ he said suddenly, in a fit of hysterical rapture” (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 380–81, 409–10, emphasis added).*

28. Here I cannot enter into a thorough discussion of what is meant by masculine and feminine beauty. I take for granted that beauty should not be reduced to physical perfection. As exterior radiance of the truth of the person, beauty is always an inseparably physical and spiritual reality. There is obviously beauty in the manners and way of acting and moral behavior of a person.

er kinds of loving contemplation, let us turn briefly to the biblical narrative that has been handed down to us as a sort of snapshot of Adam's first encounter with the woman:

So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Gn 2:20–25)²⁹

First, as the opening "at last" makes clear, the woman is deliberately presented by the sacred author as the last step of an ascending ladder. No matter how odd or offensive this may sound to our modern ears, the author intentionally builds his narrative in such a way that between the cattle, beasts, and birds previously brought before Adam's eyes, on the one hand, and the woman, on the other, there is a sort of figural relation: the former foreshadows the latter. The uniqueness of the beauty of the woman surfaces only when seen against the backdrop of the somehow similar, although inferior, beauty and goodness ("tov-ness") of cattle, beasts, and birds.³⁰

29. The narrative has been the object, as is well known, of a much more thorough theological exegesis in *TB*, 131–204. My focus is limited to the elements that concern us here, namely the question of the relationship between eros and wonder.

30. It suffices here to recall that in biblical typology the distinctive superiority of the fulfillment vis-à-vis the figure only comes to light through pondering *both* the similarity *and* the difference between the two. On the importance of typology in biblical theology, and on its ontological and logical structure, see my "Novum in Vetere Latet. Vetus in Novo Patet: Toward a Renewal of Typological Exegesis," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 389–424.

As to the similarity, it is not difficult to see what the animals and the woman have in common: both help Adam via an analogous combination of likeness and difference in relation to him.³¹ As to the contrast, things get a bit more complicated. One may be tempted to say that the only reason for Adam's superior delight in seeing the woman is simply the fact that she, as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, is more similar to him than any other creature. More closely considering what this actually means, however, we are immediately confronted with an interesting paradox: the same likeness that makes the woman look so familiar is also the cause of her incomparable mysteriousness. On the one hand, by being a human person like him, Eve is able to open herself to Adam and welcome him into herself much more perfectly than any other creature can (Gn 2:24). On the other hand, and for the same reason, she also stands before him as "the master of herself" (John Paul II), as a "garden locked" (Sg 4:12) to which Adam can descend (Sg 5:1) only by making himself humbly receptive to the free self-disclosure and self-gift of the woman herself.

Most notably, and given the perfect innocence of the hearts of both (Gn 2:25), Adam's intuition of the awesome, inscrutable depth of the woman's irreducible freedom in no way appears to him as a threat to his longing for intimacy.³²

31. To be fair, the author of Genesis 2 discretely insinuates, in a genuinely biblical fashion, that not only the animals but in some way all the creatures that Adam encounters in the Garden, e.g., the trees and perhaps even the precious stones and the waters of the rivers (Gn 2:10–14), share with the woman the power to "help" Adam through an analogous combination of likeness and difference. (On the relationship between Adam and the animals in particular, see the remarkable passage of Gregory of Nyssa in *The Making of Man*, 7). That to which such a combination of similarity and dissimilarity ultimately points is made sufficiently clear through the very word that defines the common role of the woman and the animals in man's life: *ezer* (helper, rescuer). To ears trained in biblical Hebrew, this word evokes the rescuer or savior par excellence: the Lord of the Covenant. Not unlike the woman in relation to Adam—in fact infinitely more than her—God can be for Israel that Other who can come to help even when no apparent hope is left, precisely because he is both familiar and foreign, reliably faithful and yet infinitely Other, that is, mysterious and unsearchable in his ways (Rom 11:33). There is no space here for elaborating on this important point. The woman is obviously only a *figure* of the Lord precisely because God is both infinitely more immanent and transcendent than the woman will ever be in relation to Adam.

32. Sexual difference, no less than personhood, is constitutive of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that Adam and the woman are for each other.

On the contrary, Adam must have rejoiced in perceiving it, for the simple reason that such a depth is nothing other than the flipside of the woman's power to give herself in the freedom of love. Nowhere is this paradox better expressed than in Song 4:12–15:

[A] A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a garden locked, a fountain sealed. (4:12)

[B] Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
with all choicest fruits,
henna with nard, (4:13)
nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
with all trees of frankincense,
myrrh, and aloes,
with all chief spices— (4:14)

[A] a garden fountain, a well of living water,
and flowing streams from Lebanon. (4:15)

Between the images of Song 4:12 and those of 4:15 there is no mutual exclusion, but rather an exquisite, subtle relation of “reciprocal causality.” If the man can see the woman as a “garden locked” and “fountain sealed,” this is only because he yearns for the “waters of her well,” a love he can enjoy only through a sovereign gift of herself. Yet the reverse is even more striking: the Shulamite would not appear to him as a well of living water if he were not able to see her as a “fountain sealed,” or an inviolable person.³³ For his yearning is a *human* one, a desire to beget in the ever-new freedom of love given and received.

Another image of the Song illuminates the same paradox from a different angle:

Behold, you are beautiful, my love,
behold, you are beautiful!
Your eyes are doves behind your veil. (4:1)

Between the power of Adam to perceive the personal otherness and distance of the beloved as good, and the power to perceive her sexual difference as *fas-cinans*, there is perfect continuity and analogy.

33. On this profound insight, see the sections of *TB* that discuss the Song of Songs (548–92).

On the one hand, the woman's eyes "are doves," meaning they shine with love.³⁴ But on the other hand, they do so from behind her veil (see also Sg 4:3, 6:7). What this means, according to the poet, is that what the man finds beautiful about the woman's gaze is not only that her eyes make visible (Sg 4:9, 6:4–5) her yearning for him (the doves), but also that they do so from behind her veil, thus revealing at the same time the "inexhaustible" depth of her person (the veil). The image of the veil conveys also a further nuance. The woman does not just pour out her passion, openly exposing it. A sort of modest discretion tempers and somehow counterbalances the free expression of her yearning, endowing her gaze with an aura of inwardness, which is the expression of her consciousness of her own personal dignity. The spark that glitters on the woman's eyes (*species*) and confers on them their uniquely fascinating light (*lumen*) is produced, we could say, by the friction between two opposite interior movements, analogous to those which her beauty elicits in her beloved's heart. There is both the unifying movement of eros, which pushes her toward the beloved, and the distancing movement of reserve, which pushes her back into herself, into the "cleft of the rock" (Sg 2:14), as though to reveal her awareness that the gift she is invited to give is a very great one indeed.³⁵

We can therefore conclude that Adam's superior delight in seeing the woman depends not only on the innocent eros she enkindles in him through the fascinating beauty of her loving gaze, but also and inseparably in the unique *reverence* she inspires in him in the very moment in which she lets him glimpse,

34. The dove is here clearly a symbol of love. See Gianni Barbiero, *Cantico dei Cantici: Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (Milan: Paoline, 2004), 28.

35. It is in this respect not irrelevant to remark that the only context in which physical virginity is seen as a perfection in the Old Testament is, ironically, marriage. As is well known, the Jewish bride-to-be was expected to be a virgin. In light of the above considerations, this requirement reveals itself to be much more than a primitive, patriarchal "rule." Virginity, understood as the bodily sign that the woman has kept herself for her spouse-to-be, visibly manifests the interior truth of the woman's person as Israel understands it, that is, as bride-to-be. There is indeed a perfect mirroring between the nuptial meaning of physical virginity (*virginitas carnis*) and the interior structure of nuptial love, as we are describing it (*virginitas cordis*). If the essence of virginal love is spousal waiting, as a synthesis of zealous desire and reverent giving space to the freedom of the gift, then the virginal body bears witness to precisely such a love.

through that same gaze, the at once tremendous and delicate mystery of her person. A sort of parallel crescendo is at work here: to the greater promise of intimacy and union (Gn 2:24) there corresponds a greater need for distancing reverence and a generous “letting be” on Adam’s part.

6. “MY SISTER, MY BRIDE”: THE VIRGINAL FORM OF CONJUGAL LOVE (II)

Let us go back to the image of the locked garden. We have just seen how Song 4:12 and 4:15, far from contradicting each other, bear witness to that mysterious mutual interiority of intimacy and distance that lies at the heart of the dynamism of love. A closer look helps us to go deeper into this same idea, while at the same time opening it up to a broader horizon:

A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a garden locked, a fountain sealed. (4:12)

A garden fountain, a well of living water,
and flowing streams from Lebanon. (4:15)

First, the poet tells us that the living water, welling up from the invisible depths of the woman, streams from the far away mountains of Lebanon. This note sends the reader back to the earlier verses of 4:7–8:

You are all fair, my love;
there is no flaw in you.
Come with me from Lebanon, my bride;
come with me from Lebanon.
Depart from the peak of Ama’na,
from the peak of Senir and Hermon,
from the dens of lions,
from the mountains of leopards.

The peaks of Lebanon, rich with waters and vegetation, as well as the mountains of leopards whence the woman comes, are metaphors pointing to the two sides, as it were, of the awesome mystery of the Shulamite. On the one hand, she is a luxuriously rich land, overflowing with promise and attractiveness. On the

other hand, she appears as a still unexplored and thus frightening world, different than that of the man, and therefore experienced as unapproachable (leopards, lions, peaks). Both things are at once implied in the fact that her origin is Lebanon.

Through his patient work of “keeping and tilling” (Gn 2:15), the beloved has evidently succeeded in transforming the lush but still wild forest into a garden, whose riches are now made available to him by the woman.³⁶ Her foreign origin, however, is not for this reason left behind. On the contrary, the waters through which she quenches the beloved’s thirst are living and lifegiving only and precisely because they flow down from a place so different than the dry land of Palestine.

This means that even when the Shulamite has become “his garden fountain,” the beloved can find genuine refreshment in her only if he continues to see her as “streaming from Lebanon,” that is, as an ever-new gift arriving from the peaks of the North, a symbol of her ineradicable bond with the unapproachable source of life who is ultimately the Creator himself.

We come in this way to the second and most profound sense in which distancing awe and intimate unity are inseparable and mutually interior to one another. Adam’s recognition of the woman’s personal dignity is far from reducible to the acknowledgment of her equality with him in freedom and self-possession. That the woman is to be for him sister no less than bride means rather that she can be his joy (bride) only to the extent that he sees her as someone who, together with him (sister), belongs to Another who chose her first and willed her for her own sake: God the Creator.

This is the case for at least two reasons. First, without the permanent anamnesis of the “high places” from which she flows, the woman’s face will quickly lose that mysterious aura which made her lovable in the beginning. When not seen as “flowing from Lebanon,” the “living waters” springing up from the well become stagnant and sickening. St. John Paul II says the same in a different way:

36. The garden, as symbol of the integration of nature and culture (see again Barbiero, *Cantico dei Cantici*, 17–53) is here clearly a perfect symbol of the transformation undergone by the woman as a result of her beloved’s display of his care and love for her.

The human body . . . reveals not only its masculinity or femininity on the physical level, but reveals also such a *value* and such a *beauty that it goes beyond the simply physical level of "sexuality"* [cf. Ez 28:12–13]. In this way, the consciousness of the meaning of the body, linked with man's masculinity-femininity, is in some sense completed. On the one hand, this meaning points to a particular power to express the love in which man becomes a gift; what corresponds to this meaning, on the other hand, is power and deep availability for the "affirmation of the person," that is, literally, the power to live the fact that the other—the woman for the man and the man for the woman—is through the body someone willed by the Creator "for his own sake" [*Gaudium et spes*, 24:3], that is, someone unique and unrepeatable, someone chosen by eternal Love.³⁷

Only when one reaches this point does the analogy between the virginal gaze of Christ and conjugal love come fully to light. Adam's wonder in front of the woman's beauty reaches its authentic fulfillment when it becomes veneration, a religious recognition that this creature has been brought before him by the Most High (Gn 2:22b) and entrusted into his care.

The second reason is that the meaning of the existence of man and woman is not reducible to their call to love one another. Rather, this call is a key dimension of their response to a more primordial and more comprehensive call, namely God's call to love him with all their mind, strength, and heart (Dt 6:5). Certainly, the mystery of the "one flesh" entails a real internalization of the totality of the other person into oneself. There is literally nothing about Adam that does not concern his spouse. But this is precisely why conjugal love in fact demands a great deal of sacrifice and virginal letting be and letting go. In receiving Adam into herself, the woman receives, *ipso facto*, the task of serving the totality of his God-given mission—a mission that might often require him to leave "their house." This "letting go" is not per se in tension with her desire to help him to bear fruit in the world. On the contrary, it should be spontaneously seen as one of the expressions of their fruitful love. If it is now perceived as contrary to her desire for union, this is only because of the self-centered possessiveness that the Fall has in-

37. *TB* 15:4 (188).

jected into the heart of both of the spouses (Gn 3:16b). We encounter in this way another instance in which detachment and possession go hand in hand. Here the alternative is not between possession and loss, but rather between two different understandings of possession: one of domination and of suffocation or annihilation of the other person, and one of true, mutual interiority. All this places us before a new paradox: Adam can be a true bridegroom only to the degree that he sees himself as the minister or representative of a Bridegroom that *he is not*, namely, the Lord himself.³⁸

It is in this sense that I would like to suggest that there is not only no opposition between the two most common readings of the Song of Songs—namely, the literal, “carnal” or “earthly” interpretation, and the allegorical, “virginal” or “spiritual” one³⁹—but also, and much more strikingly, that there is a sense in which the human meaning needs to open itself up to the spiritual

38. By insisting on the figural essence of the love between man and woman, I do not mean to say that human love is just a means to an end that transcends it. Although I cannot elaborate on this point, I would suggest, as is implicit in the argument developed above, that the two meanings of the Song (literal and allegorical) reciprocally need and enhance each other and are therefore both, in different respects, means and end. On the one hand, as channels of Christ’s love, the spouses represent Another, and in this sense are to be seen as “means” of the communication of a Love that does not originate or end in them. On the other hand, as channels of Christ’s love, the spouses are given the full joy (Jn 15:11) of becoming able *to love each other* with the love they receive through Christ (Jn 15:12). Considered from this perspective, that is, as a fruit of their union with Christ, the love of the spouses for each other (carnal meaning of the Song) becomes the “end,” and their vertical union with Christ (spiritual meaning of the Song) the “means.” As long as human love is a communion of love among persons, there is a sense in which it allows man and woman to participate in the form of divine triune love, a participation or sharing which is *more perfect* than the one Adam would enjoy if he were, *per absurdum*, created alone.

39. Note that the virginal or spiritual meaning of the Song presupposes and is grounded upon the goodness of the carnal or earthly meaning. On these two interpretations and the question of their relationship, see Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 11–40; Raymond Jacques Tournay, *Word of God, Song of Love: A Commentary on the Song of Songs* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 1–37; Anne-Marie Pelletier, *Lectures du Cantique des cantiques: De l’énigme du sens aux figures du lecteur* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989); Barbiero, *Cantico dei Cantici*, 17–53.

meaning *in order to be fully saved and exalted in its very "literalness."* This is so for at least two reasons.

First, human love, in its original meaning, is *always already figural*, and thus future oriented. To be sure, the woman, as the supreme created icon of the Lord, is for Adam the help-mate he was waiting for. Still, she is not the Lord. As Augustine writes: "Fecisti nos ad Te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescant in Te."⁴⁰ Only in the Lord can the human thirst for love find its ultimate fulfillment. In this sense, the traditional warning of the Church Fathers against a "carnal" interpretation of the Song of Songs, if adequately qualified, maintains its full validity: only if it is seen as a participation in a mystery greater than itself (Eph 5:22), namely, the mystery of the love between the Lord and his Bride (both his people and each and every soul), can human love be experienced and lived in its authentic truth. To stop at the "letter" of human love by refusing to see the spouse as an icon of Another is to offer a dangerous reading of the most beautiful of all songs, and to pervert human love into dominating self-deification and/or alienating idolatry.

The second reason is implicit in what is said above: the Song of Songs describes love as it should be, in its prelapsarian glory.⁴¹ The inexhaustible wonder of the Song's lovers before each other, when compared with the transitory, fluctuating character of human feelings, cannot help but appear as an otherworldly, unreal "ideal." Few have the privilege to see their spouse in this way on more than a few occasions. But this very fact only reveals how much the literal or "carnal" meaning of the Song needs the spiritual one in order to recover the glory it has lost (Rom 3:21) in our fallen world. The only way for them to continually renew their wonder before each other is for the spouses to learn to pierce through the "letter" or "flesh" of the other's face,⁴² so as to see the invisible glory of the divine image

40. "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (*Confessions* I, 1).

41. See *TB*, 108:3 (550–52).

42. In this sense, I would suggest, the patristic idea that the Song of Songs requires a path of *catharsis* in order to be enjoyed remains true for those who read it *simply* as love poetry, no less than for those who look for the allegorical

“radiating from within” (Ps 44:14). The poetic language of the Song, so saturated with metaphors and similitudes, seems to invite the reader to precisely this exercise of spiritual exploration of the mysterious depths of the beloved. This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of the reason why lovers feel a sort of irresistible necessity to metaphorically expand the “boundaries” of their beloved’s being, but it is undeniable that the imagery of the Song—precisely through its at times uncomfortable and disconcerting associations—reveals how important it is for the lover to sing the “unsearchable riches” (Rom 11:33) of the beloved.⁴³ “There is more in you than anyone else sees”: this is what the Song’s lovers mean to say when they recapitulate in the beloved the perfections of the precious stones, flowers,⁴⁴ fruit, trees,⁴⁵ deer, and mares⁴⁶ of the whole of creation.

This natural dynamic is secured and finds its superabundant fulfillment in the eyes of faith. This “more,” shining through the wrinkles of the aging face of one’s spouse, becomes for the believer Christ himself: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink” (Mt 25:35). This is but one more reason why the spiritual sense of the Song is no less necessary than the literal sense for those who want to live the literal meaning in truth, without falling into a shallow, carnal eroticism, on the one hand, or a disappointing romanticism, on the other.

It is worth concluding this section by focusing on the enigmatic final verse of the Song of Songs. Readers have often been puzzled by the fact that the Shulamite, who previously had shown very little lenience toward the absence of her beloved, seems now to invite him to go back to the mountains of spices from which he came:

or spiritual meaning in it, as the Fathers and monks did (see the prologues of Origen’s, Gregory of Nyssa’s, and Gregory the Great’s respective exegeses of the Song of Songs).

43. On the function of metaphor in the Song of Songs, see Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 17ff.

44. Sg 2:1–4, 2:16, 4:5, 5:13, 6:3, 7:2, etc.

45. Sg 1:2, 1:4b, 4:10b, 4:11, 5:1, 7:2, 7:9, 8:2, etc.

46. Sg 1:9–15, 2:8–9, 2:14–17b, 4:1b, 2:5–8b, 5:2, 5:11–12, 6:5–6, 7:4, 8:14.

Make haste [*barach*: flee], my beloved,
 and be like a gazelle
 or a young stag
 upon the mountains of spices. (8:14)

In light of everything said above, this strange finale becomes perfectly intelligible. Through a painful process of initiation, the Shulamite has finally understood that letting her beloved “continually” go back to the place where he is from is in fact the only way to be perpetually re-surprised by the gift of his presence. Before bringing this point to our final conclusion, however, three indispensable corollaries must be added.

First, in light of all of the above, it is less difficult to see why conjugal chastity, far from being simply a form of renunciation of the joy of love, is actually a path that leads toward its fullness.⁴⁷ If such a path now implies mortification and ascetical conversion, this is only because human love needs to be redeemed by Christ’s grace together with the whole of our wounded humanity.

This brings us to the second corollary. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has persuasively shown,⁴⁸ if the “mutual interiority” of virginity and marriage to one another is no longer as visible as it should be, this is only because the Fall has dramatically reduced such visibility. On the one hand, as perceivable especially in the woman’s *defloratio*—a word that significantly evokes a certain loss of beauty—the conjugal embrace entails now an unavoidable renunciation of virginity.⁴⁹ On the

47. On this point, see *TB*, 321–78.

48. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 83–122, 183–250.

49. Addressing *in recto* the notoriously difficult question of the prelapsarian form of the conjugal embrace would require an entirely separate paper. Here I limit myself to pointing out three “presuppositions” which serve as the implicit background of my whole argument. First, it is impossible, as far as I can see, to describe with precision such an embrace. Second, we can nevertheless hold with a certain degree of reasonable certainty at least two things. On the one hand, the conjugal embrace would not be incorporeal or disembodied. As the Song of Songs teaches, the language of the masculine and feminine body belongs to the original “music” of human love, and not only to its postlapsarian version. On the other hand, such an embrace would not entail any loss of virginal integrity, in a physical no less than spiritual sense. If it is true, as we have been stressing all along, that by virginity we

other hand, and conversely, virginity now entails celibate life, that is, a renunciation of marriage and of physical paternity and maternity.⁵⁰ In some way, then, both marriage and the celibate life entail a certain element of painful renunciation, which the grace of redemption does not remove but rather transfigures. Taken up into the glory of the Cross, the renunciation becomes sacrifice, a way of participating in Christ's redeeming love.

In this way, we come to the third corollary. The Exsultet's *felix culpa* applies in different ways to both virgins and Christian spouses, no less than to our holy Redeemer.⁵¹ In marriage, this means that the very same "bleeding" which symbolically epitomizes the unavoidable suffering any woman exposes herself to by saying "yes" to marriage, can be transformed, through analogy with the blood of the Cross, into a means of displaying the greatest kind of love: self-sacrifice and forgiving patience (1 Cor 13:4a–7c). The task of the final section is to show what this means for the virgin.

mean not *simply* physical integrity but rather a *way of loving* in which the beloved is welcomed as a gift from God in an attitude of reverent waiting, it has to be also true, from the opposite perspective, that the woman's loss of virginity, symbolically epitomized in her physical bleeding (*defloratio*), should not be understood as just a neutral material event, but rather as the epiphany of the violent and grasping (*concupiscent*) way in which Adam and Eve move toward union with each other after the Fall. Here Mariology, and in particular the dogma of Mary's *virginitas in partu*, can offer important insights. Instead of looking at Mary's virginal and painless maternity as an awkward and anti-natural miracle, we can better understand its meaning by seeing it as the physical epiphany of her interior virginity, i.e., of her complete lack of possessiveness in relation to her God-given child. Conversely, as Gn 3:16 clearly suggests, if now both the conjugal embrace and the woman's childbearing take place through pain and bleeding, this is because of the violent self-centeredness and "impermeability," so to speak, that sin has brought about in both man and woman. In this sense, the recalcitrance of Eve's womb in delivering her child is nothing but the physical symptom of the hidden possessiveness of her heart—a possessiveness she will always have to fight against, in order to let her child be free to walk in the world in search of his vocation. For a penetrating rereading of the problem in light of the entire patristic and theological tradition, see Balthasar, *The Christian States of Life*, 67–129.

50. The existence of a distinction between virginity and celibacy highlights the fact that the two realities are far from equivalent and coextensive.

51. "O *felix culpa* quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem," "O happy fault that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer."

7. A FRUITFUL SACRIFICE

First of all, there is no doubt that in embracing celibate life one renounces marriage, and that this renunciation entails the privation of at least two natural goods: spousal intimacy and physical fruitfulness. The flipside of this fact, however, is that the virgin is able to transform this very renunciation into a sacrifice of love to God for the life of the world. Here a decisive distinction becomes crucial. When we say that the renunciation of marriage is a sacrifice, we should by no means think that renunciation and sacrifice are synonymous. The renunciation is not *per se* the sacrifice. What makes my renunciation of marriage a sacrifice is only my love for Christ—a love so great that by God’s grace it makes me want to give away even the joy of marriage for his sake.

The notion of sacrifice, in other words, presupposes two things: my love for God, and my appreciation of the goodness and value of the victim I am offering for his sake. If either of these two is missing, there is no good sacrifice. Sacrificing a spoiled victim, as the prophet Malachi impressively puts it, has no value in God’s eyes (Mal 1:6–14). This means, in our context, that the virgin’s transformation of his or her flesh into a sacrifice to God *presupposes an appreciation* of the beauty and goodness of the flesh, that is, of the sexual body. Existentially, this means it presupposes a vulnerability to the attractive beauty of the other. In this way, we encounter a new sense in which the literal and spiritual meanings of the Song fruitfully interact: The more I see the woman as naturally attractive, the more I will perceive the gift of my flesh to God as a sacrifice, and vice versa.

Let me be clear: I am not at all arguing that it is good for a celibate priest to fall in love with a woman. The life of virginity requires a serious ascetical path of purification from the “passions of the flesh.” What I am saying, rather, is this: to experience what Fr. Giussani calls “preference,”⁵² or a strong feeling of affection for and attraction to a person of the other sex, can be, and in fact often becomes, an essential “hour”—taken in the

52. On Giussani’s understanding of preference, see especially his “Tu” (*o dell’Amicizia*) (Milan: Rizzoli, 1996).

genuinely Johannine sense⁵³—in the path of the virgin toward the full flourishing of his or her vocation. This is true for at least three interrelated reasons.

The first is implicit in what has just been said. The moments in which I am given to feel more intensely the cost of virginity (Jn 12:3a) and that it really is a sacrifice, are also the moments in which I perceive more clearly the greatness of my gift to God. It is as if the very fire that sets my heart aflame at the same time allows me to smell the sweet fragrance, as it were, of the holocaust of my flesh. The squandering of Mary's nard at Jesus' feet would not give off such a good fragrance (Jn 12:3) if it did not look like a foolish waste (Jn 12:5).

This is not the whole picture, however. The virgin's act of letting the beloved go is never just an expression of his or her love for God. It is also and inseparably a sacrifice embraced in reverent respect for the beloved's own God-given vocation and mission. Seen from this perspective, the sacrifice expresses not only one's love for God, but also and simultaneously one's generous love for the beloved.

We see at work here the paradoxical power of beauty on full display. Precisely by asking me to let her be, the beauty of the other lifts me up and makes me ascend on high. In offering to God the pain I can at times feel when I have to step back from her lovable face, I am indeed transforming my suffering flesh into the efficacious sign of my love, not only for God, but also for her.

In this way, we come to the third and most profound point. What do we mean exactly when we say that the virgin's gift of his flesh to God is a sacrifice?

First, such an expression makes sense theologically only if and when such a gift is freely given in response to, and as a participation in, Christ's own sacrifice, that is, his total gift of his flesh on the Cross in obedience to the Father for the life of the world (Jn 3:16). This means that in giving up one's flesh to Christ, one's very gift is "taken up" by Christ himself into his "love for his own to the end" (Jn 13:1). While we have no space

53. *The hour without qualification*, as is well known, indicates the event of Jesus' glorification through death, Resurrection, and ascent to the Father, considered as a unified whole. In what sense this concept is analogically relevant in our context will become clear below.

to delve into the depths of the nuptial theology of John's gospel,⁵⁴ it is not difficult to grasp the importance of this theology's central ironic paradox for our topic: the ultimate end of Jesus' act of laying down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13) is *not a separation*, but rather the opposite: it is *an entering into fuller communion with them*. In John, the Cross makes sense only as a step toward the Eucharist. To be sure, the consummation (Jn 13:1, 19:30) of this new union requires passing through a painful moment of separation. But this sorrowful separation is actually the means toward the full joy of a deeper intimacy with those very ones for whom Jesus gives his life. True, it is a "unity" no less hidden than it is intimate. And yet, it is truly *fuller* than the unity Jesus had with his own before his death.

Unfortunately, there is not space to show the exquisite and subtle ways in which this paradox is the central key of the two "nuptial" scenes that open and close the drama of the Lord's passion, namely John 12:1–18 (the anointing at Bethany) and John 20:1–18 (the encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene at the tomb). It will suffice to mention the central idea. For John, the paschal mystery is first and foremost the way in which the Lord transforms his flesh and blood into the means of his eucharistic union with those he loves. In light of this, John sees that the very departure through death and ascent to the Father that seems to distance Jesus (Jn 12:8, 20:17a) from both women—who in the fourth gospel symbolize the Song's bride—becomes the means of fulfilling their greatest desire, namely, permanent intimacy with him. This is a fulfillment that superabundantly surpasses anything that either Mary could have dreamed when she gave voice to her desire to cling to him (Jn 12:3, 20:17).

Such a supernatural union of course infinitely transcended anything the world had known before. And yet, between the original structure of nuptial love (Song of Songs) and its hyperbolic fulfillment in the post-paschal "intercourse" between Mary⁵⁵ and the Lord, there is not only contrast but also continu-

54. See my forthcoming *To Kalon Kalei: Essay on the Theopoetic Aesthetics of John's Gospel*, pt. 3, "Nuptial Mystery."

55. Although they are most likely two different people, in my view it is not at all accidental that both the women who typologically represent the

ity. In fact, the contrast here between image (nuptial union) and fulfillment (union with Christ) here is due not to the *absence* of the constitutive elements of the image, but rather to their *presence in hyperbolically intensified form*. As we saw, the interweaving of closeness and distance, of intimacy, on the one hand, and reverent affirmation of the ever-ungraspable mystery of the person of the spouse, on the other, belongs already to the original form of nuptial love, as we discover in the human love sung by the Song of Songs, which is for John the figural point of reference. Now, in the life of faith to which Mary is called, both the irreducible mysteriousness of the Bridegroom's person and the corporeal and spiritual intimacy with him are intensified far beyond any possible previous expectation. There is *intimacy* because the Bridegroom, besides sending his Spirit to dwell in her, has contrived a way to give his very self, his very flesh and blood to his Bride to eat and drink. There is *distance* because Jesus' person has never been more hidden and impalpable than in this way of being present (*adoro te devote, latens deitas!*).⁵⁶ Hence the paradox: through the miracle of the Eucharist, Mary can *truly* touch Jesus (cf. Jn 20:17) and taste of his love, "sweeter than wine" (Sg 1:3), far more than any human lover could; yet she can *only* do so precisely *in and through* the "distanced" touch and taste of faith.

I would dare to suggest that something analogous takes place in and through the virgin's act of offering up his or her flesh for the life of the world, a sacrifice that obviously includes the people dearest to them in a special way. As we said above, there is an objective aspect of renunciation and painful separation in such a sacrifice.⁵⁷ Yet renunciation is not the end. On the

Shulamite in John's gospel bear the same name: Mary. Symbolically speaking, the two are one and the same character: the bride of the Lord.

56. See the eucharistic hymn composed by Thomas Aquinas in honor of the institution of the Feast of Corpus Christi, which begins, "Devoutly I adore you, *hidden* God."

57. Allow me to note at least one important difference between Jesus' virginal self-offering on the Cross and the consecrated virgin's faithful "yes" to his or her vow in a moment of trial. In the case of the consecrated virgin, the dimension of suffering that faithfulness to the vow entails is always *also* due to the purification from the disordered passions of the flesh that he or she needs to undergo, which is obviously not the case for Jesus. Jesus' suffering and death, on the contrary, are entirely vicarious, for and on behalf of others, which is why it is precisely in death that the Word fully consummates his loving "de-

contrary, such a “death” is a passage or passing over (*pascha*) to a further end, one which is, in analogy with Christ’s eucharistic presence,⁵⁸ a new, hidden, and yet real form of “joyous exchange” with those one loves. To be sure, it is a communing in distance, and yet it is a real form of communion, one in which the friends, by way of their mutual charity, become for each other a source of spiritual nourishment.⁵⁹

Here the Song of Songs’s insistence on comestible metaphors is helpful.⁶⁰ As we have shown elsewhere, what food

scent” toward union with sinners. This dimension of Jesus’ suffering is absent from the virgin’s own sacrificial “passion.” In saying yes to his or her own sacrifice, the virgin is rather letting the redeeming effects of Christ’s own sacrifice become manifest in his or her flesh (Col 2:1). My point here, however, is that the suffering of the virgin—and this is where the analogy with the physical separation between Jesus and “his own” lies—is never due only to impurity or affective immaturity, but also to the renunciation of a natural good for the sake of a greater one. Considered from this perspective, the virgin’s sacrifice resembles the paschal mystery not so much as a process of catharsis from impurity to purity, but rather—in analogy with the glorification undergone by Jesus through his death and Resurrection—as a process of transformation of one’s body into a sacrifice of love, and thus into a purer means of communion with both God and one’s friends. It goes without saying that this second stage presupposes and requires the first.

58. There is evidently at least one element in the Eucharist that remains absolutely inimitable: the crucified and risen Christ feeds the Church by giving her his flesh to eat and his blood to drink in the most real sense. In this respect, as we already stressed above, between Christ and the virgin there is pure difference. No union through bodily contact is possible here. Still, the Eucharist remains in my view the best key for illuminating the paradoxical sense in which the end of the virgin’s sacrifice of love is not only renunciation and letting go, but also and precisely as a fruit of this suffered letting go, a kind of hidden, discrete, and nonetheless real and nourishing being in the beloved and having the beloved in oneself.

59. Cf. Jn 6:56. Continuing with the Johannine paradigm, here I consider mainly the case in which the preference is reciprocal and entails therefore the full joy of mutuality, that is, friendship. It goes without saying that things are different when this elective affinity is unilateral. In that case, the sacrificial dimension of virginal love takes on a further note: accepting the place in the heart of the beloved that God wants to grant. This sacrifice brings about also its own kind of reward, namely a more gratuitous charity. It remains true, however, that the ultimate paradigm of human love, as of divine love, is fruitful communion or friendship, which entails reciprocity. In this sense, any frustrated love can genuinely endure only if it is open in hope to that eschaton in which all true love will receive recognition and return.

60. See Sg 1:2b, 2:1, 2:3–5, 2:16, 4:3b, 4:5, 4:10b–11, 4:13c, 5:1, 5:13, 6:3, 6:7, 7:2, 7:8–9, 7:12–13, 8:2.

reveals about the nature of love better than any other symbol is precisely the direct proportion between the lover's degree of self-sacrifice and his power to give life and joy to the beloved.⁶¹ Although this is true of Christ's eucharistic presence to an obviously inimitable degree, the same must be true also in its own way of the life of virginity, insofar as it is a special participation in the fruitful sacrifice of the Cross. In letting the wine of love (Sg 1:13, 4:11) turn into the blood of his sacrifice, the virgin is also allowing the opposite conversion to take place. Once poured out in radical obedience to one's vocation, the blood turns into wine (Jn 2:1–11), that is, painful separation turns into joyous communion, and the eyes of Beatrice become spiritual food and drink, that is, the privileged place where one beholds the glory of God: “dopo Dio e il Firmamento, Chiara” (Francis of Assisi).⁶²

In brief, the end to which the “crucifixion” and “burial” of the natural eros of the flesh tends is not, for the Christian virgin, cold indifference, but rather virginal charity, which we could describe as a kind of synthesis of detached freedom and white-hot love: “He gives snow like wool” (Ps 147:16). If the quintessence of the life of virginity, according to the Church, is an anticipated experience of the risen body, then the positive content of this experience consists in just such a “cool warmth.” Once the flame of the previous carnal eros has been put to death, the eyes of the virgin are filled with a new “cold fire,” which is the Spirit of the Risen Christ: “His head and his hair were white

61. See my “The Wine of the Wedding,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 574–605. If it is true that “the goal of poetic metaphor . . . is to reshape or expand the meaning of a given reality (the tenor) by transferring onto it precisely those qualities of the other reality (the vehicle) which the former does not have in the same way or to the same degree” (604), then we can legitimately wonder what those “transferred” qualities are in the relationship between food and human love. In “The Wine of the Wedding” I stressed two: “first, food *gives itself over to its receiver* in a way and to a degree that is obviously absurd to confer upon the body of the spouse. Second, it is precisely through this inimitable ‘self-sacrifice,’ as it were, that food becomes a source of life and delight. Going back to the tenor, we begin to glimpse the value of the metaphor: in some way the metaphor of food, when applied to the higher level of interpersonal love, speaks *better than any other image* of the indissoluble link between the lover's capacity to give joy and life to his beloved and the degree of his self-dedication” (ibid.).

62. “After God and the heavens, Clare.”

as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire” (Rv 1:14).

Let us dare to say something more. What is the difference between Jesus’ flesh before and after his death and Resurrection? Or, to put it in a perhaps more Johannine way, how has Jesus’ death of love changed him? With Pope Emeritus Benedict, we can say that, for the pierced and risen Christ, time and space are no longer a limit:

His presence is entirely physical, yet he is not bound by physical laws, by the laws of space and time. In this remarkable dialectic of identity and otherness, of real physicality and freedom from the constraints of the body, we see the special mysterious nature of the risen Lord’s new existence. Both elements apply here: he is the same embodied man, and he is the new man, having entered upon a different manner of existence.⁶³

The fruit of his sacrificial death (Jn 12:24) and concealment in the Father (Jn 16:10) is Jesus’ newly-attained power to be with, and even dwell in (Jn 6:56, 14:20, 15:4–7, 17:23), those whom he loves, a power much greater than the one he enjoyed when he was visibly with them. Analogically, the fruit of the virgin’s sacrifice is the ability to enter into a new form of intimacy with others, one full of genuine care and affection coincident with untasted purity and freedom.

To go back to the beginning of our path, it becomes clear at this point why I claimed that virginal love, positively understood, is nothing but the hyperbolic intensification of that “possession in detachment” that we are all given to experience in the contemplation of the beautiful. Are not both the detachment and the enjoyment proper to the natural beholding of beauty brought in equal measure to the extreme (*eis to telos*: Jn 13:1) in the virgin’s way of loving? The detachment, because the spontaneous letting be proper to aesthetic experience becomes here a costly, painful letting go, one that can, at times, make one cry and bleed “to death.” The possession, because the fleeting sense of gratuitous love that we are given to taste in the experience of

63. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, *Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 266.

beauty becomes here the power to rejoice in the other's being, even if he or she is thousands of miles away. Such an impossible unity of passion and freedom is really the beginning of heaven on earth.

8. ASCENDING INTO THE DEPTH

There is no place in Scripture where all of this is more sublimely expressed than the Johannine narrative of the encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus at the tomb. This is not the place for an in-depth exegesis of this dense and mysterious text, but I would like to draw attention to Jesus' mysterious words to Mary, which have rightly inspired the imagination of great artists of all time: "*mē mou haptou*," or in the Latin, "*noli me tangere*," "do not touch me" (Jn 20:17). The correct translation of the Greek, however, is "Do not hold me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." Mysterious words. What does Jesus mean? In my view, there is no better way to grasp the meaning of these words than to read them against the background of the text that lies hidden behind the whole of this Johannine narrative: Song of Songs 3:1-4:

Upon my bed by night
 I sought him whom my soul loves;
 I sought him, but found him not;
 I called him, but he gave no answer.
 "I will rise now and go about the city,
 in the streets and in the squares;
 I will seek him whom my soul loves."
 I sought him, but found him not.
 The watchmen found me,
 as they went about in the city.
 "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"
 Scarcely had I passed them,
 when I found him whom my soul loves.
 I held him, and would not let him go
 until I had brought him into my mother's house,
 and into the chamber of her that conceived me.

In the clinging of Mary Magdalene to her newly-found Risen Lord, the mysterious vision of the sacred poet has now become reality in a new way. Mary is now the woman of the Song of

Songs, who having searched in vain for the body of a Beloved whom she thought she had lost forever, suddenly hears his voice calling her by name: “Maria” (Jn 20:16). And just as the woman of the Song, Mary cannot help doing what vehement love invariably tends to do: “I held him, and would not let him go.” Jesus’ response seems to radically contradict the finale of the Song’s poem, for where the Shulamite says she will not let her beloved go until she brings him into her mother’s house, Jesus entreats Mary to let him go so that he may return to his Father’s house. The contrast is evident. But is Jesus truly saying “no” to Mary’s desire to cling to him? A careful reading of his words reveals this is not the case: “Do not hold me, for I have not *yet* ascended to the Father.”

What Jesus is saying is not that Mary is indefinitely forbidden to hold him, but that he has to ascend to the Father before she can touch him. In other words, the condition for the superabundant fulfillment of Mary’s desire, ironically enough, is the Risen Lord’s *return to the Father*. The Lord’s “fleeing” (Sg 8:14), his ascension to the Father, is the condition for an intimacy with the Lord that is greater than Mary ever imagined possible, an intimacy more interior and therefore freer, and no longer troubled by physical distance.

A final key element is still missing. The encounter between Mary and Jesus does not end with the latter’s departure simply, but with Jesus sending her to his and her brethren:

Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (Jn 20:17)

For Mary, the joy of being electively chosen as the first witness of the Lord’s Resurrection becomes immediately a task to communicate the Good News to her brethren. So too, for the virgin, the joyful experience of a virginally-lived elective friendship always overflows into a greater passion for the salvation of all souls. We could, and even should, say that precisely such an overflowing, which is the growth in the virgin’s heart of a missionary zeal, measures the truth, beauty, and goodness of any virginal friendship. In Christianity, “preference” is good, but it

is good only to the extent that it opens up to the world in a way that is fruitful. Otherwise it becomes destructive. We encounter here the last important analogy between nuptial love and virginal friendship. True love is always fruitful, overflowing, and open to the world. If it is not, it is not true, and will in fact destroy the lovers, whether in virginity or in marriage.

In conclusion, Fr. Giussani always taught that the feast of the Ascension of the Lord is the feast of virginity. I hope to have shown why this is the case. The Ascension of the Lord is not a departure from his friends, but rather a path into a deeper mode of union with them—the proper name of which is virginity. □

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