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Divine and Human Love in the Song of Songs († Elder Placide Deseille, Abbot of the Holy Monastery of Saint Anthony the Great in France)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English



[Previous post: <http://bit.ly/2CWKQUF>]

Reading the Song in the light of Church tradition and the experience of the holy Fathers we can tell ourselves: ‘It’s absolutely clear that our Lord Jesus loves us who are members of His body, the members of His Holy Consort, and that each of us has been called to love Him back with a love that’s unique’.

‘Christian couples’ who have sealed their love with the stamp of Christ can discover and experience this familiarity with Christ through the mystery of conjugal love: ‘husbands love your wives as yourselves, as Christ loved the Church... this is a great mystery’ (Eph. 5, 25; 32). This Apostolic saying reveals to us the majesty of Christian marriage, and how much closer it is to the monastic ideal than any merely human view of conjugal union.



As Father Paisios used to say on the Holy Mountain, ‘a monastic is a person who has preferred spiritual pleasures to all those of the world’ and who has understood that Christ’s love is sufficient to fill his or her heart.

If we feel only slightly how much Christ loves us and how much He awaits our love in return, such love can immediately fill our life. He’s not content with anything less than a total, exclusive commitment, which includes even a commitment of our life itself. This is what the end of the Song means, when raw passion comes into conflict with the idyllic serenity of the dialogues which have gone before, for no reason other than to manifest the powerful flame which mystically inspires them: ‘for love is as strong as death; jealousy is as cruel as the grave’ (Song. 8, 6).

Just as Christ’s love found its supreme expression in His death on the Cross, so our love for Him finds its most perfect expression in martyrdom, or, at least, in the full acceptance of pain and death at the time and in the manner which God has

ordained.

This is why the holy Fathers taught us that 'those who love God participate with Christ in all His actions, that is, they suffer a little martyrdom in everything they do' (Sayings of the Desert Fathers). In this sense, which has nothing of the 'doloristic' about it, it's simply that you serve God better only through pain (Saint Gregory the Theologian, in a reference from Saint Gregory Palamas). Acceptance of pain, our consent to it, becomes our expression of complete internal divestment. As is the mystery of the total commitment of our self to love. As one of the Fathers said: 'If sickness is received with patience and thanks, it acquires the same crown as martyrdom'.

In the world to come, when death will be overcome once and for all, this total commitment of our self to love will be realized through the transfiguration of the whole of our existence, body and soul, through divine glory, into a state beyond pain and death. In this sense, Christ Himself, through the glory of the Resurrection, is in an equally 'Substantial' state as He was when He was on the Cross. But in our present, worldly situation, Christ's victory over pain and death -which are the consequences of sin and our voluntary separation from God- is manifested and confirmed not by their abolition, but by their transformation into evidence of supreme love, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the compliance of our own freedom. The joyful zeal of the martyrs, their fervour in spilling their blood for Christ, is the definitive proof of this love.

The Song of Songs is a poem inspired by the Holy Spirit, a cup that can be tasted only by those who have been admitted into the love of Christ: 'Hear, friends, and drink and do so abundantly' (Song, 5, 1) 'The holy things to those who are holy'! We should respect its secrets and not seek to understand and explain everything. Any excessive interpretive commentary would risk stripping it of its God-given force and reducing it to a mere allegory. May the Holy Spirit grant that we, too, might experience what a monk on the Holy Mountain said: 'When I read the Song of Songs, my mind doesn't always understand the meaning of each phrase, but my heart burns, as did those of Luke and Cleopas when the Lord explained Scripture to them on the road to Emmaus'.