

## 21st Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for MFC - 19.09.2014

The theme of Christ's love as a furnace that purifies and gives life to our love in Christ for everyone, allows me to return to the verse of the Song of Songs we have been deepening – "You have seized my heart ... with one glance of your eyes" – but from another angle. Neither St Bernard nor William of Saint-Thierry were able to finish their commentary on the Song of Songs, so they never arrived at verse 9 of chapter 4. Moreover, the Cistercian fathers were not able to interpret this verse as I have perceived it, for the simple reason that the Latin translation that was available to them was not "You have *taken* my heart," but: "You have *wounded* my heart": "*Vulnerasti cor meum, soror mea, sponsa; vulnerasti cor meum in uno oculorum tuorum*" (Song 4:9).

Obviously this changes the possibility of interpreting this verse of the Song. But it also allows one to interpret it with further depth, adding the dramatic element of the wound, and thus permitting one to read it in the light of John's Gospel, in which "the one glance" that sees and seizes the Heart of Christ is first and foremost that of those who pierced him: "When they came to Jesus, seeing that he was dead already, they did not break his legs, but one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and immediately blood and water came out. He who has seen this bears witness and his witness is true: and he knows that he says the truth, so that you may believe. All this happened so that the Scripture might be fulfilled: *Not a bone of him shall be broken*. And another scripture says: *They will look on him whom they have pierced*." (Jn 19:33-37)

We immediately notice, however, the difference between the look of the soldiers who pierced Christ and the verse of the Song of the Songs translated as "You have wounded my heart ... with a glance of your eyes". In the case of the soldiers, the look is *after* they have pierced his side, and therefore, the Heart of Christ. In the Song of Songs, instead, it is the glance itself that wounds His Heart. It is something to meditate on, because basically it gives a meaning of extreme sensitivity to the wound in Christ's Heart. If the wound is caused by our glance, and not necessarily from our "spear", that is, from our violence, from our sin, we understand that this wound is not so much a wound endured but rather a wound that is willed in the total freedom of Christ's love. Even the wound of the lance was freely willed and allowed by the Lord, as everything else that He endured during his Passion. But the image of the glance that is enough to wound the Heart of the Lord highlights this total freedom of God in loving us, and his extreme sweetness. God is very sensitive to each human's relationship with Him. Christ is so sensitive to the relationship with us, that even just our glance intimately wounds Him, not in a negative sense, that is, in the sense that our glance would do him harm, but in the sense that God reveals to us his availability, at the least sign of our return to Him, of our relationship with Him, to give himself to us even in the most intimate aspect of his Being, to the point of emptying Himself for us.

Gilbert of Hoyland, the English Cistercian abbot who continued the commentary on the Song of Songs left unfinished by St. Bernard, has come to our verse, and devotes a great sermon to it. I invite you to meditate on it, even if it is difficult to find.

Gilbert emphasizes precisely the extreme sensitivity of the love demonstrated by Jesus: "O heart truly sweet, if the impulses of our affection pushed him to repay our love! (...) He does not receive all the love that you give as due to him, but as a free gift. He feels provoked to love confessing that his heart is wounded." (§ 1). Gilbert then invites us to "take advantage" of this sensitivity of God's Heart, wounding it as much as possible with our glances of love: "Do not hesitate, o bride, to reach your Bridegroom with your darts. Use your fervent glances as if they were sharp arrows. Do not be too timid in this, do not content yourself to wound your Beloved only once, but inflict wound after wound on Him. Blessed are you, if your arrows penetrate Him, if your loves militates against Christ, if your gaze is incessantly fixed upon Him. This wound is good, because power flows from it. A woman just touched the fringe of his garment, and Christ felt power flow out (cf. Lk 8:43-46). How much more he feels grace emanating from Himself when his heart is not only touched, but wounded. This wound is not insensitive; then thrust into it the darts of a pure glance, consider it as a target (*signum*) disposed to receive such arrows. It willingly receives them because he, too, throws them in the same way. He looked at Peter, and struck his heart; he pierced it so that it would do penance (cf. Lk 22:61-62). Tears are a sign of a wounded heart." (§ 2)

As you can see, this is not a mysticism of "pious women"; rather it is a mysticism full of passion, coming from medieval knights and ladies. It is masculine and feminine at the same time. Here is all the affective passion of Magdalene and the impetuosity of Peter. In it, a St. John can be simultaneously the "son of thunder" (Mk 3:17) and the sweet friend that rests on the chest of the Master (cf. Jn 13:25, 21:20). The authors of the 12th century were much freer than we are in expressing the opposite, often conflicting, poles of human psychology. They were free because they were clear about what is the center that unifies the human person, about that which makes up the unity of human beyond him or herself and in the depths of themselves, that is, Christ the Bridegroom, the Heart of Christ who loves us and is loved.

We are free and fruitful only if in our life and vocation we do not lose sight of the center of unity to which we can bring everything, even that which inwardly and outwardly divides us. A good religious, monastic community, is not a community of angels, but of men and women who help to trace everything back to unity in Christ. It is neither a good monastery, nor a good community, in which one is perfectly formed on one aspect of life and vocation, but not on the unity in Christ of *every* aspect of our life and vocation. The worst monasteries are those in which one prays well but lives everything else badly (fraternal life, work, rest, etc.). But also in those where one works well but prays badly. It is better to live everything

badly, but be aware that everything can find unity only in Christ, than to deceive oneself thinking that they are living their vocation well because they live well only one aspect of it ignoring all the rest. This means that Christ is not the center of one's *whole* life.

Gilbert of Hoyland, continuing in his Sermon on the Song of Songs chapter 4, verse 9, refers to this unity deepening the theme of "just one glance" by which the Heart of Jesus is wounded:

"Your eye is one if it is pure; it is one if it does not look in many directions; it is one if it is simplified, rigorous and directed toward a single object, and is not divided, diffused, dispersed on many things. Your eye is one if it tends and continually looks towards, and only towards, that single reality. In short, your eye is one if it is the eye of love. (...) The unified eye searches for and fixes itself on just one thing. (...) If your intention is not unified and simple in fixing itself on God, if your thoughts are floating without discipline, then the movements of a wandering and undisciplined spirit blind the attentive eye, break the simple sharpness of its intention and dissipate the heart." (§ 3)

These texts, this mysticism, before being Cistercian, are evangelical, Johannine and Pauline. They should help us perceive that the unification of our life in Christ is not a practice, so to speak, *zen*. It is a drama, it is the Christian drama! The Christian drama is a love that lets itself be wounded, that suffers, that causes suffering. It is never a "holy indifference." The Christian drama is a wounded charity, or rather a wound of charity, a wound of love, which the Song of Songs still speaks about. Even the bride says: "I met the guards who were making the rounds in the city, they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him that I am sick with love!" (Song 5:7-8).

Christian mysticism is a mysticism of compassion.