LASSE HODNE

The Bride and Groom of the “Canticum novum”

Abstract

The article concentrates on the “Coronation of the Virgin” in medieval art. This image is based on the Bride and Groom theme from the Canticles. However, whereas this text from the Old Testament was examined already by the Church Fathers in their exegetical writings, a “canonical” representation of it was coined only in the 12th century. This “late introduction” reflects deeply rooted changes in religious life which profoundly changed church history. The turtle dove which sings in the Canticles is, according to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, not only a symbol of faithfulness but also of chastity. This chastity must, in turn, be connected with the chastity of the clergy and the development of the idea of celibacy precisely in this period. Hence, the “Coronation”, besides being a symbol of the Church, is also an expression of a precise conception of the Church, namely a body constituted of men who maintain their virginity as brides awaiting the arrival of the Groom.

In the 23rd canto of his *Paradiso*, Dante describes the descent of something that looks like a circle or a crown. The event is accompanied by the overwhelming sound of the new song and a sweet melody which “a sé l’anima tira”.¹ Dante feels himself drawn upwards by the force of the sound of this new song, which is like thunder compared to a lyre.

The corresponding picture from Giovanni di Paolo’s illustrations of the *Paradiso* shows Dante and Beatrice on the left, looking at a circle of stars within which we see the Almighty and a group of young, naked men (Fig. 1). These men represent blessed souls at the day of salvation, and the circle or crown is probably a representation of the celestial Jerusalem. If the descending crown is to be identified with the New Jerusalem seen by John in his prophetic vision, then the forceful melody, mentioned several times in the 23rd canto, most likely refers to the *canticum novum* of Revelation 5:9.

Giovanni di Paolo’s work, which is an illustration of Dante’s great poem, represents the soul’s union with God after death. Another famous image, representing the same theme, but this time focusing on the mother of God, is the *Coronation of the Virgin* (Fig. 2). This motif, which shows the Virgin receiving the bridal crown from her Son, is not an example of incest, but is rather

1. Dante, *Divine Comedy*, *Par.*, C. 23, l. 98.

a visualization of the Christian exegesis of the nuptial theme from the *Song of Songs*. The connection between the *Coronation* motif and the *Song of Songs* is confirmed by the scroll held by the Virgin in the Santa Maria in Trastevere apse (Fig. 3). The inscription LEVA EIUS SUB CAPITE MEO ET DEXTERA ILLIUS AMPLEXABITUR ME is a direct quotation from the *Canticles*, chapter 2, verse 6, in English: “O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!”

For obvious reasons, such a topic from the Old Testament would never be used to decorate the apse of a Christian church if its typological meaning had not been clear in terms of identifying the bridal couple with central persons in the New Testament. Moreover, the clear-cut erotic metaphors which describe, for instance, the Bride’s breasts “like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies” (Song 4:5) would have to be read allegorically as descriptions of a spiritual rather than carnal love.

The Bride and Groom become Mary and Jesus, and many, among them Philippe Verdier, consider the late Medieval mariological interpretations of the *Canticles* as the main source and reason for the development of the *Coronation of the Virgin* motif²; a subject that is unknown to the art of the Eastern Church, and which makes its first appearance in the West in the first decades of the twelfth century, only a few years before the decoration of the Trastevere apse.

But the Bride is also always the Soul, and her coronation which, referring to ancient wedding rites, marks her nuptial unification with the Lord, may also symbolize her integration into the body of the Church. She is therefore also a symbol of the *Ecclesia*. Such an interpretation of the Church based on the *Song of Songs* does not stray far from ancient Jewish tradition. In his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Origen interprets the Solomonic text as having a historical as well as an allegorical sense. On the allegorical level, the hymn is a song of love with human love and the divine spirit as interlocutors. According to David Banon, this is nothing but a repetition of ancient Jewish wisdom, according to which the Bride and Groom of the *Canticles* was to be interpreted as an image of the bond between God and the people of Israel.³

It is in this context that we must consider the emergence of this new, important motif in the iconography of the Middle Ages, not only in Rome, but also elsewhere in Europe. The choice of a mariological subject for two ancient basilicas – first, the mosaics from around or shortly after 1140 in S. Maria in Trastevere and then, about 150 years later, the apsidal decoration of S. Maria Maggiore – is by itself nothing but natural, given the fact that these two churches are the most important Roman sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin.

However, it could have been a different one, such as the Madonna and Child-type that we encounter in the apse of S. Maria in Domnica (Fig. 4), which

2. Verdier 1980, 14.

3. Banon 2001, 52-53.

FIG. 1 – Giovanni di Paolo, illustration to *Canto XXIII* of *Paradiso*, *Divina commedia*. (Photo credits: John Pope Hennessy, Giovanni di Paolo, ...).

FIG. 2 – *Coronation of the Virgin*, S. Maria Maggiore, Rome (Photo credits: LH).

shows the two seated frontally, just as in the *Sedes sapientiae* that we have seen above. In both cases, the focus is on the relationship between a mother and her son, between the Virgin Mary and Christ. However, in the Late Medieval apses of Trastevere and S. Maria Maggiore, the artists and the patrons were not satisfied with stating once again the old truth concerning God's Incarnation.

Instead they created a new motif showing aspects of love and marital union which, in turn, became metaphors for the Church. Actually, marriage and the relationship between man and woman were not new as metaphors for the Church. They had already been exploited by St. Paul in several of his letters. For instance, in the famous passage from the Letter to the Ephesians which normally is interpreted as a statement about women's inferiority with respect to men, he says, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body," (Eph 5:22-23) followed by, "This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church." (Eph 5:32)

Likewise, in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, he describes the Church as a Lady, a Bride, that he presents to Christ like a chaste virgin. "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband (*uni viro*)."

 (2 Cor 11:2)

According to Ignace de la Potterie, the "chaste virgin" of these verses is a reference to the daughter of Sion, also referred to by the prophets as the "virgin of Sion" or "virgin of Israel"⁴. She is here, after periods of exile, invited to be faithful to the New Alliance and to a new and only Groom.

These passages from the Apostle show again that the image of a wedding could easily be understood as a symbol of the Church. But if the idea that the apsidal image should represent the Church was old, it still holds, I think, that the new image of the Church represented by the *Coronation of the Virgin* expresses a new or, at least, a somewhat changed conception of the Church in this period. In addition, the period under consideration is that which follows upon the final schism between the two Churches in 1054.

The development of different iconographies in East and West was a natural consequence of the schism. One example is the scenes of the Virgin's *Dormition* and *Assumption* (motifs which in the church's cycle are often connected to the *Coronation*) which in the West, particularly in France, often included aspects referring to the Virgin's bodily Assumption⁵.

The question concerning details of the Virgin's Assumption was but one of several important theological issues that tended to divide the two Churches. More important in this respect was the debate surrounding the so-called *Filioque*-formulation, which postulates that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father. The phrase had been added to the Nicene Creed

4. de la Potterie 1992, 18-20.

5. For more details, see the chapter "L'assunzione del corpo" in Hodne 2007 (111-126).

FIG. 3 – *Coronation of the Virgin*, S. Maria in Trastevere, with detail. (Photo credits: LH).

during a Council held in Toledo against the Arian heresy, but was used by Charlemagne as early as 792 to challenge Byzantium's jurisdictional claims as heirs to the Roman Empire. In some way, then, the wording of the Creed was associated with the question of primacy, and this may be the reason why the question again came to the fore precisely in connection with the renewal of the conflicts between the Roman Church and the Patriarch in Constantinople in the mid-eleventh century.

However important, the *Filioque* controversy was only one of many bones of contention between the two Churches during this period. Another was the question of priestly marriage. In the East, the civil status of priests who were married before they took up their service as priests, was not deemed as illegal.⁶ The view of priests' marital life in the Early Church was very much inspired by the Pauline letters. In his Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle declared that "it is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." (1 Cor. 7:1-2) Then to the unmarried and the widows, he adds that "it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they

6. See, for example, Stickler 1994, 39.

FIG. 4 – S. Maria in Domnica, *Virgin and Child* (Photo credits: LH).

should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” (1 Cor. 7:8-9)

The rule that was recommended to all Christians was also valid for priests. The Pauline Letter to Titus - in which it is stated that a man who is elected as minister of the Church must be *unius uxoris vir*, that is, a man who has had only one wife⁷ – was interpreted by authorities of the Church such as Jerome as a confirmation that a candidate to the sacred order must have had only one wife, and that he could not continue to generate children in the future. The same practice was recommended by Pope Leo I, who declared that “to transform the union of bishops, priests and deacons from carnal to spiritual, they must, without leaving their own wives, live together with these as if they did not exist, to safeguard matrimonial love after the discontinuation of any nuptial activity”.⁸

7. Tit. 1, 6. See also 1 Tim 3, 2 and 12.

8. For Pope Leo’s letter to Rusticus of Narbonne, see Cochini 1990, 261-263.

It appears, however, that it was difficult for many of the Church's men to remain sexually continent in the proximity of their wives, and at least in the Latin West, so-called nicolaism or concubinate of the cleric proliferated. Many continued with an ordinary marital life also after their election as priests, and it was principally this activity that by the reform movement in the eleventh and tenth centuries was deemed as one of the main sins to combat, together with simony and lay investiture.

Even though the main target of the reformer *par excellence* in this period, Pope Gregory VII, was the Nicolaitans within the Roman Church, the situation could not but deepen the contrasts between East and West. A new concept of priestly celibacy was developed in the Latin West. Continence was now understood to be lifelong continence and lifelong sexual continence is, in turn, the same as virginity.

Interestingly, this development from a patristical understanding of sexual continence to a somewhat different late Medieval conception of the same topic, can also be traced in the respective exegeses of the *Song of Songs*. Take, for example, these verses from the second chapter of the *Canticles*: "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." (Song 2:1) and "The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land." (Song 2:12) Both Origen and Bernard – authors of important commentaries on *The Song of Songs* from different periods – interpret the name Sharon and the mentioning of a valley where lilies grow as references to different and opposed places. To Origen, they are the countries of two different nations. With an implicit reference to the contrast between the periods *sub lege* and *sub gratia*, he describes the first as the land of the circumcised, where the flower first sprung up. But because of the pride of that people, the flower could not grow and bear fruit. Only among that other nation of which it is said that not "even Solomon in all his glory was ... arrayed like one of these" (Luke 12:27) could the Groom become a lily, and only then, could she who was close to him, imitating him, be a lily as well.⁹

The ancient opposition between the nations *ex circumcissione* and *ex gentibus* is conspicuous in the thinking of Origen, but this is not equally evident in St. Bernard's interpretation of the same verses. In Bernard's writings, the second place, where the flower could bear fruit, becomes the garden of the *hortus conclusus*, also mentioned in the Cantic's fourth chapter. The difference between barren terrain and the *hortus conclusus* is that in the latter, flowers can grow in soil which need not first be cultivated by man. Thus, the flowers of the garden testify to the birth of the Saviour by a Virgin, without man's intervention.¹⁰

Origen too, is, of course, aware of the Bride's status as a virgin, but her rôle is essentially that of giving birth to a different nation, and the reason that she is

9. Origen, *Commento*, 2, 1-2, 193.

10. *Scd* 47, 3.

a virgin is to mark that Christ, being without an earthly father, represents precisely this shift in heritage and the creation of a new nation. Only in the commentary of Bernard does virginity become a topic by its own right. It is good, he says, "to place virginity in the gardens that are familiar to the shyness that flees from public life, loves to hide away and is subject to discipline. Besides, in the garden the flower is isolated. ... Hence you have the *hortus conclusus* and the *fons signatus* (Cant. 4:12). This refers to the defence of virginal chastity and the custody of unviolated sacredness, on the condition that the virgin really is holy in body and spirit".¹¹

It is also significant that the new interpretation of the *Canticles* as well as the new conception of the Church and the Christian community as a whole comes from the monastic orders. In medieval writing, one used to distinguish between two gardens. One, the *hortus deliciarum*, was a garden of earthly pleasure which, again, is associated with the Garden of Eden. The other, the *hortus conclusus*, refers, as mentioned, to the garden in the Song of Songs: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed". This latter type is also mentioned in medieval writings on horticulture, where it refers to the enclosed courtyard or *quadriportico* of the monastery.

Returning, however, to our interpretation of certain metaphors and how they are understood in the commentaries on the *Canticles*, a shift in the passage from early Christian to medieval readings can be detected as regards a second central figure in the Solomonic text, actually in the same phrase. When the text of the Scripture reads "... the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land" (Song 2:12), who or what is that bird?

In both periods, the turtledove is seen as a bird which distinguishes itself in nature by keeping to one companion throughout its life. These details are not explained in the text of the Scriptures, however, but must stem from another ancient source, probably the *Physiologus*, written by an unknown author at some time between the second and the fourth centuries of the Christian era.¹² Rufino's quotation of it in his comment on Genesis from 406 constitutes a *terminus ante quem* and it is interesting that scholars often associate it with the Alexandrian school of Clemence and Origen.

Despite the transformations of this literary genre through the centuries from the original *Physiologus* to the medieval *Bestiaries*, the image of the turtledove is always represented in more or less the same fashion. The love for its companion is so strong that if its partner should be caught by a falcon or a fowler, it does not seek a new companion but remains in solitude. Still, in the late Middle Ages, the loneliness of this bird is hinted at in Dante's description of a bird on its nest in the opening verses of *Paradiso's* 23d canto: "Come l'augello, intra l'amate

11. See 47, 3. My translation is from the Italian translation by C. Stercal, Rimini 2003, 34-35.

12. The *Physiologus* exists in English translation,

but I have read the Italian edition by F. Zambon: *Il Fisiologo*, Milan 1975.

fronde, posato al nido ... ". The word "amate" makes us think that the bird not only happens to be secluded in the greenery, but even desires solitude.

But some aspects of the turtledove, as with the garden of the Sharon, do change. In Origen's *Commentaries on the Song of Songs*, it is described as a bird which "passes its days in remote places, far from people, loving the mountainous regions or deep forests, always far from the crowd and to other people a foreigner."¹³ This isolation has a double aspect. The shyness and the isolation are symbols of "God's most profound wisdom, which is hidden in the mystery".¹⁴

In contrast to the other books traditionally attributed to Solomon - the *Proverbs* and the *Ecclesiastes*, written respectively in "moral" and "natural" modes - the *Canticles* has prevalently a contemplative character. The contemplative level of the exegesis is "the knowledge which, surpassing the visible reality, makes us able to meditate divine and celestial truths that only can be perceived by our mind, ...".¹⁵

The voice of the turtledove which makes itself heard only far from the crowd is thus by Origen associated with a higher level of wisdom, but it is also the voice of the Word Incarnate that revealed the full meaning of the words which had earlier been conveyed by the prophets of Israel.

Secondly, Origen's description of the turtledove as a bird that desires remote places can also be read as an exhortation to the Christians to leave behind public life and dedicate themselves to meditation and prayer, as hermits and anchorites have done.

Another possibility is that it refers to monogamy. The prohibition of polygamy in the first Christian communities was one of the factors that, at the time, distinguished them from the ancient Hebrew tradition. But some, as for instance Tertullian, also advised widows not to remarry, so that they could dedicate their lives to the service of God. Solitude can therefore be an expression of a concept according to which the death or absence of a companion not leads to a new marriage, but a change of civil state. The turtledove, according to Origen, is not a virgin, but a widow. Marriage itself is not prohibited, but second marriage is. The passage from the *Canticles* was thus read by Origen and the Fathers to follow as a defence of continence within the monogamic relation.

But in the late Middle Ages, the conception was changed, even though the point of departure for St. Bernard as for Origen was still the turtledove's chastity as was described in the *Canticles*, in the *Physiologus* and (later) in the *Bestiaries*. Paraphrasing a verse from the *Canticles* which reads "your cheeks are comely with ornaments ..." (Cant. 1:9), St. Bernard asks himself why this beauty is like that of the turtledove? The answer is that this small bird is chaste and does not enjoy the company of others, after which follows an apostrophe directed towards his reader:

13. Origen, *Commentarium*, 12, 60-62.

14. Origen, *Commentarium*, 12, 58-59.

15. Origen, *Commentarium*, 12, 60-62.

“you, then, who listen to this, ..., if you are moved to tears by the exhortation of the Holy Spirit, and exert yourself to make your soul the Spouse of God, take care and protect the beauty of your two cheeks, so that, in imitation of this most chaste turtledove, you be seated alone, according to the words of the Prophet, ... Is it really beyond your capacity to follow God and constitute with him one spirit? Sit down alone, then, like the turtledove”.¹⁶

As we see, the turtledove's chastity is directly associated with the main argument of the *Song of Songs*: the soul's matrimonial union with God. This means that according to St. Bernard the metaphor of the little chaste bird was essential to the understanding of the Solomonic poem. In addition, it means that the interest of the great Cistercian is not so much directed towards the turtledove's feeling of loneliness as a sign of its capacity to withdraw from the temptations and passions of this world, but rather its solitude as a result of a choice; a choice to remain alone and protect its pudor and chastity in expectation of what is to come. In other words, the turtledove is no longer alone because it has lost its companion, but because its companion is yet to come. It must remain in its virginal state so that, just like the wise virgins, it will be prepared when the Groom arrives.

St. Bernard is well aware of the fact that what he describes is not an eternal law, but one which has specific actuality in his own times. In the beginning, he says, the voice of the turtledove was not heard, but rather a different voice that commanded the people of Israel to grow and be numerous on earth (Genesis 9:1). This means that the patriarchs at the time of the Old Alliance were living according to a different law, which stated that it was important to become numerous and take possession of the earth.

The contrast in this respect between the times before and after Christ had already been discussed by Tertullian, who in his *De exhortatione castitatis* questioned the validity of the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Perhaps this had already been substituted by another one stating the opposite.¹⁷ Similar conclusions could also be drawn on the basis of the Pauline Letters, but it was only in the late Middle Ages that this was interpreted as a call for virginity.

Bernard says therefore that “the voice of chastity would have been in vain if one had not yet heard about the land of the resurrected, where people are much happier not taking a husband or wife, but live like angels in heaven. Could this voice perhaps have been heard at a time when being sterile in Israel was seen as a malediction, and whence the Patriarchs themselves had several wives”.¹⁸ However ... “when from that celestial mouth sounded the praise of the eunuchs who have made themselves thus for the kingdom of God, and the advice of another most chaste turtledove concerning virginity grew strong, then for the first time one could say in truth that the voice of the turtledove is heard on earth”.¹⁹

16. *Sec* 40, 4.

17. Tertullian, *De exhortatione* VI, 1-2.

18. *Sec* 59, 8.

19. *Ibid.*

In these quotations, Bernard demonstrates a remarkable awareness not only of historical change, but also of the existence of conditions that determine historical changes. According to Joachim of Fiore, who was himself a cistercian and who praised Bernard as the angel of the sixth seal, history corresponds to three types of civil status: the period of the Father is dominated by the married, that of the Son is dominated by the continent, whereas that of the Holy Spirit is dominated by the virgins.²⁰

This development can be demonstrated by an illustration from the *Speculum virginum* which shows, at the root, Adam and Eve (Fig. 5). From this grows an acanthus which divides the page into three levels. At the bottom level, its leaves encircle images of "couples", more precisely of Noah and Job with their wives. In contrast, the biblical personages on the next level are all seen alone: They are Anna, Deborah and Judith, representing the widows. On the upper level, no names are mentioned, only "vir-gin" is inscribed.

Since, reading in ascending order, we proceed from Adam and Eve to Christ, this should mean that the last period before the second advent is to be dominated by virgins, which symbolically may represent the new monastic movement, but it might also be a reference to the new priesthood which precisely during this period was about to free itself from nicolaism and concubinate.

The question which arises is how we can explain the emergence at this exact time of so many new motifs which focus on marital status, since, from the days of the Apostles, the Church understood as the union of man and God, has always been conceived through the wedding metaphor? The answer to this question is complex, but I would like to point out one important aspect. The soul's ascension towards God, as it was described in the exegeses of the *Canticles*, was also about each individual person's salvation. Each of the faithful would as the Spouse of God enjoy eternal bliss. But to obtain this, one would have to be prepared with oil in one's lamps like the wise virgins in Matthew 25:1-13.

What distinguishes the eleventh and twelfth centuries from the earlier periods, is that priestly celibacy was one of the central issues in the moral revival of the reform movement. What one saw in these centuries was the emergence of a new Church in which ancient demand to continency had obtained new vitality. To be prepared as a Bride at the arrival of the new King was not merely a metaphor. The faithful were not likened to virgins, but should actually be virgins.

The *Coronation* motif shows this. The bridal couple is no longer Solomon and the daughter of Sion, and the *Song* is no longer the old hymn which praises terrestrial pleasures, but the *Canticum novum* of the Revelation, the voice from heaven that sounds like thunder and harps, and can only be understood by the 144,000. These, still according to the Book of Revelation, "have not defiled them-

20. Joachim of Fiore, *Expositio* I, 1.

FIG. 5 – Arundel MS., British Library, *Three types of civil status*. (Photo credits: E. Simmons Greenhill, *Die geistigen Voraussetzungen der Bilderreihe des Speculum Virginum*, Münster: Aschendorffsche, 1962).

selves with women, for they are chaste; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes ..." (Rev 14:4).

Hence, the voice of the turtledove which sits in solitude, awaiting her eternal Groom, is the *Canticum novum* of the Revelation, the song of blessed souls of the fourth order, that of contemplatives and virgins. The image of the *Coronation* is thus an image of a new Church in which man and woman alike are likened to the wise virgins who, with oil in their lamps, await the arrival of the Groom.

Lasse Hodne

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

Department of Art and Media Studies

7491 Trondheim

Norway

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