

Sponsa Verbi: The Virgin Consecrated to Christ

By Blessed Columba Marmion, abbot (1858-1923)



Blessed Columba Marmion was born in Dublin in 1858 and given the name Joseph Aloysius. Ordained a priest in 1881, he later entered the Benedictine abbey of Maredsous and made his solemn profession in 1891. He preached retreats in Belgium and in the United Kingdom, and gave spiritual direction to many communities, particularly those of Carmelite nuns. Columba Marmion was elected the third Abbot of Maredsous in 1909. He died during a flu epidemic on 30 January 1923. Pope John Paul II beatified him on September 3, 2000. His optional memorial is observed on October 3.

Sponsa Verbi, translated here by Dom. Francis Izard, O.S.B., is a series of conferences Blessed Columba gave to the Benedictine nuns at the Abbey of St. Scholastica at Maredret (France).¹ In them Abbot Columba comments on St. Bernard of Clairvaux's *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles* that had especially struck him during his convalescence in the summer of 1918. These passages from the great Doctor indicate the conditions necessary for the soul aspiring to become the spouse of the Word.

Chapter One

THE CALL TO THE DIGNITY OF A SPOUSE OF CHRIST

SUMMARY. –*The Consecrated Soul is invited by the Word to the dignity of Spouse – This teaching is based on Holy Scripture and the Liturgy – The amazingness of the divine condescension which is revealed has its source in Love – How St. Bernard draws the portrait of the Soul espoused to the Word.*

The greatest gift made by God to the human creature is that of his supernatural adoption by grace into Jesus Christ the Word incarnate. The sovereign Being, infinite in all perfections who neither depends on of has need of anyone outside Himself, allows His immeasurable love so to flow over and permeate His creatures that they are elevated thereby to a participation of His Life and Felicity. This gift exceeds the demands, surpasses the powers of nature, makes man the child of his Heavenly Father, the brother of Christ, the temple of the Holy Ghost.

There exists, however, between God and the soul a deeper and more intimate relation than that derived from its quality of child; the soul is invited by the Word to the rank of spouse.

We have heard Christ more than once compare the Kingdom of Heaven to a nuptial banquet.² God through and by the Word calls souls to the banquet of divine union. At a great feast various categories of people are to be seen.

In the first place, we have *the servants*. These respect the master of the house, bear themselves fittingly in his presence, execute his orders, and in return are paid a fitting wage. If they acquit

¹ Marmion, Columba. *Sponsa Verbi: The Virgin Consecrated to Christ* (St. Louis, Missouri: B. Herder Book Co., 1925).

² Matt 22:1ff; 25:1ff; Luke 14:16ff

themselves well in their various duties they are esteemed; but they are not received at table, not admitted to intimacy, do not become sharers of their master's secrets. These are an image of those Christians who, guided habitually by servile fear, treat God as a Master, as some great Seigneur, and, like the servant in the Gospel, they find Him sometimes "hard"³ they accomplish what they ought to do from fear of punishment. These souls who still live by "the spirit of bondage in fear": "*Spiritus servitutis in timore*,"⁴ have no intimacy with God.

Then there are *those invited, the friends*. The King has called them to his table, he speaks to them in a tone which betokens mutual friendship; he partakes with them of the banquet. However, there are degrees in this friendship. This is a picture of those Christians who love God without giving Him all; when they are present, He holds them in honor, but they are not always in the company of the Prince; they have to depart to see about their own affairs; their friendship is expressed in an intermittent fashion.

When the friends have departed, *the children* remain. They belong to the house, are at home and remain there. Bearing the same name as their Father, they are the heirs of His property; their life is one of honor, obedience and love given to their Father; they receive from Him in return, confidences which are not given to friends. These represent the souls who live and act as children of God, who realize perfectly those words of St. Paul: "Ye are no longer strangers and foreigners, but ye are fellow-citizens of the Saints, and members of the household of God: *Jam non estis hospites et advenæ sed estis cives, sanctorum et domestici Dei*."⁵ They exercise the virtues of faith, hope and charity, the realization of which issues in a spirit of complete abandonment to the good pleasure of their heavenly Father. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God": *Quicumque Spiritu Dei aguntur, ii sunt filii Dei*.⁶ To these souls who are His children, God gives himself as the Supreme Good which satisfies all their desires.

Finally, there is the *Spouse*. From her the husband has no secrets; she shares with him the greatest intimacy of love; there can be no more perfect union. The union contracted between them far surpasses in its nearness that between parent and child. Those who are espoused, said our Lord, "shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to one another": *Dimittet homo patrem et matrem, et adhærebit uxori suæ*,⁷ no union surpasses this in intimacy, tenderness and fecundity.

Now it is to contract an union of this sort that the Word invites the soul who is consecrated to Him by the vows of religion.⁸

You will reply at once: Is not every baptized soul in some measure espoused to the Word? That is true. It was not only to those consecrated by a vow of chastity that St. Paul wrote: "I have

³ Matt 25:24

⁴ Rom 8:15

⁵ Eph 2:19 – Every soul in a state of grace is, without doubt, a child of God, but many Christians neither take notice of this divine reality, or seek to make it more vivid. They live and act only as if they were servants or friends. For a further development of this thought, see *Christ in His Mysteries*, Chapter XIX, § IV.

⁶ Rom 8:14

⁷ Matt 19:5

⁸ However strange these expressions of bride and bridegroom, espousals and marriage may appear to those who are carnally minded, devoid of any spiritual sense, and ignorant of divine love, yet they are boldly and frequently employed by Holy Scripture, are so inseparable from dogma and catholic theology that they could not be passed over in silence or suppressed without profoundly mutilating the Christian religion itself. Mgr. Farges, *Les Phénomènes Mystiques*, p. 218.

betrothed you to one husband, to present you a chaste virgin to Christ: *Despondi enim vos uni viro virginem castam exhibere Christo.*⁹ In baptism the soul freely¹⁰ renounces Satan, his pomps, his works, the world and its maxims, to adhere to Jesus Christ and consecrate herself to His service. The grace of the Spirit of Love gives her to God, renders her worthy of the favors of the heavenly spouse, grants a right to those immeasurable joys of Heaven that Our Lord Himself has compared to those of a nuptial festival. How holy and sanctifying is the union of the baptized soul with Christ! Yet the union is much closer, the quality of spouse shines with a much greater brilliance in the case of the souls consecrated to God by the vows of religion. It is to these souls that in all verity can be applied the title of spouse of the Word; in them this sublime condition is realized in its plenitude. That union which by its profound intimacy imitates, though in an absolutely spiritual manner, the marriage union, does it not constitute the summit of the religious life? Ought not the soul to tend towards this union, by use of the many divine favors, by its generous and attentive efforts to remove all obstacles, and by using all means which lead to God? Can it not be said that the virgin consecrated to Christ will not have fully attained His ideal, will not have completely realized the thought of God in her regard, if she does not tend with all her strength towards this blessed state?

It is true that when the soul thinks of the infinite greatness of God, of His incomprehensible sanctity, and then considers her own misery and nothingness, she is seized with a sort of stupor at being the object of such a wonderful privilege. She cries out: “Is it not presumption, is it not temerity and foolishness to dream of aspiring to a condition which surpasses that of all human desires? How can these things be? *Quomodo fiet istud?*”¹¹

Certainly had it not been for Revelation, such an elevated thought would not have been born in the human soul. But God Himself desires this union; He makes the advances; He invites the soul both by words and works.

Does not the Old Testament, despite the severities depicted there, which have given it the name of the law of fear, also picture in advance under the most exquisite forms the undreamt-of outpourings of the divine affections which mark the law of love?

The Divine Wisdom declared that “His delights are to be with the children of men.”¹² “That He delighted playing each day in the world the work of His hands”;¹³ astonishing terms when it is remembered that they refer to the intercourse of the eternal wisdom with man, and indicate something much higher than simple friendship.

Has not the Psalmist also celebrated in poetical accents the royal union of the bride and bridegroom? – “My heart hath uttered a good word: I speak my words to the King. . . . Thou art beautiful above the sons of men: grace is poured abroad in thy lips. . . . Hearken, O daughter, and see, and incline thy ear; and forget thy people, and thy father’s house. And the King shall greatly desire thy beauty.”¹⁴ The “Canticle of Canticles,” what is it but an epithalamium composed by the Holy Ghost to extol under the symbols of human love the union of the Word with the sacred Humanity, the union of Christ with the Church and with souls?

⁹ 2 Cor 11:2

¹⁰ Or the sponsors renounce for her until the soul is capable of ratifying her act deliberately.

¹¹ Luke 1:34

¹² Prov 8:31

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30

¹⁴ Ps 45(44):2, 3, 11, 12

But it is in the Gospels that the idea is expressed in all its plenitude; there is its real source; there it stands most clearly revealed. The Incarnate Word, unchangeable Truth, does He not give Himself to the spouse in person¹⁵ in front of whom come the virgins destined to form His court?¹⁶ Is it not from His lips that the most prodigious invitation ever fell that could touch the human heart? “All things are ready: come ye to the marriage”: *Omnia parata, venite ad nuptias*.¹⁷

Does not St. Paul, the herald *par excellence* of the mystery of Jesus, show us the Bridegroom “going to death in an excess of love”; “preparing for His spouse the most beautiful jewels?” washing her in His blood so that she may appear before Him, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish?”¹⁸ worthy in truth of the “marriage of the Lamb” of which St. John sings in his Apocalypse.¹⁹

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church in her Liturgy has appropriated this thought. In the office of Virgins the intimate union between the Spouse and His bride are frequently mentioned. In the office of St. Agnes she puts into the mouth of the young martyr words full of a holy boldness. “My love is for Christ, for that Christ who will lead me into His nuptial chamber” *Amo Christum, in cujus thalamum introibo*.²⁰ In the consecration of virgins, when the Bishop puts the ring on the finger he says, most explicitly, that he makes her “the spouse of Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High:” *Desponso te Jesu Christo Filio summi Patris. Accipe ergo annulum fidei . . . ut sponsa Dei voceris*.²¹

Without doubt we may say once again that we ought to dwell in a profound admiration for the thrice-holy God, yet at the same time we must never lose sight of the fact that Jesus Christ is the Sovereign Master of all things. “You call me Master and Lord, and you say well for so I am.”²² *Vocatis me Magister et Domine et bene dicitis, sum etenim*. but this divine Master, this Lord before whom “the angelic powers, tremble,” *tremunt postestates*:²³ a few moments before had so humbled Himself before these same disciples as to wash their feet. It is love again which has led Him to descend to the consecrated souls, to raise them to the ineffable dignity of spouse. This love plunges reason in astonishment, but faith lifts them to these heights. “We have known and have believed the charity which God hath to us”: *Et nos cognovimus et credidimus caritati quam habet Deus in nobis*.²⁴ Every soul vowed to God by the religious consecration is called to this position of spouse to the Word; she carries the title; if she is faithful, she enjoys the rights which

¹⁵ Matt 9:15 and John 3:29

¹⁶ Matt 25:1-13

¹⁷ Matt 22:4

¹⁸ Eph. 5:25-27. – The text of the apostle applies, in the first instance, to the Church, but it can and should be extended with the same force to each soul, to whom Christ unites Himself in quality of spouse, by the religious consecration.

¹⁹ Apoc 19:7, 8; 21:2, 9

²⁰ *Breviarium monasticum* III, ad matutinam. [Webmaster’s note: A more precise translation would be, “I love Christ, into whose nuptial chamber I enter.” This text, likely from the spurious *Acts of the Martyrdom of St. Agnes*, was not included in the reform of the Roman rite’s Liturgy of the Hours following the Second Vatican Council.]

²¹ Roman Pontifical, *In benedictione et consecratione virginum*. [Webmaster’s note: This text is taken from the Rite of the Blessing and Consecration of Virgins as it was in use in 1925. The full text of this passage reads: “I wed you to Jesus Christ, Son of the Father Most High. Receive, therefore, the ring of faith . . . that you may be called the spouse of God.”]

²² John 13:13

²³ Preface of Mass.

²⁴ 1 John 4:16

are attached to it; she is loaded with marks of tenderness by her divine Spouse, and her union with Him becomes the source of a wonderful fecundity.

It was the habit of that great monk, St. Bernard, to talk to his cloistered brethren of the astonishing union which Jesus Christ deigned to contract with the souls dedicated to him, in terms which inspired them with his own piety; he himself had first entered into “the cellars of the King,”²⁵ and to his monks who were eager for his teaching he gave of the abundant light which Incarnate Wisdom shed upon him. You know that his commentary upon the “Canticle of Canticles,” although unfinished, is a series of eighty-six conferences which he gave at the Abbey of Clairvaux. In one of these the great Abbot traces with a master hand the portrait of the soul that is truly the spouse of Christ. Here are his words: “When you shall see a soul leave all things to adhere to the Word with all her strength, live by Him, allow herself to be guided by Him, conceive what she should bring forth by Him; a soul, in short, who can say: for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain, then you can indubitably recognise her for a spouse of the Word.” *Quam videris animam, relictis omnibus, Verbo votis omnibus adhære, Verbo vivere, Verbo se regere, de Verbo concipere quod pariat Verbo; quæ possit dicere: mihi vivere Christus est et mori lucrum: puta coniugem, Verboque maritatam.*²⁶

Without doubt, in his commentary St. Bernard speaks more than once of mystic states properly so called, mystic espousals, spiritual marriage, extraordinary works of grace and of divine love to which God calls souls especially privileged. It is not, however, of these states, to which no one has the right by his own actions, that we speak here. Even though these lines borrowed from the great contemplative apply in the first place to the souls led by the Word to the summits of the mystic life, yet it is quite licit to use them to indicate the principal qualities, the essential duties of that soul who by religious profession becomes a consecrated spouse of Christ.

It is this beautiful text of St. Bernard’s which will serve as the theme for our conferences.²⁷ We shall comment on it with pleasure, being firmly persuaded that nothing can correspond more closely with the desires of Christ Himself. Is it not, moreover, by putting before your eyes the high excellence of your religious state, that you will grasp the importance of the duties it entails? Will not the contemplation of your high dignity inflame your hearts with a generous love for Him, who without your merit has predestined it for you? I shall essay, in the first place, to show you how the sacred Humanity of Jesus is espoused to the Word; for it is there that we shall find the best model of the intimate union that the soul contracts with Christ. I shall then tell you, taking the text of the holy Doctor, the necessary qualities for this union, the many means we have to maintain it, and the marvelous fruits of which it is the source. May the Immaculate Virgin, from whose fruitful virginity was born the King of Kings, aid us in our task. ❀

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Next in the series: Chapter Two, *The Human Nature in Christ, the Spouse of the Word*

²⁵ Cf. Cant. 2:4

²⁶ *In Cantic. sermo LXXXV, 12.*

²⁷ Speaking directly to nuns, as St. Bernard formerly to his monks, Dom Marmion naturally limited the teaching of the Abbot of Clairvaux to consecrated nuns; this is why he more than once quotes texts from the Pontifical for the consecration of virgins. As a matter of fact, however, in its essential points this doctrine applies to every soul vowed to Christ. – EDITOR’S NOTE.