



BEHOLDING BEAUTY

Mary
and the
Song of Songs

GREGORY
CLEVELAND, OMV

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By Gregory Cleveland, OMV



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Foreword

I confess that my first tentative forays into the Song of Songs were confusing and even comical. The ancient love similes were difficult for me to relate to, such as: “Your hair is like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing” (Song 4:1–2). I wondered how far any amorous modern might get in wooing his sweetheart by inspecting her teeth and comparing her to farm animals.

Indeed, the Song of Songs is utterly unique among the sacred books of the Bible, almost daring one to take it seriously. Those who do are changed forever.

The Song of Songs occupies a central place in the Scriptures, both literally and figuratively. It stands alone, even within the wisdom genre where it is nestled, the whole category itself inherently lyrical and stylized. The Song has no references to the spiritual disciplines (liturgy, prayer, fasting, study of Scripture, evangelization, etc.); God is never mentioned directly in the entire text; and its sensual language and intimate marital context are impossible to ignore.

Add to that the obscure way the text is arranged—somewhat like a play—and the Song of Songs can intimidate and even put

off the casual reader. But this is no casual book, and Father Gregory Cleveland, OMV is no casual observer. He has experienced what this sacred song is meant to communicate to humanity about God's love.

Notably, the ancient peoples of the Bible did not express the superlative adjectives the way we do: "good, better, best." Rather, they expressed something in triple repetition. For example: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Is 6:3); "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD" (Jer 7:4); "O land, land, land, hear the word of the LORD" (Jer 22:29); and "A ruin, a ruin, a ruin—I will make it" (Ezek 21:27).

Another prominent ancient Hebrew method for superlative expression was to declare something the X of all other X's: "Holy of holies"; King of kings"; "Lord of Lords"; "vanity of vanities." How utterly beautiful this phrase is, the *song of songs*.

In *Beholding Beauty*, Father Greg Cleveland invites us to contemplate the song of all songs with him. The Song of Songs in the Scriptures is the superlative song, the loveliest song ever composed. Passionate drama and delicate poetry about the richest king to ever rule Israel and a common girl combine in this sacred expression of intense passion and profound love.

As one who struggled with worthlessness and rage under the damaging effects of father wounds and early trauma that caused me to doubt God's love and care, I, too, have been satiated and eternally changed by the lover in this Song. I have never been so deeply touched, my spirit has never been so profoundly healed, my heart has never swelled so large, nor my spirit grown as fertile, as they have through my own slow, deliberate meditation on this book of the Bible.

How many of us are suspicious of God's motives? Or suspect he punishes with suffering? Or wonder: *Is this all there is?* I

thought Christianity was supposed to be more exciting. I expected more.

I believe most of us are stuck in such ruminations. In my years of ministry as “Bible Study Evangelista,” I have spoken with Catholic after Catholic who is more-or-less stagnant in his or her faith. Whether throughout a lifetime or simply a season, we long to be stunned with eternity. We ache for the beauty we glimpse in the weeping of violins; the silent, earthy creeping of dusk; and the bliss of sloppy kisses and gangly little boy arms around a tired, disillusioned neck.

Father Greg invites us to contemplate Our Lady as the ultimate subject of spiritual beauty and the icon of the Church in this soaring canticle. In *Beholding Beauty*, Father Greg explores Mary as the guide to that elusive *more* that the soul searches and longs for and calls us away from the sleep of complacency to an unimaginable eternal bliss in the final consummation—union with God.

He explores Mary’s own yearnings, her pondering heart, her unique grace and humility that led to a supreme and incarnational generosity. He probes her terrible sorrow and guides us to follow her into and through our own terrible sorrows so that we, too, can experience the secret bliss of an incarnational faith that changes the world.

Masterfully, he breaks open the teachings of the Church and the observations of the saints on the Song of Songs. He leads us through the difficult imagery, the ancient language, and the comical superficiality into the riveting depths of a Reality so deep, so profound, and so transformative, that your faith will never be the same if you permit the message to penetrate.

So read this substantial labor of love with an open heart. Ask Mary to reveal herself more fully to you as you consider her from so many angles and titles. Savor every chapter and allow

the Holy Spirit to enrapture you as he enraptured her, and other serious contemplatives of his Song for millennia. Implore him to impress upon your weary soul what Father Greg himself came to realize through the Song of Songs, “that God’s heart had a place that only I could fill.”

SONJA CORBITT

Bible Study Evangelista

*Best-selling author, broadcaster, speaker,
and multi-media Bible study producer*

Introduction

A New Perspective on Mary

One morning, I was praying with the words of the Song of Songs in the chapel of our rectory in Denver. My eyes were closed, and an image from our stained glass window in the sanctuary came to mind. The image is of the Woman of Revelation 12, pregnant with Jesus and ready to give birth, clothed with the sun, with the moon at her feet. Scholars regard the Woman as a figure of the Church, and especially of Mary, as the holiest and most representative member and symbol of the Church.¹ I felt at one with Mary in her experience of being full of grace, while realizing that I had a long way to go in responding to grace. I felt a desire to imitate Mary in her full and free surrender to grace, in her total self-giving to Jesus, who had given himself to her and to the whole human race in the Incarnation. It enthralled me that Mary, in receiving her beloved Lord, was in fact the complete fulfillment of the magnificent bride of the Song of Songs. Since, as Saint Augustine says, Mary is the perfect disciple of Jesus

1. See Chapter 13 for more details on the identity of the woman.



Christ, how could we not see her as embodying the role of the bride in a preeminent way? No human being ever received God's love and grace as fully as did Mary, to the point of God becoming man in her. She conceived Christ in her heart and then in her womb. Mary, as spouse of the Holy Spirit, shows us our capacity to receive God and be entirely possessed by him. In receiving Christ, she was also empowered to completely give herself to him, spirit, soul, and body, in love as his mother. She became his partner in the work of salvation and was exalted to reign with him as Queen of heaven and earth. I prayed to imitate Mary the bride who experiences the fullness of God's life of grace and the eternal fulfillment of her being.

The Song of Songs (also called the Canticle of Canticles) is a book about love, our deepest desire and eternal destiny. Since God is love, the Song is first of all about the love that God has in himself as a holy Trinity of persons in a mutual exchange of love. The Song is also about the love that God has for each of us, both individually and collectively as the body of Christ, the Church. God created us to be a communion of love to reflect the love that he has in himself, and to participate in his love. He created us male and female in his image to mirror the perfect exchange of love among the distinct persons of the Trinity. The love of man and woman in the Song reflects the Trinity's love and serves as the best analogy of the love God has for us. The book is a metaphor for the love, light, and life that God gives us through intimate relationship. We are awakened to love the Lord in return with fervor, knowledge, and commitment. The Song offers a poetic description of God's intimacy with us, enabling us to name and express our relationship with the Lord. Ellen Davis says:

the cultivation of real intimacy—with God, with other humans, with the creatures—is the greatest social and spiritual challenge of our time. Precisely because it addresses us in

the language of yearning, not satisfaction, the Song can help us grow to meet that challenge. Unhealthy yearning—greed, lust—may destroy us and even the planet, as we are now beginning to recognize. But there is immense healing power in yearning for the *shalom* (health, wholeness, peace) for which we were created. The Song can guide us because it expresses our deepest desire and seeks to direct it toward healing in all these areas.²

The love poetry in the Song of Songs is laden with symbols. The Temple signifies the Bridegroom, and the land and people of Israel are the primary images connected with the bride. The Song is also rife with allusions to the Lord's presence and activity in the salvation history of his chosen people. Solidly based in this literal understanding, the Spirit leads us to greater spiritual understanding of the inexhaustible truths of his Word in these Scriptures. According to this spiritual understanding, Church Fathers and Mothers fathom the Song as the love of God for Israel, of Christ for his Church, and of Christ for the individual Christian. Christ is truly the Bridegroom of our souls, a union realized most fully in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Mother of God and perfect disciple of Jesus. Scripture scholar D. Bertotto declares that in light of current biblical exegesis and the commentaries of the Fathers of the Church and Scholastic masters, the bride of the Song of Songs symbolizes both the Daughter of Zion and the Israelites in their faithful bond of love with their Bridegroom Yahweh. The figure of the bride also symbolizes the Catholic Church, and each faithful member, as the new Israel. The bride is typified in a preeminent way by the

2. Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God, Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2001), 81.

Church's most holy member and representative, Mary. She is most notably a fulfillment of the "garden locked, the sealed fountain" (Song 4:12) which describes her virginity; and the "you are all fair . . . there is no flaw in you" (Song 4:7), describing her immaculate nature.

Medieval commentators regarded Mary as the fulfillment of the figure of the bride throughout the entire Song of Songs. The Song of Songs became a complete interpretive key to understanding the mysteries of the relationship of Mary to the Most Holy Trinity. According to Ann Astell, "Mary's historical relationship to Christ establishes a narrative context in which the Song of Songs becomes literally true."³ Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129), Honorius of Auton (d. 1156), and Alain de Lille (d. 1202) all wrote expositions of the Song that recognize Mary as the fulfillment of the bride. Although Bernard of Clairvaux did not attribute everything spoken of the bride to Mary, he interpreted certain passages of the Canticle as pertaining to Mary. He popularized the Marian interpretation.⁴ Alain de Lille writes: "It must be known that everything in this Canticle which is said about the blessed Mary refers to her corporal or spiritual acts."⁵ In his introduction he states, "And so, although the song of love, Solomon's wedding song, refers particularly and according to its spiritual sense to the Church, in its most particular and spiritual reference it signifies the most glorious Virgin."⁶

3. Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 44.

4. *Ibid.*, 44.

5. Alain de Lille, *Elucidatio in Cantica Cantorum*, PL 210, C58, in Astell, 44–45.

6. Alain de Lille, in Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory, Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 294.

The Bridegroom of the Song refers to the Lord, and the bride refers to both the Church and the individual Christian. Mary, as the greatest disciple of Christ, is the preeminent Christian. She exemplifies the bride in an exceptional way.⁷ Mary is the New Testament fulfillment of the Old Testament bride, Israel's desire for covenantal marriage with her Lord in the coming of the Messiah. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, Mary is the only historical figure who could embody the perfections of the bride of the Canticle: "The Song of Songs stands alone in the Old Testament: an ideal which nowhere is realized in the history of salvation and which must wait for the New Testament before it can become the inner kernel of all thought about the history of salvation: when for once in all historical seriousness there would be found a sinless bride to correspond to the idyllic Shulamite."⁸ Mary sums up Israel's call to be completely faithful to God in stainless virginity, to be humble servant and spouse of the Lord in his covenant. According to the Marian interpretation, the Song of Songs fathoms the depths of Mary's passionate love for the Lord by framing it within the context of the divine romance. Mary, whose life remained so hidden, and whose interior life defies description, is cast in a whole new light of mystical union with the Holy Trinity. If the bridal mystics such as John of the Cross could find in the Song a language to express their intense longings, how much more so would the Virgin full of grace experience the intensity of these Scriptures.

7. For an excellent contemporary commentary see Paul Griffiths, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011). The author applies the verses pertaining to the bride to both Mary and the Church.

8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 101. (The bride is called "Shulamite" in Song 6:13) www.ignatius.com. Used with permission.

Two objections may arise. First, if Mary is without sin, how can she be the bride who has not kept her own vineyard (Song 1:6)? Without being sinful herself, Mary represents Israel, the sinful bride. According to Stefano Manelli, “by her original purity—in contrast to the adulterous infidelity of Israel—she recapitulates, reflects and sublimates in herself the ‘new Israel,’ i.e., the Church, and every soul, bride of the Lord.”⁹ Second, the carnal images seem inappropriate to attribute to Mary who is the purely chaste ever-virgin. But remember that the primary interpretation of the Song of Songs is of the Bridegroom representing the Lord and the bride representing Israel (whom Mary epitomizes). God’s love for his people is passionately oriented toward union. The marital imagery is the best metaphor we have as human beings for symbolizing God’s love for us. This imagery suggests a fundamentally spiritual meaning of God’s union with the Christian.

When reading the Song of Songs, women might easily place themselves in the role of the bride alongside the divine Bridegroom, while men may find that more difficult. But for all of us, Christ is the Bridegroom of our souls. Saint John Paul II notes that “in the context of the ‘great mystery’ of Christ and of the Church, all are called to respond—as a bride—with the gift of their lives to the inexpressible gift of the love of Christ, who alone, as the Redeemer of the world, is the Church’s Bridegroom.”¹⁰ It is crucial that men, in imitation of Saint John, take Mary into the home of their hearts in order to learn a spousal knowledge of the Bridegroom. The male person understands

9. Stefano Manelli, *All Generations Shall Call Me Blessed, Biblical Mariology*, trans. Fr. Peter Damian Fehlner, F.I. (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2005), 93.

10. Saint John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 27.

the mystery of bridal love for the son through filial love of the mother. Some virtues (such as hospitality, receptivity, compassion, sensitivity, and nurturing care) that might seem more feminine are common to us all, male and female alike. Both men and women must cultivate these virtues to be receptive to God's grace. All Christians are called to imitate Mary in her receptivity and responsiveness to God. As I stated in my previous book, "while men excel at giving themselves in a way that is receiving of the other, women excel at receiving the other in a way that is giving to the other."¹¹ Before God we are all called to first excel at receiving in a giving way. We see this in the account of Martha and Mary, where Mary chose "the better part" (see Lk 10:42). She received Jesus in hospitality by sitting at his feet and listening intently to his words. As the Lord gave himself to Mary, she simply received him, and in doing so, she also gave him love. God desires to give himself totally to each one of us. By receiving God, we are giving ourselves in return to him. God is pleased to give himself to us and delighted when we receive his gift of self in prayer.

Overview of the Parallels between Mary and the Song of Songs

Mary, like the bride, is "Daughter Zion" (Zeph 3:14), representing Israel in her intense longing and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Her virginity is oriented solely toward her Lord, the Bridegroom of Israel, whose presence is realized in his divine kiss. Grace has prepared her to receive her Lord wholeheartedly.

11. Gregory Cleveland, OMV, *Awakening Love: An Ignatian Retreat with the Song of Songs* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2017), 4.



Mary is the purified Daughter Zion, conceived sinless in view of her role as Mother of God. She is the bride who is dark and lovely, beautiful in grace, yet bearing the sins of her people. In her immaculate conception, Mary was kept free from original sin from the first moment of her existence. This grace does not separate her from us, but draws her closer to us, since grace unites us with one another, whereas sin divides. We share in the experience of receiving grace at baptism, which washes away our sins. Mary who is full of grace teaches us how to live by grace in the joys and sorrows of life in the most fully human way.

The first work of grace is to bring us into the union of contemplative prayer, symbolized by the King and his bride on their couch of rest. Mary enters contemplative prayer, “pondering” the events of life with her son and “keeping” them in her heart. The Bridegroom and bride gaze upon one another and admire one another’s beauty. This is a perfect image of contemplative prayer. The incarnation of the Son of God made possible this loving gaze of Mary and Jesus, which we can all imitate. In prayer, Mary finds strength in her weakness, like the bride, who swoons in love for her Bridegroom and begs for nourishment. In the presence of her King, the bride is convinced of her commonness and humility as a mere lily of the valley. Mary, in her humility as the humble servant of the Lord, is chosen to be mother of the Son of the Most High.

The next work of grace is to invite us to generous self-giving to others. The Bridegroom draws close to his beloved and calls her to “arise and come.” As Jesus draws close to Mary in the Incarnation, he calls her to arise and go to visit Elizabeth. Mary is prompt and generous in her response, compassionately bearing Christ’s presence to her cousin. Most of Mary’s self-giving to her son was offered during her hidden life with him for thirty years. She is the dove in the clefts of the rock (see Song 2:14),



with Nazareth being the place of hiddenness where she receives her son's love, where he hears her sweet voice and beholds her lovely face. Mary experiences the pain of losing her son and searches for him with tribulation, finding him in the Temple. The bride similarly goes in anxious search of her lover who has disappeared, finding him and holding on to him. Mary's self-giving to Jesus and her sacrifice to the Father reach their zenith as she stands faithfully by him during his crucifixion. Her sacrifice in union with her son bears fruit in our salvation.

At the wedding feast at Cana Mary demonstrates her role as intercessor before Jesus on our behalf. Mary is a powerful intercessor because she always asks in Jesus' name according to his will, and Jesus will not refuse her. The Bridegroom's heart is likewise ravished by the beauty and power of his beloved. He describes her appearance in formidable terms as a protective warrior woman. Mary, who grew in her capacity for grace, receives a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and, in union with the Holy Spirit, becomes our advocate. She teaches the nascent Church to pray and to await the Spirit's coming. She continues to prayerfully sustain the Church by her deep union with God. The bride in the Song calls on the wind, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, to blow upon her garden, stirring its fragrance and wafting it about. She willingly endures pain as she shares in the sufferings of her Bridegroom. As the woman of Revelation, Mary becomes our mother, having borne the labor pains of giving birth to the Church at the foot of the Cross. She sustains us in difficult circumstances by her comforting presence. Mary shows us the essential motherhood of the Church and teaches us how to be mothers to Christ, hearing his word and keeping it.

Mary is assumed into heaven body and soul to be with her son. Her body is glorified after the pattern of Christ's resurrection. Her destiny is ours as we are all called to share in Jesus'

risen life. The Bridegroom extols the bodily glory of his bride, who now resembles him in liveliness, power, and radiance. Her dance captivates and reconciles peoples, just as Mary's dance of joy in the presence of the Holy Trinity brings about peace among us all. Mary is also crowned as queen of heaven and earth, sharing in her Jesus' kingly rule. As queen she is not only exalted by God, but also draws closer to us, and by her power helps us in our need. The bride is likewise described as a queenly maiden, with power that instills fear in her enemies and can conquer even the most hardened hearts. As the woman, the new Eve, the mother of all the living in Christ, Mary is also the woman of Revelation 12, clothed with the sun, revealing God to us. By her spousal union with the Holy Spirit she becomes, like the bride in the love of her Bridegroom, the flame of the Lord himself (see Song 8:6).

How to Use This Book

This book can be used in various ways:

As a way to pray through the Song of Songs with Mary: As you read this book, you will discover the passionate depths of Mary's love for her Lord growing throughout her earthly life and ultimately fulfilled in heaven. Mary's experience of the Spirit is not foreign or beyond our reach. Instead it is a paradigm we can imitate, one which engenders our own union with God. Put yourself in Mary's place as the spiritually mature bride of the Song of Songs, with whom the Lord desires the deepest union through the joyful, luminous, sorrowful, and glorious experiences of your own life.

As spiritual reading to nourish your soul: Go beyond mere reading to prayerful consideration of the questions at the end of each chapter. Apply the stories and quotes to your own life.

As a personal retreat in daily life: Ideally, you could read one chapter per week while lingering over the prayer exercises. Let the Holy Spirit guide you to deeper meanings of the Scriptures in contemplation. Imagine yourself to be like Mary in her mysteries of union with the Holy Trinity, and the bride in her intense marriage with her beloved. Return to any moments of greater feeling, inspiration, or insight in your prayer experiences and deepen your understanding of what God is revealing.

CHAPTER I

Virgin Daughter Zion

[B] Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine,
 your anointing oils are fragrant,
your name is perfume poured out;
 therefore the maidens love you.
Draw me after you, let us make haste.
 The king has brought me into his chambers.
[D] We will exult and rejoice in you;
 we will extol your love more than wine;
 rightly do they love you (Song 1:1–4).¹

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said,

1. In the quotes from the Song of Songs, the bride is indicated as B; the bridegroom as G; and the daughters of Jerusalem as D. —Editor.



“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. (Lk 1:26–38)



Mary's gift of her whole being to the Lord inspired my own consecration in religious life. In 1993 I was ready to make my final vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the Lord with the Oblates of the Virgin Mary. I had spent seven years of formation in prayer, study, ministry, and community life, and now I was prepared. Our ceremony was held on a Friday evening at Saint Clement Eucharistic Shrine in Boston, where my seminary training had begun. I went to pick up my family members in the midst of a severe nor'easter rainstorm that had lasted all

day. All the flights were delayed, and I spent the day in the airport. As I drove back from the airport with my family, we stalled in the Sumner Tunnel due to a car fire on the expressway. We had already missed dinner, and I was not amused as my brother joked about missing the ceremony. Finally, we arrived at 6:45 for a 7:00 P.M. ceremony. My provincial superior greeted me with the news that my friend and classmate of seven years had decided to postpone his vows. Stunned, I tried to take it all in. My provincial saw the disappointment on my face and told me I could postpone if I needed to. I had no doubts, but I was terribly disheartened. I told my sister about my classmate and she asked alarmingly, "You're not thinking of backing out, are you?" "No," I answered, "but it sure feels lousy," hoping for some compassion that I didn't receive. I told the news to my spiritual director, who was sitting in the back of the church. He just shook his head, indicating that I'd come too far to be swayed by the desolation of the moment. Even though I had had a good experience of seminary formation over seven years, I was now tempted to dwell on all the moments of hardship, pain, and disappointment of that period and let them sabotage my decision.

I hearkened back to my retreat of the previous June, when I had been inspired by our Lady's yes to God. I had felt swept up by God's grace as I contemplated her *fiat*. I knew that my life's decision was founded on solid ground, and I would not waver. My years of preparation and waiting culminated with a joyful yes that was tinged with pain as I uttered the words: "I, Gregory Cleveland, into your hands, O Lord, vow for all my life, chastity, poverty, and obedience. . . . I pledge myself to the proper apostolic services of the Congregation which will be assigned to me. My God, you have inspired this consecration in me; fully aware of my weakness I pray to you: confirm within me this holy



resolve. Mary, I place myself in your hands so that you may bring me to God." By divine grace and inspired by Mary, my consecration to the Lord was the culmination of many trying years of preparation.

I first experienced the kiss of the divine Bridegroom during the Marian Year proclaimed by Saint John Paul II in 1987. It was the final day of the novena to the Divine Mercy in April. I went to holy Mass with my friends Cindy and Tony, and, when I received Holy Communion, I felt flooded with the love of God. I looked up and saw the priest purifying the vessels, and the thought came to me that God might be calling me to the priesthood. Later that day, I was going to a pro-life banquet with my friend Rosie, and we passed Saint Nicholas Albanian Orthodox Church. I had heard that there was a weeping icon of our Lady there. I had always wanted to see it, so we stopped and went in. I was captivated by the beauty of the icon and noticed that she had begun weeping on my birthday, December 6, which is also the feast day of Saint Nicholas. Her tears were for the suffering Christians in Albania, but I felt as if they were a kind of confirmation of my calling. Later that summer, I applied to the Oblates of the Virgin Mary and joined the seminary.

Throughout my formation process, I came to discover that the Lord loved me with a passionate desire, which made me come alive as never before. My studies became an intense pursuit of knowledge of him whom my soul loved. During my novitiate I discovered that the Lord didn't just want my obedience and service; he wanted my heart. While praying with the Song of Songs, I felt the Lord calling me beautiful in his grace. And I knew that he was captivated by me. He was keenly interested in everything about me and wanted me to share my heart with him. While I always knew that my heart was marked by a God-shaped

hole that only he could fill, I came to realize that God's heart had a place that only I could fill. That was why he loved me into being and died out of love for me. I had been reluctant to share myself with him or others, hiding my heart, putting up defenses, not feeling like I had much to offer. Becoming more aware of his love for me, I was able to surrender my heart to him in all my weakness and goodness, even to the point of consecrating myself to him as a religious.

Our Yearning for God

While the Lord's way of truth was stimulating my intellect in my theological studies, his way of beauty in the Song of Songs was captivating my heart in prayer. I desired his grace to transform me into a mirror of his beauty in holiness of life. In the Song, the bride's desire for the presence and kiss of her beloved in marital union is symbolic of the soul's longing for an intimate relationship with God. This yearning for union is fulfilled in the angel's address to Mary, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). While we commonly render the angel's greeting as "Hail, full of grace," the meaning of *grace* is a relationship of friendship and deep intimacy with God. Ratzinger elucidates:

"Full of grace" means that Mary is a wholly open human being, one who has opened herself entirely, one who has placed herself in God's hands boldly, limitlessly, and without fear for her own fate. It means she lives wholly by and in relation to God. She is a listener and a pray-er, whose mind and soul are alive to the manifold ways in which the living God quietly calls to her. She is one who prays and stretches forth wholly to meet God; she is therefore a lover, who has the breadth and magnanimity of true love, but who has also



its unerring powers of discernment and its readiness to suffer.²

Mary experiences grace as an openness and receptivity to receive the Lord's gift of self and to give herself in return. God, as the Bridegroom of his people, is the supreme lover who gives himself totally. Mary, representing the bride, receives his love completely and reciprocates it with her gift of love. Her experience of complete surrender to her loving Lord is meant for us all.

The bride's desire for her bridegroom is exceeded only by the Bridegroom's yearning for union. As Saint Augustine says, our thirst for God is a pale reflection of his thirst for us.³ Having created Mary to be the beautiful spouse of the Holy Spirit, God desired to enter into that beauty. In the Incarnation, God himself experienced beauty. He experienced that ecstasy by which he came out of himself and became flesh in Mary. The great apostle of Marian consecration, Saint Louis de Montfort, says that in Mary, God experienced beauty, first in creating her, and then in admiring her virtues: "The angels and even God himself were filled with rapturous admiration for her. Her humility, deep as an abyss, delighted him. Her purity so otherworldly drew him down to her. He found her lively faith and her ceaseless entreaties of love so irresistible that he was lovingly conquered by her appeals of love."⁴ Montfort sings to our Lady: "You have enraptured God. . . . Attracted by your beauty, he took human nature.

2. Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary, The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 68.

3. See *Commentary on Gospel of John*, 15, 11.

4. Saint Louis Marie de Montfort, *Love of Eternal Wisdom*, 105, 107, in *Jesus Living in Mary, Handbook of the Spirituality of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort* (Bayshore, NY: Montfort Publications, 1995), 75.

He could not help himself.”⁵ God has conferred beauty on each one of us and is drawn by that beauty to enter our hearts. Like the bride we invite God’s presence to unite with us: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Song 1:2).

The sole desire of the bride’s heart is the arrival and the kiss of her bridegroom. The bride exclaims “your name is perfume poured out” (Song 1:3), referring to the Messiah, “the one anointed” with the Holy Spirit. She immediately adds, “your love is better than wine.” The Messiah would also be the bridegroom of Israel whose role was to supply the wine for the wedding feast of the covenant. It was foretold that when the Messiah came, there would be an abundance of wine. The restoration of the kingdom meant the mountains would drip sweet wine of joy and all the hills would flow with it (see Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18). Jesus is the Messiah, the one anointed with the Holy Spirit, who is also the Bridegroom. At Cana he provided an abundance of wine for the wedding feast (see Jn 2:1–11). Mary is the bride who symbolizes Israel in her longing for the kiss of the Bridegroom and for his love, which is better than wine. The Incarnation brought these gifts. We know that Mary had the hopes and dreams of her people in mind when in her Magnificat she exclaims that the Lord has “helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy” (Lk 1:54). Mary also refers to herself as the “handmaid of the Lord,” just as Israel was called to be the servant of the Lord. In doing God’s will, Mary anticipates Jesus’ own mission to do the will of the Father.

Throughout the Scriptures, the Lord had called his people “daughter Zion,” whom he had raised and would marry as his

5. De Montfort, *Hymns* 63:5; cf. H. 81:3, in *Jesus Living in Mary*, 75.



bride so that she would bear fruit (see Hos 2:19–20). In a unique way Mary embodies Israel's relationship to the Lord as daughter Zion. A comparison between the prophets and Luke shows these parallels:

1. The Messiah will bring joy

The prophet Zechariah prophesies the coming of the Messiah to Israel: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you" (Zech 9:9). When the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary he hearkens back to Zechariah in greeting her with the same word "rejoice"⁶ addressed to daughter Zion (Lk 1:28).

2. The presence of the Lord

Just as the prophet Zephaniah had proclaimed to Israel, "The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst" (Zeph 3:14), so now Gabriel proclaims to Mary that "the Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28).

3. No more fear

Zephaniah charges Israel to "fear disaster no more" (Zeph 3:15), while Gabriel says "do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Lk 1:30).

What is foretold to daughter Zion is now directed to Mary: "She is identified with daughter Zion, she is daughter Zion in

6. Rendered "Hail" or "Greetings" in some translations, but most accurately "Rejoice." See Edward Sri, *Rethinking Mary in the New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 13–22.

person . . . the bridal people of God.”⁷ Mary carries in herself the fulfillment of the saving plan of God and herself becomes the very personification of the new Israel, the truest abode of Yahweh, through the incarnation of the Son of God, who restores the kingdom of Israel with an unending rule.⁸ Mary is the true Israel in whom the Old and New Covenants, Israel and Church, are indivisibly one. She is the “people of God” bearing fruit through God’s gracious power.

The Jews intensely longed for the coming of the Messiah. In his book *The Day Christ Died*, the American Catholic journalist Jim Bishop describes this longing, which speaks to us of the bride’s longing for her Bridegroom: “The coming of the Messiah was a sweet national obsession. It was a joy beyond imagining, happiness beyond belief. It was comfort for the weary farmer’s bones as he lay in bed at night with his family waiting for sleep. It was the dream of every gray-haired person. It was the thing a small child looked to a mountain of white clouds to see. It was the hope of Judea in chains. The Messiah was always the promise of tomorrow morning.”⁹ We can imagine how intense was this desire for the coming of the Messiah during the age of the prophets, especially while Israel was in exile, waiting to return to their homeland and the Temple. We can imagine that hope waning 400 years later, the length of time since the last prophet had spoken. Some faithful Jews, like Simeon and Anna, still felt in their bones that they might live to see the Messiah’s coming. We can imagine the peoples’ anticipation rising to fever pitch when John the Baptist appeared. He was a new prophet in the desert who

7. Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary, The Church at the Source*, 65–66.

8. See Manelli, *All Generations Will Call Me Blessed*, 95–104.

9. Jim Bishop, *The Day Christ Died* (New York: HarperOne, 1957), 76.