

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*

Finally, God himself is love, and nothing created can satisfy the one who is made in the image of God, except the God who is love, who alone is above all created natures (18.6).

Just as the troubled eye, then, cannot gaze on the peaceful sun because of its unlikeness, so the peaceful eye can behold it with some efficacy because of a certain likeness. If indeed it were wholly equal to it in purity, with a completely clear vision it would see it as it is, because of the complete likeness. And so when you are enlightened you can see even now the Sun of Justice [Jesus Christ] that “enlightens every man who comes into this world,” according to the degree of the light he gives, by which you are made somehow like him; but see him as he is you cannot, because not yet perfectly like him (31.2).

What have the Word and the soul in common? Much, on all counts. In the first place, there is a natural kinship, in that the one is the Image of God, and the other is made in that image. Next, their resemblance argues some affinity. For the soul is made not only in the image of God, but in his likeness. In what does this likeness consist? you ask. Take first the Image. The Word is truth, it is wisdom and righteousness. . . . The soul is none of these things, since it is not the Image. Yet it is capable of them and yearns for them; that is perhaps why it is said to be made in the image. It is a lofty creature, in its capacity for greatness, and in its longing we see a token of its uprightness. We read that God made man upright and great: his capacity proves that, as we have said. For what is made in the image should conform to the Image (80.2).

The soul which does not desire or have a taste for heavenly things, but clings to earthly things, is clearly not upright but bent, but it does not for all that cease to be great, and it always retains its capacity for eternity. What hope of salvation could there be for one who had no capacity for receiving it? (80.3).

But when sin intervenes, even man is dominated, but by his will, not by nature, and he is not thereby deprived of the liberty which is his birthright. What is done willingly is done freely. It is by sin that the corruptible body oppresses the soul, but it is the result of love, not of force (81.7).

[The will] is enslaved and free at the same time; enslaved through bondage, free because of its own will, and, which is stranger and even more unfortunate, guilty in proportion to its freedom, and enslaved in proportion to its guilt, and therefore enslaved in proportion to its freedom. . . . I am free because I am like God, unhappy because I am in opposition to God (81.9).

Now when Holy Scripture speaks of the unlikeness that has come about, it says not that the likeness has been destroyed, but concealed by something else which has been laid over it. . . . So it is that the soul is unlike God and consequently unlike itself as well (82.5).

I wish therefore that before everything else a man should know himself, because not only usefulness but right order demand this. Right order, since what we are is our first concern; and usefulness, because this knowledge gives humility rather than self-importance, it provides a basis on which to build (36.5).

There must be no dissimulation, no attempt at self-deception, but a facing up to one's real self without flinching and turning aside. When a man thus takes stock of himself in the clear light of truth, he will discover that he lives in a region of dissimilarity [to God], and groaning from the depths of misery to which he can no longer remain blind, will he not cry out to the Lord as the prophet did: "In your truth you have humbled me"? (36.5)

There is no difficulty in finding grounds for hope: the soul must turn to the Word. The great dignity of the soul's relationship with the Word is not without effect—and its enduring likeness bears witness to this relationship. The Spirit courteously admits into its fellowship one who is like him by nature. Certainly in the natural order like seeks like (82.7).

In this way your self-knowledge will be a step to the knowledge of God: he will become visible to you as his image is being renewed within you. And you, gazing confidently on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, will be transformed into that same image with ever increasing brightness, by the work of the Spirit of the Lord (36.6).

And really where is there safe sure rest for the weak except in the Savior's wounds? I have sinned gravely, my conscience is disturbed but not confounded, because I shall remember the wounds of the Lord. For "he was wounded for our transgressions." What sin is so deadly as not to be forgiven by the death of Christ? (61.3).

So the soul returns and is converted to the Word to be reformed by him and conformed to him. In what way? In charity: for he says, "Be imitators of God, dear children, and walk in love, as Christ also loved you" (83.2).

"God is Spirit," who is lovingly drawn by the beauty of that soul whom he perceives to be guided by the Spirit, and devoid of any desire to submit to the ways of the flesh, especially if he sees that it burns with ardent love for himself (31.6).

Now the soul has recovered its life by changing its will by love, its health by instruction, its stability by virtue, and its maturity by wisdom (85.10).

The soul that has attained this degree now ventures to think of marriage. Why should she not, when she sees she is like [Christ] and therefore ready for marriage? His loftiness has no terrors for her, because her likeness to him associates her with him, and her declaration of love is a betrothal (85.12).

Such conformity weds the Word to the soul, for one who is like the Word by nature shows herself like him too in the exercise of her will, loving as she is loved. When she loves perfectly, the soul is wedded to the Word. . . . Now the Bridegroom is not only loving; he is love. . . . Love is the being and the hope of the Bride (83.3-5).

Every soul, I say, standing thus under condemnation and without hope, has the power to turn and find it can not only breathe the fresh air of hope of pardon and mercy, but also dare to aspire to the nuptials of the Word. Why should it not venture with confidence into the presence of him by whose image it sees itself honored, and in whose likeness it knows itself made glorious? (83.1).