

Immaculate Conception, 8th December 2019

The Song of Songs is not exactly a book of the Bible that you hear read much at Mass, but today is something of an exception: “Thou art all fair (*Tota pulchra es*), O my love (*amica mea*), and there is not a spot in thee (*et macula non est in te*)” (Sg 4:7), which finds its way into today’s Alleluia verse, though with “*Maria* (Mary)” replacing “*amica mea* (O my love)”; and “*originalis* (original)” being added to “*macula* (spot)”.

Perhaps the objection might be raised, however, that these adjustments to the biblical text within the liturgy are in fact distortions. To which it could be retorted: No, the Church has not misappropriated this text from the Song of Songs, so as to fit it neatly within the feast of the Immaculate Conception, but has simply interpreted it. Who is the beloved, “O my love”, anyway, of the Song? She is indeed nameless as such, and since it is a piece of poetry, rather than a historical book, the Song of Songs can quite easily be read in an allegorical sense, and there is a long history in the Church of doing just that.

Principally, it has been the Church herself who has been identified with the beloved, the bride, of the Song. But in the course of the Middle Ages, the beloved also became identified with Our Lady. Shortly before the bridegroom declares: “Thou art all fair, O my love” (Sg 4:7), he says to her: “Thy neck is as the tower of David” (Sg 4:4), hence the invocation in the Litany of Loreto to Our Lady: “Tower of David”; the bride’s neck is also referred to later on in the Song as being like “a tower of ivory” (Sg 7:4), which forms the invocation that immediately follows within the Litany.



**Anonymous, *Immaculate Conception*, 1675-1700,
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It is therefore perfectly legitimate to identify the beloved, “*amica*” (Sg 4:7), with “*Maria (Mary)*”, but what about “there is not a spot in thee” being altered to “there is not an original spot [namely, of sin] in thee”; surely the text of the Song of Songs was written in praise of the bride’s spotless beauty rather than of her sinlessness, and certainly not of her freedom from original sin, as in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception? The Church would not argue, however, and indeed she would know that it would be foolish to argue, that the original text of the poem was not about physical beauty; but rather would argue that, because the Song is open to interpretation, the “spot”, the blemish, can also be read quite rightly in its other sense: the Latin word *macula*, like the original Hebrew מִמָּוֶה (‘mum’: yes, that is how it is pronounced!), potentially denoting a moral as well as a physical blemish.

If it is interpreted as a moral blemish, as sin, in other words, why not then qualify “*macula (spot)*” with the adjective “*originalis (original)*” – “*Tota pulchra es (Thou art all fair), Maria (Mary), et macula originalis (and an original spot) non est in te (is not in thee)*”? The Church has therefore taken the text of the Song of Songs and, without doing any real violence to it, applied it to Our Lady and the Immaculate Conception. She has indeed used this text to describe the doctrine, as in today’s Alleluia, but never (as far as I know), however, as scriptural evidence to support it, unlike today’s Gospel, which finishes deliberately with the Angelic Salutation: “*Ave, gratia plena: Dominus tecum: benedicta tu in mulieribus*” (Lk 1:28) – and it would certainly require at least one homily to explain “*gratia plena (full of grace)*” as providing key evidence for the doctrine.

The Song of Songs, being a poetic book, was better suited as such to serving as a quarry for devotional material, including those two titles of Our Lady, “Tower of David” and “Tower of Ivory”, which were incorporated into the Litany of Loreto. I said that the Church has also interpreted the bride of the Song as referring to herself. St Paul had already used bridal imagery in reference to the Church, and not only that but also to her as a bride without spot, immaculate in fact: “a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy, and without blemish (*immaculata*)” (Ep 5:27). Clearly, here in the Epistle to the Ephesians, the apostle is speaking of “blemish (*macula*)” in a moral rather than a physical sense.

Almost at the very start of this Epistle, St Paul had already stated more or less the same thing, though using the first person plural, ‘we’, in regard to the Church rather than the more abstract third personal singular, ‘it’: “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and unspotted (*immaculati*) in his sight in charity” (Ep 1:4). Yes, we are celebrating today the fact that Our Lady was conceived immaculate; and yet, although we ourselves of course did not share that particular privilege, we nevertheless still hope to become one day: “unspotted (*immaculati*)”, immaculate. And so those words from the Song of Songs might also, at some point, be applied to us: “*macula non est in te* (there is not a spot in thee)” (Sg 4:7).

Our desire to become, like Our Lady, immaculate, without *macula*, can perhaps be observed in two occasions surrounding the Mass in which the word *macula* occurs: at the washing of the priest’s hands in the sacristy; and when he is performing the second ablution after Communion. These are, as such, the very first and last points in the whole ritual in which a specific

action of his is accompanied by a prayer; while, conversely, there are during Mass specific prayers that are accompanied by an action or by actions: think, for example, of the bowing and moving connected with the Collect and Postcommunion prayers.

When washing his hands, the priest prays: “*Da, Domine, virtutem manibus meis* (Give, O Lord, virtue to my hands) *ad abstergendam omnem maculam* (to wipe out every stain); *ut sine pollutione mentis et corporis* (that without defilement of mind and body) *valeam tibi servire* (I may be enabled to serve thee)”. He therefore asks the Lord to “give” him “virtue”, to give him strength, so as to free him from all “stain (*maculam*)”. When cleansing the chalice with wine and water, after Communion, he asks for the same strength, though specifically through the Holy Eucharist: “*Corpus tuum, Domine, quod sumpsi* (Thy Body, Lord, which I have received), *et Sanguis, quem potavi* (and Blood which I have drunk), *adhæreat visceribus meis* (may it cleave to my inmost parts): *et præsta; ut in me non remaneat scelerum macula* (and grant that no stain of sins may remain in me), *quem pura et sancta refecerunt sacramenta* (whom these pure and holy sacraments have refreshed)”.

We, indeed like Our Lady, can only become truly immaculate, free from all “stain (*macula*)” of sin, by means of the strength and power of Almighty God. We began with today’s Alleluia verse and the Song of Songs; let us now conclude with the Communion antiphon, with its clear echo of Psalm 86: “*Gloriosa dicta sunt de te, Maria* (Glorious things are said of thee, Mary); and of her very own Magnificat: “*quia fecit tibi magna* (for he hath done great things unto thee) *qui potens est* (he who is mighty)”.