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SELECTIONS FROM WILLIAM OF NEWBURGH'S
COMMENTARY ON THE CANTICLE OF CANTICLES

John Gorman, S.M.

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About the article and the author . . .

The Marian literature of the Middle Ages seems to have been singularly rich in the great variety of its forms and much of it noteworthy for its doctrinal content. Some of it is familiar to all of us, for many of the hymns, such as the "Salve Regina" and "Stabat Mater," by which the Church's liturgy today honors the Mother of God were written during those centuries. The more extended works on Our Lady that the monks composed, however, long remained hidden and indeed almost forgotten. It is only in our own day that they are at last once more being brought to light. An excellent contribution to this field of Mariological scholarship is Father Gorman's critical edition of William of Newburgh's commentary on the Cantic of Canticles. His translation of selections from it presented here is, so far as we know, the first that has yet been done in English. The passages chosen form a series of exalted meditations on the principal mysteries in the life of Mary with her Son Jesus. They will introduce most of our readers to a new kind of writing about Mary and will enable them to realize, in part at least, the wealth of surprisingly beautiful works that form part of our heritage from the Ages of Faith.

Father John Gorman, S.M., a native of Springfield, Illinois, made his first profession of vows in the Society of Mary in 1944. Before entering the seminary he spent several years teaching at various schools in the St. Louis area. In 1956 he was ordained at Fribourg, Switzerland, where two years later he received his doctorate in theology. After his return to the United States, Father was stationed at Clayton, Missouri, and then in San Antonio, Texas, first at Central Catholic High School and then at St. Mary's University, where he taught theology and also served as Scholastic chaplain. At the present time he is in Rome working towards a degree in Canon Law at Lateran University.



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SELECTIONS FROM WILLIAM OF NEWBURGH'S
COMMENTARY ON THE CANTICLE OF CANTICLES

Rev. John Gorman, S.M.

INTRODUCTION

William of Newburgh was a twelfth-century Canon Regular of the Augustinian Priory of Newburgh in Yorkshire, England. He was born in 1136 near Bridlington in Yorkshire and was educated from boyhood at the priory he later joined as a Canon. He died after the summer of 1199 and probably before the fall of 1201.¹ It is possible that before he became a Canon, he had married a wealthy heiress named Emma, and with her had raised a family in Peri, near Oxford. At least extant charters make it certain that there was a William of Peri who, about 1182 or 1183 when his children were grown, left his wife Emma with her consent, to become a Canon at Newburgh where his brother was prior. William of Newburgh and William of Peri may well be the same person.²

William of Newburgh has long been well known to historians as the author of the *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, a chronicle of England covering the period from 1066 to approximately 1198.³ Three sermons of his, one on the gospel of the Vigil of the Assumption, have also been preserved.⁴

The commentary on the Canticle of Canticles was completed sometime before 1196. How long before is not determinable.⁵ In 1604 Martin del Rio, S.J., included parts of it in a large volume wherein some forty-five other commentaries on this book of the Old Testament were compared.⁶ In modern times, J.B. Terrien in his work *La Mère de Dieu et la Mère des Hommes*⁷ used four passages from it which he had found in del Rio's seventeenth-century compilation. The commentary in its entirety was printed for the first time only in 1961.⁸

William composed the work at the request of his close friend, Roger, abbot of the neighboring Cistercian monastery of Byland. The latter asked him to apply the much-commented Canticle to the Mother of God.⁹ In fulfilling this request William believed that he was the first to refer it entirely to Mary.¹⁰ He was mistaken in this belief, for shortly before 1120 both Rupert of Deutz and Honorius of Autun had independently applied the Canticle in this way.¹¹ Later in the course of the twelfth century other writers such as Philip of Harvengt, William of Weyarn, and possibly Alain of Lille wrote similar commentaries, all prior to William's own attempt.¹² There is, however, no evidence to show that he knew of the existence of these works.¹³

The commentary William produced is not a scientific treatise, neither exegesis nor a tract of theology. In his meditations he intended to lead

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by day Pope John XIII died.

his readers to consider the mystery of Mary and ultimately to draw closer to God because of that consideration. Despite its non-scientific nature, the work is rich enough in Marian doctrine to be of interest even today. Many passages maintain a surprising freshness and beauty.

The selections which follow have been translated from the Latin text of the critical edition. They were chosen with the intention of showing something of the variety, beauty, and richness in the thoughts springing from this twelfth-century Canon's filial love of Mary. Many other parts of his commentary are equally beautiful, and the passages given here do not present William's Marian doctrine completely.

I

**Thy lips, my spouse, are as honey dripping
from its comb; honey and milk are under thy tongue.**

Canticle 4:12

In this first selection,¹⁴ a kind of verbal rhapsody on the Annunciation, William meditates the great significance of Mary's free consent to the Angel's message.

The Son, who is also spouse of the Virgin, praises the beauty of her lips, that is, the delightfulness of her speech. Here we can recall that period especially, when, in a way, the fulfillment of every prophecy and the salvation of mankind were hanging on her lips. For when the Son of God would at last give answer to the tears and sighs of the saints of old who had cried out almost hoarsely: "Rouse up thy power, Lord, and come to save us," when, that is, He would at last rouse His power to go out from the Father and come into the world, not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved by Him, He sent ahead a heavenly messenger to the Virgin from whose pure flesh He was going to take that which, united to His Person, He would offer to the Father for the redemption of many.

His messenger, we said, He sent ahead to her to disclose to her this mystery of human redemption and thus solicit her consent and her cooperation. The Almighty was unwilling to take flesh from her if she would not give it, as He took from a sleeping and not-giving Adam from whom He formed Eve. And so, to show the excellence of His future mother, He willed to take flesh, not only from her, but also with her cooperation.

Sent at last to her, Gabriel said: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women." Notice how full of praise he enters who has been sent, not to force, but gently to elicit her consent. "Behold," he said, "you shall conceive in your womb and shall bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus," and so on.

As if he had said: Consent, O Virgin, through faith to the mystery

of human reconciliation, for God has indeed chosen you for this unique mystery, but is, nevertheless, unwilling to take the victim of reconciliation from you without your knowledge or your consent, which is certainly, in a special way, a glory for you. Therefore with joyous faith give to Him of yourself that which may be expended for the salvation of all. But it does not suffice simply to believe, for with the heart a man believes unto justice, and with the mouth profession of faith is made unto salvation. Unless, therefore, you express with your lips the faith in your heart, the Most High will not take from you the victim of salvation. Speak, then, the sweet-sounding word; say what you are about to say, for this is a time for speaking, not a time for keeping silent. Do not by your silence keep in suspense or hold back the salvation of all. God has given you this prerogative that the fulfillment of every prophecy foreknown to Him from eternity and the salvation of all should hang from your lips. Lest, then, you seem to begrudge the salvation of all – and you yourself are found in this all – say what you are about to say! All the angels who love men look to your lips; the holy patriarchs and the prophets in Limbo wait for your word as for a delayed rain. Every creature groans and is still in travail longing for your most sweet word. Say what you are about to say! Your lips still are as honey dripping from a comb; honey and milk are still under your tongue. Your lips are as it were a honeycomb, as honey in wax, for the most sweet word has not burst forth. Your lips still are as a honeycomb, but nevertheless dripping honey, that is, hiddenly emitting a certain sweetness when you say: "How shall this be, for I do not know man?" The honey and milk are still under your tongue, that most sweet word, which will be honey to the angels, milk to men. That angels, therefore, may rejoice and that men too may rejoice, no longer let the good word be hidden under a bushel, but let it be placed in the light for the salvation of all.

Nor did the Virgin delay, "Behold," she said, "the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to Thy word." This certainly is that sweet-sounding word which both angels and men were longing to hear. This is truly the honey and milk which were under the tongue of the Virgin. At last in this word she happily went out to meet the coming of God and joyfully offered to Him of her virginal flesh that which He would expend for the redemption of men. In this word, I say, the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

William here sees the scene of the Annunciation in a full view with the saints of the Old Testament, Angels, Patriarchs and Prophets in Limbo, men of all times, and every creature looking to Mary's answer. He had certainly meditated the fact that God did deign to ask Mary's

consent, and he saw it as a manifestation of God's will to show her excellence, of God's will to have her voluntary and conscious cooperation in His work. How beautifully William has made meaningful his final phrase: "In this (her) word, the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

II

I sat under the shadow of him whom I desired.

Canticle 2:3

Continuing his reflections on the Incarnation, William speaks of Mary's unique closeness to this mystery.¹⁵

A shadow is formed by the encounter of light and a body. As the Divine Light came to a human body in the womb of the Virgin, He made Himself a shadow, a very dense and exceedingly dark shadow. What is this shadow except the august and impenetrable secret of the holy Incarnation?

The loving mother declares that she sat under that shadow: "Under the shadow of him whom I desired I sat." She does not say, "In the shadow of him," for not even to the Virgin laden with God was it given to sit in this shadow. The humanity of the Word, therefore, alone has its seat in this shadow which is so much the more secret as it is more sacred and so much the more sacred as it is more secret. But the mother of the Incarnate Word glories only that she sat under this shadow, which, as a matter of fact, was given to her as a unique privilege.

Thus it was that the angel spoke to the one soon to be the mother of the Word: "The power of the Most High will overshadow thee." For to her uniquely was it given to sit under this shadow of the Word in so far as in her and from her the Word was made flesh in the shadowy and dark mystery known to Him alone. Others, however they shine with holiness, look from afar on the darkness of this shadow, venerating the divine mystery humbly with bowed heads, but fearing to approach closer to look at it. We read that formerly Moses with pious daring approached the cloud which contained God while all others stood far off. But if that very holy man, most devoted to God, had lived at this time, he too would have stood with the others at a distance, nor would he have dared or been able to approach the darkness of this shadow in which the Word was made flesh and under which, as was mentioned, it was uniquely given to the mother of the Word to sit. Accordingly, glorying about this singular privilege, not in herself but in the Lord, she says: "Under the shadow of him whom I desired I sat."

In the centuries after William, theology came to explain that Mary could not be part of, nor even be said to have caused, the hypostatic

union, but that her role as Mother of God placed her, nevertheless, in what is called the hypostatic order. It would seem that in his figurative language William is not far from these concepts.

III

He brought me into his winecellar. Canticle 2:4

The following paragraph¹⁶ presents some of William's insights regarding Mary's fulness of grace.

Who is so able to drink the wine of the Spouse and who is so abundantly filled with the wine of the Spouse as the mother of the Spouse? Thus she rejoices, not that she has been given to drink from the winecellar of the Spouse as others, but that she has been introduced by the Spouse into the winecellar. For to others, out of His fulness, drink is given, as it were, outside; she, however, has been specially brought in to the fulness itself that she may be more abundantly filled, that she may be inebriated more than all others. She does not herself have the fulness, for she is herself fully human; she receives as others from the fulness of the Spouse. But that she might receive more fully than others from this fulness and be more full than others who partake of it, by a special grace she was brought in to the fulness itself by the very fact that she bore Him in whom dwells all the fulness of the divinity bodily. Of His fulness we have all received, but more than all others, His loving mother.

Compared with Christ's grace, Mary's grace is received and thus differs in degree only from the grace others receive from Christ. But William clearly points out the unique motives for this more abundant fulness, the special grace of the Divine Maternity. In another passage he cites St. Augustine's famous text: "The maternal relationship would not have profited Mary at all, unless she had more happily conceived Christ in her heart than in her flesh,"¹⁷ and gently corrects: "The maternal relationship would, indeed, be nothing without faith and love, but there would be no singular love without that maternal relationship."¹⁸

IV

Thy plants are a paradise of pomegranates with the fruits of the orchard. Cypress with spikenard. . . Canticle 4:13-14

The next passage¹⁹ contains Williams clearest explanation of the foundations underlying the doctrine of the Spiritual Maternity, a doctrine which appears throughout the commentary. The connection between the text of the Canticle and the passage cited is not here given, though William does, of course, make the connection in his work.

The Savior of all men Mary bore uniquely, yet in that One she bore so many unto salvation. By bearing the Savior she bore so many unto salvation; by bearing Life she bore so many unto life. For by the very fact that she bore Life for them, she bore them unto life; by the very fact that she is the mother of the Head, she is the mother of so many members. She is the mother of Christ: mother of the Head and of the members, for the Head and the body are one Christ. Mary bore Christ, that is, the Head and the members, but the Head she bore uniquely and in a singular way; the members, however, she bore by the very fact that she bore the Head. By bearing our Head bodily, therefore, she bore all of His members spiritually. Hence she is called mother by all and is honored with fitting cult as mother.

Today this explanation is commonplace. At the time William wrote the doctrine of the Spiritual Maternity was not uncommon, but such a clear and precise explanation of its foundation seems to have been rare.²⁰

V

... a purple ascent. . . Canticle 3:10

William here examines Mary's right to the title of martyr.¹²

What of the glorious Virgin of whom Christ was born? She did not by martyrdom shed her blood, hence her ascent would not seem to be purple. To this we answer that her illustrious martyrdom was evidently insinuated and very clearly commended by Simeon when he prophesied speaking to her of her Son: "Thy own soul a sword shall pierce." Clearly that very sharp sword, that is, the sorrow at the Lord's passion, penetrating and piercing the soul of the loving mother, made her spiritually co-die with Him. Whatever He suffered in the flesh redounded, beyond all doubt, in her maternal affection.

We must distinguish the martyrdom of the loving mother from the martyrdom of others. They are martyrs by dying for Christ; she is a martyr in co-dying with Christ. They by dying for Christ are martyrs of Christ; she by co-dying with Christ is a co-martyr of Christ. The martyrdom of others consists in dying bodily for their Lord; the martyrdom of the loving mother consists in co-dying spiritually with her Son.

Indeed, to die for Christ is something sublime and great, but it was more sublime and still greater to co-die in such a holy and in such a maternal way with the dying Christ. For to be a co-martyr of Christ is more than to be a martyr of Christ. The martyrdom of the loving mother is, therefore, something unique and she is a unique martyr, for she was red, not exteriorly with her own blood as other

martyrs, but interiorly with the blood of Him with whom she uniquely co-died. Because, therefore, she has, together with the other adornments of virtues, the purple of martyrdom in so far as she co-died in her maternal affection with the greatest martyr and the head of the martyrs, being not so much His martyr as His co-martyr, correctly our Peacemaker is said to have made a purple ascent to His litter (See Cant. 3:9-10).

VI

A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me. Canticle 1:12

While in the preceding he spoke of Mary's martyrdom, William, in the present section,²² points out the relation between Mary's compassion and the work of our redemption.

It is clear that she loved her Son incomparably more than any mother, both because of His excellence and because, with respect to His flesh, He was of His mother only, who, of course, had not conceived of man. Other sons, drawing the substance of their flesh from both the paternal and maternal seed, seem, according to the flesh, not to be wholly sons of their fathers, nor wholly sons of their mothers, but, as it were, half and half. But according to His flesh our Lord was the son of His mother wholly, for according to the flesh He had no father. Hence, even by the law of nature, this mother loved this Son incomparably more than any other mother. But just as intense as her maternal love was her maternal sorrow for her Son dying or dead. Thus, to the very degree that she loved her son she was co-dying with Him as He died, co-dead with Him when He was dead. Nor could the vehemence of that maternal sorrow be better expressed than when Simeon prophesying spoke of a sword piercing her soul. But even if that sacred sorrow was so intense, so vehement, at that time the loving mother was unwilling to be without it who most certainly was not refusing her own salvation. For she also had drawn death from Adam,²³ and in the blood of the Son was also the salvation of the mother herself.

Accordingly, as her Son was on the way to His passion, or even as He was already suffering, in a certain way her maternal affection spoke: Son, if it is possible, let this chalice pass from me. Yet not as I will, but as the Father and you will. In the same way her affection said: Son, if this chalice cannot pass unless you drink it, if the predestined salvation of the world cannot come about unless by your blood, may the will of the Father and your will be done, to which my own will must be subjected. Drink, therefore, and I shall very willingly drink with you by co-dying with you, so that just as formerly, by believing, as far as I could, I cooperated in a

holy way in the mystery of your Incarnation, so also now, by suffering together with you, as far as I can, I may cooperate in a devout way in human redemption.

Incomparable love, proportionate sorrow prophesied by Simeon and willed by Mary for her own salvation and the redemption of mankind, conscious submission of her will, joining of her will to the redemptive will of the Father and of the Son revealed in the Passion, union in suffering together with her Son — these William sees very soberly as cooperation, as much as possible, in the work of human redemption. The parallelism with her cooperation in the mystery of the Incarnation would seem to indicate that William saw God's will, His divine plan, in this cooperation, not just Mary's will. Yet William knows and clearly states that all salvation, including Mary's, is "in the blood of the Son." He limits this cooperation, therefore, to the possible ("as far as I can") without trying to determine just how far cooperation was possible. Modern studies on the doctrine of the co-redemption meet exactly the same difficulty. This text of William's can take its place beside the well-known and much studied passages of Arnold of Bonneval,²⁴ who died after 1156, as an added twelfth-century witness to belief in Mary's cooperation in the Redemption.

VII

**Turn away thy eyes from me,
for they have made me fly away.** Canticle 6:4

Mary, it seems certain, did not fully take up her role as mother of all Christians until after her own Assumption when she could see them and their needs in God.²⁵ In this text²⁶ William tells of her preparation for that role during her days on earth after Christ's Ascension.

Loving mother, it is not necessary for you to be concerned now as you were formerly, when, while I was an infant, you wrapped me in swaddling clothes, warmed me in your embrace, nourished me with milk, or when, after I had grown some, you fed me, your God, with bread, clothed me according to my age, or even when, after I had become adult and a man, you did not stop pouring out your maternal love on me, even though you had then, on account of my age, stopped ministering to me with your motherly services. Hence also, when you assisted me as I agonized for the salvation of mankind and you stood next to my Cross, your loving soul was pierced with a mother's sorrow. Because, therefore, the old things have passed and a joyful newness has shone forth, do not look on me, loving mother, as formerly. Turn your eyes, those maternal eyes, from me. Do not now look upon me as mother, but from now on look upon me as my spouse and my beloved. Formerly you looked

upon me with a mother's eyes when I was growing up before you, and when, after I had sowed the word of life, I was hanging on the Cross. But because I have now ascended to my Father, from now on let those maternal eyes take rest. Let your eyes be more fully those of my spouse and my beloved.

Let your maternal eyes take rest, but with respect to me. I do not at all will that they rest with respect to my members. Do not, therefore, close those eyes, but turn them from me, just as you are doing, that is, transfer your mother's love from me to those who are mine. From me, because now that I have been taken up to the Father I ought not to be loved tenderly by a mother; but to those who are mine, that is, to those who, now that I have been taken from them, need to be comforted by the tenderness of your maternal love. Therefore do not let your mother's love grow cold, do not let it be extinguished or even diminish; rather turn it integrally from me to mine. Let it take rest with respect to me that it may be transferred to those who are mine. Turn your eyes, those maternal eyes, from me, that is, with tenderness, loving mother, love now not me but mine. Look upon them as mother; look upon me as my spouse and my beloved.

Indeed while I hung in agony upon the Cross for the salvation of men, I gave one John to you by adoption when I said, "Woman, behold your son." But as I ascended to the Father in the triumph of the resurrection, I gave many to you in my place by adoption, and I left them as sons. Woman, behold your sons, whom you are to love and tenderly cherish. Turn those maternal eyes from me, and turn them instead to them, just as you are doing.

Turn your eyes from me, for I have now flown away from you, that is, I have left you, my mother, on earth by returning to the Father. I have flown away from you, that is, by ascending into heaven I betook myself again to that place from which I had descended. I have flown away from you, and your maternal eyes caused this. Turn your eyes away from me, for they have made me fly away, that is, on account of them I have flown from you. What do I mean: on account of them? I mean: in order that they may be turned from me. Very clearly I have flown from you that you may turn your maternal eyes from me. Turned away from you, I have ascended to the Father so that you may transfer from me to those who are mine the tenderness of your maternal love, which for a while you addressed to me, so that you may look on them as a mother, on me, however, no longer as a mother, but as my spouse and my beloved.

William clearly believes that Mary's maternity is Christ's will. The text is also interesting because of William's perception of a change in Mary's attitude toward Christ after the Resurrection and especially after

the Ascension. He certainly does not mean to say that Mary stopped being Christ's Mother and became only His spouse and His beloved. He meant, I believe, that the tender, human manifestations of a mother's love were to be surpassed. The risen Christ, as Divine Spouse, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, called her to a union of the deepest faith and love while she remained on earth, and to a union of unsurpassed vision after the Assumption.

VIII

There I shall give thee my breasts. Canticle 7:12

William's commentary²⁷ now elucidates further what was involved in the work of the Spiritual Maternity. Once again Mary is shown during her life after Christ's Ascension. More precisely there is question of that period when the early Church, through Paul and the Apostles, began to turn to the Gentiles.

There I shall give you my breasts: there, that is, in the church of the Gentiles, I shall give you my breasts, who formerly gave you my breasts among the Jews. But among the Jews I gave you my bodily breasts to feed you; in the church of the Gentiles, however, I will give you my spiritual breasts to feed those who are yours. For spiritually I will feed your little ones with the milk of motherly love, who formerly fed you with corporal milk in view of the reality of the flesh. Finally, by the fact that I am your corporal mother, I will be spiritual mother to those who are yours: by maternal charity, namely, bringing forth as it were my own sons until you shall be more fully formed in them; by maternal care, in like manner, nourishing them until you grow up to perfect manhood in them — all of this, however, by assiduously commending them to you and by demanding from you in loving prayers an increase of graces for them.

IX

Arise, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come. . . ! Show me thy face, let thy voice sound in my ears. Canticle 2:13-14

In words of startling beauty Jesus calls Mary to Himself at her Assumption.²⁸

As if He said: Loving mother, delay not in your sadness, for I have not delayed in death. Your sadness arose from my death. Let it be finished with my death, and just as my death, let your sadness also be absorbed by the triumph of my resurrection. Just as by your maternal affection you died together with the one dying, so also you

should triumph together with the one rising, and not only with the one rising, but even with the one assumed into heaven and sitting at the right hand of the Father. Therefore, do not just arise, but also come! As I, first, have been taken up to the Father, come, loving mother, that you may banquet with me before the Father. Formerly I came to you to become incarnate of you; now you come to me to be glorified by me.

And notice that He does not simply arouse her, but does so with great tenderness, praising her . . . saying: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one!" My love, one to whom I am so dear. My beautiful one, you who are so pleasing to me. My love, who love me so much. My beautiful one, you who are so loved by me.

Nor does He simply say to her, "Come," but He beguiles her saying, "Come, my dove," whose young dove am I. Come to your young one! Come, loving mother, to your Son, whom you so love and by whom you are so loved. Whom you so love that it is torture not to be with Him; by whom you are so loved that He is unwilling to be with the Father without you. Therefore, show me your face, let your voice sound in my ears! Show me your face, that is, show me your presence before the Father, that where I am, there you, loving mother, may be with me, and there let your voice sound in my ears. I am unwilling that you should cry to me as the blood of Abel from the earth, but transferred to me and placed next to me, you shall speak to me much more familiarly than Abel, and in no petition of yours will you, loving mother, meet a refusal from your Son.

How profound must have been William's meditations on the personal relationship of Christ and Mary,²⁹ and how well he has applied these meditations to the mystery of Mary's Assumption.

X

You shall be crowned. Canticle 4:8

The final selection³⁰ pictures for us the scene of Mary's coronation in heaven.

Not only does He urge her "Come" but He draws her with a promise so that she may come not only swiftly but joyfully. "You shall be crowned," He says. As if He had said: Do not delay in coming, for you are to be called to a crown, to be invited to a triumph and to royal power. The Father has crowned me with glory and honor because of the bitterness of the passion tasted in obedience, because of the accomplished work of redemption; you also shall be crowned together with me because you took part in that work. My passion

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