Your breasts are better than wine  
and they pour forth fragrances more suave  
than the most exquisite unctions.  
(Canticle of Canticles 1:1,2)

The Holy Spirit does not resolve the question of whether these words of the Canticle of Canticles are from the Bridegroom to the Spouse, or from the Spouse to the Bridegroom, or even from the companions of the Spouse to their mistress, the Spouse. This is why scholars have likewise not wanted to resolve the question; rather, they say that these words can be understood in all these manners. Now, before saying how, it is necessary to know that by "breasts" are meant the affections, because they nourish the heart and are situated over it, and that from the heart flow the affections of sweetness, of gentleness, and of charity toward the poor, the infirm, and the little children. Thus one gives the breast first of all to the little infants, who are truly poor, since they have nothing and cannot in any manner gain their life, in the sense that if one would not give them the breast they would die immediately.

First, if these words are from the Spouse (meaning from the devout soul) to the Bridegroom (who is Our Lord), truly she has good reason for considering this observation of him. For the
breasts of Our Lord are infinitely better than the wine of all earthly contentments. But what are the breasts of Our Lord?

The one of his breasts is forbearance, and the other is good-naturedness. Forbearance signifies to us the patience with which he looks forward to the penitence of sinners (cf. Rom 1:4). And good-naturedness signifies the love and the compassion with which he receives them when, full of contrition and of tears, they come, in imitation of Mary Magdalene (cf. Luke 7:38), to kiss his feet by the conversion of their heart and of their affections, meaning by a veritable regret for their sins.

O how this forbearance and good-naturedness of Our Lord so well transforms and establishes souls in their duty, and has so much more efficacy and power in order to draw them back from sin than the corrections of men which are signified by wine do not have. We have several examples of it, among which two of them are here cited. The one is of the prodigal son, who not only separated himself from his father, but further "consumed all his goods in debauchery." You know that it is said in the Gospel that he "went off to a far away country" (Luke 15:13). Now, when one leaves, much time is needed in order to return. Nevertheless, after so much debauchery and such a long absence, when he returns to his father not only does he receive him without being provoked to anger against him, but what is more, he embraces him and caresses him tenderly. And having dressed him sumptuously, he provides him with a little feast as a sign of the joy which he had at his return (Luke 15:20-24). And he treats him with so much benignity, love, and testimonies of benevolence that he seems to wish to demonstrate to him more affection after his debaucheries than he would have done beforehand. The other example is that of the good thief, to whom Our Lord similarly gives the breast of forbearance, looking forward to his penitence until the last moment and extremity of his life, when he manifests admirably his good-naturedness by giving him Paradise at the first request, at the first act of repentance which he makes, without any sort of prior mortification (Luke 23:40-43). Behold therefore what are the breasts of the Bridegroom.

But after the Spouse has said to him that your breasts are better than wine, she adds: for they pour forth fragrances most suave, which are nothing else than the holy inspirations that Our Lord issues forth in the hearts of the faithful ones, by which he solicits them to convert themselves and to draw back their affections from the things of the earth. For even though the breasts of Our Lord are most sweet and a thousand times better than the wine of mundane delights, nevertheless we will never approach them if he does not draw us by means of his divine fragrances.

Some Doctors have further interpreted these words your breasts are better than wine in another manner, understanding by the breasts of Our Lord, the heavenly and divine consolations. For who does not know that the divine consolations are infinitely better than the wine of the consolations of the earth? Thus is it not marvelous if the ones are compared to milk and the others to wine, seeing that wine, as you know, is drawn from grapes. Take a grape and squeeze it. The first time you will draw from it some wine; but the second time it will be necessary to press it well, and if you do, you will draw nothing more than a little juice, which is quite sharp and bitter. But then, if you squeeze it a third time, you will draw nothing more at all. Thus it is with the consolations of the world, for in the beginning and for a little while you will draw certain delight which will give you some sort of plain and impure suavity, which in the end will
be terminated in sharpness and bitterness. And then, after you return a thousand times, you will draw no more than disgust. O certainly, the breasts of this divine Savior, meaning his holy and sacred consolations, are not of this sort, for the more they are drawn, the more they are fecund. See a woman who nourishes a little infant; although he has sucked sufficiently, if after a little while he returns to the breast, he will always draw something to be satiated anew. We have been consoled near to Our Lord; let us return as often as we would want, for we will always draw from there some new consolations. For this source of his sacred bosom is inexhaustible and will never be drained; thus it is with great reason that we can say that his breasts are infinitely better than the wine of all the contentments of the world.

Now, if these words are addressed by the Bridegroom to the Spouse, what do you think he would wish to say to her? St. Bernard explains this passage admirably well. Let him kiss me with a kiss of his mouth (Cant. 1:1), says this Spouse to her Beloved. To kiss signifies nothing else to this great saint than the sweet repose of contemplation, where the soul, by an amorous affection, disengaged from all the things of the earth, is occupied with considering and contemplating the beauties of her heavenly Bridegroom, without being distracted to assist her neighbor and to provide for his necessities. For this, the divine Bridegroom, who wishes that charity be well-ordained, responds to her: you desire, my sister and my beloved, that I kiss you with a kiss of my mouth to the end of uniting yourself to me by contemplation. Certainly you have reason, for it is a most good, excellent and desirable thing that you have asked. But it is not enough, for your breasts are better than wine, meaning that it is better to assist one's neighbor and bear the milk of holy exhortation to the weak and ignorant than of always being occupied with lofty contemplations, in the sense that sometime it is necessary to leave the one for the other. I do not say that it would not be necessary to meditate and contemplate; not at all, for it is indeed necessary to kiss Our Lord with the kiss of the mouth during this mortal life, which is made in meditation and contemplation, where the soul replenishes itself with good thoughts and holy considerations that it may be converted afterward to the utility of the neighbor. But I say that it is necessary to do the one in order to be rendered more capable of the other, principally when one is obliged by the duty and state to which one is called. In sum, this means that it is necessary to meditate and contemplate only when it is required in order to do well that which is her duty, each according to her vocation.

But if these are the companions of the Spouse who say to her your breasts are better than wine, the same St. Bernard explains it in this way: O how blessed you are, our dear companion, to rejoice thus in the chaste and amorous kisses of your heavenly Bridegroom! But while you are so submerged in this ocean of delights, we other pitiful ones dwell deprived of the aid and of the help which is necessary for us, in default of which we are in danger of losing ourselves; therefore, your breasts are better than wine.

Now, what are the breasts that the companions of the Spouse desire so ardently, and without which they can neither subsist nor be maintained? The first is the breast of compassion, by which one supports them and has pity for their foibles, infirmities, and sins. It is what allows one with a grand charity to sympathize with them, to console them, and to soothe and caress them in order to attract them to God and to aide them sweetly to withdraw themselves from the evil state in which they are plunged. In a word, by this compassion one is made, in a certain fashion, similar to them in order to gain them more easily. And it is the mark of true devotion and of good
prayer, that of being made in the example of the great Apostle, "all to all, in order to gain all" (1 Cor 9:22).

Do you wish to know if you have prayed well and if you have kissed Our Lord with the kiss of the mouth? Look to see whether you have a breast full of sweet and charitable affections towards your neighbor and whether your heart is disposed to provide for him in all his necessities and to support him lovingly in all sorts of occasions. For the prayer which enflames us and makes us presume to be something greater than others, and which carries us to scorn our neighbor as imperfect, causing us to correct his faults with arrogance and without compassion, is not good and is not at all done in charity, truth, and sincerity. It happens sometimes that we find ourselves with an arid heart; but if we celebrate with reverence and devotion the holy Sacrifice of the Mass, or if we participate in the divine office, or if we should make a good prayer, we proceed from it with a breast so replenished with charity and holy affections, that it seems that we can endure whomever we have found in order to share the consolations we have received from the bountiful hand of Our Lord.

The second breast that the companions desire from the Spouse is the breast of congratulation, by which one is consoled and rejoices in the good and the advancement of the neighbor as in her own. Do you find someone who has begun to serve God faithfully and who has made some progress in the way of holy devotion? It is necessary to rejoice with him and to give him courage not only to persevere, but even more so, to make progress and no more to be wearied or discouraged about the difficulties which he will encounter, by representing to him the excellence of the good which we claim and by exhorting him to march diligently and faithfully such as by the day and in "the light" (cf. John 12: 34,36). Courage, we must say to him, we have already made some little progress in the way of the spiritual life; let us go a little farther, let us walk another mile on the way, since we will benefit from it. And thus will we take a great interest, in order to lead souls to God.

We have a rare and excellent example of this in the glorious St. Paul, when he said with a heart full of an ardent charity: "I die all the days for you," O Corinthians (1 Cor 15:31), meaning the extreme care and the great desire that I have for your salvation makes me die "all the days." And this trait of this same Apostle, is it not admirable when, pressed by the ardent affection that he had for the salvation of the Jews, he quitted, in some sort, his own interest that he should desire "of being anathema" for them: "I could even wish to be separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers" (Rom 9:3)? Is it not admirable that he should love his divine Master so much that he could say: "I live no longer" in "myself, but it is Jesus Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20)?

Do you wish to see another good example of this ardent charity for the salvation of one's neighbor? You will find it in the life of the blessed St. Martin. The great servant of God, having holily completed the pilgrimage of his life and seeing himself on the point of entering into his so much desired fatherland, in order to receive the recompense of his travails and to kiss Our Lord with the kiss of the mouth by a perfect union with his divine Majesty, already his soul fluttered in order to fly away to this good tree of immortality, when a great number of the Religious and the spiritual children that he had engendered to Our Lord cast themselves down around him and began to cry and to say to him: Alas, my Father, do you wish to leave us? Do you wish to leave our flock without a shepherd, open to the mercy of the wolves who without
doubt will ravish it after your departure? Have pity on your children, and do not take away so
soon the breast of your charity. Having understood, this great servant of God, touched with a
paternal affection and despoiled of his own interest, lifted his hands and eyes to Heaven where
his heart had already taken its place, and said these beautiful words: Domine, si adhuc populo tuo
sum necessarius, non recuso laborem. O Lord, although by your grace I would wish soon to
rejoice in the good after which I have so deeply aspired, nevertheless if I am further necessary to
these souls for their salvation, I do not at all refuse to dwell any longer in this exile. I resign
myself entirely to your most holy will.

Behold, then, what are the breasts of the Spouse and of the Bridegroom. Behold the fruits of a
perfect prayer, which is made not only at certain hours and at certain limited times, but further by
some elevations of the spirit and some flights of the heart to God, which one calls ejaculatory
prayers, and by some frequent acts of union of our will with that of God, which can be made at
every moment and on all sorts of occasions.

But other than that which we have said for the explication of this passage (your breasts are
better than wine and they pour forth fragrances more suave than the most exquisite unctions),
several Doctors who have written about this subject say that by these breasts are represented to
us the two Testaments, namely by the left breast the Old Testament, which comprised a law of
fear, and by the right breast the New Testament, which comprises a law entirely of love. And
they say that it is necessary to foster the children of the Church, who are the Christians, with
these two breasts, seeing that it is necessary to sustain them by fear and to animate them by love,
which without fear becomes easily slackened, and fear without love discourages and enfeebles
the heart and the spirit. But this breast of fear is not the breast of the spouse, only that of servants
and of valets, to whom it is necessary to give the fear of chastisements in order to keep them in
line in their duty and in the observance of the commandments of God. Certainly the fear of hell
is one of the more powerful motives which we could have to hold us in check and to impede us
from transgressing the law of God -- that is why fear is good. But for the spouses this motive is
too scurrilous and too lowly, for they do not wish any breast other than that of love.

Some other Doctors have said that the breasts of Our Lord represent to us faith and the
Sacraments. Faith is given to us by the word: "Faith comes through hearing and what is heard
is the word of God" (Rom 10:17). For the word of God is a milk which nourishes souls, and we
can only have faith by this divine word and can participate in this holy Sacrament only if we are
faithful to the belief which it teaches us.

But I would have never made it seem that I would wish to understand all the considerations
which the Doctors offer about this passage. I concern myself only with the two that follow, and I
will say that the breasts of Our Lord are hope and love. Now these two breasts are properly those
of the spouses, for although hope of eternal rewards is not as noble and excellent a motive as that
of love, it is nonetheless sometimes expedient to make use of it in order to animate ourselves to
love. And even David, whose soul was truly a spouse, since he was "according to the heart" of
God (1 Kings 13:14), confesses nevertheless that he had made use of this motive: O Lord, he
says, "I have inclined my heart to keep your commandments because of the great rewards" which
you give to those who observe them (Ps 118:42).
It will happen sometimes that we will love as much as or more than ever, and that nevertheless we fear the contrary, seeing that we do not have the sentiment of it. For sure, there is much difference between the love which makes us do the good and the sentiment of love. (I mean that sentiment which replenishes our soul and our spirit with a great satisfaction and gives to our heart a consolation so sensible that sometimes it gushes forth to the outside.) Now, when God takes this sentiment away from us, it is not necessary to be discouraged nor to think that we have no more love, provided that we have a strong resolution of never wishing to displease him, which is that in which consists the perfect and veritable love. And then it is good to return our heart to the breast of hope, in order to encourage and comfort it, assuring it that it will rejoice one day in that which it loves and that if now this divine Bridegroom seems to absent himself, this will not be forever.

It is said in Genesis that an Angel, appearing to Jacob near the bank of the Jabbok, wrestled all night against him (Gen 32:22-26). And when the sunrise began to dawn, the Angel, wishing to quit, says to him, do not hold me back anymore: "Let me go, for it is daybreak." No, says Jacob, "I will not let you go until you have given me your blessing." Now this blessing which Jacob demanded so incessantly signifies to us the hope of rejoicing with God in the future life. But the Spouse, entirely smitten by the love of her divine Bridegroom, does not content herself with the hope of possessing him one day in eternal glory. Instead she wishes further to rejoice in his presence beginning now in this mortal life. And to the end of obtaining this good, you see what diligence she exercises in order to find him, after which, by the negligence which she showed in opening her door to him, he had passed beyond (Cant 5:2-8): I will arise, she says, and will search for the one whom my soul cherishes, by all the streets and crossroads of the city. Behold, I beg you, with what promptitude she runs after him and how she passes among the guards of the city, without fearing any difficulty. Then, having finally found him, see with what ardor she throws herself at his feet and embraces him at the knees, all transported by joy: Ah, I hold him, she says, the Beloved of my soul; I will not let him go until I have introduced him into the house of my mother (Cant 3:2-4).

But consider, I beg you, the ardent love of this Spouse. Certainly nothing can content her except the presence of her Beloved. She does not want any blessings; nor does she stop herself at the hope of goods to come, as did Jacob. She wants only her God, and provided that she possess him, she is content. Finally, she says: I have found him whom I love; I hold him and will not leave him until I have introduced him in the house of my mother, which is the heavenly Jerusalem, which is nothing other than Paradise. And there further I will not leave him, for not only will I not want to leave him, but I will be then so perfectly united with him that never will any other thing be able to separate me from him. Behold, therefore, what is the love of the Spouse toward her Beloved.

We have, it seems to me, clearly demonstrated, by that which we have said, what are the breasts of Our Lord. It is necessary now to know how and in what way one can suckle them. I say in the first place that in order to suckle the breasts of Our Lord, it is necessary to be rendered similar to little infants, for you know that it is only to them that one gives the breasts. But how will we make ourselves resemble little infants? Listen to the Apostle St. Peter instructing and giving this lesson to the first Christians (1 Peter 2:2). He says, "be without deceit" and without pretense "as (little) infants," a lesson which he had learned in the school of the Savior, when he said to his Apostles, "be simple as doves" (Matt 10:16). Consider, I beg you, how all these words
correspond so well, for St. Peter says "be without deceit" and without pretense, which is as if he had said, have a great simplicity.

But in order to suckle these divine breasts, it is further necessary to be hungry. You sometimes see some infants who do not wish to take the breast because their stomach is full of catarrh, [9] in the manner that not having any hunger, one cannot make them suckle, although nourishment provokes them and she presents to them her bosom. It is necessary, therefore, to be hungry in order to suckle the divine breasts of our Saviour. But what is the hunger of the soul? It is nothing else than desire. Certainly if we do not have a great desire for divine love, we will never obtain it. For how could we obtain it and receive the consolations of Our Lord when our understanding comes to him all distracted, our memory is filled and occupied with a thousand vain and useless things, and our will is attached to the things of the earth? It is necessary, therefore, to have the stomach of our souls empty, if we wish to suckle the breasts of Our Lord and to receive his holy graces, just as Our Lady informs us in her sacred Canticle, when she says that God "has replenished with goods those who were hungry," but that for "the rich," meaning those being full and satiated by the things of the world, he has rejected them and has not given them anything: "The hungry he has given every good thing, while the rich he has sent empty away" (Luke 1:53). By these words this Holy Virgin informs us that God communicates his graces and replenishes with goods only those who have this spiritual hunger and who are emptied of themselves and of worldly and mundane things. O God, my dear Daughters, have therefore this hunger for the love of our Lord and let us endeavor to render ourselves "similar to little infants" (1 Peter 2:2), to the end that he give us his divine breasts to suckle and that he take us within his arms and place us in his sacred bosom.

Holy Scripture teaches us that, when this divine Savior of our souls was in this world conversing with men, he caressed the little children, embraced them, and took them in his arms, as he did to little St. Martial or St. Ignatius the martyr, following the opinion of several Doctors, [10] who say that Our Lord, while holding him one day between his arms and considering him, he turned toward his disciples and says to them: "Truly, if you are not made like this little child, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:1-4; 19:13-15; Mark 9:35; 10:13-16). This means that if we do not have the simplicity, sweetness and humility of a little child, and if we are not at repose between the arms of Our Lord by a complete resignation and perfect confidence, as the infant between the arms of its mother, we will not enter into his kingdom.

Now the holy Prophet David speaks excellently of this humility in Psalm 131: "Lord," he says, "I do not have a proud heart and my eyes are not haughty." He means this: although you have elevated me to the honors and favors so grand as of carrying me upon your bosom and of giving me your divine breasts to suck, nevertheless I have not lifted my look to haughty things, nor have I withdrawn my eyes from upon the earth, which is my origin and to which I must return (cf. Gen 3:19). Since I have always borne a lowly appearance, in consideration of my nothingness and my abjection, "my heart is not inflamed" with arrogance for the great graces which you have given me. "I have not walked" more haughtily than it has pertained to me, and "have not carried my understanding to the search for" curious and "admirable things."

Certainly this holy Prophet knew well that it is necessary to approach this divine Majesty with a great simplicity and humility. "If I am not" abased and "humbled," he says, behold, O Lord, that
which I wish would happen to me: "Like a weaned child on its mother's lap, so is my soul within me." It is as if you would separate me from you and would withdraw me from your sacred breasts, and I would dwell "as the child severed before its time," who no longer does anything except languish, cry, groan, lament, and regret its loss. If, therefore, "I have" always "been lowly," vile and abject in my eyes and in my own judgment, "so be it done to my soul" (Ps 131). Behold that which the Prophet wishes would happen to him, if he does not walk before God in a spirit of humility. O sure, it is true that this virtue has an incomparable power beyond all others to elevate us to God and to render us capable of suckling his divine breasts, which he gives only to the lowly and humble of heart. This is why I exhort you, my dear Daughters, in order to finish this discourse, to exercise yourselves faithfully in the practice of this virtue. For by it you will receive your most grand graces in this life and you will attain your end in eternal glory, where it will lead us to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Notes


2. Soto, Interp. in Cant., ad locum.


7. St. Ambrose, Exposition of Psalm 118, sermon 1 § 5; Origen; Venerable Bede, in Cant.


9. "Catarrh" - an inflammation of a mucous membrane, especially one chronically affecting the human nose and air passages.

10. The common opinion, that which St. Francis de Sales shares, as one sees in the Treatise on the Love of God (bk. 1, ch. 9 and bk. 7, ch. 2), is that the blessed infant embraced in the arms of the Savior was St. Martial, who died as bishop of Limoges. Nicephore is the first one to have advanced the idea that this infant was St. Ignatius the martyr (Histor. Eccles., bk. II, ch. 35); yet he does not give any proof of this assertion. Perhaps it is founded on the title of "Theophorus" attributed to the holy Patriarch of Antioch, for although this denomination signifies "Bearer of God", it could further be interpreted "Carried by God."