

# THE WEEK OF THE BRIDEGROOM

## A Reflection on the Passion, Death, & Resurrection Like You've Never Heard Before

By Christopher West

### 1. Nard-Nard...

Six days before Passover (see Jn 12), Jesus came to Bethany. While he was reclining at the table, a woman approached him with an alabaster jar of costly genuine nard. She broke the jar, and poured it on his head (see Mk 14). “In pouring this perfumed oil upon my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of, in memory of her” (Mt 26:12-13).

**1a.** “While the king was upon his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance” (Song 1:12). “You are a garden enclosed, my sister, my bride ... with fruits of choicest yield: Henna with nard, nard and saffron, sweet cane and cinnamon” (Song 4:12-14).

**1b.** The *Song of Songs* ultimately describes “God’s relation to man and man’s relation to God. Thus the *Song of Songs* became ... an expression of the essence of biblical faith: that man can indeed enter into union with God – his primordial aspiration” (Benedict XVI, DC 10).

### 2. The Essence of Biblical Faith: God Wants to Marry Us

“‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31-32).

**2a.** “Marriage is the icon of God’s love for us” (Francis, AL 121). A “love lacking either pleasure or passion is insufficient to symbolize the union of the human heart with God: ‘All the mystics have affirmed that supernatural love and heavenly love find the symbols which they seek in marital love’” (Francis, AL 142).

**2b.** God’s “love may certainly be called *eros*.” Indeed, the Prophets “described God’s passion for his people using boldly erotic images. ... *Eros* is thus supremely ennobled ... so purified as to become one with *agape*” (Benedict XVI, DC 9).

**2c.** “Eros is part of God’s very Heart: the Almighty awaits the ‘yes’ of his creatures as a young bridegroom that of his bride. ... On the Cross, God’s eros for us is made manifest. Eros is indeed ... that force which ‘does not allow the lover to remain in himself but moves him to become one with the beloved.’ Is there more ‘mad eros’ ... than that which led the Son of God to make himself one with us even to the point of suffering as his own the consequences of our offences?” (Benedict XVI, Lenten Message 2007).

### 3. “The Week of the Bridegroom”

Byzantine Catholics call Holy Week “The Week of the Bridegroom.” Jesus himself spoke of Holy Week as the time “when the bridegroom is taken away” (Mk 2:20).

**3a.** When “Jesus speaks of the departure of the bridegroom, he is referring to one particular part of the seven-day wedding celebration [that was customary in Jewish culture]: the night of consummation. ... On the night of consummation, the bridegroom would leave his friends and family and enter into ... the ‘bridal chamber’ in order to be united with his bride, not to emerge again until morning” (Brant Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, p. 90).

The “night of consummation” would begin at the Last Supper and last until he emerged from the tomb on Easter morning. After Christ utters his last words “*Consummatum est*” (Jn 19:30), the veil in the temple before the holy of holies “was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mk 15:38).

#### 4. Entering the Holy of Holies

“When Christ came as high priest ... he passed through the greater and more perfect tabernacle ... not belonging to this creation, and entered once and for all into the [heavenly] sanctuary” (Heb 9:11-12), thus opening the gates of heaven for us all.

- The Jewish bridal chamber was both designed and decorated to resemble the tabernacle, the holy of holies ... the most intimate dwelling of the divine, which only the high priest/bridegroom could enter (see Brant Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, pp. 92-93).
- We now have “confidence of entrance into the sanctuary by the new and living way he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh” (Heb 9:19-20). “In the liturgy,” wrote Pope Benedict XVI, “the curtain between heaven and earth is torn open” (*Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 125), and Christ invites us to *enter behind the veil* into the bridal chamber to be united with him in an eternal embrace...

**4a.** “The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism ... is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist” (CCC 1617). “*The Eucharist is the... sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride*” (John Paul II, MD 26).

#### 5. The Holy Eros of Easter

To symbolize the openness of the bridal chamber to all, during Easter week, the doors of the icon screen that separate the holy of holies from the nave in a Byzantine church are kept opened (and only during this time). Fully aware of the nuptial symbolism, the saints of the early Church composed these prayers that Byzantine Catholics still chant throughout Easter:

**5a.** *O Passover, save us from sorrow, for today Christ has shown forth from the tomb as from a bridal chamber and filled the women with joy...*

**5b.** *When you arose from the tomb, O Christ, you preserved its seal intact, just as in your holy birth, a virgin’s vow was unbroken, you opened to us the gates of paradise.*

Christ was born from a virginal womb and was born again from a virginal tomb. As John reports, no one had been laid in that tomb prior to Jesus (see Jn 19:41). John also states that Christ’s burial coverings were left behind (see Jn 20:5-7). This signifies that “Christ’s body had escaped the bonds of death and corruption” (CCC 657). Countless saints have observed the parallel: the New Adam comes out of the ground in a garden just as the first Adam did: “naked without shame” (Gen 2:25) ... and fragrant with the garden’s nard...

**5c.** In the Song of Songs, eros cries out for a love that is “strong as death” (8:6). This boundless demand of eros gives expression to the basic problem of human existence: the heart demands infinity but cannot grant it; it claims eternity but is bound to the world of death and its loneliness. To the Christian, faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the expression of the certainty that [this] saying which seems to be only a beautiful dream is in fact true: “Love is strong as death” (see Benedict XVI, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 230).

**5d.** Man’s “aching desire for [the infinite is] like a signature imprinted with fire in his soul and body by the Creator himself. ... The heart’s thirst and the body’s longing ... cannot be eliminated; thus, man unknowingly stretches out in search of the Infinite, but in misguided directions: in drugs, in sexuality lived in a disordered manner, in all-encompassing technologies, in success at any cost, and even in deceptive forms of religiosity.” But “the dynamism of desire is always open to redemption.” The pilgrimage of *eros* is not “about suffocating the longing that dwells in the heart of man, but about freeing it, so that it can reach its true height” (Benedict XVI, Aug 10 and Nov 7, 2012).