



SIEBENQUELL

Bowl or Canal?



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Several years ago we spent an intensive weekend of bibliodrama with Nico Derksen, whereby intensive is putting it mildly. The topic of these days was the Song of Songs. The wondrously beautiful, poetic and warm words of the text shook us as we noticed, that the search for love not only demanded a struggle of us, but that it almost always required a different attitude from us than our romantic expectations led us to believe.

By far the most daunting struggle lay therein, to be a recipient of love. As long as we were active and involved, as long as we were seeking, we felt more or less comfortable. Yet, when we had to wait, when we had to receive and let ourselves be filled, we struggled mightily.

If it is a high art to become a giver of love, then it is assuredly a far more difficult task to become a recipient of love. As mothers and fathers we can wonderful provide for our children without ever being able to accept even the smallest token from them. As teachers we can give our students our all, without the least willingness to receive something from them. We can even give everything to God, all that we have and all that we are, without be willing to be gifted by him. After all, what is more difficult for us to profess as believers: »God, I want to love you!«, or »I am a person beloved by God.«? Which sentence crosses our lips more readily? Which sentence do we believe more readily?

Bernhard of Clairvaux loved the Song of Songs and preached often about the stories this song passes on. His words about bowls and canals mirror the eternal struggle of lovers: Can we only pass love on or are we capable of receiving it as well?

The man who is wise, therefore, will see his life as more like a bowl than a canal.
The canal simultaneously pours out what it receives;
the bowl retains the water until it is filled,
then discharges the overflow without loss to itself.
He knows that a curse is on the man who allows his own property to degenerate.
Today there are many in the Church who act like canals,
the bowls are far too rare.
So urgent is the charity of those through whom the streams of heavenly doctrine flow to us,
that they want to pour it forth before they have been filled;
they are more ready to speak than to listen,
impatient to teach what they have not grasped,
and full of presumption to govern others while they know not how to govern themselves.
You too must learn to await this fullness before pouring out your gifts,
do not try to be more generous than God.
The bowl resembles the fountain that runs to form a stream
or spreads to form a pool only when its own waters are brimming over.
The bowl is not ashamed to be no more lavish than the spring that fills it.
You must imitate this process.
First be filled, and then control the outpouring.
The charity that is benign and prudent does not flow outwards until it abounds within.
I cannot see myself being enriched by your wasting of your powers.
For if you are mean to yourself, to whom will you be good?
Help me out of your abundance if you have it;
if not, then spare yourself the trouble.

Bernhard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153), from Sermon 18 to the Song of Songs

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