



## The Odour of Spikenard

by St. Gregory of Nyssa (4th Century)

(extract from St. Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Commentary on the Song of Solomon)

*My spikenard sent forth the odour of him (Cant. i.ii)*

There are many different perfumes, not all equally fragrant, from which a certain harmonious and artistic blend produces a very special kind of ointment called spikenard, taking its name from one of the fragrant herbs that are compounded in it. It is the result of many different perfumes coalescing into a single fragrance; and this is the sweet scent which the Bridegroom perceives with pure senses. In this text I think that the Word teaches us that by His very nature He transcends the entire order and structure of the created universe, that He is inaccessible, intangible, and incomprehensible. But in His stead we have this perfume within us distilled from the perfection of our virtues; and this imitates in its purity His essential incorruptibility, in its goodness His goodness, in its immortality His immortality, in its stability His immutability, and in all the virtues we possess we represent His true virtue, which as the prophet Habacuc says, covers all the heavens (Hab. 3.3).

And so when the bride says to the friends of the Bridegroom, *My spikenard sent forth the odour of him* (Cant. i.ii), this is the profound lesson I think she is teaching us. It is that even though one may gather from all the different meadows of virtue every perfume and every flower of fragrance, and should make his whole life fragrant with the good odor of all these virtuous actions, and become perfect in this way, even then he would not be able to look steadily upon the Word of God, no more than he could the sun. But he can look upon this Sun within himself as in a mirror. For the all perfect virtue of God sends forth rays of sinlessness to illuminate the lives of those who are pure; and these rays make the invisible visible, and allow us to comprehend the inaccessible by impressing an image of the Sun upon the mirror of our souls. Now as far as our interpretation goes, it is much the same thing to speak of the sun's rays, or the emanations of virtue, or the fragrance of perfume. For no matter which of these analogies we use for the purpose of our discourse, the underlying idea is one and the same: that it is through our virtues that we derive a knowledge of the Good that surpasses all understanding...