The notions of humanism and medieval monasticism seem to be contradictory. Since the former is usually seen as a secular development in the Renaissance, one is not immediately inclined to associate humanist anthropology with the writings of monks. However, when one browses through the writings of monastic authors such as Bernard of Clairvaux and his disciples, or Isaac of Stella, who will be the main subject of this contribution, one does encounter a type of humanist discourse that gives man pre-eminence in creation, that extols the ideals of Christian instruction and that can quite justifiably be termed ‘Christian humanism’. This contribution focuses on the key concepts of solitude and the longing for God in what can arguably be looked upon as a man-centred anthropology and a Christian humanist discourse in the theology of Isaac of Stella, especially as exemplified in his ninth sermon.¹

R. W. Southern identifies three distinguishing features of medieval humanism in the period from 1100 to 1320.² First, there is a sense of the dignity of human nature. In spite of theology’s stress on the fallen nature of man and the consequent inability to acquire immediate knowledge of God, monastic authors always retained the idea that man is the noblest of God’s creatures and that he has the instruments to look into himself to catch a glimpse of God. Secondly, according to Southern, there is the awareness of the dignity of nature. This is, of course, linked with the first point, because man has a central position in nature. Thirdly, there is the understanding that the whole universe is intelligible and accessible to man. It is possible for man to understand the laws of nature and to know himself as part of creation. These humanist traits, however, are embedded in a deep conviction that humanity is a vehicle for divine activity. Man was expelled from paradise and only through prayer, penance and the protection of the saints is there hope of salvation. Yet, nevertheless, this awareness

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of human abilities and man’s central position supports and underscores the great emphasis that monastic authors such as Isaac of Stella placed on instruction, introspection and reading. Man understands creation and Scripture through symbols and allegories in which he can glean knowledge of the divine.

There are several places in the sermons of Isaac where the importance of allegorical readings is emphasised and elaborated upon, especially in the fields of morality and epistemology. In his sermon on the first of the Beatitudes (from the sermon on the mount), Isaac states: “Although the literal sense, beloved, makes reference to an earthly mountain and an exterior crowd, it is upon the allegorical sense that I wish to focus attention, especially upon that which will most teach us how to live and build us up on the one foundation”. In the sermon on the wedding-feast at Cana he writes: “The book of wisdom written on the inside of the page and on the outside enables both those who seek within and those content with what is without to find pasture. On the outside you find the story; the secret moral meaning is inside”. Humanity knows Scripture and creation by using symbols and allegories, but how does mankind know that these symbols and allegories say something about the truth of creation and Scripture? In Sermon sixteen, the first sermon for Septuagesima, Isaac deals with this question in his interpretation of Matthew 20 (“Here is an image of the kingdom of God”) when he draws this pericope on the image of the kingdom into the field of epistemology: “In any case, whatever may be said of anything with wisdom and truth, no matter what form it takes, exists from eternity, totally contained at once and forever in every possible way in eternal wisdom and truth” [italics mine, JN]. The temporal and the eternal are brought together by the Spirit of God, so that any truth that we think, speak or write must of necessity be guided by the Holy Spirit. Isaac goes further and connects a frame of mind with a condition of the heart: “Take any exegete you like who takes the same text in different ways at various times: as long as he agrees with truth and love, he can claim the approval of the Holy Spirit”. In Isaac’s thought love can become a principle of verification: “What goes against love must not be passed off as truth; what is contrary to truth cannot be called love”. Isaac’s motives for preaching take him beyond the principles of simple exegesis and he seems to be consciously aware of his wider range of moral and theological concerns:

These few remarks, brothers, are a sort of preface so that should you hear something unusual or something that differs from what you have elsewhere read (I may be somewhat bold) you will not think that I am altogether unaware of the fathers or despise their opinions or that I am foolishly rejoicing in my own ideas. […] My purpose is not so much to explain the readings of the holy Gospel as it is to take the op-

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3 Isaac of Stella, Sermon 1.4, in *Sermons*, transl. McCafery (as in n. 1), p. 4.
4 Isaac of Stella, Sermon 9, in *Sermons*, transl. McCafery (as in n. 1), p. 73.
5 Isaac of Stella, Sermon 16, in *Sermons*, transl. McCafery (as in n. 1), p. 129.
6 Isaac of Stella, Sermon 16, in *Sermons*, transl. McCafery (as in n. 1), p. 130.
7 Isaac of Stella, Sermon 16, in *Sermons*, transl. McCafery (as in n. 1), p. 130.