

The Fire of Love

into nothingness; the nature of true love is steady, lasting, sweet, easy, and beneficial; false love is poisonous, disgraceful, and rotten.

42. *The sweetness and happiness of the love of God; the song of the nightingale; a prayer for the continuation of genuine, spiritual song, not had by lovers of the world.*

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PROLOGUE

I CANNOT tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was real warmth too, not imaginary, and it felt as if it were actually on fire. I was astonished at the way the heat surged up, and how this new sensation brought great and unexpected comfort. I had to keep feeling my breast to make sure there was no physical reason for it! But once I realized that it came entirely from within, that this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful, but was the gift of my Maker, I was absolutely delighted, and wanted my love to be even greater. And this longing was all the more urgent because of the delightful effect and the interior sweetness which this spiritual flame fed into my soul. Before the infusion of this comfort I had never thought that we exiles could possibly have known such warmth, so sweet was the devotion it kindled. It set my soul aglow as if a real fire was burning there.

Yet as some may well remind us, there are people on fire with love for Christ, for we can see how utterly they despise the world, and how wholly they are given over to the service of God. If we put our finger near a fire we feel the heat; in much the same way a soul on fire with love feels, I say, a genuine warmth. Sometimes it is more, sometimes less: it depends on our particular capacity.

What mortal man could survive that heat at its peak – as we can know it, even here – if it persisted? He must inevitably wilt before the vastness and sweetness of love so fervid, and heat so indescribable. Yet at the same time he is bound to long eagerly for just this to happen: to breathe his soul out, with all its superb endowment of mind, in this honeyed flame, and, quit of this world, be held in thrall with those who sing their Maker's praise.

But some things are opposed to charity: carnal, sordid things which beguile a mind at peace. And sometimes in

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this bitter exile physical need and strong human affection obtrude into this warmth, to disturb and quench this flame (which metaphorically I call 'fire', because it burns and enlightens). They cannot take away what is irremovable, of course, because this is something which has taken hold of my heart. Yet because of these things this cheering warmth is for a while absent. It will reappear in time, though until it does I am going to be spiritually frozen, and because I am missing what I have become accustomed to, will feel myself bereft. It is then that I want to recapture that awareness of inner fire which my whole being, physical as well as spiritual, so much approves; with it it knows itself to be secure.

Nowadays I find that even sleep ranges itself against me! The only spare time I have is that which I am obliged to give to slumber. When I am awake I can try to warm my soul up, though it is numb with cold. For I know how to kindle it when the soul is settled in devotion and how to raise it above earthly things with overwhelming desire. But this eternal and overflowing love does not come when I am relaxing, nor do I feel this spiritual ardour when I am tired out after, say, travelling; nor is it when I am absorbed with worldly interests, or engrossed in never-ending arguments. At times like these I catch myself growing cold: cold until once again I put away all things external, and make a real effort to stand in my Saviour's presence: only then do I abide in this inner warmth.

I offer, therefore, this book for the attention, not of the philosophers and sages of this world, not of great theologians bogged down in their interminable questionings, but of the simple and unlearned, who are seeking rather to love God than to amass knowledge. For he is not known by argument, but by what we do and how we love. I think that while the matters contained in such questionings are the most demanding of all intellectually, they are much less important when the love of Christ is under consideration. Anyhow they are impossible to understand! So I have not written for the experts, unless they have forgotten and put

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behind them all those things that belong to the world; unless now they are eager to surrender to a longing for God.

To achieve this however they must, first, fly from every worldly honour; they must hate all vainglory and the parade of knowledge. And then, conditioned by great poverty, through prayer and meditation they can devote themselves to the love of God. It will not be surprising if then an inner spark of the uncreated charity should appear to them and prepare their hearts for the fire which consumes everything that is dark, and raises them to that pitch of ardour which is so lovely and pleasant. Then will they pass beyond the things of time, and sit enthroned in infinite peace. The more learned they are, the more ability they naturally have for loving, always provided of course that they both despise themselves, and rejoice to be despised by others. And so, because I would stir up by these means every man to love God, and because I am trying to make plain the ardent nature of love and how it is supernatural, the title selected for this book will be *The Fire of Love*.

CHAPTER I

Man's conversion to God, and matters that help or hinder his conversion.

EVERYONE who lives in this deplorable exile of ours knows that he cannot be filled with a love of eternity, or anointed with the sweet oil of heaven, unless he be truly converted to God. Before he can experience even a little of God's love he must really be turned to him, and, in mind at least, be wholly turned from every earthly thing. The turning indeed is a matter of duly ordered love, so that, first, he loves what he ought to love and not what he ought not, and, second, his love kindles more towards the former than to the latter. God is to be loved, of course, most of all: heavenly things too are to be much loved; but little love, or at least no more than is necessary, may be given to earthly things. This surely is the way a man turns to Christ: to desire nothing but him. To turn away from those 'good things' of the world, which pervert rather than protect those who love them, involves the withering of physical lust and the hatred of wickedness of any sort. So you will find there are people who have no taste for earthly things, and who deal with mundane matters no more than is absolutely necessary.

Because those who amass fortunes find comfort in such things – they do not know who will ultimately reap the benefit! – they are not therefore entitled to enjoy even a little cheerful, comforting, heavenly love. Yet they reckon they have had already some experience of future bliss – at least they say so – because of their devotion, a devotion which is feigned, and not genuinely holy. But surely it is this graceless presumption that will bring about their downfall, for their love for earthly treasure is unlimited. What is more, they will fall from the sweetness with which God delights his lovers. All love which is not God-directed

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is bad love, and makes its possessors bad too. And this is the reason why those who love worldly splendour with an evil love catch fire of a different sort, and separate themselves ever further from the fire of divine love, further in fact than the distance separating highest heaven from lowest earth! Indeed such people become like what they love, for they take their tone from the greed of their day and age. Because they will not give up their old ways they come to prefer life's specious emptiness to the warmth of happiness. They exchange the glory of incorruptible charity for a fleeting lust of 'beauty'. And this they could not possibly do were they not blinded by a counterfeit 'fire of love', which both devastates virtue at its source, and encourages vice in its growth.

Yet on the other hand there are many who, because they care nothing for feminine beauty or riotous living, reckon therefore that they will be sure of salvation. Because of this chastity, outward and visible, they see themselves as saints standing out from the rest. But this is a wrong and silly assumption if they are not at the same time destroying the real root of sin, greed. As the Bible says, there is nothing worse than the love of money,¹ for it means that one's heart is everlastingly bothering about the love of the transitory, and not giving itself a chance to acquire devotion. Love for God and love for the world cannot coexist in the same soul: the stronger drives out the weaker, and it soon appears who loves the world, and who follows Christ. The strength of people's love is shown in what they do. The lovers of Christ set themselves against the world and the flesh, just as those who love the world oppose God and their own soul.

The elect of God, indeed, eat and drink 'in God', and all their thinking is directed Godwards; they attend to mundane matters only as need – not lust – may require. They have to talk of earthly things of course, but they do so with reluctance, and they never dwell thereon. Mentally they turn back to God with all speed, and spend the rest of the time with divine duties. They neither loaf nor gad about

1. 1 Timothy 6:10.

after the spectacular or the frivolous – the mark of the reprobate! – for they sincerely care for the things which belong to God. Nor are they backward in speaking about these things, or doing them, or meditating upon them.

The reprobate on the other hand regard the things of God altogether too casually. His word they hear inattentively, their prayers they offer without love, their meditations are made without pleasure. Admittedly they go to church and even pack it to the doors: they beat their breasts and heave great sighs, but none of this means a thing. Seen of men they may be; heard of God they are not. While they are physically in the house of God, mentally they are miles away, thinking of the worldly goods they possess or would like to have, their hearts far from God. They eat and drink, not because they need to, but because they want to, and in sex and food they find all their enjoyment and pleasure. They give bread in plenty to the poor, and perhaps will clothe the cold with a coat, but all the time they are doing their alms in mortal sin, for show. Certainly when they do these things with means unjustly gotten, it is not surprising that they do not please their Redeemer, but rather provoke their Judge to vengeance.

Just as the elect of God, when they are seeing to the needs of the world or of the body, direct their thoughts Godwards, so the reprobate, when they seem to be serving God, are inwardly thinking of the world and things which have to do with worldly or carnal greed. And just as the elect in the relief of need do not grieve God, so the reprobate seemingly busy with good deeds do not please him, because they adulterate their good deeds with bad.

The devil has got hold of many whom we count good. For he possesses those who are merciful, chaste, and humble – self-confessed sinners to a man, of course, hair-shirted and penance-laden! Very often indeed are mortal wounds obscured by the odour of sanctity. He has the busy worker, the compelling preacher, but not, surely, the man whose heart is aglow with charity, ever eager to love God and indifferent to vanity. The eager love of the wicked on

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the other hand is for what is shameful. They have ceased from all spiritual exercise, or at least are flabby and very feeble. Their love has no pattern, being given more to things temporal than eternal, more to bodies than to souls.

CHAPTER 2

No one attains supreme devotion quickly, or is refreshed by the sweetness of contemplation.

It is obvious to those who are in love that no one attains the heights of devotion at once, or is ravished with contemplative sweetness. In fact it is only very occasionally – and then only momentarily – that they are allowed to experience heavenly things; their progress to spiritual strength is a gradual one. When they have attained the gravity of behaviour so necessary and have achieved a certain stability of mind – as much as changing circumstances permit – a certain perfection is acquired after great labour. It is then that they can feel some joy in loving God.

Notwithstanding, it appears that all those who are mighty performers in virtue immediately and genuinely experience the warmth of uncreated or created charity, melt in the immense fire of love, and sing within their hearts the song of divine praise. For this mystery is hidden from the many, and is revealed to the few, and those the most special. So the more sublime such a level is, the fewer – in this world – are those who find it. Rarely in fact have we found a man who is so holy or even perfect in this earthly life endowed with love so great as to be raised up to contemplation to the level of jubilant song. This would mean that he would receive within himself the sound that is sung in heaven, and that he would echo back the praises of God as it were in harmony, pouring forth sweet notes of music and composing spiritual songs as he offers his heavenly praises, and that he would truly experience in his heart the genuine fire of the love of God. It would be surprising if anyone without

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such experience should claim the name of contemplative when the psalmist, speaking in character as the typical contemplative, exclaims, *I will go into the house of the Lord, with the voice of praise and thanksgiving.*¹ The praise, of course, is the praise offered by the banqueter, one who is feeding on heavenly sweetness.

Further, perfect souls who have been caught up into this friendship – surpassing, abundant, and eternal! – discover that life is suffused with imperishable sweetness from the glittering chalice of sweet charity. In holy happy wisdom they inhale joyful heat into their souls, and as a result are much cheered by the indescribable comfort of God's healing medicine. Here at all events is refreshment for those who love their high and eternal heritage, even though in their earthly exile distress befell them. However they think it not unfitting to endure a few years' hardship in order to be raised to heavenly thrones, and never leave them. They have been selected out of all mankind to be the beloved of their Maker and to be crowned with glory, since, like the seraphim in highest heaven, they have been inflamed with the same love. Physically they may have sat in solitary state, but in mind they have companied with angels, and have yearned for their Beloved. Now they sing most sweetly a prayer of love everlasting as they rejoice in Jesus:

O honeyed flame, sweeter than all sweet, delightful beyond all creation!

My God, my Love, surge over me, pierce me by your love, wound me with your beauty.

Surge over me, I say, who am longing for your comfort.

Reveal your healing medicine to your poor lover.

See, my one desire is for you; it is you my heart is seeking.

My soul pants for you; my whole being is athirst for you.

Yet you will not show yourself to me; you look away;

you bar the door, shun me, pass me over;

You even laugh at my innocent sufferings.

1. Psalms 42:4.

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And yet you snatch your lovers away from all earthly things.

You lift them above every desire for worldly matters.

You make them capable of loving you –
and love you they do indeed.

So they offer you their praise in spiritual song
which bursts out from that inner fire;
they know in truth the sweetness of the dart of love.

Ah, eternal and most lovable of all joys,
you raise us from the very depths,
and entrance us with the sight of divine majesty so often!

Come into me, Beloved!

All ever I had I have given up for you;
I have spurned all that was to be mine,
that you might make your home in my heart,
and I your comfort.

Do not forsake me now, smitten with such great longing,
whose consuming desire is to be amongst those who love you.

Grant me to love you,
to rest in you,
that in your kingdom I may be worthy
to appear before you world without end.

CHAPTER 3

Every one who is chosen has his state ordered by God.

THOSE contemplatives who are most on fire with the love of eternity are like those higher beings whose eagerness for eternal love is most enjoyable and outstanding. They never, or scarcely ever, engage in outside activity, or accept the dignity of ecclesiastical preferment or rank. They tend to keep themselves to themselves, ever ready to reach up to Christ with joyful song. In this respect the Church is following the angelic hierarchy, for the supernal angels are

not sent out on errands, but attend closely to God. Similarly the masters of contemplative love give themselves to the things of God, and not to lording it over people. Such matters are reserved for those more concerned for that kind of activity, but less interested in spiritual delight.

Each of God's chosen has his fore-appointed place. That one may have been chosen for advancement, while this is striving to surrender himself wholly to God; God within him is drawing him, and so everything outside is ignored. Such folk are holy indeed, though men in general rate them pretty low, since they rarely go out of their way to do miracles: they prefer rather to remain in interior solitude.

And there are those who quite properly give themselves to serve God in other people, and who control those under them with sensitivity.

Again to others who live lives of unsuspected discipline there are sometimes granted – and made known – 'signs', even before they die; or it may be after death when perhaps they themselves for some period are enduring the sharp afflictions of purgatory! Not every saint does, or has done, a miracle before his death or after; nor, on the other hand, does every reprobate lack one! The judgement of God is hidden indeed. Evil men become worse when they see miracles wrought by sinners; on the other hand, the goodness of those who hold lightly to the things which can be indifferently good or bad increases more and more in the love of their Maker. Admittedly some evil men have done works that are good, but from them they have looked for the praise of men, not of God. When they die, these things die too, for they have had what they were wanting here on earth. It often happens that those whose goodness is second-rate and less than perfect work miracles, but for the most part it is the outstanding ones who now rest wholly in the heavenly places before the Face of God, having their reward amongst the great angelic choirs. This lies behind the special dignity attaching to the Feast of St Michael who is not generally reckoned to belong to one of the top orders of

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angels. So there are certain people who, though they are converted to God and are penitent and have forsaken the affairs of the world, rejoice in the thought that after death their name may be honoured by those who follow them. A faithful servant of Christ, of course, pays no attention to such matters lest he lose all he is working for.

Things common to good and evil alike are not to be sought by God's holy ones, unless it means that charity and spiritual virtues are being planted in our hearts. For these not only keep the soul from the corruption of sin but, at the Judgement, will transform the body too into something for ever memorable. Things done here on earth soon perish, but there they persist for ever – in honour or in confusion! Men of action and rank, even if they are outstanding for their virtue or knowledge, should always put contemplatives before themselves, reckoning them to be their superiors before God, and admitting that they themselves are not capable of contemplation unless, maybe, God's grace should inspire them to it.

CHAPTER 4

The difference between God's lovers and the world's; their rewards.

A HUMAN soul cannot know the fire of eternal love unless first he has completely cut adrift from worldly vanity of every kind. There must be a serious intention to study heavenly things, to long continually for the love of God, and to give every creature its due meed of affection. For if it is for God's sake that we love everything, we love God in it rather than the thing itself. And so we rejoice, not in it but in God – in whom, indeed, we shall glory and rejoice for ever. But evil men are out to enjoy this present world, and they make it the object of their love; they are always seeking things to do with worldly pleasure. What greater folly, more pitiful and damning, can anyone show than to cling