

The Fire of Love

never to be parted. But since this corruptible body bears heavily on the soul, and our earthly dwelling hinders the mind in its much thinking, he cannot always rejoice with the same ease, nor does he always sing with the same clarity and consistency. For sometimes his soul feels warmth and sweetness to be stronger, and then she finds it difficult to sing. Sometimes indeed when she would sing she is rapt with wonderful sweetness and fluency; yet when the warmth is felt to be less she will often fly off into song with the greatest pleasure, and, in ecstasy, she knows that the heat and sweetness are with her in truth. Yet there is never heat without delight, though sometimes it can be without song, for physical singing or noise can hinder it and drive it back into thought.

But in the solitude they meet more openly, for there the Beloved speaks to the heart. It is very much like the bashful lover who will not embrace his girl in public, or even greet her as a friend, but behaves as though she is like anybody else – even as if she were a stranger!

The devout soul who has definitely put away all distracting things, and whose heartfelt desire is only to enjoy the delights of Christ, and who yearns fervently for him, comes soon to the loveliest joy. Melody pours out from him, bringing wonderful pleasure to his soul, which she takes as a sign that from now on she will not be able normally to endure any worldly sound. For this music is spiritual music, unknown to those who are taken up with worldly affairs, lawful or otherwise. And no one has ever known it but he who has striven to have time only for God.

CHAPTER 38

The desire of the lover for God is explained; the love of the world is shown to be detestable by many examples; the remembrance of God does not last long in those who love the world.

No one can untie the knot
by which I bind your love to me, sweet Jesus.
I am seeking the treasure I long for,
but all I can find is longing,
because I never stop thirsting for you!
Yet like the wind my sorrow vanishes,
for my reward is this melody inaudible to human ear.
My inner being is turned into a song wonderfully sweet,
and because of this love I want to die.
Whenever this occurs, and these things
take hold of me and refresh me,
then the size of your gifts dazzles and delights me,
and love's approach tortures me with joy.

But still I lack those things which show the Beloved to the one who longs for him. And this wounds me, and fills me with longing, but gives no ease at all; rather it increases it, because with my growing love my longing increases too. *My life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing*¹ because I am parted from my Beloved, because my desire to die is not satisfied, because the remedy for my wretchedness is still not here. I rise up and cry, *Woe to me that my exile is prolonged*.² Love it is that tortures me, love that delights me. It tortures, because what is loved so much is not immediately granted me; yet it delights, because it refreshes me with hope, and infuses indescribable comfort through its very heat.

For a mighty longing develops when there is in the soul through its joy and love the song of songs, and the fierce

1. Psalms 31:10.

2. Psalms 120:5.

heat produces further sweet delight. For now one likes to think that death is life. For the flower that this thought nourishes can never die, but the splendour which all the while is growing in the lover, and which seems so wonderful, makes of death and music one thing. For when I come to die the fullness of my beatitude which the Almighty, my love, is going to grant me will begin. To be sure, my seat is made ready in that place where love knows no cooling off, no fading into inertia. For his love kindles my heart, because I can already feel his fire; there is no pressure on my spiritual strength while I am wholly held within the consolation of such love.

Nonetheless I faint because of love, and spend all my time in holy sighing. Nor will this be to my disadvantage with the angels of God, for whose fellowship I so ardently yearn, and with whom I too firmly hope and expect to be perfected. On the other hand, joyful praise will cheer the longing one, and the Beatific Vision, so dear and so loved, will reveal itself openly.

But woe indeed to those who have wasted and spent their days in vanity, whose years have swiftly perished with no fruit of charity to show. They long with a love that is unclean for the decadent beauty of the flesh, which is but the cloak for decay and corruption, and leads to a joyless death. On them also a fire has fallen, the fire of greed and wrath, and they will not see the sun of everlasting light. These will go off into the Beyond, still following after vanity; vain like the things they loved. Then, when they are judged, they will see a fierce Christ, and in their eyes intolerable, because in this life they never felt him sweet to their hearts.

But those who do feel in themselves that he is delightful here, undoubtedly will see him in all his attractiveness there. For what he is to us now, such he will appear to us then; to the lover, lovable and desirable; to the non-lover, hateful and cruel. And the difference will not be in him, but in us. He himself is unchangeably the same, but every creature will see him according to his deserts. For he shows

himself voluntarily to each man as he wills. So that at one and the same time he will appear pleased to the righteous, and angry to the unrighteous.

The love of a rational soul behaves in that way, good or bad, according to which it shall be judged. There is nothing more effective for gaining the joy of eternity than the love of Christ, nor for bringing about utter damnation than the love of the world. So let eternal love inflame our minds, and the wild and hateful love of carnal affections be thrown out. Let the sweetness of the heavenly life so intoxicate us that we just do not want to like life's bitter sweetness here, because the *poison of dragons*³ (the basest wickedness and lying bitterness) is the *wine of the ungodly*. Drinking it they are made so drunk that they give no heed to what their future will be. And the *venom of asps* (murderous evil) is deadly drink to them: there is no cure for them, for their wickedness is incorrigible.

True, this lying world has its delights of miseries, its riches of vanities, its hurtful charms, its pestilential pleasures, its sham happiness, its insane love; its mindless, hateful affection, the darkness of its high noon which ends in eternal night. It too has its savourless salt, its flat flavours, its twisted honour, its horrible friendliness (so sweet in the morning, so revolting at night), its bitter honey, its deadly fruit. It too has its rose that stinks, its joy that weeps, its melody of sadness, its approval of contempt, its really deadly nectar, its attractive abominations, its misleading leader, its domineering prince. And it has its lamentable jewellery, and its sneering praise, its black lily, its rackety song, its decadent beauty, its discordant harmony, its soiled snow, its cheerless comfort, its poverty-stricken kingdom. And it has its nightingale bellowing louder than a cow, its blackbird without voice, its sheep in wolf's clothing, and its dove fiercer than any beast.

Therefore let us flee from physical, unclean love, whose sting is in its tail, however pleasing its face. Its flower is poisonous, and its bosom bears hidden serpents; its scent

3. Deuteronomy 32:33.

The Fire of Love

cuts the soul off from God, and its baths are warmed by the fires of hell; its gold turns to ashes, and its incense gives out sulphurous fire. Here is love without mercy, madness full of lust, which does not let the soul it has bound sit with the saints, or delight in divine love.

To those who are set on loving worldly creatures it seems burdensome and quite unbearable to think about God, although such recollection would be sweet indeed, and wonderfully delightful to them.

But if they begin to think of God, he immediately escapes their mind, and they revert to their original thoughts, on which through their own choice they have dwelt so long. They are bound, of course, by their own evil habit, and minds so weak and impure will have no taste for angels' food – at least, not without great and protracted exercise in spiritual thinking, and the rejection of physical imaginations. Their heart's palate has been defiled by their fevered, wicked love, and has made it impossible to know the sweetness of heavenly joy. Even were good thoughts to come into their minds now and then, they would not stay there. The signs of divine inspiration are at once rejected by their deep-rooted evil, so they go from bad to worse, and their ruin is all the more damnable for not accepting the good which touched them.

Thus the elect who are wholly consumed with love for God, and who cling very close to Christ, when evil or dirty thoughts sometimes knock at their souls and try to force an entry, look up at once to heaven, reject them, and quench them by their fervent earnestness. Little wonder they encourage themselves by their own good habits, so that they accept nothing earthly for themselves, or any other baneful delight which could have pleased them. For a man who is on fire with perfect charity feels neither sin nor any sort of wicked attraction; rather, he rejoices in his God, and no distress or uncleanness can upset him.

CHAPTER 39

The manifold friendships between good men and bad; whether they can be broken; the rarity of friendships between men and women; true friendship, which the elect delight in on their way; the folly of some whose abstinence is too strict or stark; carnal friendship; male and female fashions.

FRIENDSHIP is a linking of wills, a mutual agreement on this thing, a dislike of that. Friendship can exist between good people and between bad, though the motives are different. The greatest friendship ought to be between God and the soul, who is expected to conform her will always to his, so that what God wants, she wants too; what he does not want, neither does she. In this way there will be complete friendship between them.

In human affections where there is true friendship it would be dreadful if physical distance caused a separation of souls; rather, an unbreakable bond of close friendship ought to lighten the sorrow of physical absence, so that a man feels he is still close to his friend all the while he can see their wills constant and unbroken. For friendship is true when one friend acts towards another as he would to himself; when his friend is his *alter ego*, loved for his own sake, and not because he is useful, or because there is a hope of getting something out of him.

It will be asked whether the friendship must be dissolved if the other friend goes wrong? Some would consider it not to be really perfect friendship unless it is one between those who share the same values. But can it ever have been perfect if it breaks up when one party goes astray? It is certainly not perfect now, if it can gradually fade away to nothing – which is *not* the meaning of true friendship, which loves a man for himself, and not because he is useful or nice. Among friends surely it is not necessary for one to be changed just because the other is. But since it is a virtue,

it is impossible for friendship to peter out if a man has not altered in some sort. It is not necessarily broken because the other has erred: if it is a true friendship there will be all the more anxiety to reclaim the wanderer. And so that friendship by which a man seeks and secures good for his friend as if it were himself must be called *love* and while they live no misdemeanour is going to break it.

But friendship is easily broken when in the friend concerned there are not found those things for which he is loved; for instance, when there are not in the friendship things helpful or pleasant, for which sake the friends are now loved. Such friendship is spurious; it cannot last, or if it does it is only while there is pleasure and benefit in it. But what causes true friendship does not collapse while friends live. True friendship does not break down while the friends are alive, though one can go astray during that time. But even if one does err the friendship will persist if it is a true one, because they love each other as themselves, for the good that is in them. 'Good' must be understood to mean 'good by nature' rather than 'good by behaviour'.

Nature makes a man seek a loyal friend for himself, for it is natural to want to keep loyalty and gratitude. Nothing happens without reason, therefore the friendship that is natural will not dissolve while nature exists unless the natural thing loved is repugnant and harmful to nature itself. And anyway, nature cannot do that unless it has been beset by corrupt behaviour. Therefore friendship which is kindled by something different from the reason for its being loved fades and dies when the thing which excited the love cannot be had; so that if behaviour or wealth or beauty maintain the friendship, then when behaviour misbehaves, or wealth disappears, or beauty fades, friendship also vanishes, and it is said of the man who had it that 'nothing is more unhappy than to have been happy'.

But friendship that nature produces in friends is not put off by poverty, or abandoned because of error, or cancelled by deformity, all the while the nature lasts which is the cause of that friendship. Such a friendship is purely natural,

and morally indifferent – unless it is scheming something against the laws of God. With it goes great enjoyment, which again is morally indifferent. For true friendship cannot exist without mutual enjoyment and pleasant fellowship and helpful conversation. And if this friendship is founded in God's grace, and is wholly his, related and directed to him, it can then be called a holy friendship, and it is very rewarding. But if through this friendship something contrary to the will of God is done by the friends, the friendship is perverted, foul and unclean, and without any merit whatever.

I cannot account for this lamentable fact but a true friend is seldom or scarcely ever found. Everybody is concerned about his own interests, and no one has a friend of whom he can say 'he is my other self'. For people pursue their own profit and pleasure, and do not blush to deceive their very friends. It is plain that they are friends not in truth but in pretence, because it is not their fellows they love so much as their goods or flatteries or favours.

But friendship between men and women can be a tricky business because a pretty face all too easily attracts a weak soul, and visual temptation kindles carnal lust, often to produce a defiled mind and body. Familiarity between women and men is apt to turn to virtue's disadvantage. And yet that sort of friendship is not improper, but rewarding, if it is practised with a good intention, and is loved for God's sake, and not for carnal delectation.

If women, say, saw that they were despised by men they would complain of God who had created them such. Perhaps they might even despair of salvation, for they feel themselves lost if they do not get advice and help from men. Reason undoubtedly is less lively in them, and so they are easily led astray and quickly overcome. They are in much need of the counsel of good men. They are attracted to evil by evil men because they are much more disposed to the pleasures of lust than to the radiance of sanctity. Yet there is a certain love that man has for woman and woman for man which none of us is without, not even the saint. It

is both natural and 'instituted of God' in origin, and through it we exist, and fit in with each other, and enjoy instinctively each other's company. Indeed this delightful thing has its own pleasures, as for example in mutual conversation, or seemly contact, or a happy marriage. Yet a man does not get any merit for this unless it is filled by charity, nor does he lose any unless it is fouled by evil. But if the urge to sin rises up so that they think lustfully, and give rein to it, then they are guilty of death undoubtedly, because they are sinning against God.

So they are utterly wrong who assert that all our actions, inward or outward, are matters of reward or punishment. They are trying to deny, or at any rate are refusing to allow, that we do certain things because we like doing them, and it is natural for us to do them! They are not afraid of introducing confusion into our splendid nature.

Admittedly friendship and familiarity between men and women is wrong and forbidden if thereby they indulge the voluptuous pleasure of carnal love, and come together in their vile passion. They put eternal things behind them for passing enjoyment, and seek to excel in physical lovings. It is those who have taken Holy Orders who sin most grievously and notably. They accost these poor women like the sinners they are, and tell them they are overwhelmed with love for them, and are being gradually overcome by intense desire, and the struggle they are having with their thoughts; and so they lead these fickle and feckless creatures on to misery, in this life and the next. But they themselves will not remain unpunished, for they bear their own condemnation with them. It is of them the Psalmist speaks when he says, *their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have dealt treacherously. O God, judge them.*¹

For God does not want women to be despised by men or to be seduced by their vain flattery, but to be instructed by them faithfully and lovingly in all that is holy and pious for the salvation of body and soul. But the man to do this is rarely found nowadays; rather (and this is the pity of it)

1. Psalms 5:9.

men are keen to teach them because it is either their belongings or their beauty they are after. So it often happens that when they instruct them in one thing, they destroy or confuse them in another, and they neither wish nor have the courage to forbid those things that women like using (even though they are sinful) so as not to offend them.

But true friendship strengthens lovers, and consoles minds, relieves grief, expels worldly depression, reforms sinners, increases holiness, decreases wrongdoing, and multiplies the rewards of the good! A man is drawn away from evil by the sound advice of his friend; he is inspired to do good when he sees in him the grace he longs to have in himself. Holy friendship is not to be despised therefore; it has the remedy for every ill. It is of God that we should be sustained amid the tribulations of our exile by the advice and assistance of friends, until we come to God himself. Then we *shall all be taught of him*,² blessed, and set by him in everlasting seats. We shall glory endlessly in him we have loved, through whom and for whom we have our friends.

I can except no one from friendship of this kind however holy he may be, because he needs it . . . unless perhaps there is one to whom angels minister, and not men. There are some, however, who rejoice in God's love, and are so intoxicated with his sweetness that they can say, *'My soul refuses to be comforted by earthly things'*³ (that is the comfort with which lovers of this world console themselves). But both nature and grace oblige them to take pleasure in their fellow men and in those things the body needs. Who eats or sleeps, or shelters from heat or cold, without pleasure? Or who has a friend and does not delight in his presence and conversation and company and fellowship? No one, to be sure, unless he is mad or lacking. Because it is in these things and such like that human life is comforted (even when it is most holy) and rejoices more abundantly in God. It is not of such things therefore that *My soul refuses to be comforted* is to be understood, but of the foul, un-

2. John 6:45.

3. Psalms 77:2.

clean, illicit comforts of the world. For afterwards the Psalmist said, *You have delighted me, Lord, with your doings, and in the works of your hands will I rejoice.*⁴ Who can deny receiving comfort who admits to rejoicing in the works of God? *But the unwise man does not understand this and the foolish does not consider it.*⁵

Some, indeed, *have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge,*⁶ for while they are set on cutting out the frills they are also, most unwisely, induced to cut out the necessities as well, believing they cannot please God unless they afflict themselves with excessive abstinence and unrestrained destitution. And although a pale face is the proper adornment of the solitary, the service that such men render is not properly controlled, for when they are bidden to chastise their bodies, and subject them to the spirit, they are not therefore expected to kill them, but to preserve them for the honour of God until he himself who joined them separates soul from body. Such men make life difficult for their fellows, and hard for themselves, for they do not know how to retain friendship because they have never practised it.

The love of one's relatives if it is uncontrolled can indeed be called 'carnal affection', and it must be broken, because it hinders one from loving God. But if it is restrained, it can be called 'natural', for it does not affect one's service of God, and nature in this way does not act against nature's Maker.

Lastly, the women of today need to be rebuked, for to adorn their heads as well as their bodies they have invented new fashions of great and fantastic conceit, and have introduced these concoctions so as to strike spectators with horror and amazement! Not only are they going against the word of the apostle⁷ with their gold, and braided hair (slaves as they are to show and licence!), but, further, against human propriety and God-ordered nature they put widespreading horns on their heads, extremely horrible, made up of hair not their own. Some of them, in their anxiety either to veil their shame or to increase their

4. Psalms 92:4.
6. Romans 10:2.

5. Psalms 92:6.
7. 1 Peter 3:3.

beauty, colour and whiten their faces with make-up, with fraudulent deceit. Men and women alike in their excessive vanity wear clothes cut in the latest style, regardless of natural decency, and only caring for what gossip and rumour and the latest fashion bring up – all at the suggestion of the devil! If anyone even occasionally wants to rebuke such things, he is laughed at; they pay greater attention to tittle-tattle than to amendment of life, so on they go and down, ensnared and seduced, those ladies (and women!) who are 'artless', and who want to be beautified in time, and defaced in eternity. Because once the glory has faded they are going to feel the pain of hell. In this life they loved, not Christ, but the basest of worldly vanities, crowning themselves with rosebuds before they withered!⁸

But now let us go on to other things.

CHAPTER 40

At all times and in all deeds there must be room for the love of God, which does not fail in prosperity or adversity; its excellence and its comparison; tears which are turned to song.

THE love of the Godhead that gets right into a man and inflames him with the fire of the Holy Spirit, takes his soul to itself with marvellous joy; nor does it let him lose for a single moment the recollection of such love. It so controls the lover's mind that he does not bother about vanities, but is wholly directed to his Beloved.

If we are true lovers of our Lord Jesus Christ we can certainly think of him while, for example, we are travelling, and retain our song of love when we are in company: we can keep him in mind at meals even when we are enjoying food and drink. But at every bite or sip we ought to praise God, and in between the pauses when we are taking our food and scraps we ought mentally to sound his praises

8. cf. Wisdom 2:8.

with honeyed sweetness, longing and yearning for him even during meals. If we are working with our hands what is to stop our heart rising heavenward, holding tight to the thought of eternal love? At every moment we will be fervent, not sluggish, and nothing but sleep will take our heart off him.

What joy and happiness infuses the lover! What happy and desirable sweetness fills his soul! For love when it is set and made firm in Christ will always mean life without end. Neither prosperity nor adversity can alter that love, that loving desire, which is rooted in heavenly places, as those who know best have written. For, not surprisingly, it turns night to day and darkness to light, sadness to song, punishment to pleasure, and toil to sweetest rest.

For this love is not imaginary or simulated, but true and perfect, utterly set on Christ, resonant with harmonious melody to the Beloved. And if indeed you love like this, as I have shown, you too will be most glorious, keeping company with the best and most honoured in the kingdom of God, and granted the vision that gives life. And meanwhile all the assaults of the devil, and all the impulses which spring from the flesh, and all the greed for worldly things, you will valiantly overcome through the fervour of love and the power of prayer. In addition, you will conquer your pleasure in seeming beauty, for you will not want there to be even one blemish caused by your thoughts. Moreover you will abound with inner refreshment, and experience the delights of eternal love, so that you know with absolute certainty and real knowledge that you are the lover of the Eternal King. Yet none of this happens to a man unless God gives it him, or unless he is aware that even in this life no small part of his future reward is already truly dwelling in his heart.

But why do I speak of these things with others who although they are the chosen yet do not possess this choicest prize? Sometimes I wonder at myself that I have spoken of the privilege of the lovers of God as if 'whosoever will' could reach it - when it is not for him who wants it or runs

after it, but for him whom Christ loves, and exalts, and receives to himself. In fact my little mind did not know how to open up what in my babbling way I was trying to make clear; yet I felt obliged to say something about the ineffable, so that those who hear or read might strive to imitate it, and find that divine love, in comparison with which all love for the most beautiful, lovable things in the world is pain and grief.

Therefore see and understand; know how very wonderful God makes his lover, how he bears him up to the heights, how he will not let him be cast down by unworthy love or vain hope, but will keep him secure in himself to be loved most sweetly. For love is a continual meditation with an immense longing for what is beautiful, good, and lovely. If anything I am loving is beautiful but not good, plainly I am not fit to love; but if it is good as well, it must be loved.

But to love a creature, however good and beautiful, is not permitted me, because I ought to offer and keep all my love for the Fount of goodness and beauty, that he may be my love who is my God and my Jesus. For he alone has in himself beauty and goodness, for he is beauty and goodness itself. Nothing else is beautiful or good unless he makes it so, and the nearer it is to him, the more beautiful and good it is. It is highly proper, then, that he should be loved who contains within himself all things that are sought by the lover. For his part he holds nothing back, so that he may be loved most fervently. But if I love something else, my conscience will prick me because I am not loving rightly. I am always afraid that what I am loving will not love me in return. And even if I am not afraid of this, I am still terrified of death which isolates those who do not love rightly from what they love, and devastates all their vanity.

Moreover, other snags often arise to disturb the serenity and enjoyment of those who love. But as for the man who loves God truly and wholeheartedly, the more fervent he knows his love for God to be, the clearer his conscience becomes. By experience he discovers that the One whom he loves is also the greatest of lovers, and death itself is not

going to sever him from his sweetness. On the contrary, when he passes from this world he will find his Love to perfection, and will be united to him in truth. Thereafter he will never be separated from him; he will hasten with all speed towards that most delightful of all embraces for he will see him without veil, him whom he has loved and longed for, and will glory in him forever.

Consequently I liken this love to some inextinguishable fire, which no adverse force can quench, nor soft blandishment overcome. This love purges our sins, and its immense heat consumes all those obstacles which hinder loving; in the flaming blaze of God's love it makes us purer than gold, and brighter than the sun. This love brings us spiritual healing, and I fancy there is nothing among all the things that the learned may tell us which can so sustain and soothe us, so cleanse us from the filth of sin, as fervent love of the Godhead, and the constant recollection of our Maker.

Tears will do to wash us from our faults, and heartfelt grief will cancel our condemnation, but ardent love unimaginably surpasses all these, for it makes our soul outstandingly resplendent. More than anything else we can do, it gains the heart of the Eternal King. It deserves to contemplate him in joyous song!

I am not saying there is no point in weeping, nor am I saying that heartfelt grief is improper, or not to be desired in our exile here. Yet the man I admire is the one who has been so rapt in joy and love that he does not weep in his devotions and prayers and meditations. I would judge that to be the truer prayer and meditation when a man's love is great enough to turn his prayer into song, so that he melts into a melody of heavenly sweetness, and produces sounds angelic rather than human, anointed as he is with honeyed fervour. He is taken up, not to lament, but to shout with joy. His tears are drawn off, as it were, and he gives himself wholly over to rejoice in the Fount of true and eternal joy. The experts are forever declaring that the perfect ought to weep, and that the more perfect they are the more abundant their tears, as much for the miseries of life as for the

delay in attaining our homeland. Yet to me it has meant a wonderful longing flowing out in love to God; and the sorrow of physical weeping has stopped before this vast inner sweetness. A man not consumed with eternal love must needs be purged with tears; but for him who longs with the love of eternity, love is sufficient punishment. No wound is more serious – or more sweet – than that of love. If indeed such a man would try to weep, he could not do it. This is especially true of his private devotion, for since he is being uplifted by the Holy Spirit, his mind too is being raised, and with delightful, angelic sweetness he sings his praise and his loving thoughts to God. The seat of love is high exalted, for it has extended even to the height of heaven: it seems to me to be on earth too, artfully and skilfully making men who were once lovely, wan and pale. It makes them wither, so that they may become fresh; and become weak, so as to be strong. Thus he draws close to the quiet of eternal glory and, undaunted, mingles with those who praise their Maker. The more fervently he loves the more sweetly he sings, and the more delightfully does he feel what he so strongly desired. For although to those who do not love God the way seems rough and long, it is love nevertheless which unites God and man, and with a little toil is the making of those who practise it.

CHAPTER 41

Perfect love unites a man to God inseparably, and makes him mindful of him; love of the world dissolves into nothingness; the nature of true love is steady, lasting, sweet, easy, and beneficial; false love is poisonous, disgraceful, and rotten.

WE have done the work perfectly if we have genuinely stopped our minds from loving creatures, and have joined them to God alone, in truth and completely: the more perfectly we do this, the better we are. This work is superior

to every other kind, since everything we do is referred to this same end: our perfect union with God. But many things would draw us away from this; for instance, the delightful beauty of the world, male and female vanity, wealth and honours, praise and popular favour. So we have got to apply ourselves to finish the task, putting behind us and forgetting all those things that hinder.

For the love to which we are rising by this work is hotter than any burning coal, and will undoubtedly leave its mark on us, because it will make our spirits glowing and splendid. Here is love which cannot be deceived by anything created, or cheated of its eternal, heavenly reward. Yet who could long sustain the flame of this love if it were always to persist in this way? But often it is tempered lest it should consume our nature which, through the corruptible body, weighs down the soul. The corruptible flesh does not allow our mind to be lifted Godwards all the time.

The fervour of real devotion can be interrupted by sleep or by immoderate physical exercise or work; yet the ardour itself is not extinguished, even if it is not felt in the same way as previously. It returns to us when we return to God, and helps us to recover from our weakmindedness, and restores to us once more our sweetness. Furthermore, it even frees the body from all sorts of disease while keeping us sober and temperate. And it raises our souls to heavenly desires, so that we find no pleasure in the lesser things of earth.

This is the love which lays hold of Christ, and brings him into our hearts; which sweetens our minds so that in our hearts we burst out singing our hymns of praise, rejoicing in spiritual music. I believe that there is no pleasure to compare with this, which intoxicates with genuine sweetness, and delights with holy charm. The soul that receives it is purged by sacred fire, and nothing remains in it of decay or darkness. All is permeated with its lovely pleasure, so that our inner nature seems to be turned into divine glory and a song of love. Thus does the eternal love cheer us as it pours in its delightful abundance. None of its friends need yield

now to creaturely or worldly affection, since they have been taken up freely into the praise and the love of Christ Jesus.

Learn then to love him who is your Cause if you want to live when you pass from here. Let your actions show that you love God now if you are wanting to live after death. Give your mind to him who is able to keep it from sorrow, here and in eternity. Never let your heart be separated from him however beset you may be by adversity and wretchedness; then you will be able joyfully to possess him, and love him for ever. You will show yourself his true lover if you never let go the remembrance of God in good times or bad.

Good Jesus who gave me life,
lead me on to love you as well,
me, sighing for this very thing.
Take for yourself my whole purpose,
so as to be my entire desire.
Let nothing influence my heart save you!
Sorrow and trouble would flee from me,
and what I covet would come
had only my soul heard and accepted
the song of your praise.
Let your love dwell in us forever;
let us feel it always abiding with us.
Therefore by your power,
make my thinking steadfast
so that it is never frittered away
in silly useless fantasies,
never laughed at for its mistakes,
never subject to earthly bliss or love or praise.
But let my mind be purified by you,
so that it burns with love for you,
so that nothing can cool it,
be it sudden or expected.

But if I have loved anything created in this world, and it has pleased my wants in every way, and if I have sought my enjoyment in it, and made it the aim of my wellbeing and desire, then when the time comes I might well dread the

burning, bitter parting. For whatever happiness I have in love of this sort, in the end there is nothing but weeping and worry, and, as it gets near, that pain which is going to punish the soul most bitterly.

Every pleasure which men in their exile think well of is like grass; now it is flourishing and green, and then it disappears as if it had never been. And undoubtedly this is how it appears to those who look at worldly joy in the right way. To those who are looking for comforts in their captivity, such joy never remains the same; it is always changing until it completely vanishes. Of course all men live in toil and trouble, and no one can avoid it. But the nature of love that is genuine and not sham is this, that it goes on, continuing steadfast, and does not change with each fresh event.

Therefore the life that can find love, and know it truly, is converted from sorrow to unspeakable joy, and lives in secret song. It will love singing, and as it rejoices in Jesus it will be like the little bird that sings till it dies. In death too it will not lack the comforting song of charity – always assuming that one does die, and not pass alive to the Beloved. And at length, when he has passed over, he will be wondrously uplifted to praise his Maker; he will overflow as he sings with indescribable joy; he will stand up amid the seraphs applauding God, that he may praise, and shine, and serve for ever and ever. And there will be love's embrace, and lovers' sweetness, and the joining of hearts, and the union of dear ones which will last through eternity. That honeyed mouth will kiss so tenderly, and the love of each for the other will know no end.

The presence of my Beloved produces immense joy and confidence, and with him I forget all my trouble. All opposition vanishes, and no other affections and lusts present themselves: silenced, they have disappeared. He alone refreshes me and hugs me to himself, he alone whom my mind has so ardently wanted. If you have loved Christ with all your will, you will loathe all squalid evil; and you will surrender your heart to him who redeemed it. Then it will

be he who possesses you by his grace, and not the devil through your sin. As your soul sought Christ truly and without flinching, refusing to give up the search until she found him, so you will be led on to eternal glory and be present with your God in the seat of the blessed. So I advise you to love as I have been explaining, and take your place with the angels!

See that you do not sell this glory and honour for any vile vanity or voluptuous purpose. Take very good care that creature-love does not shut you out of the Creator's love. On earth, indeed, fear no wretchedness except that which can throw down and confound your pure love, because *perfect love is strong as death, and true jealousy is as cruel as the grave.*¹ Love is an easy burden, and not at all onerous; rather it is helpful to its bearer. It rejoices old and young alike; in it defeators of demons delight, their prey a prisoner; by it fighters against the world and the flesh are protected. Love is a spiritual wine, intoxicating the minds of the elect, making them vigorous and manly, so that they forget the poisonous delight of the world, not bothering so much to think of it as to despise it heartily.

Therefore from holy love no lover can be the loser, but rather he stands to gain much. If he holds on to it faithfully in his heart, love without pain will dwell in the lover's soul, as indeed lovers have always proclaimed; because love makes progress, while pain destroys, and progress and destruction are complete opposites. Therefore a heart which is perfectly loving does not feel pain or worry, nor is it sad or troubled: perfect love and grievous misery are incompatible. Again, what is done gladly is not done sadly. A lover indeed works freely and gladly, and so work to him is happy, not irksome; he is under no obligation and he has no complaints, so he always shows himself cheerful and gay.

Love therefore is the sweetest and most useful thing a rational creature can ever acquire. Most acceptable and pleasing to God, it not only binds the soul with bands of

1. Canticles 8:6.

The Fire of Love

wisdom and sweetness when it joins it to God, but it also restrains flesh and blood, so that a man does not go after mistaken delights, or wander off in search of error of various kinds. Through love of this kind the heart grows healthy, and our life finds meaning and strength. Little wonder then that I have never found a better dwelling-place – or sweeter. For love unites my love and me, and makes of two one.

Yet carnal love will flourish and perish like some wild flower of summer, for its joy and existence will seem no more than a single day's duration, so sure is it to last but a short while and then decline in sorrow. This also will undoubtedly be the bitter lot of those who love vanity. Their pride, their toying with unreal beauty, will be flung out into the filth and shame which is to be theirs when they are cast into endless torment. And this will never pass away, unlike their specious happiness and their joy in shining beauty which have now passed into nothingness: all those things in which they once delighted have gone for ever.

But God does give men and women beauty, not of course that they should burn in love for each other and despise their Maker – as nowadays nearly everybody does – but that they should recognize it as a favour of the Lord their God, and glorify him with their whole heart, and love him without ceasing; so that they should constantly yearn for that unfading beauty compared with which all worldly beauty and glory is nothing. For if loveliness of the form is to be seen among the servants of the world, what will be the beauty of the sons of God set in heaven? Therefore let us love him fervently, because if we have loved we shall sing to Christ with sweet-voiced and delightful melody. His love conquers all things. Therefore let us live in love, and in it die!

CHAPTER 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.

I know no pleasure sweeter
than in my heart to sing you a song of praise, Jesus my
love.

I know no happiness greater or more abundant
than in my mind to feel the sweet warmth of love.

I believe that the very best thing one can ever do is to fix Jesus in one's heart, and never want anything else. He has made a good start in loving who has loving tears, and a sweet yearning and desire for eternal things. For Christ himself yearns, so to speak, for our love, when he hastened with such fervour to his Cross to redeem us. But it is truly said that 'love precedes the dance, and gives the lead'. It was nothing but love which brought Christ so low.

Come, my Saviour, comfort my soul!
Make me steadfast in my love for you,
so that I never cease loving.

Take the grief from me when it is my time to die,
for there is no sinner who cannot rejoice
once he be perfectly converted to you.

Remember your compassion, Jesus most sweet,
that my life may shine resplendent in your power;
and so that I can overcome my enemy
bestow on me your mighty salvation!

I ask all this of you lest I be lost with the son of perdition.
Since my mind has been fired with holy love,
I am filled with longing to see your Majesty.

Therefore I endure poverty,
I despise earthly dignity,
and I care for no sort of honour.

The Fire of Love

Your friendship is my glory.
When I began to love, your love laid hold of my heart,
and would allow me to desire nothing save love.
Then you, God, made my soul flame with your sweet
light,
so that in you and through you
I could die and not feel sad.
There is delightful warmth in the loving heart,
which has consumed gloom and trouble in its fiery
burning love.
And from it has issued sweetness,
and in particular, music which comes in to soothe the
soul,
for there you, my God and my comfort,
have set up your Temple.

Very delightful indeed is the glory I yearn for, and no man can be more earnest in such longing than I. Therefore my loving soul, adorning herself as a bride for the King Emperor, says, 'Love lays hold of my heart with unspeakable bands, and enslaves and entwines it with such vigour and wonderful mastery, that it likes to think it would rather die than live.' This flower cannot perish; so ardent is my Friend in love that he fuses together joy and death and song!

When first I was converted, and became single-minded, I used to think I would be like the little bird which pines for love of its beloved, but which can rejoice in the midst of its longing when he, the loved one, comes. While it sings its joy, it is still yearning, though in sweetness and warmth. It is said that the nightingale will sing her melody all night long to please him to whom she is united. How much more ought I to sing, and as sweetly as I can, to my Jesus Christ, my soul's spouse, through the whole of this present life. Compared with the coming brightness this life is 'night', and I too languish, and languishing, faint for love. But because I faint I shall recover, and be nourished by his warmth; and I shall rejoice, and in my joy sing jubilantly

Chapter 42

the delights of love. Flute-like, I shall pour out melodious, fervent devotion, raising from the heart songs of praise to God Most High. Already they have been offered by mouth, an earnest of the praise of God, because my soul is ever avid to love; never through grief or sloth will she give up her accepted desire.

Indeed, integrity of purpose, readiness of will, fervour of real desire, and conversion to God, if they are continually thought of – as they are by holy souls – do not allow them to sin mortally. And should they have sinned through weakness or ignorance, at once they are stirred to true penitence by these same stimuli, so they do not dwell long in sin, even if they have clung to its enjoyment. The venial sins they commit are wholly burnt up in the fire of love, unless perhaps some have been so affected by negligence that they no longer consider it a sin in which they offend and they have not enough charity to wipe out all the punishment due to them, or there is no tribulation by which their fault can be purged. But in the coming of love the heart of the lover blazes up. Hotter than fire is this wonderful heat, which rejoices the mind so sweetly, and gives coolness and shade from the heat of sins.

Good Jesus, bestow on me the rich melody
and heavenly song of the angels,
so that, enraptured, I may ever chant your praises.
What you gave me once when I neither knew nor
understood
give me again now that I am experienced and am asking for it!
Fondle me with joyful, heavenly love,
so that at my last hour I am found crowned with fire!
With a song of joy come into my soul.
Show me something of your sweetness and charm when
you so please,
so that here my transgressions may be punished and
purged,
because in your mercy you have known him

The Fire of Love

as one who clings closely to you.
But do not show me how you deal in your wrath
with those who flourish in the world,
on whom you lavish temporal blessings,
and for whom you reserve everlasting torment!
Those who love the world can indeed know
the words or verses of our songs, but not their music;
for though they read the words they cannot add the
note or the tone
to the sweetness of our love-songs.

Good Jesus, you have bound my heart
to think of your Name, and now I cannot but sing it.
So pity me by perfecting what you have planned.
Your true, solicitous lover, thinking of these things,
is so rapt into joyful praise that it is quite impossible
for such sweetness to come from the devil,
such fervour to be of any created thing,
such music to spring from human wit.
If I have persevered in these things I shall be saved.

It is only right that he who wishes perfectly to avoid
great sins should not willingly commit even the smallest
ones. For he who knowingly and freely falls in small ways,
often carelessly runs headlong into greater. It is the nature
of love that it would wish rather to incur the greatest
misery than to sin but once. No need compels a man to seek
pleasure and wealth, strength and beauty here; on the
contrary, it would be the height of absurdity for one who
in the purpose of the Eternal King is intended to be made a
knight, seemly in limb, fair and splendid, rightly propor-
tioned. And there in the court of heaven he will serve the
Emperor Most High for ever and ever.