

A fourth woman with whom I was in some way familiar did not so much rebuke me as despise me when she said 'You are no more than a beautiful face and a lovely voice: you have *done* nothing.' I think it better therefore to dispense with whatever their particular contribution to life is, rather than to fall into their hands, hands which know no moderation whether loving or despising! Yet these things happened because I was seeking their salvation, and not because I was after anything improper. What is more, they were the very people from whom I had for a while received physical sustenance!

## CHAPTER 13

*The solitary life, and the hermit's, is superior to the communal or mixed life; how it leads to the fire of love, and to joyful sweetness.*

THERE have been people, and there probably still are, who have without hesitation put communal life above the solitary. They urge us to hurry towards life in community if we want to attain the heights of perfection. It is not necessary to say much by way of argument against such folk, since the only life they approve of is the one they want to practise, or at least know something about. In other words they do not approve of the solitary life because they know nothing about it. It is a life which no one who 'lives in the flesh' can know, but only he to whom it has been given by God. No one can assess it rightly who is uncertain about it and the way it works. I do not doubt that if they did in fact have some knowledge of the life, it would be this life they would be praising rather than the other.

But a worse mistake is to keep on denigrating the solitary life, and to abuse it. They cry, 'Woe to him who is alone!' They do not define 'alone' as being 'without God', but understand it to mean 'without company'. A man is alone indeed if God is not with him. For when he dies he is taken

at once for punishment, and is for ever cut off from the vision of the glory of God and his saints. On the other hand he who for God's sake has chosen the solitary life, and lives it properly, knows not so much 'woe' as 'wonderful strength', and rejoices continually as he recalls the Name of Jesus. The less men fear to embrace for God a life that has no human comfort, the more will it be given them to glory in divine consolation. For they are the recipients of frequent spiritual visitations which certainly they would not know in community. It is for this reason the beloved soul is told, *I will lead her into solitude, and I will speak to her heart.*<sup>1</sup> There are those who have been divinely taught to seek solitude for Christ's sake, and to hold on to it tight. And at once, in order to serve God with greater freedom and devotion, they have relinquished the habit of the community. They have spurned and rejected the transitory, and in the sublimity of their mind have risen above the temporal. Their sole desire is for the joys which are eternal; and so they make time for devotion and contemplation, never wavering in their wholehearted effort to love Christ. Many of their number, although they live physically among people, are mentally remote from them; they never falter in their heavenly longing, because in spirit they are far removed from a sinful way of life.

Thus hermits rightly have one controlling motive: they live loving God and their neighbour; they despise worldly approval; they flee, so far as they may, from the face of man; they hold all men more worthy than themselves; they give their minds continually to devotion; they hate idleness; they withstand manfully the pleasures of the flesh; they taste and seek ardently heavenly things; they leave earthly things on one side without coveting them; and they find their delight in the sweetness of prayer.

Some of them, indeed, genuinely experience the sweetness of heavenly refreshment. Chaste in heart and body, with mental vision un sullied, they behold the citizens of heaven, and look on God himself. Because here they have loved the

1. Hosea 2:14

bitter cup of penance and hard toil, there they are consumed with unending and loving contemplation; they are fit to wait on God, and to await the kingdom of Christ.

A hermit's life is a great one if it is greatly lived! Take for instance, the blessed Maglorious, a miraculous man if ever there was one, and who had rejoiced in angelic visits from childhood. As his predecessor, the blessed Sampson, had foretold, he was made an archbishop, and he ruled the Church of God both long and laudably. But an angel visited him with heavenly counsel, with the result that he gave up his archbishopric, and chose to live as a hermit. And at the end of his life his passing was revealed to him. Similarly the blessed Cuthbert exchanged the life of a bishop for that of an anchorite.<sup>2</sup>

If then men of this quality have done such things to deserve greater reward what man in his senses would dare to set another state of life in the church above the solitary? In this state men are occupied with nothing outward, but give themselves totally to divine contemplation, so as to be on fire with love for Christ, the cares of the world put behind

2. Of these three saints the only one about which there is much factual information is St Cuthbert. But hagiographers have not been slow to fill the gaps with improving legends, which when they are not improbable can be quite fantastic. It seems that St Sampson (c. 490-565) was a Welshman, who in the course of his episcopate migrated from Cornwall to Brittany, where he founded a monastery at Dol. His evangelistic efforts spread beyond the French mainland, for his name is associated with the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey. He had a great name for miracles. His cousin, St Maglorious, was a monk in his monastery. When Sampson died Maglorious succeeded him in the bishopric, a post which he later relinquished in order to retire to Sark. There he founded his own monastery, becoming its first abbot. Angels clearly played a large part in his thinking, for his traditional emblem shows him giving one of them Holy Communion. He died c. 586. Perhaps the greatest of these three was the Northumbrian, St Cuthbert, who after a life of devoted pastoral and evangelistic work resigned the see of Hexham to live as a solitary on Farne. He died there in 684. The *Penguin Dictionary of Saints* describes him as 'a man of extraordinary charm and practical ability, who attracted people deeply by the beauty of holiness'. Durham Cathedral is still his shrine.

them. And so celestial music resounds amongst them, and sweet flowing melody rejoices the solitary. From such melody the man who lives in the midst of clatter is distracted, and can but rarely meditate or pray.

It is of the solitary that the Psalmist speaks when he tells of the lover's hymns, *I will go into the place of his wonderful tabernacle, up to the house of God.*<sup>3</sup> The way he goes, rejoicing and praising, is thus described, *In the voice of praise and thanksgiving, the sound of the banquet.*<sup>4</sup> And to show that solitude is essential for this, so that away from physical racket and song man may capture and retain some of the joy of that sound, he demonstrates elsewhere quite clearly, *I would get me away far off, and remain in solitude.*<sup>5</sup>

For in this life he is straining every nerve to burn with the fire of the Holy Spirit and, captured as well as consoled by the delight of love, to exult in God. So the perfect solitary will burn vigorously in his love for God, and when he is 'above himself', in ecstasy through contemplation, he is lifted up to celestial joy and song and sound. Such a man indeed is like the seraphim: there is an inner blaze of indescribable and unwavering charity. His heart is shaped by the divine fire and, ablaze beyond description, he is borne to his Beloved. Indeed, at death he is taken up at once to the chiefest seats of heaven, that he may dwell serenely, in place of Lucifer. This will be his lot because he has been fired with indescribable love, and has sought the glory of his Creator alone, and yet has walked humbly, and has not thought himself better than the rest of sinful men.

3. cf. Psalms 43:3.

4. cf. Psalms 42:5 (B.C.P.).

5. Psalms 55:7.

## CHAPTER 14

*Praise for the solitary life, and its first lovers; the love of God consists in warmth, song, and sweetness; quiet is necessary for it; such men are saved from delusions, and are not preferred to ecclesiastical office.*

THE blessed Job who was taught the hard way by the Holy Spirit sums up in a word the multifarious reasons for approving saintly hermits in the passage, *Who set the wild ass free.*<sup>1</sup>

In the first place, the freedom of grace is commended in the saying *Who set the wild ass free*. Secondly, there is reference to the rejection of carnal affection in the words, *and he loosed their chains*. Thirdly, there is the solitary life itself in *he gave them a house in the wilderness*. And in the fourth place, the longing for everlasting bliss is in the saying *his tent is in the salty earth*. Salt does not quench thirst, but rather aggravates it. Those who perceive something of the sweetness of eternal life desire all the more fervently to get hold of it, and sample it.

Indeed, Saint John Baptist, the prince of hermits (our Lord excepted) was not behind in his affection, for he chose the solitary life. Others in like manner have chosen it – the locust, for example, who according to Solomon has *neither prince, King, nor master, yet go they forth by bands*<sup>2</sup> of virtue and gifts!

Now there are two sorts of chains: those of nature and sin, which in the case of solitaries God has broken asunder, and those of love, which he has strengthened. The *house in the wilderness* can also refer to 'quietness of heart', because holy hermits, away from tumult and town, experience

1. The passage in Job 39:5-6 runs thus: 'Who hath sent out the wild ass free? or who hath loosed the bands of the wild ass? Whose house I have made the wilderness, and the barren land his dwellings.' Rolle is quoting from the Vulgate version.

2. Proverbs 30:27.

sweetness with a clear conscience through the generosity of Christ. They rejoice to sing of everlasting love; they refresh themselves, and relax in delightful warmth. And though in the body they suffer hardship and adversity, yet in the spirit they maintain a constant harmony and fervour.

But there is an evil solitude, a solitude of pride, which occurs when one sets himself up above the rest, or ascribes his gifts to his own strength of will. It is to these that the saying applies, *Woe to him who is alone when he falls; for he has not another to help him up.*<sup>3</sup> Admittedly in the beginning of their new life (I am not speaking of the *girovagi*<sup>4</sup> who are an eremitic scandal!) hermits inevitably are wearied by many different temptations. But after the storm of evil promptings God infuses them with the calm of holy desires. And if they exercise these desires vigorously with tears and meditation and prayer, seeking only to love Christ, they will soon make them feel that they are now living more in pleasure than in grief, worry, or toil. They will have him whom they have loved, sought, and longed for. Then indeed they will rejoice and not grieve! For what is rejoicing if it is not the attaining of the good one has longed for, the brooding on it, the relaxing in it? Small wonder if there is cheer when true lovers meet, and mutual joy in their physical contact. It is quite impossible to describe the ardent longing of those in love. The exchange of sight and speech is sweeter to them than honey and the honeycomb!

Jeremiah, too, commends the solitary life. *It is good for a man to bear the yoke of the Lord in his youth. He will sit in solitude and quiet, and will raise himself up*<sup>5</sup> because he longs for and contemplates eternal things. So it is that in Ecclesiasticus we read, *On earth the man has not been born who is like Enoch*<sup>6</sup> for he was caught up from the earth.

3. Ecclesiastes 4:10.

4. Tramp-like solitaries who cadged their way from place to place. They are invariably condemned in Christian literature, yet their numbers persisted.

5. Lamentations 3:27.

6. Ecclesiasticus 49:14.

For contemplatives are superior to other men, both in the outstanding quality of their work, and in the fervour of their love.

All the while he is indifferent to worldly power love indwells the heart of the solitary. Herein is the foundation of his fervour and his longing for light, because he is tasting the things of heaven and singing his honeyed (not heavy!) song. He offers his praise to his noble Lover, like the seraphim, and since his loving mind is in tune with theirs he says, 'See how I burn in my love; how hungrily I long!' So is the lover's soul consumed with indescribable fire, shot through with that flame which gladdens and glitters with heavenly light. There is no end that I can discover to this fervour and happiness, and as I am always pressing on towards the object of my love it means that death becomes sweet to me as well as sure.

Because for the sake of the Saviour the holy hermit has made solitude his home, in heaven he will receive a dwelling, golden and glistening, and in the midst of the angelic orders. Because for love of his Creator he dressed in filthy rags, his Maker will clothe him in eternal splendour. Because once he was prepared to live here with features wan and drawn, so now his countenance shines with wonderful glory. In exchange for his revolting garments he will wear raiment glorious and resplendent with precious stones, forever in the midst of those who dwell in Paradise. Because he has purged himself from vices and avoided all ostentation and has done with all appearance of filth, his warm love for Almighty God has gained for him a song which is sweet and heavenly. The harmonies of those who praise divine charity have filled his mind, and rightly so. And thus it is with courage and not dread that he quits his exile here; and at the end of all he hears angelic song, and rises up, he who has loved so ardently; he is caught up to that eternal hall, and honoured in the most splendid fashion, to sit on high with the seraphim.

As far as my study of Scripture goes, I have found that to love Christ above all else will involve three things: warmth

and song and sweetness. And these three, as I know from personal experience, cannot exist for long without there being great quiet.

If I were to stand up when I was engaged in contemplation or to walk about or even to lie prostrate on the ground I found that I failed to attain these three, and even seemed to be left in dryness. Consequently, if I were to hold on to and retain deep devotion I must sit – which is what I have decided to do. I am aware that there is an underlying reason for this, for if a man does much standing and walking his body gets tired, and thus his soul too is hindered, wearied, and burdened. He is not as quiet as he can be and so is not in his most perfect state; if the philosopher<sup>7</sup> is right, it is the quiet sitting that makes the soul wise. Let him who still stands more than he sits when delighting in the things of God recognize he has a long way to go before he reaches the heights of contemplation!

In these three things (which are the sign of love in its most perfect form) the utmost perfection of the Christian religion is undoubtedly found. I, by the grace of Jesus, and to the limit of my meagre capacity, have accepted them, yet I dare not equate myself with the saints who displayed them, because they understood such things so much more perfectly. However, let me press forward with all my strength so that my love becomes more fervent, my song more fluent, and my experience of love's sweetness all the fuller. For, my brothers, you are wrong if you suppose that people today cannot be as holy as the prophets and apostles were.

I call it *fervour* when the mind is truly ablaze with eternal love, and the heart similarly feels itself burning with a love that is not imaginary but real. For a heart set on fire produces a feeling of fiery love.

I call it *song* when there is in the soul, overflowing and ardent, a sweet feeling of heavenly praise; when thought turns into song; when the mind is in thrall to sweetest harmony.

This twofold awareness is not achieved by doing noth-

7. Aristotle, *The Physics*, I, vii, 3.

ing, but through the utmost devotion; and from these two there springs the third, for unspeakable *sweetness* is present too. Fervour and song bring marvellous delight to a soul, just as they themselves can be the product of very great sweetness.

Now in all this richness is no trace of a false note, but rather the most exquisite perfecting of all our deeds. Not at all like those people who in their ignorance of the contemplative life are led astray by the *demon of noonday*<sup>8</sup> into a sham and fanciful devotion, because they consider themselves to have reached the top when in fact they are well down the scale. But the soul in whom are met these three things I have been speaking of remains completely impervious to the darts of the enemy; she continues to think all the time of her Beloved, rising ever higher, with her will unbroken, and her love stimulated. You must not be surprised if for such a soul, in her ordered love, there is melody and a continual retention through her Beloved of its music and comfort. For now she lives *no longer subject to vanity*,<sup>9</sup> but with heavenly support burns ever with uncreated, unfailing heat. And so, as I have already said, she loves ardently without ceasing, and feels within herself that supreme and gladdening heat, knowing she is simply burning with love's eternal fire. In her longing and sweetness she experiences her most Beloved; her meditation changes to a song of glory; and her very nature is renewed when she is caught up into this joyous song. Which is why her Maker has granted her her heartfelt desire: to pass without fear or grief from this decaying body, and to quit this world unafraid of death. For she who was the friend of light, and foe of darkness, loved nothing but life!

But men of this sort, who have been raised to such exalted love ought not to be chosen for positions of authority or for outward honour, or to be called to any kind of secular employment. They are stones like the topaz, found but rarely, and for that reason esteemed most precious. They are two-coloured: the purest colour is like gold, and

8. Psalms 91:6.

9. Romans 8:20.

the other is as clear as the cloudless sky. It surpasses the glory of every jewel, and nothing more beautiful can be seen. If we were to polish it we would make it dull, but leave it alone and it will retain its beauty. So the holy contemplatives mentioned earlier are the most rare and therefore the most dear of men. Like gold in their outstanding and fervent love, they are like the sky in the glory of their heavenly living. They surpass the life of any saint, and are the more beautiful and bright among the stones (I am speaking of course of the elect). They whose sole purpose is to love and possess this life shine more brightly than all other men, past or present. But if anyone wants to polish them, as it were, by loading them with honours, he will only diminish their ardour, and dull their beauty and brightness. And if they themselves accept public office and dignity, they do in fact demote themselves, and become less worth. So they ought to be left to engage in their own pursuits, in order that their brightness may continue to grow.

## CHAPTER 15

*How and when he was urged to the solitary life, and the song of love; about the change of place.*

As adolescence dawned in my unhappy youth, present too was the grace of my Maker. It was he who curbed my youthful lust and transformed it into a longing for spiritual embrace. He lifted and transferred my soul from the depths up to the heights, so that I ardently longed for the pleasures of heaven more than I had ever delighted in physical embrace or worldly corruption. The way all this worked out, if I were minded to publish it, obliges me to preach the solitary life. For the inbreathing Spirit meant me to follow this life, and love its purpose. And this, from that moment, with all my limitations, I have sought to do. Yet I was still living amongst those who flourished in the world, and it

was their food I used to eat. And I used to listen to that kind of flattery which all too often can drag the most doughty warriors from their heights down to hell itself. But when I rejected everything of this sort to set myself to one purpose, my soul was absorbed with love for my Maker. I longed for the sweet delights of eternity, and I gave my soul over to love Christ with every ounce of my power. And this she has received from the Beloved, so that now it is solitude that seems most sweet, and those comforts which in their madness men treasure are counted nothing.

From then on I continually sought quiet, and that although I went from one place to another. For to desert one's cell for reasonable cause does a hermit no harm any more than does its recovery if that seems right. Some of the holy Fathers were accustomed to do this, and thereby incurred criticism – but not from good men! For evil men spoke evil things, and would have gone on to do them if they had continued in the same place, for that is the way of them. Lift the lid of the pan, and there is only stink! Those who speak evil speak out of the abundance of their heart, and there lurks the poison of asps! I know this: the more men have been furious with me with their denigrations, the more have I advanced in spiritual growth. My worst detractors have been those I once counted my faithful friends. Yet I did not give up the things which helped my soul because of them, but got on with my study, always with the favour of God. I recalled the scripture which said, *They may curse, but you bless.*<sup>1</sup> And in the course of time I was granted growth in spiritual joy.

From the time my conversion of life and mind began until the day the door of Heaven swung back and his Face was revealed, so that my inner eye could contemplate the things that are above, and see by what way it might find the Beloved and cling to him, three years passed, all but three or four months. But the door remained open for nearly a year longer before I could really feel in my heart the warmth of eternal love.

1. Psalms 109:28.

I was sitting in a certain chapel, delighting in the sweetness of prayer or meditation, when suddenly I felt within myself an unusually pleasant heat. At first I wondered where it came from, but it was not long before I realized that it was from none of his creatures but from the Creator himself. It was, I found, more fervent and pleasant than I had ever known. But it was just over nine months before a conscious and incredibly sweet warmth kindled me, and I knew the infusion and understanding of heavenly, spiritual sounds, sounds which pertain to the song of eternal praise, and to the sweetness of unheard melody; sounds which cannot be known or heard save by him who has received it, and who himself must be clean and separate from the things of earth.

While I was sitting in that same chapel, and repeating as best I could the night-psalms before I went in to supper, I heard, above my head it seemed, the joyful ring of psalmody, or perhaps I should say, the singing. In my prayer I was reaching out to heaven with heartfelt longing when I became aware, in a way I cannot explain, of a symphony of song, and in myself I sensed a corresponding harmony at once wholly delectable and heavenly, which persisted in my mind. Then and there my thinking itself turned into melodious song, and my meditation became a poem, and my very prayers and psalms took up the same sound. The effect of this inner sweetness was that I began to sing what previously I had spoken; only I sang inwardly, and that for my Creator. But it was not suspected by those who saw me, for if they had known they would have honoured me beyond all measure, and I should have lost part of this most lovely flower, and have fallen into desolation. Meantime wonder seized me that I should be caught up into such joy while I was still an exile, and that God should give me gifts, the like of which I did not know I could ask for, and such that I thought that not even the most holy could have received in this life. From which I deduce that they are not given for merit, but freely to whomsoever Christ wills. All the same I fancy that no one will receive them unless he has a special

love for the Name of Jesus, and so honours it that he never lets it out of his mind, except in sleep. Anyone to whom this is given will, I think, achieve this very thing.

From the time my conversion began until, by the help of God, I was able to reach the heights of loving Christ, there passed four years and three months. When I had attained this high degree I could praise God with joyful song indeed! And here that blessed state has remained since that initial impetus: and so it will continue to the end. In fact it will be more perfect after death, for though it is here that joyful love and burning charity begin, it is there, in the kingdom of heaven, that it will receive its most glorious fulfilment. But a man who has passed through these stages in his life profits to no small degree, yet he does not ascend to a higher stage, for he is one who has been confirmed in grace as it were, and so far as mortal man can be, is at rest.

I thank God that this is so, and I want to give him unceasing praise. In tribulations, in troubles, in persecutions, he has given me comfort; and in prosperity and success he makes me await in confidence his everlasting crown.

So, Jesus, I want to be praising you always, such is my joy.

When I was down and out you stooped to me,  
and associated me with those sweet ministers  
who through the Spirit give out those lovely and  
heavenly melodies.

I will express my joy and gratitude  
because you have made me like one of those  
whose superb song springs from a clear conscience.

Their soul burns with their unending love.  
And your servant too, when he sits in prayer,  
glows and loves in his fervour.

His mind is transformed: he burns with fire;  
indeed, he expands in the vehemence of his longing.

And virtue, beautiful, true, lovely and faultless,  
flourishes before the face of his Creator.

His song suffuses his whole being,  
and with its glad melody  
lightens his burden,  
and brightens his labour.

God's gifts to us are manifold, wonderful and great, but none of them in this life can be compared with this one, which so perfectly confirms our hope in the beauty of the unseen life in the loving soul, and comforts him with its sweetness as he sits in prayer, and catches him up to the heights of contemplation, and to the sound of angels' praise.

And now, my brothers, I have told you how I came to the fire of love: not in order that you should praise me, but rather that you might glorify God. From him I have received whatever I have had of good. It is so that you who are aware that *everything under the sun is vanity*<sup>2</sup> might be moved to imitate, not denigrate.

## CHAPTER 16

*The prayer of the poor lover who desires to die; the praise of divine Charity.*

WHEN a man, devout and poor, worries over his sin, he can pray (if he so desires) like this:

Jesus Christ, my Lord and God, take pity on me;  
please consider my body's grievous yoke,  
which depresses my soul so quickly.  
My flesh is faltering under the burdens of life,  
and in consequence my spiritual strength is flagging too.  
For all that the world ever gave me I have spent,  
and now nothing remains but for you to lead my soul  
to that other world where my most precious treasure,  
where my real and lasting wealth, abides.

2. Ecclesiastes 1: 14 *et passim*.

There I shall live without wearying;  
there rejoice without grief;  
there delight without being sated;  
and there, loving you, seeing you, glorying in you,  
shall be satisfied for ever.  
For truly my treasure is you, yourself.

Death, why do you delay? Why are you so slow in coming to me, a man alive but mortal? Why do you not catch hold of him who is longing for you? Who can possibly assess that sweetness which brings an end to all sighing, a beginning to all blessedness, the gate to a desired, unending joy? You are the end of my grief, you are the goal of my toil, you are the cause of my fruitfulness, you are the entrance to my joys. Yes, I burn, I pant for you. If you come I will be safe. Ravished though I be with love, yet I still cannot enjoy fully what I so desperately want; not until I taste that joy you are going to give me. For if I must, or rather because I must, like all my forbears, pass your gate, I beg you do not delay too long, do not be too far off. You can see how I am pining because of love, how I am longing to die, how I am aflame for you. Not, of course, for your sake, but for the Saviour's, my Jesus, on whom, once I have got what I want from you, I hope to gaze eternally. How good, Death, is the sentence you pass on this poor man, whose soul has been sweetened with love; on this poor man, moreover, whose love is for Christ, whose thoughts are heavenward, who burns sweetly with the fire of the Holy Spirit!

For this same poor man is taken after death to the place where angels sing, because he has been cleansed, and blessed, and now lives in the Spirit's music. He, who all his life has based his meditation on that lovely Name, will die surrounded by marvellous melody.

The hosts of heaven greet him with their hymns, and take him with honour to the court of the Emperor Eternal; there he will sit in blessedness among the inhabitants of heaven. Love brought him to the state in which he lives with such interior delight, and joyfully bears whatever may

happen, and thinks on death not with anxiety but with pleasure. For he believes that it is then that he will truly live, when it is granted to him to pass from the light of this world.

Sweet charity, you are so obviously the dearest of all that is sweet! You take hold of our minds by your love; you possess them so clearly; you make them despise so quickly things that are transient, and pleasures that are vain; you cause them so remarkably to yearn for the things you want. You came to me ... and every secret corner of my heart has been filled with the lovely sound of your joy, and made abundant with fervent, spiritual happiness. Not surprisingly then, I long for love, the fairest of flowers, and inwardly burn with fiery flame. If only I could be quit of this place of exile!

The heat is such that no one can imagine it unless he has experienced its comfort for himself. His heart is bursting with song, a captive in the care of charity. For of all the things I experience here, this is the most delightful: I nearly die while it builds up its fervent love. Now my Beloved, grant that I may cease to live; for death, dreaded by so many, will be as the sound of music to me. And though I am now physically sitting in solitary state, I seem to be seated in Paradise, there singing sweetly my song of love for the joys my Beloved has given me!

## CHAPTER 17

*How perfect love is acquired by purity and affection; imperfect love; beauty; the threefold strength of divine love; rich men, poor men, and almsgiving.*

IN a truly loving mind there is always a song of glory and an inner flame of love. They surge up out of a clear conscience, out of an abundant spiritual joy, out of inward gladness. Small wonder if a love like this wins through to a perfect

### The Fire of Love

love. Love of this sort is immense in its fervour, its whole direction Godwards, totally unrestrained in its love for him. It cleaves to Christ without the opposition of silly thoughts; it rejoices day and night in Jesus, never distracted from him, never seduced by evil, never deceived by 'dead flies', or driven off by them from the fragrance of the ointment.<sup>1</sup> The world, the flesh, and the devil leave him unmoved, however violent their attacks; he tramples them underfoot, accounting their strength nothing. There is no tension in his fervour, but there is vigour in his love; there is sweetness in his song, and a warmth about his radiance; his delight in God is irresistible, his contemplation rises with unimpeded ascent. Everything he conquers; everything he overcomes; nothing seems impossible to him. For while a man is striving to love Christ with all his might he knows it to be true that within him is eternal life, abundant and sweet.

For we are in fact turned to Christ when we strive to love him with all our mind. For, as subject, God is so wonderful and, as spectacle, so entrancing, that it amazes me that any one can be so stupid and perverse as not to want with all his heart to see him.

It is not the one who does many things and great who is great; but the one who loves Christ much: he is great, and beloved of God. Philosophers have laboured much, yet they have completely disappeared, and many who seemed to be Christian, doing great things and performing great wonders, have not been found worth saving. Not doers, but lovers of God are rewarded with the heavenly crown.

I ask you, Lord Jesus,  
to develop in me, your lover,  
an immeasurable urge towards you,  
an affection that is unbounded,  
a longing that is unrestrained,  
a fervour that throws discretion to the winds!

1. Ecclesiastes 10:1.

### Chapter 17

The more worthwhile our love for you,  
all the more pressing does it become.  
Reason cannot hold it in check,  
fear does not make it tremble,  
wise judgement does not temper it.

There is no one more blessed than he who dies because he loves so much. No creature can love God too much. In everything else what is practised in excess turns to evil, but the virtue of love is such that the more it abounds the more splendid it becomes. A lover will languish if he does not have the object of his love near him. Which is why the Scripture says, *Tell my Beloved that I languish for love.*<sup>2</sup> as if it were saying, 'It is because I cannot see him whom I love; my very body is wasting away with the intensity of my devotion!'

Undoubtedly when a man is turned wholly towards Christ he is at first moved with real penitence, and this involves his giving up everything that panders to vanity. It is afterwards that he is 'seized' by this taste for eternal sweetness, which is going to make him sing joyously for God. This is exactly what Isaiah says, *I will sing to my Beloved,*<sup>3</sup> and the Psalmist, *In you is my song for ever.*<sup>4</sup> So it is not surprising that those who have lived in God's love, and are accustomed to this inner, sweet, and burning fire, are not afraid to face death, but rather pass from this present light, even with joy. And after death they will ascend with gladness to the heavenly realms.

It is the mental wound caused by the flame of divine love that is referred to in *I am wounded with love*. Similarly when one pines for love, and is carried away by it, one can say, *I languish for love*. For it is thus that a man regards his Beloved. He forgets himself and everything else for Christ's sake; and so he says, *Set me as a seal upon your heart.*<sup>5</sup>

For what is love but the transforming of the desire into the loved thing itself? Or if you prefer, love is a great longing for what is beautiful, and good, and lovely, with its

2. Canticles 5:8.

4. Psalms 71:6.

3. Isaiah 5:1.

5. Canticles 8:6.

thought ever reaching out to the object of its love. And when he has got it a man rejoices, for joy is caused only by love. Every lover is assimilated to his beloved: love makes the loving one like what he loves. But God (and, for that matter, his creature too) is not above or averse to being loved: rather, everyone admits to liking being loved, and finding pleasure in others' affection. People are not made sad by the fact of loving, unless the loved one is ungrateful or they despair of obtaining the object of their love. Such disappointments are never found in loving God, though they are met with often enough when it is a matter of loving the world – or women!

I would not venture to say that all love is good. There is a love which delights more in the creature than in the Creator, and prefers the pleasures of the visible to the splendours of the spiritual. This is evil and abhorrent, because it rejects a love which is eternal for something which is transient and impermanent. Yet perhaps even this is not wholly culpable, since its purpose is to love and be loved rather than to corrupt and be corrupted. For the more beautiful a creature is, so much the more lovable it is. There are some who take more pains over the salvation of those who are outwardly more beautiful than of those who are despised, because for the beautiful there are more occasions of evil. Nature itself teaches us that it is more pleasant to love what is beautiful, though a disciplined charity says we should prefer the good. All physical beauty is straw, and disappears like a puff of wind. But goodness persists, and God often chooses the things that are weak and despised,<sup>6</sup> paying no heed to the powerful or lovely. This is what the psalm says, *He has delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy's hand.*<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere we read, *You trusted in your own beauty and played the harlot.*<sup>8</sup>

It is the nature of love to melt the heart (as, for example, *My soul melted when my Beloved spoke*<sup>9</sup>). For sweet love and a devout heart so dissolve in the divine sweetness that

6. 1 Corinthians 1:27-8.

8. Ezekiel 16:15.

7. Psalms 78:61.

9. Canticles 5:6.

the will of man is united with the will of God in a remarkable friendship. In this union there is poured into the loving soul such sweetness of warmth, delight, and song that he who experiences it is quite unable to describe it.

The nature of love is that it is diffusive, unifying, and transforming. It is diffusive when it flows out and sheds the rays of its goodness not merely on friends and neighbours, but on enemies and strangers as well. It unites because it makes lovers one in deed and will, and draws into one Christ and every holy soul. He who holds on to God is one in spirit with him, not by nature, but by grace and identity of will. Love has also the power of transforming, for it transforms the lover into his Beloved, and makes him dwell in him. Thus it happens that when the fire of the Holy Spirit really gets hold of the heart it sets it wholly on fire and, so to speak, turns it into flame, leading it into that state in which it is most like God. Otherwise it would not have been said, *I have said, 'You are gods; all of you are children of the Most High.'*<sup>10</sup>

For there are some whose love for each other is so great that it almost seems there is but one soul in the two of them. Yet he who is poor in this world's goods but is rich in spiritual things is far removed from love of this sort. For it would be quite extraordinary if the man who is receiving all the time, and who is rarely or never in a position to give, ever had a friend on whom he could entirely rely. Yet he who is thus thought by others to be unworthy of devoted love has a faithful friend in Christ. He can confidently ask him whatever he wills. Where human aid is wanting, divine assistance is undoubtedly at hand.

All the same it would be more useful to a wealthy man if he chose for his special friend some poor saint, with whom he was willing to share all his possessions, and give them freely to him – even more indeed than the poor man might want – and should love him affectionately as his best and dearest friend. For Christ said *Make to yourself friends*<sup>11</sup> – and he meant the saintly poor who are the friends of God.

10. Psalms 82:6; cf. John 10:34-5.

11. Luke 16:9.

God freely gives to the lovers of such poor the joy of Paradise because of their love. I reckon that such a rich man would be well satisfied with his friendship. But nowadays the proverb is only too true which says 'The sea will be dry when the poor man has a friend'!

I have found that some wealthy men will only give food to those whom they consider poor; they are unwilling to give clothing or other necessary things, reckoning it enough if they give food. So they make friends who are only half-friends or part friends, not bothering whether their friendship is with the good poor, or the bad. And all the precious things that ought to be given away they reserve for themselves or their children. The saintly poor are no more beholden to them than they are to those other benefactors who have given them clothing or anything else. What is worst of all, to the wealthy the poor seem a very considerable burden!

## CHAPTER 18

*The praise and effectiveness of charity; the renunciation of the world; the taking up of the penitential life.*

CHARITY is the queen of virtues, the loveliest star of all; that beauty of soul which produces all these effects in our soul. In other words it wounds her and makes her long for God; it intoxicates and melts her, beautifies her, gladdens and enkindles her. Its behaviour is orderly, its practice is admirable. Every virtue to be true virtue must be rooted in charity. A man can possess no virtue that has not been planted in this love of God. He who multiplies virtues or good works apart from the love of God might as well throw precious stones down a bottomless pit! It is quite clear that whatever the things are that men do, they will not contribute to ultimate salvation if they are not done in love for God and neighbour. Since love alone makes us blessed, we ought to be willing to lose our life rather than to sully love

by thought, word, or deed. It is in this love that the warrior rejoices; in these things that the conqueror is crowned.

The Christian hugging earthly riches, or looking for comfort in worldly things, is only half a Christian. There is no total renunciation of possessions, and without that no one can attain perfection.

For when a man intends to love God perfectly he strives to have done with everything contrary to the divine love, whether outward or inward, which may hinder him from loving. To do this sincerely he has to exercise great diligence, because he is going to endure serious hardship in its execution. Yet ultimately he will find the sweetest rest in this thing he has been seeking.

We have heard that *the way is narrow that leads to life*.<sup>1</sup> This is the way of penance and few find it. 'Narrow' is what it is called, and called rightly; through it the flesh sheds its unlawful things and the worldly comforts; through it the soul is held back from degenerate delights and decadent thoughts; through it the soul is totally given over to love of the divine. Yet it is not often found among men, because scarcely any have taste for the things of God, but look for earthly joys, and find their pleasure there. So they have recourse to sensual lusts, and neglect the mental: they detest any way that would lead to spiritual well-being, and reject it as narrow and rough, and to their lust intolerable.

All the same a mortal man would do well to consider this: he will never attain the kingdom of heaven by way of wealth or fleshly delight and pleasure, especially when it is written of Christ, *it was necessary for Christ to suffer, and so enter into glory*.<sup>2</sup> If we are members of Jesus Christ, our Head, then we are going to follow him. If we love Christ, we ought to walk as he walked. Otherwise we are not members of him, being separated from our Head. And if indeed we are separated we ought to be very much afraid, because it means that we are joined to the devil, and at the General Judgement Christ will tell us, *I never knew you*.<sup>3</sup>

In fact he too entered heaven by the *strait gate* and

1. Matthew 7:14.

2. Luke 24:26.

3. Matthew 7:23.