

CHAPTER 29

Instruction for the simple and beginners who are eager to love; the avoiding of women.

THE faithful soul, bride of Jesus Christ, rejects pride because she loves humility so profoundly. She abominates vainglory because her only desire is for eternal joy and to follow Christ. She loathes carnal pleasure with its softness because she is already tasting the sweetness of eternity, and is burning to have for ever the love of the Beloved. There is no bitterness or resentment about her because through her love for Christ she is ready to endure anything. Indeed, she does not even know how to be envious of other people, since, radiant with real love, she rejoices in the progress and salvation of everybody.

As a matter of fact no one is ever jealous unless he is in truth less than the larger size he thinks himself to be! Such a man will heap insults on people lest they should seem equal to himself! But if anyone is said to be more important, beautiful, or strong, he at once becomes terribly jealous and dejected. But a soul which has been kindled however slightly by the fire of the eternal vision does not look for empty glory and passing praise. It is obvious that men who backbite and are envious of each other do so because they have no love for God – unlike God's elect. Where they are who love God, there too are men as eager for the good of their fellows as they are for themselves. So if you want to love God supremely, learn to abominate all earthly praise. For Christ's sake embrace the contempt of man and his mockery – and brace your mind for the everlasting sequel! You would choose rather to experience fiery torment with the reprobate in hell, than to have any part with them in sin. For the man who loves Christ ardently, and rejoices and sings in the sheer delight of that love, is the one who lives secure and sure. To him it would seem more pleasant to fall into the flames of eternity than to commit just one mortal

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sin! Such are the saints, for they live purely, despise all worldly things, and now sing melodiously what once they could only say – such is their fervour and spiritual joy. They burn with love for Christ, their eyes are set on heaven, and to the utmost of their power they occupy themselves with good works; they abound in the delights of everlasting life, yet to themselves they seem the vilest of men, and the lowest and worst of all.

Therefore you who till now have been uncouth and ignorant must make every effort to withstand your spiritual enemies, and not allow any wrong thought to find room in your heart. Set your wisdom against the wiles of the devil. When some unclean imagination or thought has obtruded itself against your better judgement, do not yield to it, but fight it manfully, and cry unceasingly to Christ until you are clothed with God's armour. If you want to imitate those who despise the world, never think about what you are giving up, but what you are despising, with what devotion you are presenting your vows to God, with what longing and love you offer your prayers, with what fervour you yearn to see God, and to be united to him. If you truly hate all sin, if you do not hanker after passing things, if your soul refuses to comfort herself with earthly consolation, if you savour things supernal, if you crave to contemplate heavenly things (and supremely the Son of God), if your speech is controlled and wise – for whoever's spirit is absorbed in the sweetness of loving God and singing to Jesus does not speak unless obliged to – by such means and such training you will reach perfection.

It is not surprising that God should approve one who in this way despises the world. The soul, made sweet through her shining conscience, and beautiful through her love of eternal charity, can be called 'the garden of Christ'; for when the vices have been weeded out she flowers with virtue and rejoices with joyful song – like the singing of birds! We must, then, give all diligence to obeying God, to serving him, to loving him, and in all our good works our purpose must be to attain to him.

For what is the point of wanting earthly things, or desiring carnal love, if the only lasting result is the wrath of the Judge, and everlasting punishment? For carnal love inevitably excites temptations; it blinds the soul from following real purity; it hides the sins that have been committed, and foolishly precipitates new wrongs; it inflames the soul with every sort of depraved delight. Moreover it troubles quiet of every kind, and hinders fervent love for Christ; it corrupts the virtues earlier won.

And so it follows that a man who honestly wants to love Christ must not let his imagination toy with the love of women. When women love, they love without reserve, because they do not know how to restrain their manner of loving. On the other hand loving them can be a very tricky and prickly business! One eye they keep on the main chance, and the other on genuine emotion. Loving women upsets the balance, disturbs the reason, changes wisdom to folly, estranges the heart from God, takes the soul captive, and subjects it to demons! And he who looks at a woman with natural affection yet not with lustful desire finds he is unable to keep free from illicit urges or unclean thoughts. Often enough he feels in himself the stain of filth and even may take pleasure in the thought of developing it.

Womanly beauty leads many astray. Desire for it can sometimes subvert even righteous hearts, so that what began in spirit ends up in flesh. So beware of entering into conversation with a woman just because she is lovely. You will be caught by the poisonous disease of pleasure, and, knowingly deceived, you will set about implementing your dirty thoughts. Fool that you are, you will allow yourself to be taken captive by your enemies. Be wise then, and flee from women. Do not ever think about them, because even if a woman is good, the devil's attack and his insinuations, the attraction of her beauty, and the weakness of your flesh can beguile your will beyond measure.

But if you brood ceaselessly on the love of Christ, and wherever you are keep it reverently before you, I warrant you will never be deceived by false female flattery. Indeed,

the more you see you are attracted and tempted by their empty endearments, so the more you will despise them for the stuff and nonsense that they are, and, not surprisingly, the more richly you will rejoice in God's love.

For in those who love him Christ works in the most wonderful fashion, and with tender, special love takes them to himself. They have no desire for luxury or for physical beauty, and they have consigned all transitory things to oblivion; they do not care about worldly success, nor do they fear opposition. They love especially to be alone, to hasten unhindered towards the joy of knowing God's love. Suffering for Christ seems to them something very sweet, not very hard. If anyone wants to honour a martyr's triumph worthily let him show his devotion to his virtue by his imitation of it; let him share the martyr's cause even if he does not have to submit to his pain; let him persist in patience, for in so doing he will have complete victory.

The soul which gives up the folly of evil love enters upon the narrow way. It is on this way that the foretaste of the life of heaven is experienced. The consolation felt is such that it overcomes all delight in passing things; the soul asks her Beloved to grant his comfort and inner refreshment, and to pour in the grace of perseverance lest she be fatigued by her errors, and falter. So when a young man begins to do well let him always remember that he must persevere and never drag his feet or give up his good purpose. Mentally at least let him always advance, and rise from lesser to greater things. When he has rejected even the shadow of error and has spurned with contempt the sweet poison of lawless living he will lay hold of the narrow life and embrace the sweetness of a life devoted to God. Thus step by step and helped by the Holy Spirit's gifts within him he climbs the heights of the contemplation of God. He is refreshed and delighted by the warmth of everlasting love, and in this heavenly joy he abounds – up to the very limit possible for mortal man.

To be sure, the beloved soul who is troubled on every side and tormented by raging temptation is unable to savour the

sweetness of love as it is in itself. Yet she has experienced its joy, and she keeps steadily reaching out to her Beloved. It is quite possible not to have this marvellous sweetness, but she loves Christ with such longing that she keeps going for love of him alone.

How greatly ought we to praise this most generous help! Every true lover among us has known it. It comforts the distressed, sweetens the heartbroken, soothes the troubled, scatters and destroys confusion. The soul, now separated from vice, and a stranger to carnal lust, is purged from sin. She knows that sweet and certain delight is awaiting her in the future, and so she is confirmed in hope, sure of attaining the Kingdom. And now, in her life here, she offers Christ a draught most delightful, warm with fervent love, laced with spiritual gifts, and adorned with the flowers of virtue. And Christ is pleased to accept it, for he, for the sake of love, *drank from the torrent on the way*.¹

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The secret judgement of God on backsliders, who are not to be judged by us; a powerful attack on the money-makers.

BUT if someone should ask how it is that many of those who have lived the most austere lives, and seem completely to have given up worldly pleasure, are able to *return to their vomit again*¹ unafraid, and not attain their goal, we keep our peace and are silent, reluctant to pass judgement lest we should be wrong. It is not for us here to know God's hidden judgements: everything we need to know will be made clear in due course. All the ways of God are just and fair, fundamentally true and right, and he never rebukes this man independently of his wonderful justice, or that one without his great mercy, which is just too – and he does this in order that a man might choose life. So we ought to ponder the text, *the deep, like a garment, is his clothing*.²

1. cf. Psalms 110:7.

1. 2 Peter 2:22.

2. Psalms 104:6.

We must be men who fear, then, while we are on the road, and never those who foolishly presume. No man knows whether he is worth hating or loving, or how he is going to finish when this life ends. Good people should fear lest they fall into evil, and evil men should hope to overcome their ill.

Moreover if men persist in their greed and wickedness, there is no point in their expecting to receive mercy before their sin has been dealt with. Sin is never forgiven before it is forsaken, and then only when satisfaction has been made by the sinner at the first opportunity.

But the worldly rich and powerful are consumed with an insatiable desire to get hold of other people's possessions, and by such wealth and goods to increase their own earthly greatness and worldly power, buying at small cost what is of great worth from the point of view of passing substance. They hold established positions in the service of kings or great men; they receive many gifts undeserved and unjustified; they get sensual delights and pleasures along with their honours. Let them hear the words, not of me, but of blessed Job: *They lead their lives in pleasure*, he says, *and they descend to hell in a moment*.³ In a single moment they lose everything that throughout their life they had sought to acquire. With these people has dwelt *the wisdom of this world* which is called *foolishness with God*.⁴ They have known the prudence of the flesh – and the enmity of God. And so the mighty suffer mighty torments, because *though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God*⁵ but rather glorified themselves, and banished him from their thoughts. *Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools*.⁶ And now those who had experienced the fame and delights of this life are come to the depths of stinking hell.

Indeed, of all those who have been bound up with the vices of this world, none, I reckon, have so little hope of salvation as those commonly called 'exploiters'.⁷ For when they have spent all their youthful energy in getting hold of others' property by hook or crook, afterwards, in their old

3. Job 21:13.

4. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

5. Romans 1:21.

6. Romans 1:22.

7. Latin *perpetratores*.

age, they sit back as if they were quite safe. Of course, they hang on to what they have wrongfully acquired. But conscience can be afraid, and their wickedness carries its own witness of condemnation. All they have done is merely to have ceased from their unjust exactions, for they do not hesitate to use others' property as if it were their own. Perhaps if they were to give it all back little would remain for themselves. But their pride will not allow them to beg, and they could not endure to fall from their erstwhile rank. *To dig⁸* they are unable. And so they choose, because demons have deceived them, to escape worldly woe in favour of suffering an eternal, endless hell!

Indeed, when such people lord it on earth they oppress lesser folk by their tyrannical power; and yet for others, the fact that they have not been exalted to such heights in their exile, is not a thing to be feared so much as to rejoice over; for lest the beloved of God should get like this, God restrains them, and they fulfil what the Psalmist says, *Be not afraid, though one be made rich, or if the glory of his house be increased.⁹* A man takes none of it with him when he dies, nor does his earthly splendour accompany him. There is not even a drop of water for the tongue of the rich man burning in hell.¹⁰ He forfeits all his glory at death, and when he goes down into the shades only sin is his companion. For that he will be tormented in eternity.

CHAPTER 31

Why perfect contemplatives do not heed outward singing; the mistake of blaming them; the way of advance in contemplation.

BECAUSE there are in the church men and women duly appointed to sing the praise of God, and to stimulate people's devotion, folk have sometimes come and asked me why I do not want to do the same as the others, for they

8. Luke 16:3.

9. Psalms 49:16.

10. Luke 16:19-31.

have often seen me at Solemn Mass. They thought my attitude was wrong, for they said that all men ought to sing aloud to their Creator, and give voice audibly. But I gave no answer, because they knew neither the kind of music I made for my Mediator, nor the sweet strains I bore. For they fancied that no one could perceive spiritual song because they themselves were unable to discover how it could be. But it is stupid to think that one who wholly belongs to God may not receive a special gift from his Beloved, merely because they have had no such experience themselves.

For this reason I thought I ought to show them some sort of an answer, and not let those who argue in this way get away with it. For what business is it of theirs the way other people live, about whose manner of life they know nothing, whose life in many ways excels their own, and who in the matter of 'things unseen' are much superior? Is God not to be allowed to do what he wants? *Are their eyes evil because he is good?¹* Are they really wanting to cut the will of God down to their size? Surely all men belong to God, and he can take whom he wants, and leave whom he wills? To whomsoever he wishes, whenever he chooses, he gives whatever he pleases – and shows the magnificence of his bounty!

I fancy the reason they grumble and grouse is that they want those who are better than themselves to come down to their level, and so conform to their inferiors. These people think they are superior when in fact they are less! And so my soul summoned up enough courage and I opened up to them something of my music, which was springing from the fire of love; that music in which I sing to Jesus, and sound forth notes of sweetest harmony. But then they withstood me even more fiercely, because I sought to flee from the 'outward' songs customarily sung in church, and from the organ pieces that worshippers listen to: and because I was only present when I needed to hear Mass – I could hear it no other way – or when the importance of the day de-

1. Matthew 20:15.

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manded it, to avoid arousing thereby the bitterness and backbiting of people!

Above all else I have always longed to sit and concentrate on Christ, and him alone. This was why he gave me spiritual song, by which I could offer praises and prayers to him. But those who argued with me did not share this opinion, and tried to make me conform to their pattern. But I could not possibly desert the grace of Christ, and accept the views of foolish men who were completely ignorant of all that was going on within me. I put up with all their talk, and I did what I had to do according to the state in which the Lord had placed me.

But I say all this, and give thanks and glory to Christ, so that now there need no longer be this sort of folly among people, this venturing to sit in judgement. What I have been doing has not been done in pretence or for fun, as some interpret my actions. Many indeed are led astray by such things, and believe themselves to have got what in fact is not theirs. But an unseen joy really has come to me, and in my soul I have been truly warmed with the fire of love.

It has lifted my heart above these lesser things, so that I now rejoice in Jesus, far away from outward melodies, but with one that is within.

In addition to my hatred of things that contaminate and my rejection of empty words, I have at the same time striven not to eat more food than necessary, nor to discipline myself stupidly – though I have been described as one who is addicted to rich men's houses, the pleasures of the table, and high living generally! But through the overruling of God I have had a soul differently ordered, which samples heavenly things rather than sweetmeats.

From that time I have never ceased to love solitude, and have chosen to live apart from men, as far as the needs of the body allow – and I have been continually upheld by him whom I love.

We must not be surprised if a man does not attain the heights of contemplation or experience its sweetness at the beginning of his Christian life. It is quite simple: to acquire

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contemplation means much time and hard work, and it is not given to anyone any time anyhow, even though its possession brings unspeakable joy. It is not within man's power to achieve it, and however great his efforts they will be inadequate. But God is generous, and it is granted to those who truly love him, and who have sought to love Christ beyond what men consider possible.

Yet many people after repentance fall away from their cleanness back into slackness and, indeed, into *the abomination of the Egyptians*.² Because they were not consumed with love their experience of the sweetness of contemplation was only occasional, and then but slight. And so, inadequate, they wilted under trial. Or perhaps it was that they became bored and scornful of God's *manna*, and *harked back to the fleshpots*,³ wanting once again to live in worldly feasting and comfort.

If one is to despise the world, to desire the Kingdom, to hunger for the love of God, to hate sin, it is a great help to read or meditate regularly upon holy books. By these means the devout and instructed soul profits and develops, and has a ready defence against the darts of the enemy. The devil is confounded when we raise the word of God against his temptations. If indeed men can endure it, bearing *the burden and heat of the day*⁴ patiently, never allowing themselves to be drawn into the love of false delights, after many tears and diligent prayers they will be inflamed with everlasting love, and feel within themselves a continual, unending warmth. For *while they are thus musing the fire kindled*.⁵

2. Deuteronomy 29:17.

4. Matthew 20:12.

3. Exodus 16:3.

5. Psalms 39:3.

CHAPTER 32

Instruction on the contemplative life, through prayer, meditation, fasting, watching; false contemplatives and true; true jubilant song.

THEREFORE an elect soul, completely absorbed in his longing to love Christ, and Christ alone, transforms himself into his Beloved. He has neither worldly possessions nor the wish to possess any; in voluntary poverty he follows Christ, and lives content on the alms of others. His conscience is clear and sweet with heavenly savour, and he pours his whole heart out in love for his Maker, striving every day to grow in, and be consumed with, his longing for heaven. No one who renounces this world in his zeal to be set alight on fire by the Holy Spirit is going to allow his practice of prayer and meditation to cool. For it is in this way, and by the tears that result, and indeed by the favour of Christ that the mind kindles in love most wonderfully, and kindled rejoices, and rejoicing is raised to the life of contemplation. The soul which is in this excellent state flies up in ecstasy; she is taken out of herself, and to her inner eye the opened heaven offers its secrets for her gaze.

But first of all a man must exercise himself vigorously in prayer and meditation for some years, virtually heedless of his bodily needs. By his ardent use of these means, he rejects all that is unreal, and day and night eagerly seeks to feel the love of God. In this way the almighty Lover inspires the one who loves him to fresh love, and raises him to sublime heights, far above earthly things and the tumult of vain and vicious thoughts. Now no *dead flies destroy the sweetness of the ointment*,¹ for they have disappeared, completely dead! And at last the love of God will become sweet to him indeed, and he will be intoxicated with sweetness ever more rare; he will taste the honey of surpassing wonder, so that in himself he knows only the comforting

1. Ecclesiastes 10:1.

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infusion of this heavenly savour, token of the highest sanctity. Anointed with sweetness of this sort he will strive to keep watching, for one who really feels his heart burn with the fire of eternal love is not going to let his mind turn away from this bright and sweet mystery. And yet some who were thought to be his equal had such fire only in their imagination. People like these, who are living, not in the truth but in the shades, when they are summoned to the Marriage Feast, think themselves fit to take the chief place. Not surprisingly at the true Judgement they will go down with *shame to find a lower place*.² For it is said of them, *A thousand shall fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand*.³ If only they would try to know themselves, and search their own consciences! They would never then presume, or compare themselves with others' merits, and thus insult their betters!

The lover of the Godhead, whose whole being is shot through with love for the unseen Beauty, rejoices in the deep recesses of his soul; he is gladdened by that most delightful fire, for he has given himself to God with utter devotion. And so, not because he deserves it, but when Christ wills it, he will receive into his heart a sound sent from heaven; and then his meditation will be turned into melody, and his mind will dwell in marvellous harmony.

For it is angelic sweetness which he has received into his soul, and the songs of angels too, although his praise of God is not expressed in identical words. Yet his melody is similar to that of the angels, though again it is not as great or exact, for he is still hampered by corruptible flesh. He who has experienced this sweetness, has at the same time experienced the songs of angels, because they are both of one and the same kind: one here, the other in heaven. It is the tune that makes the song, not the words that are chanted. This praising is angelic food, not for the casual passer-by, but only for those who are most fervent in their love. They rejoice and delight in Jesus now that they have themselves been adjudged worthy to join in the eter-

2. Luke 14:9.

3. Psalms 91:7.

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nal praise ever sung by the angels to God. The Psalmist sang of this, *Man has eaten angels' food*.⁴ And so his nature is renewed, and will change into a divine glory and happiness. He will be sweet and godly and full of song because now he is feeling the delights of eternal love, singing unweariedly with the greatest sweetness. Then it is that there happens to such a lover what I have never found in any learned writing or have heard expounded, namely that this song will spring to his very lips, and he will sing his prayers in a spiritual symphony of celestial sweetness. It will make him slow of speech, because the abundance of his inner joy and the singular nature of his song impose delay, and what once occupied him not more than an hour he will now find difficult to complete in half a day. And while this is happening he will sit alone, mixing as little as possible with those who sing psalms, and deliberately not singing with the rest. I am not saying that all should try this, but let him to whom it is given do what he wishes, for he is being led by the Holy Spirit, and his way of life is not going to be diverted by what men say.

Moreover his heart will be living in splendour and fire, and marvellous music will exalt him. He will pay no particular respect to any one, even if he is thus thought to be an oaf or a bumpkin. In the depths of his being there is the praise of God and jubilant song, and his praise bursts out aloud; his most sweet voice rises up to heaven, and the Divine Majesty delights to hear it.

He whose beauty the King desires has a lovely face, because he holds within himself the uncreated wisdom. For his wisdom is drawn from the secret place, and her pleasures are for those who love eternity; she is not found by worldlings and their soft living. But she dwells in him of whom I have been speaking, because his whole being is absorbed in loving Christ, and all within him cries out for God. This cry is his love and his song, and he lifts a great shout to the ears of God. It is the longing of a good man, this eagerness for perfection. His is no worldly shout, for he

⁴ Psalms 78:25.

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is craving Christ and none else. His inner being is ablaze with the fire of love; his very heart is alight and burning; he engages in no outward work which cannot be turned to good. He praises God in song – but his song is in silence. His lays are not meant for the ears of men; but in the sight of God he utters his praise in unspeakable sweetness.

CHAPTER 33

Spiritual song does not fit in with outward song; the reason for the error of those who deny this; knowledge infused and inspired, and how it differs from what has been acquired.

A MAN raised to holiness can know that he has the song of which I have been speaking in this way: he cannot abide the noise of psalmody unless his own inner song is mentally attuned to it; it is destroyed if he has to speak outwardly. Some indeed are distracted in their singing and psalmody, not because they are perfect, but because they are not yet settled in their own minds, and people's words interrupt and disturb their prayers; a thing which does not happen with the perfect. For those who are well founded cannot be distracted from prayer or meditation by noise or tumult or anything else: it is only from song that such things pluck them. For that sweet, spiritual song is very special, and given only to the most special! It is not an affair of those outward cadences which are used in church and elsewhere; nor does it blend much with those audible sounds made by the human voice and heard by physical ears; but among angel melodies it has its own acceptable harmony, and those who have known it speak of it with wonder and approval.

See and understand, you men, and do not be misled, because I have shown you, for the honour of God Almighty and our own blessing, why I used to escape these songsters, and why I was not anxious to mix with them, or wanting to hear organists play. As far as I am concerned they put an