

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

Chapter 18

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*.¹ 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*.² 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*.³

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

1. Matthew 7:14.

2. Luke 24:26.

3. Matthew 7:23.

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*narrow way.*⁴ How can we, wretched sinners as we are, desire to exchange poverty for wealth, to indulge in all the delights and flatteries which this world offers, to secure for ourselves every trifle and luxury, and yet at the same time expect to reign with Christ in the life to come?

Christ *though he was rich, for our sakes became poor,*⁵ and we, though we are poor, want nothing so much as to be (or to seem to be) rich. Christ, though he was Lord of all, was made the servant of all: and we, though we are worthless and useless servants, want to lord it over all. He, though he was the great God, was made lowly man: and we, though we are merely weak exiles, are puffed up with pride as if we were gods. He lived among men that he might lead us up to heavenly things: and we, all our life, desire earthly things.

It seems quite evident that we do not love him, since we do not conform our will to his, nor are we concerned to implement what we ask for daily when we say *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*⁶ It is a waste of time for such men to count on being heirs with the elect, since they do not share in Christ's Redemption: we have been redeemed by his Blood, yet they despise it by their wicked and foul deeds. Of their own free will they enslave themselves to the devil.

CHAPTER 19

The beauty of the mind, the vanity of the world, the love of God and neighbour, considered together. Can perfect love be lost and obtained in this life?

If you delight in beauty you ought to know that this quality of your mind will cause you to be loved by the Supreme Beauty, so long as you keep such delight unsullied for love of him alone.

For all fleshly beauty is corruptible, weak, and contemptible; it quickly passes – and it deceives its lovers. In this life

4. Matthew 7:14. 5. 2 Corinthians 8:9. 6. Matthew 6:10.

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virtue involves an unswerving hold of truth, the scorning and trampling down of vanity.

All those visible things people long for are vain. On the other hand the things which cannot be seen are true, and heavenly, and eternal. Every Christian shows himself to be the elect of God in this way: he scorns earthly things as nothing, and he is wholly given over to godly desires, which yield him the secret, sweet, music of love, a sound never known by earthly love. All the while a man is beguiled by worldly lust he is far removed, alas, from any taste for heavenly joy. But not surprisingly the shining soul, tirelessly following Christ, and wholly intent on loving eternity, is wont to be filled with abundant sweetness. Even in this life of flesh it sings its joyful song as if it were living with angels.

Therefore if our love is pure and perfect, it means that whatever our heart loves is God. If indeed we love ourselves and all other lovable creatures for God, and only in God, what else are we doing but loving him both in ourselves and in them? For when God is loved by us with all our heart and mind, undoubtedly both our neighbour and every other lovable thing is loved as well – and quite right too. So if we pour out our whole heart to God, in love for him, and by that token are bound closely to him, what other love can we have?

For in the love of God is the love of our neighbour. Therefore as he who loves God cannot but love man, so in the same way he who loves Christ in truth, can be shown to love nothing but God in him. And whatever it is for which we are loved or do love, we refer it all to God who is the source of love. For he who commands that every man's heart should be yielded to himself, is also eager that every affection and movement of the spirit should be fixed in him. Indeed he who really loves God, feels there is nothing in his heart save God, and if he feels there is nothing else he *has* nothing else. Whatever he has he loves for God, and he loves nothing but what God wants him to love. Therefore he loves nothing but God, and thus all his love is God.

In fact the love of this man is a true love because he

conforms himself to his Creator, who formed everything for his own sake. So he too loves everything for God's sake. Indeed, when the love of eternity is truly kindled in our souls, all earthly vanity, all fleshly lust, is accounted the filthiest refuse. And the mind, which is now completely given over to devotion, and seeking only the good pleasure of its Creator, blazes up within itself by the fervour of its love quite remarkably. Gradually it grows and glows in spiritual good, and no longer travels the broad slippery slope which leads to death, but is lifted with heavenly fire to the life of contemplation, ever going onwards and upwards.

No one in this vale of tears is going to attain perfection in the contemplative life overnight. For, first of all, a man's heart must be set really on fire by the torch of eternal love, so that he feels it burn with love, and he knows his conscience melt with exceptional sweetness. Little wonder when a man is first made a true contemplative, and tastes the sweetness and feels the warmth, that he almost dies through excess of love! He is held tight in the embrace of eternal love, almost as though it were physical, because with unceasing contemplation, and with his whole heart, he is attempting to reach up to and see that indescribable light. In the end such a man will allow his soul no comfort unless it comes from God, for now he is longing for such, and to the end of his life here he knows he will so desire, crying out anxiously with the Psalmist, *When shall I come and appear before the face of God?*¹

Here is perfection of love. However, whether this state of love once attained can ever be lost is not an improper question to ask. For all the while a man can sin, it is possible for him to lose charity. But to be unable to sin means that a man is not still on the way but has reached his fatherland. Therefore however perfect a man may be in this life he is still able to sin, and sin mortally. For the attraction of sin is never wholly extinguished in any pilgrim, as a matter of common experience. But if anyone were able not to be tempted or to lust, he would clearly belong more to

1. Psalms 42:2.

the heavenly state than to this life, for he could not do wrong if he could not sin! I just do not know if there is any such person living in the flesh, but, speaking for myself, *the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh*² and though *I delight in the law of God according to the inner man*³ my love is not yet so great as to extinguish lust completely.

Yet I think there is a degree of perfect love which once a man reaches he will never thereafter lose. It is one thing to be able to lose it; it is another always to hold on to it because one does not want to let it go, even if such were possible. But the perfect abstain as much as they can from everything which will destroy or hinder their perfection. Though their own free will remains they are filled with the grace of God, and by it they are continually moved to love and speak and do good – and to draw back from an evil mind or mouth or deed. When a man is perfectly converted to Christ, he will hold in contempt all things that are transient, but keep a tight hold on his longing for his Maker – as far as is given to mortals, who have to allow for the corruption of the flesh. And then, not surprisingly because of this vigorous effort, he sees with his inward eye heaven open, as it were, and all the inhabitants there. Then it is that he feels that warmth most sweet, burning like a fire. He is filled with wonderful sweetness, and glories in jubilant song. Here indeed is charity perfected, and no one can know what it is like unless he lays hold of it; and he who does never loses it, but lives in sweetness and dies in safety.

CHAPTER 20

The usefulness and worth of prayer and meditation.

To acquire and retain this stability of mind, continual prayer is a great help. If in intention it is truly founded, it will overthrow the strength of devils. For although God

2. Galatians 5:17.

3. Romans 7:22.

knows everything – even before we ask for anything he knows perfectly well what it is we are wanting to ask – there are many reasons why we should pray. For Christ gave us an example of prayer when he went up alone into the mountain, and spent the whole night there in prayer. Moreover there is the apostolic precept, *Pray without ceasing*¹; *men ought always to pray and not faint*.² Also, we pray in order to acquire grace in this present life, and glory in the future. So it is said, *Ask and you will receive. Everyone who asks receives, and it is opened to him who knocks*.³ Again, angels offer our prayers to God, and so help their fulfilment. Our thoughts and longings are, of course, open and clear only to God, yet angels know when saints think worthy, holy thoughts, and when their fire burns brightly with the love of eternal life. They know through God's revelation, and by watching their outward actions, because they can see that they are serving God alone. Which is why the angel said to Daniel, *You are a man of strong desires*.⁴

Again, it is through continual prayer that our soul is kindled with the fire of love for God. For God says through his prophet, *Are not my words as a burning fire, and as a hammer for breaking stones*?⁵ And the Psalmist adds, *Your speech is a burning fire*.⁶ There are many nowadays quick to reject the word of God spoken from the heart, and allow it no room. So they do not kindle with warm comfort, but stay cold, sluggish, and indifferent, even though they have made countless prayers and scriptural meditations. It is because they do not pray or meditate with a perfect heart. But on the other hand there are those who drive sloth away, and in no time at all are alight and burning with love for Christ. And so rightly the verse goes on, *and your servant loves it*.⁷ He is on fire indeed, because *he has loved your word, Lord*, which means he has meditated on it, and lives according to it.

1. 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

4. Daniel 9:23 (Vulgate).

6. Psalms 119:140 (Vulgate).

2. Luke 18:1.

3. Luke 11:10.

5. Jeremiah 23:29.

7. *ibid*.

He has sought you, rather than yours,
and he has received from you both yourself and yours.
Others serve you for what they get out of you,
and they care too little for yourself.
They pretend that they want to serve you,
but it is only to gain worldly honour, and to be famous
with men.
But while they rejoice, they find very little, and lose a
great deal:
not only you and yours, but themselves and theirs.

Again, we ought to pray in order to be saved. So James exhorts, *pray for one another that you may be saved*.⁸

Or again, we must pray so that we do not ease up, but rather busy ourselves continually in good works. That is why it is said, *Watch and pray that you do not enter into temptation*.⁹ We ought always to be praying, or reading, or meditating, and doing other useful things, so that our enemy never finds us idle. We must give the closest attention to *watching in prayer*¹⁰ with all our powers, so that we do not fall asleep. Failures in this respect distract the mind and make a man forget his aim, and if they are serious can be enough to destroy the effect of devotion. But this devotion is felt by the mind of a man who prays, provided he prays with watchfulness, and care, and love.

CHAPTER 21

The contemplative life is more worthy and meritorious than the active; preaching and prelacy.

SOME people are doubtful as to which life is the more meritorious and excellent, the contemplative or the active. To many of them the active life seems more deserving because of the amount of good works and preaching it performs. But this is the mistake of ignorance, because they do

8. James 5:16.

9. Matthew 26:41.

10. Colossians 4:2.

not know what the contemplative life stands for. True, there are many actives who are better than some contemplatives. But the best contemplatives are superior to the best actives. So we say therefore that the contemplative life, taken in itself, is sweeter, nobler, worthier, and more meritorious in respect of its fundamental principle, which is delight in *uncreated good*; in other words it is because this is the life which loves God more ardently. Therefore, the contemplative life, if it is properly lived, issues in a greater love of God, and demands more grace, than the active life. There is in the contemplative life the basic principle which calls for a more fervent love than the active life affords; and because contemplatives are quiet in mind and body, they can savour the sweetness of eternal love more than others do. Actives, to be sure, serve God with their toil and outward activity, but they spend little time in inner quiet. And the result is that they can only rarely and briefly know spiritual delight. On the other hand contemplatives are almost always enjoying the embrace of their Beloved.

But there are those who take an opposite line. They say, 'The active life is more fruitful, because it performs works of mercy, and preaches, and does other such things. Therefore it is more meritorious.' I say, 'No, because such works have their own accidental reward, which is the joy of the *created good*.¹ Thus a man taken up into the angelic order could have what an actual member of the order of cherubim or seraphim could not have, namely, the joy of some created good which he had done in his lifetime, which the other (who is, say, unrivalled in his love for God) did not do. So it often happens that someone of less merit is good and preaches, and another, who loves much more, does not preach. Is he who preaches therefore better? No; the one who loves more is the superior and better, although the one who is less will have merit because of his preaching; a merit

1. The distinction between *uncreated good* and *created good* is one of the instances which show Rolle's grasp of scholastic theology. *Praemium essentiale: gaudium de bono increato. Praemium accidentale: gaudium de bono creato.*

the other does not have because he did not preach. It is patent therefore that a man is not more holy or excellent because of the outward deeds he performs. For God who looks on the heart rewards the will rather than the deed. Good works depend on the will, not the will on the works. The more ardent a man's love, the more exalted his reward. For there is in true contemplatives a certain sweet fervour and an abundance of God's love, which because it abides in them infuses them with joy and song, and ineffable pleasure. This is never found here in those who are actives, for they do not set their minds solely on heavenly things so as to deserve to rejoice in Jesus. Therefore the active life is rightly put second, and the contemplative preferred both for the present and the future.

In Solomon's litter the pillars were silver and the back-rest gold.² Our episcopal 'pillars' are the strong supporters, and good rulers of the Church. They are 'silver', because in their conduct they shine out, and in their preaching sound forth! The 'golden back-rest' however must mean the contemplatives; on these, living in supreme quiet, Christ specially lays his head. And they too deliberately rest in him. These are 'gold', because in the integrity of their lives they are purer and more precious, and in the fervour of their loving and contemplating more aglow. God indeed predestines his elect to fulfil various ministries. It is not given to any individual to hold every office, but each one has what best suits his state. Which is why the Apostle says, *To each of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ*.³ Some people give alms out of their wealth rightly acquired; some defend truth even unto death; some preach the word of God clearly and powerfully; others show their preaching in their writings; some perform great penances for God's sake, and put up with wretchedness in this life; some through the gift of contemplation yield themselves wholly to God, and surrender themselves completely to loving Christ. Undoubtedly among all the states which exist in the Church it is those

2. Canticles 3:9.

3. Ephesians 4:7.

who have that particular gift who rejoice; they have become contemplatives of the divine love, so now they exult and sing – and deservedly so.

If any man could achieve both lives at once, the contemplative and the active, and sustain and fulfil them, he would be great indeed. He would maintain a ministry with his body, and at the same time experience within himself the song of heaven, absorbed in melody and the joy of everlasting love. I do not know if anybody has ever done this: it seems to me impossible to do both at once. We must not reckon Christ in this respect as an ordinary man, nor his blessed Mother as an ordinary woman. For Christ did not have wandering thoughts, nor did he contemplate in the way that saints in this life commonly do. He did not need to work at it as we need, because from the moment of his conception he saw God.

Small wonder then that jubilant song comes to us only after great effort in spiritual work, and we receive from heaven the sweetest of sounds. Then it is that we wish to remain in this quiet, so that we can altogether delight in its continuing sweetness. Let him who manages his active life well set about rising up to the contemplative. But let not him who has reached the supreme degree of contemplation in the manner we have described come down to the active unless perchance he is obliged to accept office in the Church, a thing which as far as I know has never, or scarcely ever, happened. But perhaps some contemplatives could be chosen for this if they are less imbued with loving warmth. For lesser saints are sometimes better fitted for ecclesiastical office than are greater ones, because for the matters of everyday business those unable to persevere quietly in interior longing are more suited.

CHAPTER 22

The fire of love purges vices and sins; the signs of true friendship.

WHEN the fire of love has really taken hold of the soul it cleans out all vice, it puts away the trivial and unnecessary, it creates beauty in every virtue. It has nothing to do with mortal sin, though venial sin may remain. Yet the emotion and devotion of divine love can be so ardent that it will burn up venial sins as well, even if one is unaware of their existence. For when a real lover of God is carried away with fierce and fervent longing for him, everything displeases him which hinders the vision of God. Though he is delighting in joyful song his heart is unable to express what he is savouring of heaven. So much does he languish in love.

The perfect never carry combustibles with them into the next life! All their sins are burnt up in the heat of their love of Christ. But lest anyone should think himself perfect when he is not, let him listen to what it means to have perfection in oneself.

This is the life of the perfect man: it means rejecting all care of worldly affairs; leaving one's parents and one's property for Christ; spurning all transitory things for the sake of eternal life; destroying the things of the flesh after prolonged toil; refraining from wanton and improper desires as much as possible; burning in love for the Creator alone; experiencing, after the bitter sorrow and tremendous effort of spiritual labour, the sweetness of heavenly contemplation; and thus (if on behalf of the privileged I may be allowed to speak) to be taken hold of, and pass through the joy of loving God to spiritual song, through contemplation to heavenly music, remaining sweetly in inner peace with all commotion done away.

Although he has reached the point where he finds no pleasure in outward activity, inwardly the man of God is rapt

with the delights and music of eternal love expressed in melodious song and unspeakable joy. So little wonder if in his mind he enjoys the sort of sweetness that angels have in heaven, although to a less degree. In this way a man is made perfect, and does not need to be purged by fire after this life: the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in him while he is yet in the body.

Yet this perfect love does not make a man incapable of sinning, but no sin can persist in him because it is at once purged by the fire of love. Again, one who loves Jesus Christ like this does not say his prayers the same way as other men however righteous they may be, because his mind is raised to great exaltation and is rapt with love for Christ. He is taken out of himself into indescribable delight, and the divinest music floods into him. Consequently, when he is reciting prayers, he does so with a certain spiritual quality, lifting up his vocal prayers in melodies inaudible to human senses, but clearly heard by himself and God. For spiritual power and strength have overcome the burden of the flesh to such an extent that now he can really rejoice in Christ. His heart, transformed by the fire of love, actually feels the heavenly warmth, so that he finds it difficult to sustain the immensity of love so ardent: he fears he may melt away! But the mercy of God preserves him until his appointed time. God it was who gave him the power to love so much, and to say in truth, 'I languish for love.' Like the fiery seraphim he burns, and loves, and sings, rejoices, and praises, and glows. The more fervent he is in loving, the more acceptable does he become. Not only does he face death unafraid, but he is even delighted to die, for he says with the Apostle, *To me to live means Christ is my life, and to die is joy.*¹

1. cf. Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:21.

CHAPTER 23

Perfect love does not adulterate the love of God; why and what one must love; carnal love is blinding.

If we do in fact give up the squalor of sin and the vices of this world, we will be loving nothing that is not God. For what else do we see to love in our neighbour if not God? We are not wanting to love anyone unless it is for God's sake, and then to love him in God. For how can God really be all in all if there remains in a man a love for something else? No man can have joy except from a good that is loved. Consequently the more a man loves God, the more he will find abundant joy in him: and not surprisingly, for the more ardent and determined our pursuit of an object, the more intense is our joy in attaining it. Now if the source of a man's joy is his possession of God, God is that true joy which none can have who seek anything other than God. Indeed, if I am looking for something for my own sake, and not making God the end of that desire, clearly I am giving myself away, and parading my secret guilt for all to see.

But God wants to be loved in such a way that no one else has a share in that love. For if your heart is divided, and shamelessly loves some other thing as well, be quite sure that your love has been rejected by God, who does not bother with halfhearted love. All or nothing he accepts, for it is all that he redeems. Indeed you would have been damned, body and soul, because of the sin of Adam your father. But God came down into the Virgin's womb to be made man and to pay the price which set you free, to deliver not only your soul from the power of the devil, but also to bless you, body and soul, at the end of time.

And therefore you have the precepts of eternal life; if you want to enter the kingdom which was lost and has been recovered by the blood of Christ you must keep the com-

mandments of Christ. And in so far as you desire to attain full and perfect joy when you die, you must remember to love God with a full and perfect heart while you live. Otherwise if you are not given to loving God today, you will have tomorrow not the fullness of joy but everlasting torment. All the time your love is not wholly directed towards your Maker you are making it plain that you are loving one of God's creatures beyond what is honest and lawful. It is not possible for a rational soul to be without love while it is alive. It follows that love is the foot, so to speak, by which after its pilgrimage on earth it will be carried either up to God or down to the devil, to be subject there to him whom it served here.

Nothing is loved except for the good it contains or is thought to contain, whether real or apparent. This is the reason why those who love physical beauty or temporal wealth are deceived or, one could say, tricked. For in visible and tangible objects there does not really exist either the delight that superficially appears, or the glory that is supposed, or the fame that is pursued.

No neglect of his soul is more damnable than that of the man who looks at a woman to lust after her. For when the glance of the eye excites a man, soon he will start thinking about the woman he has seen, and such thoughts cause lust in the heart, and corrupt the inner being. Then suddenly he is blinded by the smoke of a destructive fire and prevented from seeing the sentence which the strict Judge will pass. For the soul is cut off from the sight of heavenly things by this unclean and evil love, and cannot fail to show outward signs of damnation. It sets it well-being in the realization of the uncleanness it has conceived. So immediately it conceives sorrow in its grievous desire, and deservedly brings forth wickedness. The more the man is mistaken about the great danger which besets his soul – and he tries not to see it! – the more quickly does he stumble into filthy delight. For the judgements of God are *far away out of his sight*.¹ The moment he begins to enjoy carnal pleasures he pays no

1. Psalms 10:5.

attention to the miserable pit into which he is falling. The sentence of God in such a case is that he who has by his own choice despised God and fallen into mortal sin, will be (against his choice!) condemned after this life. This is God's judgement. In the life to come he will be quite unable to protect himself against the jaws of hell, because in this life here he sunk himself in crime and sin whenever he could, never wanting to forsake them, or even beginning to do so.

CHAPTER 24

The filthiness of soft living; its danger; physical contact; the evil of avarice, and pointless pleasure.

WHEN a man refuses to marry out of a pure love for God and virtue and chastity, and then sets about living in continence, adorned with every sort of virtue, there can be no doubt that he acquires a great reputation in heaven. Just as here he loves God without ceasing, so there he will praise him without ceasing. Marriage, of course, is good in itself, but when men subject themselves to its bond in order to satisfy their lust, they turn what is good into something evil. And when they reckon they are making the 'progress' they intended, they are by the same token going rapidly downhill. As for the man who loves wedlock merely because he fancies he will get rich as a result, undoubtedly he is trying to loosen its reins by his lasciviousness. Abounding in licence and wealth, he boasts that he has found what 'helps' his vile flesh.

Moreover there are men so perverse that they are consumed by uncontrollable lust for their own wives for the sake of their beauty, and the more quickly the body is reduced by their strength, the more they give themselves to satisfy their carnal lusts. But even while they are enjoying their delights they are beginning to fail; while they flourish they perish. Busy 'finding fulfilment' in voluptuous lust,

they are in fact exhausting most dreadfully their mental and physical powers.

There is nothing more dangerous, more degrading, more disgusting than that a man should exhaust his mind in love for a woman, and pant after her as if she were his 'blessed rest'. And after it is all over, small wonder that he begins to degenerate, because before it had happened he had striven for this 'supreme blessedness' with such great anguish. But he knows well enough afterwards, as he thinks over his swift pleasure and its lengthy discomfort, that he has gone wrong, shamefully and senselessly wrong, in such love. For it is clear that he was tightly held by the evil bond of weak vanity. But not wanting to turn to God with all his heart, he did not recognize his wretchedness until he experienced it. So he fell into the pit, a captive, simply because he had no thought for the Throne of Glory. If he had known even a drop of the sweetness of eternal life, carnal beauty (that false, vain grace!) would not have seemed so sweet to his mind. But, alas, he does not consider how his wretched lust appears to the eyes of God Almighty, nor can he see himself as he really is in conscience, foul and revolting.

Again, no one can yield to the seductions of the flesh, without straying from the right path. For all the while the fire of earthly love inflames a man's mind, naturally enough the dew of divine grace evaporates, made useless and dry. Such love ever increases its heat, and from the fire of greed kindles the fire of sensuality, so that the crazed, enslaved soul most extraordinarily longs for nothing but carnal pleasures, and increased riches. It makes these things the purpose of its life: it burns because it must have them. It does not see the punishment which is the outcome, and to which it is rushing headlong. For the word of God, and his commandments, it cares nothing. Coveting only joys which are outward and visible, it is blind to those which are inward and unseen. And so it goes to the Fire with eyes tightly shut! And when the unhappy soul shall be free of its body, at once and for certain it will know at the Judge-

ment how wretched it was while it lived in the flesh, though then it had thought itself to be both innocent and happy.

Therefore in whatever we do, we should always care more for cleanness of mind than cleanness of body. For it is a lesser evil to touch a woman's flesh with bare hands than to fill one's mind with evil longing. If in fact we do touch a woman, yet in heart think only what is good, clearly this ought not to be called 'sin', though because of this carnal temptation can sometimes arise. A man does not collapse in moral ruin when he keeps his mind fixed on God!

Yet when the heart of the handler is seized by all sort of sinful longings or is turned towards evil delights, and he does not check himself at once by love of his Maker or by firm virtue, you can be quite sure that that man has within him the sin of impurity, although in fact he may be far removed not only from any woman, but from any man too.

Moreover, if a believing man is married to an unbelieving wife it is likely that his own mind will be turned to unbelief. For it is the way of women when they sense they are loved by men above measure to proceed to beguile them by charm and flattery, and to lead them on to those things which their most wicked minds suggest, things which first they will have tried by open speech.

For Solomon was a wise man, and for some time was faithful to God. But later because of his too great fondness for female company, he most deplorably defected from faithfulness and from God's commandments. The man endowed with such great wisdom deserved to collapse grievously once he had allowed himself to be overcome by some foolish woman. When one hears that the wisest man can act so very unwisely no one is going to be so silly as to delude himself or to boast, 'I'm safe! I'm not scared! Worldly flattery is not going to trick me!'

Avarice, too, is another form of spiritual adultery, because the covetous man through his passion for money lays himself wide open to devilish prostitution. Before this excessive love of wealth he used to love God as his true spouse, but now he has deserted him through his inordinate

greed, and has taken to himself wicked harlots. What is he committing if not fornication and idolatry? We must try therefore, to the best of our ability, to show a clean heart to the eyes of Almighty God, and to put paid to all those baneful pleasures. And if we have done anything at any time through frailty, at least let it be seen that in heart before God there is only that which is perfect and exalted. Sometimes people vilify us because we are too happy; sometimes our joy shows itself in the way we speak or look; and although this sort of thing can be done before God with a clear conscience, before man, as we well know, it is liable to be misunderstood. Therefore we have got to be sensible and take special care not to put ourselves into a position where we could unwittingly be a possible cause of evil.

For servants of Christ it is good to cling closely to God, because through longing for him they receive the fire of the Holy Spirit, and sing the delights of eternal love with the loveliest and sweetest sound of heaven. The heavens are made honey sweet: in other words, the saints love Christ all the more ardently the more they realize how much he has borne for them. For while the mind of the saints is set wholly on the love of eternity, they who are rapt with the sweetness of heavenly life glory in the fact that they have already savoured it and its melody on earth.

CHAPTER 25

Perfect love; what is necessary to obtain spiritual song; affection and correction.

THE splendour of our reward depends on the greatness of our love, and the one who loves very greatly burns with an unquenchable blaze, and is filled with heavenly sweetness. The more generous his love, the higher his standing in the Kingdom. But this love, however, is in the heart, and the more he loves God the more joy he experiences in him. They are wrong then who assert that he who has only ex-

perienced the joy of love occasionally or briefly loves as much as does the man who all day long is as it were sated with sweetness. Some find it hard to love, others easy, but the love of God is more blessed when it is easier; being easier makes it more fervent; more fervent means sweeter; sweeter greater. It is greater in men who live quietly than in those who toil. So they who continue in quiet, love the more fervently. They are superior to those who sometimes are given to quiet, and sometimes are busy about outside jobs.

Nothing is better than mutual love, nothing sweeter than holy charity. To love and be loved is the delightful purpose of all human life; the delight of angels and of God, and the reward of blessedness. If then you want to be loved, love! Love gets love in return. No one has ever lost through loving good, if he has persisted in love to the end. On the other hand he does not know what it is to rejoice who has not known what it is to burn with love. So no one is ever more blessed than the man who is transported out of himself by the vehemence of his love, and who through the greatness of God's love experiences for himself the sweet song of everlasting praise. But this does not happen to a man overnight unless he has been converted to God, and has made remarkable efforts, and has rejected every desire for worldly vanity. Normally God infuses his own indescribable joy into those who love him. For a mind ordered and clean receives from God its thoughts of eternal love. Thinking has been cleansed when it is surging up into spiritual song. Purity of heart deserves to have the sound of heaven; and so as to maintain the praise of God with joy the soul is kindled with divine fire, and made glad with ineffable sweetness.

A man who gives up this world completely, and attends closely to reading, prayer, meditation, watchings, and fastings, will gain purity of mind and conscience, to such an extent that he would like to die through his supernal joy, for he longs to *depart and to be with Christ*.¹ But unless his mind wholeheartedly cleaves to Christ, and he longs for

1. Philippians 1:23.

him constantly and deliberately in all his thoughts, thoughts which are wholly loving and in intention unending, thoughts upon which he meditates unceasingly wherever he sits or wherever he goes, seeking interiorly to love only Christ, he will certainly not know any heavenly song, or sing joyfully to Jesus, or sound his praises either mentally or aloud.

Pride indeed is the downfall of many, for when they think they have done something which others are not accustomed to, at once they put themselves forward and quite improperly snub those who could well be better than they. But let them realize this: that man does not know love who presumes to despise what is common to himself and his neighbour. He injures his own case who does not acknowledge the right of another, and he violates the law of common humanity because he does not respect his bond with his neighbour. It is in this way that men stray from the love of God, and they do not know how to attain it because they do not give themselves to love their neighbour as they ought. Him they dismiss as altogether sinful and wrong, or if they begin to correct or rebuke him they speak with such asperity and harshness that they often make him worse by their correction.

They should speak with gentleness, so as to win him by soft words. Unbridled correction only makes matters worse.

CHAPTER 26

The sighs, vows, and humility of the perfect lover; the dissimilarity between love of the world, and love of God; meditation.

THE voice of the soul longing with eternal love and seeking the beauty of her Maker, rings out. *Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth,*¹ it says; in other words, let him delight me in union with his Son. Faint with love, I long with

1. Canticles 1:2.

my whole heart to see my Love in all his beauty. But meanwhile may he visit me with his sweet love as I toil and struggle on through this pilgrimage. And may he turn my heart to himself so as to delight me with the warmth of greater and greater love. Until I can see my Beloved clearly I shall sing at every remembrance of his sweet name; it is never far from mind.

He who delights to do what his Saviour wishes not surprisingly finds delights in this present world as well. Nothing is more pleasant than praising Jesus; nothing more delectable than hearing him. For hearing rejoices my mind, and praising lifts me to himself. And when I am deprived of these things I sigh in my need, for then I hunger and thirst, and know myself bereft. Yet when I feel the embrace and caress of my Sweetheart I swoon with unspeakable delight, for it is he – he whom true lovers put before all else, for love of him alone, and because of his unbounded goodness!

And when he comes, may he come into me, suffusing me with his perfect love. May he refresh my heart by his continual gifts, and by removing every hindrance to his love make me glow and expand. Who will dare to say that a man is going to fall into the foul filth of the flesh, if Christ has deigned to refresh him with the heavenly sweetness of celestial vision? This is why such a man sings sweetly something like this, 'We will rejoice as we remember your breasts that are better than wine,'² as if to say,

'We are wanting your honour, your glory:
we are rejoicing in your delights.

The pleasures and plenty of passing vanity
have been put away,

things which so bemuse those who love them,
that they cannot see the evils they will suffer.

And although as yet we cannot see your Face
our longing is still so ardent
that were we to live for ever thus

2. Canticles 1:1 (Vulgate).