

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).

we would seek no other object of our love.
 The longer we live the more fervently we want you,
 and the greater joy we experience in your love.
 We sigh earnestly for you.
 Things cease to be unpleasant when men love you,
 and they become happy and joyful.
 For the soul that truly loves you, Jesus,
 would rather die the most awful death
 than consent to sin, however little.'

A man's love for Christ is not true or perfect if he is afraid of anyone else. *All things work together for good to those who love God.*³ Love that is perfect conquers pain and overcomes threats, because it is afraid of no one. It rejects the proud, yet in its humility yields place to all. It is truly said, *The righteous love you,*⁴ for the righteous are humble, and love in truth, and do all the things they should. Though they live in high perfection, in thought and deed they bear themselves in great humility. And so each true lover may say to himself, 'All men are better than I in their contempt of the world, their hatred of sin, their desire for heaven, their sweet and fervent love for Christ, their charity towards their neighbour. Some abound in virtue, some glitter with miracles, some are exalted with the heavenly gift of contemplation, some search out the secrets of Scripture. When I think of the worthy lives of such people in comparison with my own I am reduced, as it were, to nothing: I give way to the very lowest.'

The righteous are those who deliberately run away from earthly hindrances, for they pant only after everlasting joys. All appetite for transient things fades, and they run after the love of God with urgent longing. Quite properly they are said to love God, for they go by the right, straightforward way of shining charity, and have no taste or longing for anything but Christ. They do not resemble those mentioned by the Psalmist, *Let their eyes be blinded so that they cannot see, and ever bow down their backs,*⁵ referring

3. Romans 8:28.

4. Canticles 1:3.

5. Psalms 69:23.

to those who cling to earthly things, and make eternal things second to transitory. Which is why the wrath of God is poured out upon them, and justice is vindicated in the great and violent torments which overwhelm them.

For without pause the righteous aim at enjoying the vision of God, and this they do with heart and voice and effort, all pretence put away. They do not turn aside to love pointless vanity lest they be deflected in their pilgrimage from following the path of righteousness. When a man wants to please Christ he will not do anything, good as well as bad, contrary to Christ's will. It is indeed ghastly to go down into the fires of Gehenna, but more hateful still to want to sin for one's own pleasure. In this way one can lose Christ for ever!

The soul that is truly separated from vice, and is a stranger to venal and carnal sweetness, the soul that is wholly given to heavenly desire, and is enthralled thereby, enjoys quite remarkable pleasure because she is in some way experiencing the delight of her Beloved's love. Now she is able to contemplate more clearly, and her pleasure is all the keener. Now is the time when she demands her Spouse's most gracious lips, and his sweetest kiss. 'All earthly things I despise,' she cries, 'I know how much I love my Beloved, I am aware of his most wonderful comfort, I yearn for his sweetness, I am not going to fail now that the greatest temptations have been put behind me. Love is making me bold to summon my Beloved that he might comfort me, come unto me, and *kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.*'⁶ For the more I am raised above earthly thoughts the more fully do I enjoy the pleasure I long for; the more carnal longings are banished, so much the more truly do the eternal ones flare up. Let him kiss me and refresh me with his sweet love; let him hold me tight and kiss me on the mouth, else I die; let him pour his grace into me, that I may grow in love.' Children are fed and nourished with mother's milk; and elect souls, blazing with love, are fed with supernal delights, and so led on to the vision of the everlasting Glory.

6. Canticles 1:1.

To be sure, the delights of loving Christ are sweeter than all the tasty pleasures of the world and the flesh. Indeed, unimaginable carnal pleasure, and abundant earthly possession, in comparison with the minutest sweetness poured by God into an elect soul are paltry and appalling!

Vast as the difference may be
between the sum total of earthly wealth
and the greatest depth of worldly poverty,
so the sweetness of your love, my Beloved,
is infinitely greater
than all those delectable earthly joys
the lustful thirst after,
and the worldly live for,
and in which alone they glory.
They have no experience of that love of yours
which ought to be their delight.

But spiritual gifts oblige the devout soul to love fervently, to meditate sweetly, to contemplate deeply, to pray joyfully, to praise worthily, to long for Jesus and him only, to cleanse the mind from the filth of sin, to quench the desires of the flesh, to despise all things of earth, to have a mental picture of the cross and wounds of Christ, and with tireless longing to pant and sigh for the vision of that most glorious purity. These are the ointments best suited for beautifying the soul who is dedicated to the love of God.

CHAPTER 27

True humility; the way of benefiting by adversities, and the examples of the saints; meditation on the Passion of Christ.

HUMBLE men do not look at other people's sins but at their own, nor do they praise their own good deeds but those of others. The reprobate, however, do just the opposite, because they concentrate more on the evils of others than on their own, these latter being in comparison (they

Chapter 27

say) either non-existent or trivial. But their own good deeds – assuming there are any – they prefer to anybody else's, whose goodness indeed they are anxious to play down when they cannot altogether dismiss it.

But there are two things which it hurts me to hear. The first is when I, wretched I, have known myself praised when I ought properly to have been despised. The second is when I see my neighbour whom I have loved in God, and for God, slandered and denigrated. Nevertheless, you who are giving up the world in the attempt to follow Christ in his path of poverty must strive to know yourself. Because if you do in fact renounce the greeds and deeds of this day and age, you are binding yourself for Christ's sake to bear cheerfully the rebuffs of the world, and with all your might to run away from riches. Were you to be unaware of this, and give no heed to it, you would be led astray and away from the love of Christ.

Do not be surprised therefore if you are worn out with troubles of every sort, or are attacked by a variety of temptations. Withstand them unmoved, and you will be sweeter and dearer in the sight of God. Remember that *he proves them as gold in the furnace is proved*.¹ Those who know for themselves the sweet love of Christ can embrace tribulation gladly, because they are not seeking any outward consolation at all. Such is the sweetness poured into the mind of the true lover of Christ that if all the pleasures of the world were to be put together in one place he would still run off into the wilderness, rather than cast even a single glance at it. To such a man the sum total of earthly comfort seems desolation rather than consolation; for a soul regularly visited by God's love and joy just cannot feed itself with empty glory. His heart never leaves his Beloved, and he would rather die than even once offend his Redeemer.

But that you also may obtain this grace, keep well in mind the examples of sinners who repented, and try to imitate the life of the saints. Then you who also are a

1. Wisdom 3:6.

sinner (though converted to the service of God) may get a glimmer of hope through the example of sinners who have been raised to his Kingdom, and by studying the lives of the righteous may keep yourself from undue elation! It is by the recollection of these better things that the holy man becomes humble. Because whoever it is that you find described or written about, you can always reckon that he is incomparably more worthy than yourself. It is such people who are called the lovers of Christ: those who for his sake get the knocks and blows of the world; who because they despise wealth and empty glory are subjected to contempt, insult and slander; whose very praise is torture to them. Yet they live as solitaries, for God's sake, living a dying life – and they are taken up to the company of angels in their fatherland!

I myself fled to the wilderness when it proved no longer possible to live harmoniously with men, who, admittedly, were a frequent obstacle to my inner joy. Because I did not do the kind of things they did, they attributed waywardness and bad temper to me. But *when I found trouble and heaviness, I called on the name of the Lord.*²

But lest we give way through temptations let us make it our aim to let earthly coveting go, and to keep the crown of eternal glory firmly before our mind. And then, as we have been found watchful, we will receive the promised blessedness. But in the meantime we take whatever steps we can to ensure that carnal lust is held in check at source, and the heart, most sensibly, relinquishes its physical greed, so that in the service of God our body can stand firm and strong.

The man who really gives up everything for love of Jesus, who lets go the will to possess, both stands fast and benefits through this. He will own joyfully that *he has found what his soul loves.*³ For Christ is found in the heart warmed by eternal love – and that warmth is longing to be sought out, and no mistake!

For Christ comes down into the soul with a warmth of honeyed sweetness, and with a joyful song, and he who

2. Psalms 116:4.

3. Canticles 3:4.

experiences this can boldly say, 'I have found my Love.' The man who in his prayer sees his mind really lifted out of itself and raised beyond the material heaven (assuming of course that he does not give up but yearns more and more for the taste of eternity) can cheerfully wait for the mercy of Christ, for in a few short years he knows he will be caught up to contemplate glory. So with humble heart he keeps going and ceases not till he reaches the fellowship of everlasting rest.

But if in your prayer your inner eye is ravished by contemplating heavenly things, the time is near when your soul, risen above earthly matters, is going forward in the love of Christ. But the man who prays without being raised to things supernal will be wise not to stop meditation, prayer and vigil until he sees these higher things. Else he will grovel, feeling himself despised, in anguish and affliction.

Go forth, daughters of Sion, says the Scripture, meaning 'you souls who are newborn', and *see King Solomon crowned,*⁴ meaning 'understand Christ is truly our peace, for he suffered for our salvation. Gaze at him, and you will see that divine head crowned with thorns, his face spit-covered, those clear eyes languid and wan, his back scarred with flogging, his breast bare and bleeding, his venerable hands transfixed, his dear side pierced with the spear, his feet nailed through, and all that tender flesh marked with wounds, as it was written, *from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head there is no health in him.*⁵ Leave then, leave your illicit lusts, and see what Christ suffered for you, so that your sins can clearly be cast away, and your hearts taught to burn with love.'

4. Canticles 3:11.

5. Isaiah 1:6.

CHAPTER 28

*The true lover spurns earthly things, and sighs for eternal;
the avoiding of pride, and the embracing of humility.*

SEE, wretched little man, how the delights of carnal lust cover up the terror of the coming damnation! Which is why you must withstand them, because they seek to take away virtues, things that belong to Christ. For before your heart can burn with the love of Christ it will have to get rid of its appetite for all passing vanity whatever. A mind on fire with the spirit of Christ finds its sole nourishment in its love of eternity, and its gladness in joyful song.

If the sweetness of eternal love is present in your soul, undoubtedly it will destroy lascivious and carnal wickedness. It does not allow you who delight in Christ to know anything but Christ, because now you cannot fall from him or know any other sweetness than his. The perfect, indeed, when they die are duly presented to God, and are sat down in the seats of blessed rest, because they see Christ to be God, and they are in peace.

Those who really begin to love Christ will subsequently have great and loving joy and honey-sweet fervour, and will never cease in their love-songs to the Lord Jesus. No earthly thing can possibly please the man who truly loves Christ, since because of his great love he can find no value in anything merely passing. Though the righteous see physical things, of course, with their bodily eye, they are in fact looking at celestial things with hearts humble and clean. They are alight with the flame of the heavenly vision, and know themselves free from the burden of sin, and now no longer sin in their wills. The heart that has turned to fire, embraces nothing of the world, but strives always to pierce heaven.

Those indeed who are destined for holiness, at the outset of their conversion give up their evil crimes and worldly vani-

Chapter 28

ties through fear of God; next they subdue their flesh by severe penance; and then, when they have put the love of Christ before all else, they taste something of the delight of heavenly sweetness and progress rapidly in devotion of soul. So they mount up, step by step, abounding in spiritual virtues; and thus are made beautiful by the grace of God, to come at last to the perfection which affects heart, speech, and toil.

But he who has been absorbed by the love of Christ is made dead as it were to the attraction of outward things; he is savouring and seeking *the things that are above and not the things of earth*.¹ It is no surprise that in his mind he sighs as he longs for the heavenly Kingdom, or that he grows in his love for the Bridegroom, or that he rejoices in deep interior happiness, or that he loses his passion for worldly things, or that he is full of longing for his true love, his whole mind bent on seeing God in his beauty. Ablaze with flaming love for God, he wants only what God desires, and he himself desires nothing save God. For when a faithful soul longs most fervently only for the presence of the Bridegroom, she is completely frigid towards all lascivious and empty glory. And so she pines for love, because she holds everything earthly as nothing; and she sighs, while she hastens on to the everlasting joys.

He who delights himself in Christ's love, and longs to have this consolation continually, not only does not seek human solace, but even flees from it most strenuously, as if it were smoke hurting his eyes. For just as air is suffused by the sun's rays and becomes itself splendid with the splendour of its light, so the devout mind, inflamed by the fire of Christ's love and filled with desire for heavenly joys, seems to be all love. It is totally transformed into something different, indescribably delightful, though it retains its fundamental essence. For when the mind is kindled by the fire of the Holy Spirit, it is liberated from all idleness and uncleanness. It is made sweet in the torrent of God's love, for it is always looking at him, and not considering earthly

1. Colossians 3:2.

things at all, until that day when it is glorified with the perfect vision of its Beloved.

But one must beware of pride and a spiritual swelled head, because this can throw the most noble of men into profound dejection. For what is more loathsome, or deserving of punishment, what is more worthless and abominable, than that the most despicable worm, the worst sinner, the lowest of the low, should swagger about and exalt himself here on earth, this world for which the King most high, the Lord of Lords, condescended to humble himself? If you were to consider Christ's humility deeply, whatever your own background or wealth or virtue, not in your self would you find reason for pride, so much as cause to despise yourself – and then, humility. You, therefore, the despiser of sinners, look at yourself lest you are in fact making yourself worse than other people, for a proud righteous man displeases God more than does a humble sinner.

But when true humility has taken root in your mind, whatever good you do is done in praise of your Maker, so that you despise your own virtue and seek his glory, lest you succumb to vanity and lose your everlasting reward.

Think therefore of Jesus with a longing heart; let your prayer go out to him; let it continually seek him; your only care be to possess him. Happy the rich man who has such a possession! For this, let go all the emptiness of the world; he will conquer your enemy and bring you to his kingdom.

The devil who assails you will be overcome, the flesh which is so aggravating will be subdued, the world which tries to deceive you will be despised – all this, if your heart does not give up its quest for the love of Christ.

That man is not sitting idle who in his heart is crying out to Christ, however silent his tongue might be; for there is no physical rest for the body when the mind is tirelessly desiring heavenly things. The man who persistently and always covets eternal things will not be thought lazy. The thoughts of a lover of Christ rise upwards swiftly and smoothly. They do not allow themselves to go after passing

things, or get involved in carnal matters, but they go on and up until they reach the heavenly places.

For sometimes when the body is tired in the service of Christ, the spirit is exalted, and the mind is caught up to heavenly refreshment and, indeed, to the contemplation of God. For he who prays devoutly does not have a heart which wanders about in worldly things, but one that is transported to God in heaven. He who wants to have what he prays for pays careful attention both to the subject-matter of his prayer, to the one he is addressing, and to the reason he is making it, so that he may love him to whom he prays, lest like some outcast he is asking in vain for a reward from life.

The saints, however, are so profoundly humble that they believe themselves to know nothing and to achieve nothing. Their claim is that they are more worthless and wretched than anybody else, worse even than those they correct and chastise! In obedience to the Lord's command they take the lowest seat, yet that lowly seat of theirs receives not rebuke from God, but honour: not demerit or the denigration of their merits, but the reward of praise and promotion to splendour. To this humility best disposes! For that very humility brings praise to Christ, torment to the devil, and glory to the people of God. It makes the servant of Christ love more ardently, serve more devotedly, praise more worthily; and it produces a fuller degree of charity. The more a man humbles himself the more does he promote the praise of God. He who really perseveres in loving God and his neighbour, and yet in his humility and self-knowledge reckons himself to be of no value and inferior to others, will conquer his enemies, have a confident hope in the love of the great Judge, and when he passes from the light of this world be received by angels into eternal joy.