

ceptional. So many and such like things are asking for trouble, and all too often bring a holy man down. I reckon it a major miracle when a man through God's grace and a love for Christ spurns these allurements completely, and out of the midst of them all (which war against his soul, however pleasant they be to his flesh), rises like a man to the utmost heights of heavenly contemplation. There is no doubt that he is more holy as a result of all this, and inwardly much richer through the comfort brought him by his love of God. If he was thrown into the fire of hell he would not burn! For he has completely extinguished the seductions and delights of life which come to him from outside. It is not surprising, even if it is unusual, that Christ works thus in some of his beloved. It is said of such *He has spread a cloud*<sup>1</sup> (obviously a cloud of divine grace) *for a covering* (from carnal lust, by the fire of everlasting love) *and fire to give light* (within their mind) *in the night* (of this life); and all this lest they should be taken captive by the attraction of empty beauty. But Christ's love burns in them with such sweetness that they deem every carnal, illicit pleasure the most appalling filth, and trample it down.

Therefore you are not to touch these slippery things which are unlawful for you either to want or to have. Remember that you are to discipline your hands, your tongue, your appetite, and not be enticed by women. Maybe incitement to soft living is wrapped up with being a man or a woman – and hot food and drink by their very warmth inflame the flesh unduly! Men are ever fashioning comfort for their bodies, and destruction for their souls. These must be eschewed by the chaste.

1. Psalms 105:39.

## CHAPTER 9

*In adversity God is to be praised and loved; good men are pleasant and humble.*

IF temporal honour can be destroyed by shame, and earthly glory finished by confusion, it seems to be undoubted that an insult is better than honour, confusion than success, grief than glory. It is by these latter things that a man often enough lapses into vainglory. Yet if he habitually faced the former with patience he would learn humility in this life here, and escape punishment in the life to come, because God does not punish the just twice. More, he would be crowned in splendour because the patience of the poor will not ultimately perish.

These are the things that belong to holiness: first, never to think, say, or do what displeases God and, then, to think, say, and do what does please him! Do this as well as you know how, so as not to cause offence, and do not pretend to a holiness that is not yours. A man is a fool if he is always wanting to appear holy, just as a good man would be abnormal if he wanted to seem bad. There are some things which looked at by themselves are neither good nor bad; which in their natural state are worth neither praise nor blame. The doing of such things does not displease God any more than does their omission. We can see, hear, smell, feel or touch them, and be no better off – or worse either. All sin, however, shows a contempt of God, or is done to hurt one's neighbour, or to harm oneself. But many human matters are none of these things. All the same, to be despised or to be made a fool of in front of others helps a man rise to the joy of the angels!

Good Jesus, scourge me, wound me, slay me, burn me;  
do with me here and now whatever in your goodness  
you decide;

that in the days to come I may know and feel  
not evil but your love – and that, for ever!

To be despised, rejected, insulted by all,  
for your sake, is sweeter to me  
than to be called the brother of any earthly monarch,  
honoured among men, and praised by all.

In this present life I would know misery as my lot in  
every place,  
if I might be spared by you, my God, these things in  
the other!

It is here I would suffer, and be put right;  
Christ grant me this now in the present,  
if I may not otherwise escape punishment in the  
future!

But the conceited and touchy consider themselves so  
magnificent as to be beyond any possibility of suffering. Yet  
the least word can often upset them, and for no reason at  
all. It is better to avoid them rather than argue with them,  
because they never let go. They defend whatever position  
they take up, however false or wrong it may be. They can-  
not be persuaded by reason or authority because they are  
not going to be seen to be beaten or ridiculous. Even when  
they are ignorant (and know it) they still would be  
thought inspired in everything that has to do with God, so  
as to lay the law down everywhere without fear of contra-  
diction. They would even prefer to remain in error than that  
they should be publicly accused of it!

My brothers, give up this mad pride, and proud madness!  
Let us be genuinely humble all through life. It is better, and  
a good and lovely thing, to have Christ tell us, after we  
have died, *Friend, go up higher*,<sup>1</sup> rather than that he  
should say, *Fool, go down lower*. For this is what will  
happen to the lowly and the lofty. A righteous man need  
not fear tribulation, grief, misery, perplexity, or rejection:  
at least, all the while he does not sin, and is advancing in

1. Luke 14: 10.

## Chapter 9

contemplation and love for God. For before we can arrive at  
the court of the King where with the angels and saints of  
God we shall rejoice in sweet plenty, we must ourselves be  
proved here below, whether it is by flattery or detraction,  
by blandishment or backbiting, by praise or calumny. In  
patient humility and love we must cleave to the precepts  
and counsels of Christ so that when judgement is given it  
can be said of us, even as it has been written, *As gold in the  
furnace is tried, so he proved them*.<sup>2</sup> On every side there has  
been fire, and *he found them worthy of himself*.<sup>3</sup> In this  
way we pass through things pleasant and unpleasant,  
through fire and water, until we attain the living rest of  
heaven. So in every unpleasant situation, be it hardship or  
poverty, remember never to murmur or speak foolishly or  
perversely. If *in everything you give thanks*,<sup>4</sup> with all the  
more joy will you be raised to the kingdom of the saints –  
always assuming that you have voluntarily endured in the  
world those things of which we have been speaking.

My soul, whatever happens, praise the Lord with delight  
and devotion. With your praise, taste its sweetness; with  
your song, its honey. *While I live I will praise the Lord*.<sup>5</sup>  
Whether I suffer or prosper, face insult or honour, *I will  
praise my God while I have my being*.<sup>6</sup> If I rest in Jesus I  
will rejoice: if I undergo persecution I will not forget the  
love of God. I only ask to love God and to attain him. I can  
do nothing else; my one concern is to love Christ. So far I  
have not reached the love of God as did my predecessors;  
and they did many useful things beside. Wherefore I hang  
my head and *shame has covered my face*.<sup>7</sup> So, Lord, make  
my heart bigger, better able to perceive your love. For the  
greater a man's capacity, the fuller the love he gets and  
savours, and the less his concern for the flesh. But even this  
must be with common sense, so that it may accord with the  
saying of the wise man, *I travailed but little, and I found  
much rest*.<sup>8</sup> For after the few years of life here, the right-

2. Wisdom 3: 6.

4. 1 Thessalonians 5: 18.

7. Jeremiah 51: 51.

3. Wisdom 3: 5.

5, 6. Psalms 104: 33.

8. Ecclesiasticus 51: 27.

eous man finds rest for eternity. For while God's saint and lover is in exile here he reveals himself to be a man neither too lighthearted nor too sad. There is a maturity about his cheerfulness.

There are some who disapprove of laughter, and others who praise it. The laughter of a frivolous, silly mind can be reprehensible, but surely that which springs from a cheerful conscience and spiritual buoyancy is worth praising? Only the righteous have it, and they call it *delighting in the love of God*. Yet when we are cheerful and joyful the irreligious call us 'dissolute'; and when we are serious they call us 'hypocrites'! It is unusual for a man to assess as good in another what he does not find in himself, and the sins at which he stumbles he attributes to other folk too. It is the act of a presumptuous man to think that if others do not follow his own particular way of life they are depraved and deceived! And the cause of it all? He has let go humility.

The stages of humility are these: to keep one's eyes down rather than up; to be restrained in speech, and not exaggerated; to listen gladly to those who are better and wiser than oneself; to want others' wisdom to be heard rather than one's own; not to speak out of turn; not to run away from everyday life; to prefer others to oneself; to recognize one's weaknesses; and to reckon oneself the least of all. Were I really anxious to mix with people my ambition would be to sit in the lowest place, with my reputation minimal, so that I might glory in Christ Jesus, caring nothing for human praise or blame, but eager to be united in devotion to God.

For many of those who used to speak with me were like scorpions: with their head they oozed flattery, and with their tail they struck slanders. From whose lying lips and deceitful tongues may God deliver my soul, and establish it in peace and joy!

But where does such madness in the minds of men come from? No one likes to be belittled; no one likes to be re-proved; everyone wants to be praised. People rejoice in

honours, and are delighted by applause – and this is true of some who have a reputation for sanctity of life. Such people seem to me either too holy for words, or else complete fools, though men call them wise and learned. For what sane man is going to abandon himself to dissipation, and enjoy the empty words of men? If he has a good look at himself, and takes the trouble to learn what sort of man he is in thought and deed, he will find out soon enough, and discover whether he is deserving of praise or blame. And when he sees that in many things he is blameworthy, and laudable only in few, he is not going light-heartedly to accept the honour and favour which he does not deserve – not unless he is mentally deranged. But if in his self-investigation he finds he is glowing with the heat and sweetness of divine love beyond description, and he is setting out on the contemplative life, and is committed thereto, and if moreover he cannot recall ever having committed grave sins or, having committed them, believes them to have been wiped out by penance, he is certainly not going to grieve that men do not honour him; his reward is much greater: his fellowship is with the angels! The man of such disposition takes no more pleasure in sitting next to a king than to a pauper, because he is considering, not the riches and dignities of men generally, but the life and merits of each one singly. He does not regard it as important that he should glitter with gold or be attended by a huge retinue, or go about in episcopal purple, or wear a mitre. No indeed: he esteems a holy and sweet conscience better than all these things and delights.

## CHAPTER 10

*The lover of God despises the world, weariness and idleness;  
about hypocrites and covetous men.*

It is said in the Canticles that *love is strong as death, jealousy is as cruel as hell*.<sup>1</sup> Death does indeed slay the living, and hell does not spare the dead. So too, when the love of God takes complete charge of a man, not only does it kill the root of his love for the world, but since he is now dead to the world and one with heaven it fires him to bear for God's sake whatever tribulation and misery life may bring. You who reckon you love Christ pay attention to this: if you still regard earthly things with pleasure your soul will be unprepared to endure suffering or death. And you will show clearly that you are not a true lover of God. Indeed a true lover of God never lets his eye linger on the world, and if it is for God's sake, nor does he fear suffering. He allows nothing to take his mind off the Beloved.

And you, a lover of God (or at least desperately anxious to be one!) must study always as best you know how, and with the help of Christ's grace, not to be ensnared by boredom or affected by sloth. And should your prized facility of prayer or meditation desert you and you cannot raise your mind to joyful and holy contemplation or sing as once you did, you are not on that account to give up your reading or praying or whatever other useful thing you do, be it outward or inward, lest you degenerate into sloth. Boredom drags many people down into sloth, and sloth into carelessness and sin. Therefore you must always be as fervent as you can, and not let your affections go after any worldly thing you covet. No one can be united to God perfectly while he is held by a liking for the created and worldly.

There are some indeed who seem outwardly united to God, who inwardly are given over to the devil: impostors

1. Canticles (or Song or Songs) 8:6.

## Chapter 10

who ostensibly despise the world, but who in fact love it! They wish to appear to speak of God, though their hearts are so possessed with the love of money that sometimes they will fall out over a farthing! They serve God with their lips, but are wholly devoid of devotion. And though they have no real faith or love they seem by the way they behave and dress and speak to be the most holy of men. Moreover, people like these profess themselves to be steadfast in light affliction, but when they come up against what must be firmly resisted, then they at once break and fall down. And what was once hidden is now wide open for all to see! When they are rolling in money or living on the fat of the land they protest that they are eating next to nothing: it is their conviction that the whole world is no more than vanity, and therefore (they claim) they can barely survive because of their weakness.

They are deceivers: theirs is the wisdom of the world. They deceive in this way so as not to be seen in their other ploys, inasmuch as they are on guard against worldly loss, disguising their real contempt for eternal things under a specious greed for 'spiritual quiet'. But however much they may conceal for a while, there can be no doubt that long before the end, or at all events *at* the end, they will be recognized for what they are. When they give alms, or do any other good deed, they do it publicly, so that everything shall be seen by men.<sup>2</sup> They deservedly provoke the wrath of God because they do not really want to be perfect but only to seem so. In their heart, which is where God sees them, true humility is lacking, and they are after their own glory, and not God's. It is extremely difficult to have riches and not to love them, and it is no less difficult to hold a profitable job or position and not to want more.

Whence it happens that often among people priests are denigrated: if they are chaste they are found to be avaricious; if they are generous they are dissolute. Often enough it happens that those who have taken priest's Orders fall more deeply into sin, the more so because they have taken this

2. Matthew 6:1.

step unworthily. Some, in truth, carried away by worry or greed, plead future infirmity or poverty, and say they are amassing goods against impending misery. But these are just a joke to the demons, because not only do they let the good things of life slip through their fingers, but the very calamities they fear they run into, since they leave no place for God, who delivers his servants in his sight. Worst of all, when they are full up inside with worldly coveting, outwardly they reckon to shine in the odour of sanctity. But the servant of God puts his trust in God, and such goods as he has beyond his immediate requirements he distributes to the needy. On the other hand the servant of the world seeks to keep everything for himself, for he is insatiably greedy and evil. Moreover, he is so miserly that he can only bring himself to eat what is cheap and nasty, since it is by being mean that he amasses much money. These are those whom the Psalmist condemns, *His enemies shall lick the dust.*<sup>3</sup>

## CHAPTER 11

*The lovers of God will judge with him; the love of knowledge that has been acquired, and the love of God; the true lover of God does not err, nor is he deceived by fastings, abstinence, advice, or presumption.*

SINCE the human soul is capable of receiving God alone, nothing less than God can fill it; which explains why lovers of earthly things are never satisfied. The peace known by lovers of Christ comes from their heart being fixed, in longing and in thought, in the love of God; it is a peace that sings and loves and burns and contemplates. Very sweet indeed is the quiet which the spirit experiences. Music, divine and delectable, comes to rejoice it; the mind is rapt in sublime and gay melody and sings the delights of everlasting love. Now from human lips sounds forth again the praise of God; the praise too, of the Blessed Virgin in

3. Psalms 72:9.

whom he glories beyond measure. This need occasion no surprise, for the heart of the singer is altogether ablaze with heavenly fire. And he is transformed into the likeness of him in whom is all melody and song, and is transported by loving desire for the taste of heaven. A man overflows with inner joy, and his very thought sings as he rejoices in the warmth of his love. All this, to be sure, is meaningless to those who are 'dead', and an outsider cannot understand how anything so sweet and lovely is experienced by a man in a decaying body, limited by its very mortality. But even the one who has all this himself wonders at it, and rejoices at the unspeakable goodness of God who *gives liberally and does not upbraid*,<sup>1</sup> for it is from him the experience comes. Moreover when he has once had experience of that great thing (and it is a great thing, completely unknown by dying men) he knows that when it is missing he is never at ease, but is always pining for love. So he remains vigilant, and sings and thinks of his love and his Beloved – and if he is on his own sings all the more blithely!

Once a man has known some such experience, he is never thereafter wholly without it, for there always remains a sort of glow, some song or sweetness, even if these are not all present together in equal strength. Yet all are present, unless illness catches him, or he is gripped by intolerable hunger or thirst, or is held up by cold, or heat, or travel. It behoves him then who would sing his love for God and rejoice fervently in such singing, to pass his days in solitude. Yet the abstinence in which he lives should not be excessive, nor on the other hand should he display too much extravagance. Better for him slightly to exceed the limit if it is done in ignorance and with the sound intention of sustaining the body, than that he should falter by over strict fasting, and through physical weakness be unable to sing. But, to be sure, he who is chosen for this life is not overcome by the devil's deceit whether he eats or abstains. The true lover of Christ, one who is taught by him, does not worry overmuch whether there is too much or too little.

1. James 1:5.

He will deserve infinitely more by his joyful song, by his prayer and contemplation, by his reading and meditation, yes, and by his discretion in eating, than if, without it, he were ever fasting, or only eating bread and vegetables while he prayed and read. I myself have eaten and drunk things that are considered delicacies; not because I love such dainties, but in order to sustain my being in the service of God, and in the joy of Christ. For his sake I conformed quite properly to those with whom I was living lest I should invent a sanctity where none existed; lest men should overpraise me where I was less worthy of praise.

On the other hand there are many from whom I have parted, not because they fed me ill or badly, but because our ways of life were not compatible, or for some other adequate reason. Yet I venture to say with blessed Job, *Fools did despise me, and when I parted from them they turned against me.*<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless those who said I was not willing to stay in any place where I was not comfortably fed will blush when they see me. It is better to see what I despise than to desire what I fail to see. Fasting is effective in the control of the desires of carnal lust, and in the mastery of a wild and wayward mind. But in him who attains the heights of contemplation with joy and ardent love, the desires of the flesh now lie virtually dead. It means death to evil longings for the man who surrenders himself to contemplation, whose inner self is being changed to a glory and pattern that is different. Now it is *no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him,*<sup>3</sup> and as a result he is overwhelmed by love and longing for him. He almost dies because it is so beautiful; he can hardly live because of such love.

His is the soul that says,  
*tell my Beloved I am pining for love;*<sup>4</sup>  
 I am wanting to die;  
 I long to pass away;  
 I am burning to pass over.

2. Job 19:18.

3. Galatians 2:20.

4. Canticles 5:8.

See I am dying through love!  
 Come down, Lord.  
 Come, Beloved, and ease my longing.  
 See how I love, I sing, I glow, I burn.  
 Spare a thought for this poor wretch:  
 order me to be brought before you.

He who has this joy here, and glories in it now, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. He cannot go wrong: he can do what he likes, and he will be safe. No mortal man can give him such sound advice as that which he has within himself from God Eternal. If others would advise him, they will surely go astray because they do not know what is happening. But he himself will not go wrong however much he might wish to agree with their advice, because God will not permit it; for God keeps him within his will, so that he does not go beyond it. Of such it is said, *The spiritual man judges all things, and himself is judged by no man.*<sup>5</sup>

No one ought to assume, however, that he is one such just because his renunciation of the world is perfect, and his entrance into the solitary state irreproachable, and his contemplation of things supernal transcendent. This grace is not given to all contemplatives, but only rarely and to very few, and then to those who attain to supreme quiet of mind and body; they are chosen solely for the business of loving God. It is difficult to find such men, who are few and far between; they are held very dear, and are much sought after, loved by God and man. Angels rejoice when they quit this life, for they are fit for angelic company. On the other hand, there are many who in great devotion and sweetness offer their prayers to God, and through their prayer and meditation are able to taste the delights of contemplation, who do not move on but remain in their quiet state.

5. 1 Corinthians 2:15.

## CHAPTER 12

*About not judging another, but rather giving thanks; the eight results of loving God; about avoiding the company of women.*

THE man who lives a holy and righteous life is not going to despise sinners, however bad. Those who are tempted fall because they have not the grace to resist – though it was through their own sinfulness that they turned from good to evil. No one can do good, or love God, or be chaste, unless God enables him to do so. So if you get puffed up because you have done well, or have kept off carnal pleasures, or have endured hard penance (and consequently have received the praise of human lips!) you should remember that unless Christ in his kindness had protected you, you would have fallen into similar evils as did the bad man – or worse. You have no power to resist of your own, but only his power of whom it is said, *I will love you, Lord, my strength.*<sup>1</sup> If therefore you have nothing that in the first place you did not receive, *why do you boast as if you had not received it?*<sup>2</sup> I thank my God, who not for any merit of mine but solely for my good and his own glory so chastised me his child, and so frightened me his servant, that to me it seemed sweet to flee from the 'delights' of the world (which in any case are few and fleeting) and to escape the many, never-ending pains of hell. Moreover this was the way he taught me, and through that teaching endowed me with such strength that I can now gladly put up with present, difficult, penance, especially since I am to come so easily to eternal delight and full reward. For if we want to, even in this life and without undue hardship, we can repent completely and purge ourselves of our sins, so long as we destroy all those sins to the best of our ability. If in fact we are not cleansed here, in time to come we shall find the

1. Psalms 18:1.

2. 1 Corinthians 4:7.

## Chapter 12

Apostle speaks the truth when he says, *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*<sup>3</sup>

Lord God, pity me: my infancy was stupid,  
my boyhood vain, my adolescence unclean.  
But now, Lord Jesus, my heart has been set on fire with  
holy love,  
and my disposition has been changed,  
so that my soul has no wish to touch those bitter things  
which once were meat and drink to me.

Such are my affections now that it is nothing but sin I hate, none but God I fear to offend, nothing but God in which I rejoice. My only grief is for sin, my only love is God, my only hope is in him. Nothing saddens me except wrong, nothing pleases me except Christ.

Yet there was a time when I was rebuked, quite properly, by three different women. One rebuked me because in my eagerness to restrain the feminine craze for dressy and suggestive clothes I inspected too closely their extravagant ornamentation. She said I ought not to notice them so as to know whether they were wearing horned head-dresses or not. I think she was right to reprove me. Another rebuked me because I spoke of her great bosom as if it pleased me. She said, 'What business is it of yours whether it is big or little?' She too was right. The third jokingly took me up when I appeared to be going to touch her somewhat rudely, and perhaps had already done so, by saying, 'Calm down, brother!' It was as if she had said, 'It doesn't go with your office of hermit to be fooling with women.' She too deservedly made me feel uncomfortable. I ought to have held off rather than to have behaved this way. When I came to myself I thanked God for teaching me what was right through their words, and for showing me a more pleasant way than my previous one, so that I might cooperate more fully with Christ's grace. I am not going to put myself in the wrong with women henceforward.

3. Hebrews 10:31.

4. cf. Luke 15:17.

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

## CHAPTER 13

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Hosea 2:14