

rescued from the brothels by the most beautiful ruse of a certain soldier, and afterwards had as companion in martyrdom him whom she had found as the guardian of her chastity in the brothel.

I could give you many such examples if their length did not prevent it or their richness indicate silence. For Jesus Christ announced it; he spoke and they were multiplied without number. 'Greater love than this no man hath that he lay down his life for his friends.'

Ivo: Should we hold then that there is no difference between friendship and love?

AELRED: Indeed there is a great difference; for divine authority sanctions that many more are to be received in the ambit of love than in the embrace of friendship. For, by the law of charity we are forced to give the warmth of love not only to friends, but also to enemies. But only those we call friends, to whom we do not fear to deliver our hearts and all that lies therein, those most dear to us, bound to us in the same law and security of the Faith. . . .



## ON LOVE FOR GOD

ST BASIL<sup>1</sup>

**L**OVE for God assuredly cannot be taught. We did not learn from others to rejoice in the light or to seek to live; no one taught us to love our parents or those who brought us up. In the same way, and indeed much more truly, the lesson of desiring God is nothing external to us. But as soon as the living creature was formed—I am speaking of man—a sort of seminal principle was implanted in him, having within it a native propensity to love. The school of God's commandments takes charge of this: the right place to cultivate it carefully, to rear it skilfully, and with God's grace bring it to perfection. We welcome your zeal, then, as indispensable for this end. By God's gift and with the help of your prayers, we will try, according to the power

<sup>1</sup> Translated from *The Longer Rules*, question 2, by John Higgins, monk of Quarr.

given us by the Spirit, to kindle the spark of divine desire hidden within you. You must understand, however, that while this virtue is a single one, yet potentially it fulfils and includes every commandment. For, 'He that loves me', says our Lord, 'will keep my commandments' (John 14, 23). And again, 'On these two commandments the whole Law and the Prophets depend' (Matt. 22, 40). We will not now attempt a minute examination of the matter—otherwise we should find ourselves involved in a review of every passage that concerns the commandments—but so far as it lies in our power and it is proper to our present aim, we will put you in mind of the love we owe to God.

But first we will say this, that for all the commandments given us by God we have received from him powers sufficient to perform them; that we may neither be offended as if something extraordinary were demanded of us, nor be elated as if we contributed more than had been given us. Then when we exercise these powers justly and worthily, we are achieving in godly fashion the virtuous life; but if we use them corruptly, we fall into vice. Why, this is the very definition of vice; namely, the wrong employment, contrary to our Lord's commandment, of things God has given us for good; just as the definition of the virtue God requires is the use of them, with a good conscience, in line with our Lord's commandment. Since this is so, it will apply to the case of love as well. Because a command to love God has been received, we have been equipped from the first with an innate capacity of love. The proof is not to be sought outside us, but anyone can himself learn it, from himself and within himself. For first our heart is naturally set on noble things; though it is true enough some things seem nobler to one than to another. And then, untaught, we have an affection for our own family and belongings, and abound in goodwill towards our benefactors. But what, I ask, is more wonderful than divine beauty? What thought more delightful than God's magnificence? What desire so keen and so unbearable as that engendered by God in a soul that is purged from all evil, that cries in sincerity, 'I am wounded with love'? (Cant. 2, 5). The lightning-strokes of divine beauty are beyond utterance and description; no speech represents them, no

hearing receives them. You may talk of the brightness of the day-star, the moon's shining, the light of the sun; all are nothing in comparison with that glory, and fall more short of the true light than does the deep gloom of a moonless night of the clearest noonday. This beauty—invisible to bodily eyes, perceived by soul and mind alone—if perhaps it shone upon any of the Saints and left them with an intolerable sting of desire, weary of this life they cried, 'Alas, that my sojourning is prolonged; when shall I come and appear in the presence of God?' (Ps. 119, 5; 41, 3). And again, 'To depart and to be with Christ is far better' (Philipp. 1, 23). And once more, 'My soul was athirst for the strong and living God' (Ps. 41, 3). And, 'Now lettest thou thy servant depart, O Lord' (Lk. 2, 29). Oppressed as they were with this life's prison, they could hardly contain the eagerness with which the divine desire had touched their souls. These, being insatiable of the vision of God's beauty, would pray that the vision of the delightfulness of the Lord might be as far prolonged as the whole of life eternal.

We conclude, therefore, that men are naturally desirous of noble things. Goodness in its own right is noble and lovable. And God is good; all things tend towards good; therefore all things tend towards God.

2. So then well-doing, freely chosen, is ours we can even say by nature; so long at least as our reason is not perverted by vice. Love for God is required of us as a matter of strict debt, which to the defaulting soul is the most intolerable of ills. For estrangement and aversion from God is something harder to bear than the torments looked for in Hell, and, even though pain is absent, are more grievous to the sufferer than the loss of light to the eye or of life to the living creature. If a natural fondness for their parents is found in those they beget—and this is clear both in the case of the brutes and in the affection children from the first have for their mothers—we must not seem more irrational than little children, more savage than wild beasts, unloving and hostile towards our Maker. Even though from his very goodness we have not learnt what he is like, yet from the mere fact that we exist through him we ought to have far more love and tenderness than they, and cling to the thought of him

continually like little children to their mothers. A benefactor ranks first of those who are naturally loved; and this affection is not peculiar to men, but all living things, one might even say, are well-disposed towards those who do them good. 'An ox', he says, 'knows its owner, and an ass its master's stall.' May what follows not be said of us: 'But Israel does not know me, and the people has not regarded me' (Is. 1, 3). A dog, for example, and many other such creatures, no need to say how fond they show themselves of those who feed them. But if we feel natural goodwill and attraction for our benefactors, and will take any trouble to repay their benefits, what measure can rightly match the gifts of God? While their number is so many they pass reckoning, they are so great as well and of such excellence that one alone makes us liable to the Giver for a full tribute of gratitude. Some I will pass over, even though in themselves of surpassing grandeur and glory; but like stars in the sunlight, since they are outshone by greater, they display their intrinsic glory less brightly. For I have no time to leave aside the more excellent things and measure our Benefactor's goodness by the lesser.

3. Nothing then will I say of the sunrise, of the moon's changes, the varieties of weather, the seasons' alternations; of waters that rain from the clouds or spring from the ground; nor even of the sea and the wide earth, of what grows from the earth, what lives in the waters, of the families of the air, the myriad diversity of living creatures, of all things ordained to minister to our life. But there is one benefit we could not pass over even if we would; and while to be silent as to this is quite out of the question, at least to anyone of sound mind and speech, yet to speak of it worthily is still more impossible. I mean, how God made man to the divine image and likeness, and judged him worthy of the knowledge of himself; furnished him with understanding above all living things, made him to delight in the inexpressible beauties of Paradise, and appointed him ruler over everything on earth. Then, though man was beguiled by the serpent, though he fell into sin, and through sin into death, and all that goes with death, yet God did not disdain him. But first he gave him a law to be his aid, he set

Angels to guard him and to care for him, he sent Prophets to reprove vice and to teach virtue, with threats he checked the impulses of vice, with promises he awakened eagerness for good things, often he anticipated the outcome of each in various examples as a warning to others; and after all this, though we continued disobedient, he did not turn away from us. For we were not abandoned by our Master's goodness, we did not hinder his love for us, even when, insensible to his honours, we insulted our Benefactor. Nay rather, we were recalled from death, and restored to life, by our Lord himself, Jesus Christ. Moreover, there is in him beneficence more astonishing still; for being in the form of God, he did not count it a prize to be equal to God; but he stripped himself, taking the form of a slave (Philpp. 2, 6-7).

4. And he took on himself our infirmities and carried our sicknesses, and for us he was wounded, that by his stripes he might be healed (Is. 53, 4-5; I Pet. 2, 24); and he redeemed us from the curse, having become a curse for us (Gal. 3, 13) and suffered the most ignominious death that he might exalt us to glorious life. And it was not enough merely to give life to the dead, but he bestowed the dignity of Godhead and prepared eternal mansions, for the greatness of their joy surpassing all human conception.

What then shall we render to the Lord for all he has rendered us? Yet he is so good, he requires no recompense, but in return for what he has given us is content only to be loved. When I recall all this to mind,—let me state my own experience—I sink into a sort of horror and am lost in dread, lest through inattention or concern with vanities, I should fall away from God's love and become a reproach to Christ.

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So much, then, concerning love towards God; for as I said, my aim is not to say everything; that is impossible. It is rather, under various heads, to provide in your souls a concise reminder that will continually revive the desire for God.