

William of Saint Thierry I: The Five Senses of Love

by Geoffrey Webb

464

'When Our Lord said "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom", He was calling down upon it long life and blessing. The praises of this life were first sung by the apostles, who learned it either from our Lord or from the Holy Spirit, with whose grace they had recently been clothed from on high. They established a way of life such that the multitude were of one heart and one soul. They had all things in common and with one accord they would all meet in the temple. Since that time there have always been men to imitate the community of the apostles . . . '

The quotation is from William of Saint Thierry, a Cistercian, writing not very long after the famous dictum of Etienne de Muret: 'If you are asked which order you belong to, say you belong to the order of the gospel. I will not be monk, canon or hermit: the titles are too holy for me'. A period of evangelical revival was beginning, which would culminate a century later with the beginning of the friars under Innocent III. And so it is not really surprising to find a monastic author like William, in the twelfth century, identifying the scope of a life which we have tended to think of as enclosed, exclusive and specialized, with the most basic demands of the Christian life.

Of course we have always known that the monastic life was essentially nothing more or less than a concentration on Christian ideals. But when we made our retreats in monasteries, we were confronted by a way of life that was beautiful to observe, but by no means the kind of thing we would want to have day after day, year after year, for the rest of our lives. Those of us who had 'vocations' were special people. We said goodbye to them with awe, a touch of envy, and a shade of relief ('rather you than me, but the best of luck'). And if they happened to come out after a year of novitiate, or some time before making profession, we felt rather uncomfortable for them, aware of their disorientation, of the fact that they were having to find their feet in a world now alien and somewhat inimical. Either that, or they went a little wild for a time, on account of the excitement of being back in the swim. At any rate, there was a clear and fixed gulf between world and cloister, always far removed from each other in the nature of things.

But the fact remains that a monastic writer, living at the time of one of

the greatest monastic revivals the Western Church has ever known, insists that this is an apostolic institution, a fellowship in the Spirit, a 'joyous state of brethren living together in unity'. It represents an ideal of Christian behaviour, which none the less remains a norm, related to human beginnings, *normal* people, not angels. William, like others of his time, fell in love with Saint Bernard's monastery at Clairvaux because it was full of love. Obedience, chastity and *conversio morum* were no doubt there in abundance, the specialized means for attaining the end that every Christian has to pursue – charity. But it was the charity that took his breath away.

'When you come down from the hills into the valley of Clairvaux for the first time, you are struck by a realization that God lives there, for the simplicity and unpretentiousness of the buildings in the quiet valley witness to the humble, simple life that the monks lead for the sake of Christ. You find that the silence of deep night prevails even at mid-day, although in this valley full of men there are no idlers, and everyone busies himself with the work entrusted to him. The only sounds you hear are of the brethren at work, or singing their office in praise of God . . . And the psalmody is so reverent, harmonious and fervent that it seems to be offering to God a melody composed of the very lives and loves of the brethren, and following the rules of charity rather than those of music'.

There is, in the whole Benedictine (and *ipso facto* the Cistercian) ideal, a certain something that one could perhaps call a psychological realism, a facing of facts about people. You find it throughout the rule, from the major propositions such as that the abbot must adapt himself to many dispositions if he is to discharge his duty properly both as father and master, to small provisions like having the opening psalm of matins chanted slowly enough to allow the latecomers to slip into choir on time. Bred in such a tradition, the Cistercians of the twelfth century renaissance could go further, as their *de Anima* treatises prove. They were interested in matters psychological and psychosomatic. They analyzed more carefully than their forbears the nature of man, his potentialities, requirements and aims. And gradually there came into being this extraordinary unanimity in seeing Saint Benedict's 'school of the Lord's service' as a school of charity, an environment for developing and deploying all the love that a human creature could ever have at his disposal. It is something you find throughout Saint Aelred and William of Saint Thierry, in Saint Bernard and his biographers, who saw him more fundamentally as a lover of the brethren than as a reformer or a politician, and in all the lesser but still important figures of the school – Gueric, Isaac (another Englishman) the monks of Ford, and Baldwin, the crusading archbishop of Canterbury.

Admittedly their language may occasionally tend to fossilize their thought (sometimes even more in translation than in the original!) but

the fact remains that these are the figures with whom we need to make contact because they have something that belongs to all time, and not just to one particular context. The French series *Sources Chrétiennes* has very wisely added a *Sources Monastiques*, realizing that the medieval voice is as authentic a source as Cyril of Jerusalem, and Origen, and for the same reason. The basis of everything Christian is here. It is doctrine that is offered, not degrees, ways, mansions, post-Tridentine categories that have become irrelevant for our time. It analyzes a life in which the development of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and real relationships to the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are the whole context. It is about grace and glory, about man, fellow-man and God. It is one of the great Christian syntheses. We must think of it, not so much as monks cooking up something peculiar as it were in Tibet – but as Christians thinking about Christianity, living it at its deepest, without defences or substitutes, living it passionately.

The passage that follows really needs no commentary. Its context, in William's *Nature and Dignity of Love*, is the right ordering of something natural that fallen nature can make unnatural. The natural movement of love is upward and outward, the unnatural movement downward and inward. And just as the body has five senses to contact physical reality, the soul has its spiritual senses for the exercise of love, the reality which is its particular concern. The doctrine goes back to Origen, but the Cistercians used it for some interesting developments. The five loves in question are family love, social love, natural love, spiritual love, and the love of God.

'The love of near relatives is compared to the sense of touch, for this disposition is inherent in all men, and we think of it as common and somehow tangible. It wells up in everyone in the most natural way, and there is no manner of stopping it. The sense of touch is wholly corporeal, and it comes about by the contact of two bodies. Contact will engender touch in any body which is alive. Likewise the soul can never be without the love which is analogous to the sense of touch. For this reason the love of near relatives does not receive much commendation in holy scripture. In fact our Lord says, "Unless a man hate father and mother, he cannot be my disciple", so that this love may not become excessive.

'Social love is compared to the sense of taste. This is brotherly love, the love of the Holy Catholic Church, of which it is written: "Behold how good and merry a thing it is for brothers to live in unity". As life is given to the body by means of taste, likewise by means of this love the Lord sends "blessing and life for ever and ever". Taste is admittedly a corporeal function, but its purpose is to bring about the savouring of food within the body, which savouring is for the soul's appreciation. So we may say that this sense is mainly a bodily thing, but quite evidently it also belongs in some measure to the soul. This is equally true of social love, which comes as a result of people living together and sharing the same profession, or

studies, or such like things. It provides a common bond, and grows through mutual help and exchange. It would seem to belong to the soul considered in its relationship with the body (being based on physical cohabitation and common material interests), but it is in a large part spiritual. For just as flavour is in tasting, so does brotherly love yield that love which is said to be like perfume on the head, flowing down to the beard, even unto Aaron's beard and to the skirts of his clothing. It is like the dew of Hermon falling on Mount Sion.

'To the sense of smell we can compare natural love, by which we mean that love which causes us to love every man in virtue of our sharing in the same nature, and to ask for nothing in return. It comes from the hidden recesses of our nature, and invading the soul, will not admit anything human to be alien to it, or unkindly. The sense of smell would appear to belong more to the soul than the body, for in order to smell something, all that is needed on the body's part is a slight intake of breath through the nose. And albeit the smell comes in through the body, it is the soul, not the body, which is thereby affected. Natural love, then, belongs more to the spirit than to the soul which vivifies the body, for it considers only the human connaturality of the loved one, and has no consideration of consanguinity, society, or any other kind of obligation.

'Spiritual love we compare to the sense of hearing, and by spiritual love we understand the love of our enemies. Hearing, instead of producing its effect within the body, works after an exterior fashion. That is to say it knocks on the ear and calls on the soul to come out and hear. Likewise, the love of our enemies is not stirred in our hearts by any power of nature, nor by any spontaneous affection, but by obedience alone, which hearing signifies. That is why this love is called spiritual, for it brings us to the likeness of the son of God, and confers on us the dignity of sons of God. As the Lord says "Do good to those who hate you, that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven".

'Divine love is compared to sight, for sight is the highest sense, and divine love is the highest of all the affections. Although it is the eye which sees, sight is in some sense predicated of the other senses, as when we say "taste and see" or "touch and see". In the same way, it is because of divine love that we may speak of the other affections being loves, if they are good . . . The power of seeing is located in the highest part of the body, and because of this it has all the other instruments of sense beneath it. Those which belong rather to the soul are nearer to it than those which belong more to the body. The least of the senses, and the lowest, is touch, which is most proper to the hand although it is common to the whole body. The mind, which is the head of the soul, must be the seat of the love of God, so that from this position it may illumine, govern and guard all the loves below itself, giving them of its own warmth and light'.

At the end of the treatise William insists that 'it must be remembered that the stages of love are not like the rungs of a ladder. The soul does not leave the lesser loves behind it as it moves onward to the more perfect love. All the degrees of love work together as one'. In other words completion is the aim. 'Be ye perfect' is understood here in its proper sense of *teleios*, fulfilled, whole and integral, and not in the sense it has acquired since of a scrubbed, shining and merely ritual purity. The complete lover, in the monastic context, is someone who comes as a son, to learn not only from a father but from a benign community of brothers, uncles and grandfathers as well. He grows up to love, to root himself socially in the community, to develop. From having been a receiver he must become a giver, as we do in marriage almost inevitably, and if we are not married we have to find some other technique for making our lives go outwards, in love and service to some kind of community. We develop in giving, grow old in it, and with any luck ripen as we decay. William's analysis of the five loves of a complete lover can remind us of what James Baldwin might call the 'variousness' of Christian love, the full and necessary cycle from 'holy palmers' kiss' to the achievement in those lines to Grimold . . . 'all your boys / your little laughing boys, your happy school', who 'bring huge apples clasped in their two hands'. All the degrees of love work together as one.

Poem

Then launch forth voyager, let this step be taken
 No use repining while the costs mount up
 The terror of the plunge blots out the horror of inaction
 You can't, but will, swig down the fearful cup

You're one so used to wince the knife's mere whisper,
 To fear in an approach a dark intent;
 A nerve's swift jangling is for you heart severing,
 At scenting loss there's none so diligent

To cut these bonds that chafe the heart so tamely
 This is your destiny, it's bound to come.
 Slip fancy's pageantry and risk you're ordinary:
 Ulysses' last adventure finds him home.

Ronald Torbet