The Fire of Love

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.\(^3\)

\textbf{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 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 \textit{gives liberally and does not upbraid};\(^1\) 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.

\(^3\) Psalms 73:9. 

\(^1\) James 1:5.
The Fire of Love

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 over-praise 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. 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, 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;
 I am wanting to die;
 I long to pass away;
 I am burning to pass over.


Chapter 11

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.

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

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

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.

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2. 1 Corinthians 4:7.  
The Fire of Love

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 to 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.* 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 ardent 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
bitter cup of penance and hard toil, there they are consumed with unending and loving contemplation; they are fit to wait on God, and to await the kingdom of Christ.

A hermit's life is a great one if it is greatly lived! Take for instance, the blessed Maglorious, a miraculous man if ever there was one, and who had rejoiced in angelic visits from childhood. As his predecessor, the blessed Sampson, had foretold, he was made an archbishop, and he ruled the Church of God both long and laudably. But an angel visited him with heavenly counsel, with the result that he gave up his archbishopric, and chose to live as a hermit. And at the end of his life his passing was revealed to him. Similarly the blessed Cuthbert exchanged the life of a bishop for that of an anchorite.8

If then men of this quality have done such things to deserve greater reward what man in his senses would dare to set another state of life in the church above the solitary? In this state men are occupied with nothing outward, but give themselves totally to divine contemplation, so as to be on fire with love for Christ, the cares of the world put behind them. And so celestial music resounds amongst them, and sweet flowing melody rejoices the solitary. From such melody the man who lives in the midst of clatter is distracted, and can but rarely meditate or pray.

It is of the solitary that the Psalmist speaks when he tells of the lover's hymns, I will go into the place of his wonderful tabernacle, up to the house of God. The way he goes, rejoicing and praising, is thus described, In the voice of praise and thanksgiving, the sound of the banquet. And to show that solitude is essential for this, so that away from physical racket and song man may capture and retain some of the joy of that sound, he demonstrates elsewhere quite clearly, I would get me away far off, and remain in solitude.

For in this life he is straining every nerve to burn with the fire of the Holy Spirit and, captured as well as consoled by the delight of love, to exult in God. So the perfect solitary will burn vigorously in his love for God, and when he is 'above himself', in ecstasy through contemplation, he is lifted up to celestial joy and song and sound. Such a man indeed is like the seraphim: there is an inner blaze of indescribable and unwavering charity. His heart is shaped by the divine fire and, ablaze beyond description, he is borne to his Beloved. Indeed, at death he is taken up at once to the chiefest seats of heaven, that he may dwell serenely, in place of Lucifer. This will be his lot because he has been fired with indescribable love, and has sought the glory of his Creator alone, and yet has walked humbly, and has not thought himself better than the rest of sinful men.

2. Of these three saints the only one about which there is much factual information is St Cuthbert. But hagiographers have not been slow to fill the gaps with improving legends, which when they are not improbable can be quite fantastic. It seems that St Sampson (c. 490–563) was a Welshman, who in the course of his episcopate migrated from Cornwall to Brittany, where he founded a monastery at Dol. His evangelistic efforts spread beyond the French mainland, for his name is associated with the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey. He had a great name for miracles. His cousin, St Maglorious, was a monk in his monastery. When Sampson died Maglorious succeeded him in the bishopric, a post which he later relinquished in order to retire to Sark. There he founded his own monastery, becoming its first abbot. Angels clearly played a large part in his thinking, for his traditional emblem shows him giving one of them Holy Communion. He died c. 586. Perhaps the greatest of these three was the Northumbrian, St Cuthbert, who after a life of devoted pastoral and evangelistic work resigned the see of Hexham to live as a solitary on Farne. He died there in 684. The Penguin Dictionary of Saints describes him as 'a man of extraordinary charm and practical ability, who attracted people deeply by the beauty of holiness'. Durham Cathedral is still his shrine.

3. cf. Psalms 43:3.


Chapter 14

Praise for the solitary life, and its first lovers; the love of God consists in warmth, song, and sweetness; quiet is necessary for it; such men are saved from delusions, and are not preferred to ecclesiastical office.

The blessed Job who was taught the hard way by the Holy Spirit sums up in a word the multifarious reasons for approving saintly hermits in the passage, Who set the wild ass free? 1

In the first place, the freedom of grace is commended in the saying Who set the wild ass free. Secondly, there is reference to the rejection of carnal affection in the words, and he loosed their chains. Thirdly, there is the solitary life itself in he gave them a house in the wilderness. And in the fourth place, the longing for everlasting bliss is in the saying his tent is in the sally earth. Salt does not quench thirst, but rather aggravates it. Those who perceive something of the sweetness of eternal life desire all the more fervently to get hold of it, and sample it.

Indeed, Saint John Baptist, the prince of hermits (our Lord excepted) was not behind in his affection, for he chose the solitary life. Others in like manner have chosen it the locust, for example, who according to Solomon has neither prince, King, nor master, yet go they forth by bands 2 of virtue and gifts!

Now there are two sorts of chains: those of nature and sin, which in the case of solitaries God has broken asunder, and those of love, which he has strengthened. The house in the wilderness can also refer to 'quietness of heart', because holy hermits, away from tumult and town, experience

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1. The passage in Job 39:5-6 runs thus: 'Who hath sent out the wild ass free? or who hath loosed the bands of the wild ass? Whose house I have made the wilderness, and the barren land his dwellings.' Rolle is quoting from the Vulgate version.
4. Tramplike solitaries who cadged their way from place to place. They are invariably condemned in Christian literature, yet their numbers persisted.
5. Lamentations 3:27.
The Fire of Love

For contemplatives are superior to other men, both in the outstanding quality of their work, and in the fervour of their love.

All the while he is indifferent to worldly power love indwells the heart of the solitary. Herein is the foundation of his fervour and his longing for light, because he is tasting the things of heaven and singing his honeyed (not heavy!) song. He offers his praise to his noble Lover, like the seraphim, and since his loving mind is in tune with theirs he says, 'See how I burn in my love; how hungrily I long!' So is the lover's soul consumed with indescribable fire, shot through with that flame which gladdens and glitters with heavenly light. There is no end that I can discover to this fervour and happiness, and as I am always pressing on towards the object of my love it means that death becomes sweet to me as well as sure.

Because for the sake of the Saviour the holy hermit has made solitude his home, in heaven he will receive a dwelling, golden and glistening, and in the midst of the angelic orders. Because for love of his Creator he dressed in filthy rags, his Maker will clothe him in eternal splendour. Because once he was prepared to live here with features wan and drawn, so now his countenance shines with wonderful glory. In exchange for his revolting garments he will wear raiment glorious and resplendent with precious stones, for ever in the midst of those who dwell in Paradise. Because he has purged himself from vices and avoided all ostentation and has done with all appearance of filth, his warm love for Almighty God has gained for him a song which is sweet and heavenly. The harmonies of those who praise divine charity have filled his mind, and rightly so. And thus it is with courage and not dread that he quits his exile here; and at the end of all he hears angelic song, and rises up, he who has loved so ardently; he is caught up to that eternal hall, and honoured in the most splendid fashion, to sit on high with the seraphim.

As far as my study of Scripture goes, I have found that to love Christ above all else will involve three things: warmth and song and sweetness. And these three, as I know from personal experience, cannot exist for long without there being great quiet.

If I were to stand up when I was engaged in contemplation or to walk about or even to lie prostrate on the ground I found that I failed to attain these three, and even seemed to be left in dryness. Consequently, if I were to hold on to and retain deep devotion I must sit — which is what I have decided to do. I am aware that there is an underlying reason for this, for if a man does much standing and walking his body gets tired, and thus his soul too is hindered, wearied, and burdened. He is not as quiet as he can be and so is not in his most perfect state; if the philosopher is right, it is the quiet sitting that makes the soul wise. Let him who still stands more than he sits when delighting in the things of God recognize he has a long way to go before he reaches the heights of contemplation!

In these three things (which are the sign of love in its most perfect form) the utmost perfection of the Christian religion is undoubtedly found. I, by the grace of Jesus, and to the limit of my meagre capacity, have accepted them, yet I dare not equate myself with the saints who displayed them, because they understood such things so much more perfectly. However, let me press forward with all my strength so that my love becomes more fervent, my song more fluent, and my experience of love's sweetness all the fuller. For, my brothers, you are wrong if you suppose that people today cannot be as holy as the prophets and apostles were.

I call it fervour when the mind is truly ablaze with eternal love, and the heart similarly feels itself burning with a love that is not imaginary but real. For a heart set on fire produces a feeling of fiery love.

I call it song when there is in the soul, overflowing and ardent, a sweet feeling of heavenly praise; when thought turns into song; when the mind is in thrall to sweetest harmony.

This twofold awareness is not achieved by doing noth...
The Fire of Love

ing, but through the utmost devotion; and from these two there springs the third, for unspeakable sweetness is present too. Fervour and song bring marvellous delight to a soul, just as they themselves can be the product of very great sweetness.

Now in all this richness is no trace of a false note, but rather the most exquisite perfecting of all our deeds. Not at all like those people who in their ignorance of the contemplative life are led astray by the demon of noonday into a sham and fanciful devotion, because they consider themselves to have reached the top when in fact they are well down the scale. But the soul in whom are met these three things I have been speaking of remains completely impervious to the darts of the enemy; she continues to think all the time of her Beloved, rising ever higher, with her will unbroken, and her love stimulated. You must not be surprised if for such a soul, in her ordered love, there is melody and a continual retention through her Beloved of its music and comfort. For now she lives no longer subject to vanity, but with heavenly support burns ever with uncreated, unfailing heat. And so, as I have already said, she loves ardently without ceasing, and feels within herself that supreme and gladdening heat, knowing she is simply burning with love's eternal fire. In her longing and sweetness she experiences her most Beloved; her meditation changes to a song of glory; and her very nature is renewed when she is caught up into this joyous song. Which is why her Maker has granted her her heartfelt desire: to pass without fear or grief from this decaying body, and to quit this world unafraid of death. For she who was the friend of light, and foe of darkness, loved nothing but life!

But men of this sort, who have been raised to such exalted love ought not to be chosen for positions of authority or for outward honour, or to be called to any kind of secular employment. They are stones like the topaz, found but rarely, and for that reason esteemed most precious. They are two-coloured: the purest colour is like gold, and the other is as clear as the cloudless sky. It surpasses the glory of every jewel, and nothing more beautiful can be seen. If we were to polish it we would make it dull, but leave it alone and it will retain its beauty. So the holy contemplatives mentioned earlier are the most rare and therefore the most dear of men. Like gold in their outstanding and fervent love, they are like the sky in the glory of their heavenly living. They surpass the life of any saint, and are the more beautiful and bright among the stones (I am speaking of course of the elect). They whose sole purpose is to love and possess this life shine more brightly than all other men, past or present. But if anyone wants to polish them, as it were, by loading them with honours, he will only diminish their ardour, and dull their beauty and brightness. And if they themselves accept public office and dignity, they do in fact demote themselves, and become less worth. So they ought to be left to engage in their own pursuits, in order that their brightness may continue to grow.

Chapter 15

How and when he was urged to the solitary life, and the song of love; about the change of place.

As adolescence dawned in my unhappy youth, present too was the grace of my Maker. It was he who curbed my youthful lust and transformed it into a longing for spiritual embrace. He lifted and transferred my soul from the depths up to the heights, so that I ardently longed for the pleasures of heaven more than I had ever delighted in physical embrace or worldly corruption. The way all this worked out, if I were minded to publish it, obliges me to preach the solitary life. For the inbreathing Spirit meant me to follow this life, and love its purpose. And this, from that moment, with all my limitations, I have sought to do. Yet I was still living amongst those who flourished in the world, and it

was their food I used to eat. And I used to listen to that kind of flattery which all too often can drag the most doughty warriors from their heights down to hell itself. But when I rejected everything of this sort to set myself to one purpose, my soul was absorbed with love for my Maker. I longed for the sweet delights of eternity, and I gave my soul over to love Christ with every ounce of my power. And this she has received from the Beloved, so that now it is solitude that seems most sweet, and those comforts which in their madness men treasure are counted nothing.

From then on I continually sought quiet, and that although I went from one place to another. For to desert one’s cell for reasonable cause does a hermit no harm any more than does its recovery if that seems right. Some of the holy Fathers were accustomed to do this, and thereby incurred criticism – but not from good men! For evil men spoke evil things, and would have gone on to do them if they had continued in the same place, for that is the way of them. Lift the lid of the pan, and there is only stink! Those who speak evil speak out of the abundance of their heart, and there lurks the poison of asps! I know this: the more men have been furious with me with their denigrations, the more have I advanced in spiritual growth. My worst detractors have been those I once counted my faithful friends. Yet I did not give up the things which helped my soul because of them, but got on with my study, always with the favour of God. I recalled the scripture which said, *They may curse, but you bless.* And in the course of time I was granted growth in spiritual joy.

From the time my conversion of life and mind began until the day the door of Heaven swung back and his Face was revealed, so that my inner eye could contemplate the things that are above, and see by what way it might find the Beloved and cling to him, three years passed, all but three or four months. But the door remained open for nearly a year longer before I could really feel in my heart the warmth of eternal love.


Chapter 15

I was sitting in a certain chapel, delighting in the sweetness of prayer or meditation, when suddenly I felt within myself an unusually pleasant heat. At first I wondered where it came from, but it was not long before I realized that it was from none of his creatures but from the Creator himself. It was, I found, more fervent and pleasant than I had ever known. But it was just over nine months before a conscious and incredibly sweet warmth kindled me, and I knew the infusion and understanding of heavenly, spiritual sounds, sounds which pertain to the song of eternal praise, and to the sweetness of unheard melody; sounds which cannot be known or heard save by him who has received it, and who himself must be clean and separate from the things of earth.

While I was sitting in that same chapel, and repeating as best I could the night-psalms before I went to supper, I heard, above my head it seemed, the joyful ring of psalmody, or perhaps I should say, the singing. In my prayer I was reaching out to heaven with heartfelt longing when I became aware, in a way I cannot explain, of a symphony of song, and in myself I sensed a corresponding harmony at once wholly delectable and heavenly, which persisted in my mind. Then and there my thinking itself turned into melodious song, and my meditation became a poem, and my very prayers and psalms took up the same sound. The effect of this inner sweetness was that I began to sing what previously I had spoken; only I sang inwardly, and that for my Creator. But it was not suspected by those who saw me, for if they had known they would have honoured me beyond all measure, and I should have lost part of this most lovely flower, and have fallen into desolation. Meantime wonder seized me that I should be caught up into such joy while I was still an exile, and that God should give me gifts, the like of which I did not know I could ask for, and such that I thought that not even the most holy could have received in this life. From which I deduce that they are not given for merit, but freely to whosoever Christ wills. All the same I fancy that no one will receive them unless he has a special
The Fire of Love

love for the Name of Jesus, and so honours it that he never lets it out of his mind, except in sleep. Anyone to whom this is given will, I think, achieve this very thing.

From the time my conversion began until, by the help of God, I was able to reach the heights of loving Christ, there passed four years and three months. When I had attained this high degree I could praise God with joyful song indeed! And here that blessed state has remained since that initial impetus: and so it will continue to the end. In fact it will be more perfect after death, for though it is here that joyful love and burning charity begin, it is there, in the kingdom of heaven, that it will receive its most glorious fulfilment. But a man who has passed through these stages in his life profits to no small degree, yet he does not ascend to a higher stage, for he is one who has been confirmed in grace as it were, and so far as mortal man can be, is at rest.

I thank God that this is so, and I want to give him unceasing praise. In tribulations, in troubles, in persecutions, he has given me comfort; and in prosperity and success he makes me await in confidence his everlasting crown.

So, Jesus, I want to be praising you always, such is my joy.

When I was down and out you stooped to me,
and associated me with those sweet ministers
who through the Spirit give out those lovely and heavenly melodies.
I will express my joy and gratitude
because you have made me like one of those
whose superb song springs from a clear conscience.
Their soul burns with their unending love.
And your servant too, when he sits in prayer,
glows and loves in his fervour.
His mind is transformed: he burns with fire;
indeed, he expands in the vehemence of his longing.
And virtue, beautiful, true, lovely and faultless,
flourishes before the face of his Creator.

Chapter 16

His song suffuses his whole being,
and with his glad melody
lightens his burden,
and brightens his labour.

God's gifts to us are manifold, wonderful and great, but none of them in this life can be compared with this one, which so perfectly confirms our hope in the beauty of the unseen life in the loving soul, and comforts him with its sweetness as he sits in prayer, and catches him up to the heights of contemplation, and to the sound of angels' praise.

And now, my brothers, I have told you how I came to the fire of love: not in order that you should praise me, but rather that you might glorify God. From him I have received whatever I have had of good. It is so that you who are aware that everything under the sun is vanity⁴ might be moved to imitate, not denigrate.

Chapter 16

The prayer of the poor lover who desires to die; the praise of divine Charity.

When a man, devout and poor, worries over his sin, he can pray (if he so desires) like this:

Jesus Christ, my Lord and God, take pity on me;
please consider my body's grievous yoke,
which depresses my soul so quickly.
My flesh is faltering under the burdens of life,
and in consequence my spiritual strength is flagging too.
For all that the world ever gave me I have spent,
and now nothing remains but for you to lead my soul to that other world where my most precious treasure, where my real and lasting wealth, abides.

a. Ecclesiastes 1:14 et passim.
The Fire of Love

There I shall live without wearying;
there rejoice without grief;
there delight without being sated;
and there, loving you, seeing you, glorying in you,
shall be satisfied for ever.
For truly my treasure is you, yourself.

Death, why do you delay? Why are you so slow in coming to me, a man alive but mortal? Why do you not catch hold of him who is longing for you? Who can possibly assess that sweetness which brings an end to all sighing, a beginning to all blessedness, the gate to a desired, unfailing joy? You are the end of my grief, you are the goal of my toil, you are the cause of my fruitfulness, you are the entrance to my joys. Yes, I burn, I pant for you. If you come I will be safe. Ravished though I be with love, yet I still cannot enjoy fully what I so desperately want; not until I taste that joy you are going to give me. For if I must, or rather because I must, like all my forbears, pass your gate, I beg you do not delay too long, do not be too far off. You can see how I am pining because of love, how I am longing to die, how I am aflame for you. Not, of course, for your sake, but for the Saviour’s, my Jesus, on whom, once I have got what I want from you, I hope to gaze eternally. How good, Death, is the sentence you pass on this poor man, whose soul has been sweetened with love; on this poor man, moreover, whose love is for Christ, whose thoughts are heavenward, who burns sweetly with the fire of the Holy Spirit!

For this same poor man is taken after death to the place where angels sing, because he has been cleansed, and blessed, and now lives in the Spirit’s music. He, who all his life has based his meditation on that lovely Name, will die surrounded by marvellous melody.

The hosts of heaven greet him with their hymns, and take him with honour to the court of the Emperor Eternal; there he will sit in blessedness among the inhabitants of heaven. Love brought him to the state in which he lives with such interior delight, and joyfully bears whatever may happen, and thinks on death not with anxiety but with pleasure. For he believes that it is then that he will truly live, when it is granted to him to pass from the light of this world.

Sweet charity, you are so obviously the dearest of all that is sweet! You take hold of our minds by your love; you possess them so clearly; you make them despise so quickly things that are transient, and pleasures that are vain; you cause them so remarkably to yearn for the things you want. You came to me . . . and every secret corner of my heart has been filled with the lovely sound of your joy, and made abundant with fervent, spiritual happiness. Not surprisingly then, I long for love, the fairest of flowers, and inwardly burn with fiery flame. If only I could be quit of this place of exile!

The heat is such that no one can imagine it unless he has experienced its comfort for himself. His heart is bursting with song, a captive in the care of charity. For of all the things I experience here, this is the most delightful: I nearly die while it builds up its fervent love. Now my Beloved, grant that I may cease to live; for death, dreaded by so many, will be as the sound of music to me. And though I am now physically sitting in solitary state, I seem to be seated in Paradise, there singing sweetly my song of love for the joys my Beloved has given me!

CHAPTER 17

How perfect love is acquired by purity and affection; imperfect love; beauty; the threefold strength of divine love; rich men, poor men, and alms-giving.

In a truly loving mind there is always a song of glory and an inner flame of love. They surge up out of a clear conscience, out of an abundant spiritual joy, out of inward gladness. Small wonder if a love like this wins through to a perfect
love. Love of this sort is immense in its fervour, its whole direction Godwards, totally unrestrained in its love for him. It cleaves to Christ without the opposition of silly thoughts; it rejoices day and night in Jesus, never distracted from him, never seduced by evil, never deceived by ‘dead flies’, or driven off by them from the fragrance of the ointment. The world, the flesh, and the devil leave him unmoved, however violent their attacks; he tramples them underfoot, accounting their strength nothing. There is no tension in his fervour, but there is vigour in his love; there is sweetness in his song, and a warmth about his radiance; his delight in God is irresistible, his contemplation rises with unimpeded ascent. Everything he conquers; everything he overcomes; nothing seems impossible to him. For while a man is striving to love Christ with all his might he knows it to be true that within him is eternal life, abundant and sweet.

For we are in fact turned to Christ when we strive to love him with all our mind. For, as subject, God is so wonderful and, as spectacle, so entrancing, that it amazes me that any one can be so stupid and perverse as not to want with all his heart to see him.

It is not the one who does many things and great who is great; but the one who loves Christ much: he is great, and beloved of God. Philosophers have laboured much, yet they have completely disappeared, and many who seemed to be Christian, doing great things and performing great wonders, have not been found worth saving. Not doers, but lovers of God, are rewarded with the heavenly crown.

I ask you, Lord Jesus,

to develop in me, your lover,
an immeasurable urge towards you,
an affection that is unbounded,
a longing that is unrestrained,
a fervour that throws discretion to the winds!


Chapter 17

The more worthwhile our love for you, all the more pressing does it become. Reason cannot hold it in check, fear does not make it tremble, wise judgement does not temper it.

There is no one more blessed than he who dies because he loves so much. No creature can love God too much. In everything else what is practised in excess turns to evil, but the virtue of love is such that the more it abounds the more splendid it becomes. A lover will languish if he does not have the object of his love near him. Which is why the Scripture says, *Tell my Beloved that I languish for love,* as if it were saying, ‘It is because I cannot see him whom I love; my very body is wasting away with the intensity of my devotion!’

Undoubtedly when a man is turned wholly towards Christ he is at first moved with real penitence, and this involves his giving up everything that panders to vanity. It is afterwards that he is ‘seized’ by this taste for eternal sweetness, which is going to make him sing joyously for God. This is exactly what Isaiah says, *I will sing to my Beloved,* and the Psalmist, *In you is my song for ever.* So it is not surprising that those who have lived in God’s love, and are accustomed to this inner, sweet, and burning fire, are not afraid to face death, but rather pass from this present light, even with joy. And after death they will ascend with gladness to the heavenly realms.

It is the mental wound caused by the flame of divine love that is referred to in *I am wounded with love.* Similarly when one pines for love, and is carried away by it, one can say, *I languish for love.* For it is thus that a man regards his Beloved. He forgets himself and everything else for Christ’s sake; and so he says, *Set me as a seal upon your heart.*

For what is love but the transforming of the desire into the loved thing itself? Or if you prefer, love is a great longing for what is beautiful, and good, and lovely, with its

2. Canticles 5:8.

3. Isaiah 5:1.


thought ever reaching out to the object of its love. And when he has got it a man rejoices, for joy is caused only by love. Every lover is assimilated to his beloved; love makes the loving one like what he loves. But God (and, for that matter, his creature too) is not above or averse to being loved: rather, everyone admits to liking being loved, and finding pleasure in others’ affection. People are not made sad by the fact of loving, unless the loved one is ungrateful or they despair of obtaining the object of their love. Such disappointments are never found in loving God, though they are met with often enough when it is a matter of loving the world—women!

I would not venture to say that all love is good. There is a love which delights more in the creature than in the Creator, and prefers the pleasures of the visible to the splendours of the spiritual. This is evil and abhorrent, because it rejects a love which is eternal for something which is transient and impermanent. Yet perhaps even this is not wholly culpable, since its purpose is to love and be loved rather than to corrupt and be corrupted. For the more beautiful a creature is, so much the more lovable it is. There are some who take more pains over the salvation of those who are outwardly more beautiful than of those who are despised, because for the beautiful there are more occasions of evil. Nature itself teaches us that it is more pleasant to love what is beautiful, though a disciplined charity says we should prefer the good. All physical beauty is straw, and disappears like a puff of wind. But goodness persists, and God often chooses the things that are weak and despised, paying no heed to the powerful or lovely. This is what the psalm says, He has delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy’s hand. Elsewhere we read, You trusted in your own beauty and played the harlot.

It is the nature of love to melt the heart (as, for example, My soul melted when my Beloved spoke). For sweet love and a devout heart so dissolve in the divine sweetness that

6. 1 Corinthians 1:27–8.
8. Ezekiel 16:15.

the will of man is united with the will of God in a remarkable friendship. In this union there is poured into the loving soul such sweetness of warmth, delight, and song that he who experiences it is quite unable to describe it.

The nature of love is that it is diffusive, unifying, and transforming. It is diffusive when it flows out and sheds the rays of its goodness not merely on friends and neighbours, but on enemies and strangers as well. It unites because it makes lovers one in deed and will, and draws into one Christ and every holy soul. He who holds on to God is one in spirit with him, not by nature, but by grace and identity of will. Love has also the power of transforming, for it transforms the lover into his Beloved, and makes him dwell in him. Thus it happens that when the fire of the Holy Spirit really gets hold of the heart it sets it wholly on fire and, so to speak, turns it into flame, leading it into that state in which it is most like God. Otherwise it would not have been said, I have said, ‘You are gods; all of you are children of the Most High.’

For there are some whose love for each other is so great that it almost seems there is but one soul in the two of them. Yet he who is poor in this world’s goods but is rich in spiritual things is far removed from love of this sort. For it would be quite extraordinary if the man who is receiving all the time, and who is rarely or never in a position to give, ever had a friend on whom he could entirely rely. Yet he who is thus thought by others to be unworthy of devoted love has a faithful friend in Christ. He can confidently ask him whatever he wills. Where human aid is wanting, divine assistance is undoubtedly at hand.

All the same it would be more useful to a wealthy man if he chose for his special friend some poor saint, with whom he was willing to share all his possessions, and give them freely to him—even more indeed than the poor man might want—and should love him affectionately as his best and dearest friend. For Christ said Make to yourself friends—and he meant the saintly poor who are the friends of God.

The Fire of Love

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 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

The Fire of Love

narrow way. 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, 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. 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


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
The Fire of Love

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 hence he knows he will so desire, crying out anxiously with the Psalmist, When shall I come and appear before the face of God?

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

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 and though I delight in the law of God according to the inner man 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

3. Romans 7:23.
The Fire of Love

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; men ought always to pray and not faint. 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. 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.

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? And the Psalmist adds, Your speech is a burning fire. 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. He is on fire indeed, because he has loved your word, Lord, which means he has meditated on it, and lives according to it.


Chapter 21

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. 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. 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 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

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 quieter 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*.' 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 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 backrest gold. 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.* 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

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


The Fire of Love

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
The Fire of Love

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


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 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-
The Fire of Love

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

Chapter 24

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 cleanliness of mind than cleanliness 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
The Fire of Love

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

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 aspersion 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


122

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_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 we are to live for ever thus

2. Canticles 1:1 (Vulgate).

123