

LOVE AMONG THE SAINTS ¹

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NATURE abhors a vacuum: and terrible things can happen to a man with an empty heart. That is one reason why it can be more difficult for a priest or a religious to be a good christian, living a really vital christian life, than for happily-married lay people. The latter can without too much difficulty integrate their love of each other into their shared love of God, sanctifying the one and deepening the other. What of the priest and the religious?

One sometimes meets among lay people a dangerously romanticised idea of this vocation. For them, these are men and women set apart, dedicated, living in the sanctuary, their whole lives are spent close to God, their minds and hearts filled with God, and with a charity which causes them to think of all other human beings as 'souls' to be served and saved. And to move the more sentimental, there is that appalling painting of the young monk with cowed head gazing wistfully through the narrow gothic windows of his tiny cell at the world he has lost for ever. . .

What are the facts? A youth leaves school or university and enters a noviciate. Like every other youth he has his family, his relatives, his friends, his various interests; he is the normal untidy mixture of good and bad qualities. And as he crosses the threshold of the monastery no sudden transformation will take place within him: he remains what he was before: all that he changes is his clothes. Now he enters upon a long course of training and studies: intellectually arduous and, unless there is extraordinarily wise guidance, psychologically dangerous in the extreme. Dangerous to the whole of the emotional side of his nature: inevitably he is more or less cut off from his previous normal human contacts with family and friends, with the familiar matter-of-fact daily life of the world, with the normal avoca-

¹ Pages from the Introduction to the Letters of Bl. Jordan of Saxony, O.P., to Bl. Diana d'Andalo, O.P. The book is to be published later in the year by Blackfriars Publications. To the author and publisher the Editor wishes to express his gratitude.

tional necessities, sport, films, novels, parties, dances. Then, his studies over, he returns to life in the world²: he will probably be given a job which he will find *humanly* speaking interesting, perhaps absorbing, though like most human jobs it is hard work; and all the time he will once again be meeting people. The importance of these two last points is this: that it is unlikely that his human interests and attitudes of mind will have been wholly replaced by the divine; and that one does not need to have lived behind a wall as long as Miss Monica Baldwin to find oneself more or less maladjusted emotionally to a renewal of human contacts and personal relationships. It is here that two opposite dangers can confront the young priest; and it is not surprising if he becomes involved in the one or the other—indeed, if we are to be realist we must admit that practically every priest and religious will fail to some extent in one direction or the other, for the only people who do not fail at all in this are the saints.

A tremendous—indeed, an appalling—responsibility for what will in fact follow rests of course on those directing the previous years' training. Tremendous because there is no exaggerating the good that can be achieved by a really wise guidance; appalling because, alas, there is no exaggerating the harm. Just as a foolish direction can ruin a young man's health, both physically and psychologically, in the sacred name (in this case the *sacré nom*) of asceticism or religious fervour; just as a false theory of obedience can give him a wholly wrong outlook on life by training him to identify the ideal with the unnatural; just as he may have his youthful gaiety extinguished in him for the sake of a stuffy decorum, or his individuality quenched by the imposition of a common pattern, a sort of universal pseudo-personality; so too his emotional nature, his heart, may be wholly repressed and smothered, the lid firmly screwed down, while all his energies are directed to the avoidance of any wrong-doing, so that he ends in a sort of irreproachable vacuum, an immaculate misconception. (Sometimes this last is justified on the grounds of playing for safety: but safety for what? and at

² We are not concerned here with the purely contemplative Orders.

what price? It is better—to put it at its lowest—to run the risk of an occasional scandal than to have a monastery—a choir, a refectory, a recreation room—full of dead men. Our Lord did not say ‘I am come that ye may have safety, and have it more abundantly’. Some of us would indeed give anything to feel safe, about our life in this world as in the next, but one cannot have it both ways: safety or life, you must choose.)

This sort of training may, if it is sufficiently powerful, determine a personality in this way once and for all. You will meet priests and religious who are obviously good, and indeed holy, but who are in a curious way remote, aloof, uninterested. They will gladly expend their last energies on their official duties, they will do anything to help ‘souls’, and they will surely have a very bright crown in heaven; and if you wanted an answer to some question about prayer, about the love of God, you would go to them unhesitatingly—but if you were struggling desperately with some purely human, personal problem you would never dream of approaching them. It means, surely, that though they are holy they are not saints; and they are not saints because there is something *human* lacking to them, their hearts are not fully alive, they have not yet fully realised in themselves the ideal given us under the symbol of the sacred Heart of Christ, his *human* love of men. You cannot think of our Lord not taking a vivid personal interest in his publicans and sinners, his friends and the children who flocked to him; you cannot think of St Vincent de Paul not taking a personal interest in his orphans and waifs, or St Catherine of Siena in her wayward protégés, or St Francis in all his protégés from Brother Leo to the sparrows. And of Bl. Jordan of Saxony it is enough to remember that he was always known as *dulcis*, sweet: he was no aloof, impersonal administrator.

A type of training, then, which kills the heart kills the possibility, humanly speaking, of perfect holiness. But it may only smother the heart temporarily; and then it may well be the opposite danger which will loom largest as the priest takes his place again in the world. (Indeed, even if his training has been perfectly sound and wise, he can hardly be expected to be already a saint when he is ordained, and in

this case also therefore he will have to meet the same danger.) It is the danger of gradually allowing human interests to crowd out his love of God. He may become too wholly absorbed in the humanly interesting aspects—perhaps even the financial aspects—of his work; he may be led by reaction from his previous training, or quite simply by loneliness, into plunging too wildly into personal relationships; he may simply lose his earlier fervour and look about him for distractions of one sort or another.

Officially, the priesthood is a state set apart and dedicated, yes; but priests are *people*: are human beings with the normal human tale of frailties and follies. And if they keep their hearts alive and young in them they may fall into fresh follies; and if they kill their hearts they will never reach the full glory of their vocation and may well fall into worse disasters, into a living death. That is why the example of saints such as Jordan of Saxony can be so great a help.

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The one essential thing: the love of God; there is never any wavering in these letters, never any slightest shadow of uncertainty, as to who must loom largest in Diana's mind. It is not Jordan himself, it is 'that better friend' who 'speaks to you more sweetly and to better purpose than Jordan'. The love of God comes first for both of them, though it brings them the sorrow of separation and of constant anxiety for each other. 'O Diana, how wretched this present condition of life which we have to bear, when we cannot love each other without pain or anxiety! For you grieve and are troubled because you cannot continually see me, and I too suffer because I can so rarely be with you. . . .' But at the same time it is precisely their shared love of God which binds them so closely together: 'He is our bond, in whom my spirit is bound to your spirit, in whom you are always without interruption present to me wherever I may wander . . . ?'

His wanderings were indeed immense; his life as Master General of the Order was an incessant journey, and on foot, from end to end of Europe and beyond. But, as Père Mortier notes, 'whether he is at Paris or at Padua, or trudging the roads of the world, the image of his beloved daughter

follows him, haunts him, stirs him. If his efforts meet with success, if the students flock into the Order, if his preaching wins to it famous doctors, he writes to tell Diana. His joys and triumphs, his sorrows and disappointments, he tells her all, for he knows how keenly it will interest her. This great man, so full of goodness of heart, descends to the minutest details of his life. He knew well enough how a woman's heart, however unworldly she may be, is made anxious by any suffering, physical or mental: it longs to know all, that it may share all. If Jordan delays his letters Diana is sad or indeed impatient, and often he has to restore her serenity and peace of soul by tender reproaches. His journeys were long and perilous; his health was delicate; Diana was always frightened for him. At the least onslaught of fever her whole soul is troubled. She knew the Master's austerity with himself; she knew that fatigue never stopped him; all the time she was frightened for his life. And so the letters, those wonderful letters that one cannot read without deep emotion, follow one another at every halting-place, to reassure her and console her.'³

There are some very human touches in these letters, as when he confesses his conviction that her love for him is greater than his for her; there are wonderful linguistic touches, as in the phrase, when she had hurt her foot, *pedituo patior*—the very phrase which was to cause such admiration centuries later in one of the letters of Mme de Sévigné—'Your poor foot hurts me'. But whether he is consoling her in her troubles or telling her of his, whether he is counselling or warning or pleading or simply telling her the little details of his travels, always there is the same underlying depth of feeling for her, which the constantly recurring *Carissima, carissima mea*, only serve to emphasise. 'When I have to part from you I do it with heavy heart, but you add sorrow to my sorrow because I see you then so inconsolably weighed down.' 'I cannot wonder that you are sad because of my absence since, do what I may, I cannot but be sad because of yours. But I am consoled because this separation will not last for ever; it will be over soon.' 'The more I

³ *Histoire des Maîtres Généraux de l'Ordre des Frères Prêcheurs* (tome 1, p. 167).

realise you love me truly and with all your heart, the more incapable I am of forgetting you, and the more often you are in my thoughts. For the love you have for me makes my love of you the stronger.' The letters reveal very clearly all the help that Jordan was giving Diana; but equally they reveal the help that she was giving him. That is why they are in effect such a wonderful treatise on christian friendship. The principles emerge very clearly.

First, the human love is to be wholly integrated into the love of God and therefore made wholly obedient to the will of God. Secondly, if that is done it becomes a thing of joy, though also of sorrow, and a thing very precious in itself. But thirdly, it is more than that: it is also an immense *help*: a strengthening in times of difficulty, a consolation in times of distress, yes, all that but also something more still: a positive help to the deepening, and purifying, of the personality in general and of the love of God in particular. The love of Jordan led Diana on and on towards the 'strong city' where love is perfect in God; but also the love of Diana led Jordan on, called forth from his own heart a flowering, an extra fullness of life, which helped to make his greatness, helped to make him what he was and what the Order needed him to be. 'Be constant, gay and prudent' he tells Diana and her companions in one of the letters: it is not every spiritual teacher or director who would remember—or even think—of telling his followers to be gay.⁴ Jordan who, more than any one man after St Dominic himself, created the *spirit* of the Order, gave to it a gaiety and an informality in its daily life which are amongst its greatest treasures, for they enshrine and express a whole theology of religious life. . . .

And yet even so this is not quite all: it leaves something essential to be said. A love such as this does not merely give a man more to give to men: it gives him more to give to God.

This is not always clearly seen. Sometimes an intense and deep human love comes into a life which has hitherto been wholly wrapt up in the love of God. Then the question may be asked: Does this mean either that in opening my heart

⁴ He once rebuked a thin-lipped master of novices for scolding some novices who had laughed in choir: 'Have they not reason to be gay?'

to this love I am being unfaithful to God, or that in sending it he is in some sense rejecting me? To which the answer is in both cases, no: the difficulty arises from the fact that you put the love of God and the love of man on a level, as though they were the same *kind* of love; but they are not. If a woman, happily married to a man she loves, finds her life invaded by a new love, perhaps of an intensity she had hitherto not dreamt of, she may well feel this sense of tension, of unfaithfulness, because the two loves, however different in intensity, are still essentially the same kind of love: the emotions and the senses are essentially engaged. But the love of God is essentially in the will, though the other levels of the personality may incidentally be involved at times. That is why the test of whether you love God is not whether you feel very loving but whether you do his will. Self-deception is all too easy: you could feel that you were given wholly to God, wrapt up in his love and his services, because you spent long hours in church and at prayer, or in absorbing the works of the mystics; and all the time the whole thing might be a form of self-indulgence: the test would be, Do I always do what *I* want to do, brushing aside all claims which conflict with my desires, or do I really love other people, not emotionally but in deed and in truth? If then your emotions are elsewhere engaged, why should you take this to be, inevitably, a betrayal or a diminishing of your love of God? If your senses rejoice in colour or harmony or the sun's warmth on your body, do you love God the less? If great painting makes you catch your breath, if great music brings you near to ecstasy, if great poetry makes you cry, do you love God any the less? But, you retort, all these are quite different: the love of a human being is much more *dangerous*. And so we return to the cult of safety.

More dangerous, yes: it is easy for some temperaments to become so absorbed in music or literature as to neglect their duties, it is much easier for most temperaments to become so absorbed in a human being as to neglect their duties. But danger is not the same as disaster: danger is a matter of degree, and a purely individual matter, varying with each human being. If you love both a human being

and music, are you to say I must reject the human love because that is more dangerous but I may keep the love of music because, though dangerous, it is less so? Or are you to outlaw everything? If so, what of the parable of the man who hid his talent in a napkin? What of the homely proverb, which applies to God as well as to men: Love me, love my dog? What of the idea of vocation, which means using for God the gifts that God has given you? Read Bl. Jordan: you must be 'constant, gay, prudent': and of course where danger is greater, there prudence must be greater too. (But danger, let us be clear, essentially not of falling into this or that particular sin so much as of being absorbed, being led to turn away from God or to reject him, to cease to have the eyes ever towards the Lord.) At the bar of heaven shall we be expected only to say how we have done with our fasting and almsdeeds, our pursuit of virtue? Shall we not also be expected to say, You gave me a love of music, and I have tried a little to deepen and sanctify it: to love the magic you put into the souls of your children—John Sebastian and Wolfgang and Ludwig and Johannes—and to praise you through it; you gave me a love of words, and of the magic you make through men's lips, and I have tried not to belittle your gift; you gave me a love of colour, and I have tried to use your gift creatively in a sad, drab world? And shall we not, still more, be expected to say: You gave me, though unworthy, the love of these your children, to keep me young and gay in heart and to help me in the dark places, and I tried to be prudent and to let no harm come thereby to them or to me, but also I tried not to disparage the gift nor refuse its responsibilities? Be constant, gay, prudent: if like Jordan you have care for the widows and orphans and keep yourself unspotted from this world—if, in other words, you grow more and more free from egoism and greed and rapacity, then you have less and less cause for fear: you can find a better motive in all that you do than the cult of safety.

Be prudent. There is one very important question which helps to a prudential judgment: Does this love, whatever it is, make me less faithful and devoted to my *vocation*? does it take my mind and heart away from my work, my family, my prayers, the good I can do and ought to do in

the world? For it may be so, and if it is, then indeed it shows that there is something very wrong. But it need not be so: and if you find on the contrary that through it your work is enriched, your family life made more gay and tender, your prayers deepened, your work for men more wise and sympathetic and gentle, then indeed you have nothing to do but to thank God: there is nothing more to be said.

Or rather, there is one thing more; and it appears very clearly in these letters. When God brings a human love to a soul who before loved only himself it is not a rejection of her love but the exact contrary: he is giving her more to love him with. He may well be asking something harder, more complicated, of her: he certainly is not asking something smaller. Every love you have—of nature, of art, of men, of wisdom—is an added way of loving and worshipping him, an additional gift to offer him. But that means, in the last resort, a gift to give back to him. For every love is a new joy, but implies also a new sorrow, until that ‘strong city’ is reached on which the hearts of Jordan and Diana were set. ‘Naked I came, said he, when I left my mother’s womb, and whence I came, naked I must go.’ What prudence demands of us, and seldom has the lesson been more beautifully taught than in these letters, is that we should make our own those other words of Job, to be constantly with us: The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord.



ON HUMAN FRIENDSHIP

ST AELRED OF RIEVAULX¹

PROLOGUE: While I was yet a boy at school and took great delight in the company of my fellows, in the midst of the habits and vices with which that period of life is usually beset, my energy was wholly given to affection and devoted to love; so that nothing seemed to me more pleasing, nothing more joyful, nothing more useful, than to be loved and to love. So, fluctuating between diverse loves and friendships, my mind was dragged hither and

¹ A new translation by Bernard Delfendahl.