

Homily for the Funeral Mass of Fr. Aelred Squire

[The Gospel: "I call you no longer servants but friends..."]

Introductory note

Aelred Squire died at New Camaldoli Hermitage, Big Sur, California, on May 1, 1997. Born in London on December 6, 1920, baptized in the Church of England, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church at Oxford in 1943 by Fr Conrad Pepler. He was accepted as a postulant at Prinknash Abbey, expecting to join as soon as the war was over. In the event, he joined the Dominicans in 1946, was ordained in 1952, and, apart from a brief spell at the preparatory school then run by the Order in Monmouthshire, taught at Blackfriars, Oxford, until 1965. He moved to Belgium to live as a hermit, returned to London to teach at the study centre conducted by the Dominican Sisters in Portobello Road, migrated to Norway in 1972 to serve as a mission priest at Lillehammer, finally yielded to monasticism in 1980, first with the Benedictines at Christ in the Desert, New Mexico, transferring his vows from the Dominicans in 1982, and at last, from December 1983, with the Camaldolese Benedictines at Big Sur. He published little in this journal (but see 'The Cosmic Dance: Reflections on the De Musica of St Augustine', November 1954); but with Aelred of Rievaulx: A Study (1969); Asking the Fathers (1973), a fine introduction to patristic spirituality and theology; Summer in the Seed (1980), a somewhat idiosyncratic reflection on the cultural situation of Catholicism after Vatican II; and Fathers Talking (1986), a popular anthology of patristic texts, he has left a considerable theological legacy. The homily at his funeral was preached by Dom Robert Hale, Prior of New Camaldoli.

When I came here from Berkeley, in 1987, Aelred was still delighted to be working in the community garden, with Cassian. He could be seen there, digging away, in old work clothes, resembling less a gentleman gardener and more a happy peasant! Once, just to be mischievous, I went up to him and asked, "Oh Father, should you as an Oxford scholar be out here in all this dirt and grime?!"

He responded, "Yes, I should think so! The one thing does not contradict the other. Indeed, the one thing wants the other!"

Well, I was edified, and I think even now that his spontaneous response reveals something of the *spaciousness* of his spirituality—and also of our Camaldolese charism, and also catholicity at its best. Inclusivity! Aelred was never constricted, never confined in his spirituality. And so he couldn't be confined to either/or. He was more often both/and!

For instance, using the famous Jungian and Briggs Meyers categories, would we want to say that Aelred was "extrovert" or rather "introvert"? On the one hand, he certainly loved people, was energized by his encounters and deep dialogues with people. But on the other hand, he loved his solitude, his time alone for study and prayer.

Was he more "into" liturgical prayer, or more "into" private prayer? Well, certainly he loved the liturgy, he loved to celebrate Eucharist, also to preach, loved the office, loved even arranging the flowers for the altar and Marian shrine, loved washing and ironing the altar linen! On the other hand, he loved silent prayer, the Jesus prayer. In preparing his body in the coffin, we have placed in his hands his favorite Jesus prayer rosary.

Was he more a "conservative" or more a "progressive"? A strong case can be made for either. He certainly loved the *apertura* that Vatican II brought, was committed all the way to ecumenical dialogue. He has so many Anglican and Reform and Orthodox friends! Also he was committed to the inter-religious dialogue and fascinated by all the great world religions. We have been going through the books in his personal library, finding studies on Taoism, Confucius, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, etc. And Japanese Zen pictures on his wall. Then he loved the modern sciences, psychology especially, and the scholarly method. If in fact scholarship can dig up very little or nothing about a given saint, he preferred that we say that, not sugar it over with pious traditions. If there were problems with a pope we should say it! These are just some of the points that could be made in arguing that he was definitely a "progressive."

On the other hand, he loved the Latin Mass, and the Latin collects, was appalled by the later translations (and often based his homilies on scathing comparisons of the two versions of prayer!). He loved the Fathers and felt it had never been quite so good since. When I was teaching the History of Christian Spirituality at the G.T.U. in Berkeley, I invited him to come up and do the St. Augustine session. Well, of course inevitably some young turk Berkeleian students attacked, lamenting that Augustine had ruined it all for us in the West,

having taught us to hate the body, hate our sexuality, hate creation. Aelred humphed in reply, "Well, of course, if you haven't read deeply or widely in Augustine you shouldn't speak at all, should you!"

Did Aelred have a "high anthropology" or rather a "low anthropology"? Certainly he insisted, also in his books, that we can ultimately only understand the human person in the light of the Transfiguration, we can aspire to nothing less than Divinization. But on the other hand, he had "heard it all," about the human condition, through his hours and hours of confessing, through his hours and hours of spiritual direction, and indeed simply by looking into his own heart. He knew of human woundedness, of the darkness within, and this called forth his special compassion and patience.

Did he have a high theology of the monastic community, or rather a low one? He knew with his namesake, St. Aelred, that the community is the cross of Christ, but "that cross which brings forth love, of which nothing is sweeter."

How did he hold all these antinomies together? I think he wasn't able to. None of us can. But he more and more realized that Christ can. He had discovered Christ as friend early on, through his reading of St. Aelred's *Spiritual Friendship*. (He had taken the name of Aelred early on, way back in 1947, and as a Dominican, when St. Aelred was virtually unknown. But Aelred knew him, and they became fast friends!)

It was Christ the Gardener Aelred encountered out in the community garden. Thus his quote on the wall about happiness here below of being in the garden with the Gardener, and happiness above being finding that garden of the Kingdom. It was Christ as Truth that Aelred encountered in his scholarship and studies, leading him to the firm conviction that truth is one, and we Catholics should be at least as dedicated to the truth as anyone else. It was Christ the pray-er, *L'Orante*, that Aelred encountered in Church and in his private prayer. And Christ the solitary he met in the many hours he spent alone. And Christ the friend who embraced his own many and deep friendships.

It is moving to re-read Aelred on St. Aelred. In his book our own Aelred is exploring the depths of the saint's spirituality, but also revealing his own, as it had already taken shape and as it would continue to unfold throughout his years. So the importance for both of them of friendship, and Aelred could be writing as much about his own convictions as about the twelfth century Cistercian when he writes:

"A friend is said to be like the keeper of one's love or, as some would say, one's soul-keeper. His functions are, as far as possible, to

cure, or at least to bear with, one's faults [that is marvellously like Aelred! The friend should cure the other friend's faults...or at least put up with them!!] and regards all that concerns one's good as his own. Hence friendship... is not among the virtues that pass away, but among those that are everlasting" [p. 102, *Aelred of Rievaulx*].

So friendship is a *definitive* reality, the royal road that got Aelred into the Kingdom. But as a human reality, it is subject to all kinds of problems, defects, misunderstandings, etc. St. Aelred lists at length the dangers of friendship, and Aelred himself was well aware of them. Our only safeguard is Christ, that our friendships remain open in him, find their beginning and ending in him. Thus Aelred writes:

"That friendship, which ought to exist between [us], begins in Christ, is preserved for Christ, and has its purpose and value referred to him" [ibid].

In his chapter on St. Aelred's last years there is much that is autobiographical. The Saint had struggled with inner tensions, dark dimensions within, his own forgetfulness, but had somehow come to weave it all into praise of God. So also our own Aelred was writing prophetically of his own last years when he noted,

"The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity have thus become the centre of Aelred's life, and his reading of scripture leads him to see the hand of God in all that happens, in all the factors that shape his life, both without and within. [Here we have a glimpse of Aelred's own spaciousness of spirit, inclusivity]. It is this which vindicates his courage in using everything and rejecting nothing about his life, his temperament, his weakness even, all his half-forgotten past, though he may not always have seen at the time how it could be of use in the service of God" [ibid., p. 145].

The chapter ends with the Saint's testament and confession to his brethren. And it is our own Aelred's testament and confession to us! Aelred writes:

"We need not doubt that he spoke the truth when he said 'God, who knows all things, knows that I love you all as I love myself and truly,... I long for you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ'".

And Aelred concludes: "No one could ask for a more Christian ending."

Indeed!