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FRIENDSHIP: THE MYSTICISM OF AELRED OF RIEVAULX

1. Historical Roots

"To live is to love and to love is to suffer, the only other alternative is not to live," was the rather stoic response of Dr. Viktor Frankl when asked how he could have endured the death-camp deaths of his friends and relatives and still continue to love. Why one should risk the potential pain involvement brings is a contemporary question, asked today not only in the face of physical death but in the many deaths of relationships so prevalent around us. And it is a perennial question as well. In 44 B.C., the death of his friend is the setting for Cicero's treatise *On Friendship* (*De Amicitia*). When told that friendship brings too many cares and is to be avoided the response is: "When the soul is deprived of emotion, what difference is there between man and a stock or a stone...?"¹ Across the ages, choosing to love is presented as the foundational humanizing choice.

In his early works, Augustine is found relying on Cicero's concept of friendship, but it is abandoned in the *Confessions*.

Human love perishes, Augustine finds, but when one loves God he never loses a friend: "Blessed be he who loveth Thee, and his friend in Thee and his enemy for Thy Sake. For he alone loses none dear to him to whom all are dear in Him who cannot be lost."² In this solution the soul is not deprived of love, for it loves God, but love is a step removed from the realm of human relationships. Fraternal charity, a general love of humankind, is the work of the will and the intellect; it is the kind of love which can even be directed towards an enemy. But affectionate love,

1. Cicero, *De Amicitia*, Chap. XIII.

2. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book IV, Chap. IX.

which one does not feel for an enemy, is directed towards God in a "pure love," thereby avoiding the pain and pitfalls of specific human to human love. Individual spiritual friendships, which Augustine calls the consolation of his life, are achieved by God alone, beyond the scope of human control joined in a bond of charity which is pure and free from all passion or personal interest.

While for Augustine friendship is an intensification of fraternal charity, for John Cassian fraternal charity (*ajiry*) and friendship (*Sixotois*) are two different grades of love, both divine, one which is shown to all men even to enemies, and a higher love of affection shown to but a few with differing degrees of feeling. Love of one person above others is a fuller and more abundant love but not an exclusive one which would put lesser loves in conflict with it.³

Particular and exclusive associations based upon a symbiotic emotional fascination, which generated divisive effects, especially within the monastic community, caused all friendships to be regarded with suspicion. While the *Rule of St. Benedict* does not specifically deal with friendships, it does give strong warnings against the formation of "factions" which would undermine communal unity.⁴ And many saw any personal involvements as possible threats to one's ability to love God. In both Patristic and Medieval works it is the exception rather than the norm to find friendship as an interpersonal relationship given a positive evaluation.⁵

But in the milieu of the twelfth century Cistercian ideal of community, we find Aelred of Rievaulx not only giving positive view of friendship but developing a theology of friendship. (And indeed he was regarded as dangerous for a long time in some monasteries.)⁶ Aelred produced an original religious work in his treatise *On Spiritual Friendship (De spirituali amicitia)*.

3. John Cassian, *First Conference of Abbot Joseph*, Chap. XIV.

4. *The Rule of St. Benedict* Chap. 69.

5. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. by Mary Eugenia Laket SSND with introduction by Douglas Roby, (Washington, D.C.: Cistercian Publications, Consortium Press, 1971), p. 15.

6. Amedee Hallier OCSO, *The Monastic Theology of Aelred of Rievaulx*, Cistercian Studies Series: Number Two, trans. by Columban Heaney OCSO with Introduction by Thomas Merton (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian publications, 1969), p. xii.

An estimated one-third of Cicero's *De Amicitia* is contained in Aelred's work. Cicero's concepts of benevolence and disinterested love were extremely popular in this period,⁷ but his basic definition of friendship, "Friendship is nothing else than an accord in all things, human and divine, conjoined with mutual goodwill and affection..."⁸ had, according to Gilson, "too many stoic overtones and metaphysics to please our (12th century) authors."⁹ An initial reading of Aelred could lead to the conclusion that he simply baptized and rewrote Cicero, but allegory is scarcely used in *On Spiritual Friendship* and Aelred's interpretation is much more than an equating of Virtue or the immortal gods with Christ. Aware of the differing points of view presented in Augustine and other Church Fathers, he did not hesitate to offer his own unique insights. Although he did add a Christian element to Cicero's teaching, he moves beyond the value which Augustine was willing to give to human relationships in his belief that a love which is neither egotistical nor narcissistic, can be "pure love" even if it is given to a neighbour directly, and not indirectly through God.

In Aelred, however, the dynamics of friendship are understood in a "mathematically" different equation giving an added awareness to the nature of friendship which makes it qualitatively different from his sources.¹⁰ Friendship is not two persons melting in one Absolute, nor is it two incomplete half persons uniting to form one whole person, nor is it two persons who together are still two distinct and unique although enhanced and enriched, but rather it is two complete and distinct persons who together are unique and distinct and enhanced and enriched and whose friendship has "a life of its own," forming a meta-self or meta-person, a unique third-self. Friendship is the mysterious mathematics of two distinct personalities uniting to yield a trinitarian whole.

7. Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, trans. by A. H. C. Downes, (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1940), p. 1.

8. Cicero, *De Amicitia*, Chap. VI.

9. Gilson, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

10. Cicero and St. Jerome called a friend "a part of my soul." St. Ambrose used the "better portion" and "larger part" to refer to a friend. A friend is frequently called "half of my soul." An analysis of these views of friendship can be found in Adele M. Fisk, *Friends and Friendship in the Monastic Tradition*, *Cidoc Cuaderno* 51, (Cuernavaca, México, 1970).

Such an interpretation presents an understanding of friendship which is different in nature and not merely in degree. The meta-self opens up a whole new realm of love which has a positive spiritual value. In this essay, "what" Aelred says of friendship in his metaphysical world-view, in the psychological characteristics he discerns, and in the moral aspects of the conduct of friendship will be presented. The main concern, however, will be with "what" he is writing "about": true friendship as a mystical path leading to the discovery of Christ as friendship's third party.

2. A Metaphysic of Love

Love directed to God or to a neighbour is the same love. In both cases it may become perverted or it may grow to different levels of intensity. Thus, friendship as understood by Aelred is a distinct application of love, a special circumstance which falls under the umbrella of love. In *Mirror of Charity* (*Speculum Caritatis*) Aelred had developed a general theory of love; this, in turn, plays a fundamental role in his metaphysical perspective.

For Aelred, men and women were made in God's image; their souls, images of the Trinity, were composed of the three faculties of memory, intellect and will, with the last, the will, being particularly significant as the faculty of loving. In the beginning, love existed in full measure but, through an original misuse of the will, charity was perverted by concupiscence and disintegrated, thereby distorting the divine image in mankind, causing humans to no longer be what they were intended to be, and fragmenting the natural love union between individuals. The soul, which had previously clung to God, "falls" into forgetfulness, error and cupidity. Only a residue of God's image remains yet it contains an inborn dormant capacity to be reformed. Jesus Christ revives this capacity, restoring the soul's power for memory, error-free knowledge and love. Activation of this power requires the co-operation of the human will in obedience to the new commandment of love. Under the influence of grace, love directs the soul back to its source, back to a union with God and fellow human beings.

Love is central to Aelred's world-view and to his anthropology. As a property of the image given by God, its source, love is the *élan* of the soul, entelechy of human beings in the Bergsonian sense of an inward determination which regulates the function and purpose of the whole organism and determines the overall design

or pattern of its development. This determination is not mechanical, for the individual has control over it, nor is it final, for its outcome is not forced by an external power towards a specific end, but an inward tendency in that man cannot help but love.

Aelred finds the operational pattern which love takes in three human acts: (1) *choice*, the consciously reasoned selection of a love object; (2) *progress*, the movement, towards the chosen object in desire and action; and (3) *enjoyment*, the union of joy at the end of this process. While charity always contains love, love can be perverted, which can happen at any of the three stages, in which case it ceases to be charity/love and becomes love/covetousness. Charity and covetousness proceed according to the same pattern. The enjoyment of covetousness is, however, fleeting, while that of charity, in elevating the soul, endures. It is primarily the will which keeps love on the noble path or chooses an evil route.

3. The Mystical Path

An object is chosen and pursued for the purpose of enjoying it. This enjoyment Aelred calls the Sabbath, the day of rest and joy. Using the allegory of the three Sabbaths from the Old Testament, he elaborates on the classic distinction of love of self, of others, and of God. The first Sabbath is the seventh day where one loves oneself in the "secret place of his soul" where there is peace and order made possible by a peaceful conscience, the fruit of six days of labour. Next, the second Sabbath, the seventh year, is the sweetness of brotherly love gathered from the six years, or types of relationship: family, friends, Christians, Jews and Gentiles, heretics and schismatics and enemies. And, finally, the Jubilee Sabbath when we return to our Maker and rest in Divine Love. The activity of loving is learnt through these stages of love. "First we are recollected in our own souls, then we are drawn to the love of our fellow-men, and finally we are lifted up to heaven."¹¹

These stages parallel the three levels which compose the Christian mystical way. Although they do not represent an actual progression required by all mystics or even experienced by all mystics, they do provide a capsule perspective in which isolated and fragmented accounts of mystical experience can be located.

11. St. Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, trans. by Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co., Ltd., 1962), p. 92.

Stage one is the "Prayer of Quiet," the vertical, introverted mysticism which is frequently described as a circular descent, often pictorially expressed as a wandering through a castle, moving from the noisy outer rooms to the silent depths "where the King dwells." By fixing the *will* on the goal which is the achievement of a "centred personality," and employing recollection, *memory*, techniques, the *intellect* or discursive thought which scatters unity is stilled in darkness. When the intellect is quiet, the imagination seems to present a new challenge. "There seems to be an inescapable consciousness of two levels of the mind working at the same time. Up above, the imagination is working wildly, running amuck, while below at a deeper point one is silently and lovingly concentrated on God."¹²

The period of anguish, doubt, and "death" of the "dark night of the senses" shocks and centres the personality, bringing the mystic into union with his "own nature", "true self" "soul", or God. Here the empirical ego ceases while the subject and object blend as one. Cold light, touches, wounds, freedom, peace and trinitarian symbols (especially, those of Incarnation) are among the conceptual language often used in describing this ineffable union.

In traditional theistic mysticism, stage one is considered to be a partial mysticism to be followed by a second stage. Basically, this second stage is a great effort to direct the centred-self outward towards union with God. Purgation of vice and a growth in virtue are the disciplining vehicles of this outward thrust. Once the searcher's wholeness has been projected outside, he waits, detached and open, in a totally passive state, often feeling the agony of abandonment, in the "dark night of the soul." For the union to be complete, God must seize the soul in a penetrating experience most often described in terms of a violent sexual union or piercing wound. The union experience is frequently referred to in terms of a spiritual marriage, and symbols which express brilliant light, joy, harmony, and unity with diversity, are frequently used.

4. Friendship's Role in the Mystical Way

For Aelred, stage one is the seven-day Sabbath, stage two is the seven-year Sabbath, and stage three is the Jubilee Sabbath.

12. William Johnston, *The Still Point* (New York: Harper and Row, Pub. Inc., (Perennial Library), 1970, p. 70.

These three stages of Sabbaths are three degrees in which the soul rests in an ever-increasing peace. In the first Sabbath, freed from sin, it recollects itself (*colligitur ad se*) in the purity of its conscience; in the second Sabbath, freed from cupidity, it opens up and goes out of itself (*extenditur extra se*) in a most sweet union of many minds; and finally, in the third Sabbath, freed from all tension, it is ravished out of itself (*rapitur supra se*) up to the very contemplation of God.¹³

These stages are not jettisoned as they are passed through but continue together so that love activity may pass back and forth among them being continually nourished by each point and continually drawing increased energy. All charity, being charity, participates in Charity so that resting in one love is to rest in them all, and if one is missing all are absent. The model for this interpenetration of love is the triune God, a transcendent unity of one nature and communion of Persons. Love necessitates distance and separation to maintain the required reciprocal love union and this creates a paradox between the act of love as total self-surrender and self-giving, and the maintenance of "a self to love with." Only in a trinitarian structure where self is surrendered, accepted, and returned from lover to beloved can this paradox be resolved.

Thus Aelred sees that God is Love in the oneness of union, and in the relationship of the Father and the Son abiding in each other in love God is Friendship.

Ivo: Shall I say of friendship what John, the friend of Jesus says of charity: "God is Friendship"?

Aelred: That would be unusual, to be sure, nor does it have the sanction of the Scriptures. But still what is true of charity, I surely do not hesitate to grant to friendship, since "he that abides in friendship, abides in God, and God in him."¹⁴

13. Charles Dumont OCSO, "Seeking God in Community According to St. Aelred," in *Contemplative Community*, ed. by M. Basil Pennington OCSO (Washington, D. C.: Cistercian Publications, Consortium Press, 1972), p. 131.

14. Aelred, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

And human friendship as a reflection of God provides a way through the second mystical stage. In the love and union of friendship, one is "outside" of oneself and open to the Divine embrace. "Friendship is a stage bordering upon that perfection which consists in the love and knowledge of God, so that man from being a friend of his fellowman becomes the friend of God.¹⁵"

Using the Song of Solomon so popular among his contemporaries, Aelred elaborates on the stages of friendship referring to verse 1:2: "O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!" He divides the levels into three kisses: the corporal kiss, the kiss of common friendship made by the impression of the lips as a mark of peace, love and unity; the spiritual kiss, the kiss of spiritual friendship made by a union of purified hearts in an act of intense intimacy in a discovery of the true personality or the friend and a self-revelation when the breath of Christ joins the two lovers in a mingling of spirits which directs the soul to a longing for the intellectual kiss, the kiss of God, the infusion of God's grace, given by Christ alone.

5. The Way of Friendship

Biblically, Aelred finds an archetype for friendship in the covenant between Israel and Yahweh. Friendship is a deep and mutual, freely-made commitment between persons. Such a commitment requires a period of preparation as well as a faithful adherence to the ethical conduct of friendship. He is aware that such friendships are difficult to obtain and rare but insists there is a virtue to be reaped in the very striving for friendship by itself; in *On Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred draws up specific rules to aid in the quest for the attainment and preservation of a covenant friendship.

"Virtue," says Cicero, "is the parent and preserver of friendship and without virtue friendship cannot exist at all.¹⁶" Aelred agrees with this understanding of the role of virtue but calls it imperfect for Cicero did not know the author of all virtue, Christ. This added knowledge, aids the Christian in forming friendships which begin among the good, progress among the better, and will be consummated among the perfect. Quoting St. Ambrose, Aelred records that "friendship is a

15. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

16. Cicero, *De Amicitia*, Chap. VI.

virtue, not a trade. It is produced not with money, but with love, not with the offer of rewards but by a mutual competition in doing kindness."¹⁷ The virtue of friendship is made up of four elements: love, which secretly or openly is foundationally the love of God; affection; security; and happiness. And like virtue, friendship is eternal.

Several relationships which exist among men appear to be friendship but do not measure up to the definition of true friendship and are to be avoided. Among them are relationships of a puerile nature based on affection without reason found, chiefly in children where feelings dominate, or those based upon a "likeness of evil," or ones founded upon advantage, whether the expected advantage is in money or honours or counsel or other benefits which should follow from friendship not precede it.

The formula for authentic friendship is given by Jesus Christ: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Love of self is a prerequisite for the love of a neighbour. It is a love which one gives oneself gratuitously, seeking only what is good without looking for advantage or reward. It is this gratuitous love which one extends to a friend, a mirror of self, a companion of one's soul. A friend is that chosen one "to whom you entrust yourself as to another self, from whom you hide nothing, from whom you fear nothing."¹⁸

Such intimacy behoves one to make a careful choice, seeking one whose habits and disposition are in conformity with those of the seeker. *Selection* is the first of a four stage progress of friendship. Anyone who is angry, fickle, suspicious or garrulous should in most cases¹⁹ be avoided as he lacks the tranquillity, security and seriousness which friendship requires.

Probation is the second stage in which the prospective friend is tested for four qualities: loyalty, purity of intention, discretion and patience. Loyalty, which is most often hidden in prosperity, is revealed by confiding some small innocuous secret and if it can be kept to continue confiding secrets of greater importance until convinced the friend can be trusted. After loyalty, a friend's intention should be tested to determine if the friendship is sought for friendship's sake. If flattery, insincerity and envy are revealed,

17. Aelred, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

18. Aelred, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

19. Aelred allows friendship with persons who are struggling to conquer these vices and points out that such people often end up stronger as a result of their personal battles.

or an indication that a reward of honour, glory, or material wealth is expected, the right intention is lacking. Discretion includes an awareness of the proper time and place for certain behaviour; if one is thoughtless or imprudent it is an indication of an inability to be a trusted friend. And, finally, a friend should be patient both in the handling of the faults of others and in the manner in which corrections and advice are given and accepted.

With the results of these testings, a person should be admitted to friendship if he has proved himself worthy. And once the *admission* is made, it is an *eternal commitment* broken only by a denial of familiarity necessitated by some destructive situation, but never a withdrawal of love. The denial of familiarity may be necessitated if one of five vices injures the relationship. Aelred lists these vices as upbraiding, reproach, pride, disclosing of secrets and a treacherous wound, concretely experienced in slander, embarrassment, a lack of humility and a failure to admit guilt, secret distraction and having one's confidences made public, and persecution, or the disgrace of injuries directed towards other persons which reflect upon and discredit the friendship. In more contemporary terms, a "relationship is destructive when one friend displays a sense of superiority, habitually criticizes, disparages, oppresses, punishes or demeans the other."²⁰

If all attempts to amend these vices fail, the relationship should be "unstitched little by little," except in the case of an insufferable offence, but in *all* cases the abuses are to be endured; the welfare and the honour of the friend should be maintained; his reputation should be safe-guard; his secrets must be carefully kept and the love given him should continue despite the pain. In this sense, the friendship while no longer intimate is preserved with its virtue undiminished.

Since a broken friendship is a very painful event, Aelred stresses the need for careful selection of a friend. After admission, the final stage in the progress of friendship is *harmony*, the enjoyment and cultivation of this precious friendship.

6. Cultivation of Friendship

Although Aelred did not specifically substitute the word friendship for the word love in the Pauline definition in I Cor.

20. James, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

13: 4-8, it is consistent with his manner and his thought to describe the ingredients in the cultivation of friendship in such terms:

Friendship is patient and kind; friendship is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Friendship does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Friendship bears all things, believes all things hopes all things, endures all things. Friendship never ends.

As an art, friendship is not cultivated without discipline. Only that which is honourable should be sought from a friend and only that which is honourable should be performed for a friend. The likeness which Aelred accepts in Cicero's definition is not a "yes, yes" to all things, an external likeness of superficial conformity, but an internal essential likeness, a likeness in virtue which "rejoices in the right."

A relaxed atmosphere should be fostered in which partners can freely exchange innermost thoughts. Such an atmosphere requires a degree of concentration in order to be available to the other, both physically and psychologically and to be sensitive to oneself and to one's friend, to listen intently and seriously.

Patience is an important aspect in the cultivation of friendship. It is needed to give the relationship time to grow and to allow it to develop a life of its own as well. Whenever guidance, counsel or admonishment is to be given or accepted, patience plays an important role. Patience must keep anger under control.

The final and perhaps most important condition for the success of a friendship is called by Aelred reverence. Reverence includes the maintenance of equality, in never preferring one's self to one's friend. Reverence demands honest self-revelation. Truthfulness is always owed to one's friend. Reverence requires one to extend to a friend "unconditional positive regard," confidentiality, loyalty, and empathy and to regard the friendship with "ultimate concern."

Friends who ultimately concerned will be an aid and an advantage to mutual spiritual growth. As such, friends are "to be solicitous for one another, to pray for one another, to blush for one another, to rejoice for one another to grieve for one another's

fall as one's own, to regard another's progress as one's own."²¹ In this way, the joyful union of friendship is cultivated and friends are given a foretaste of the eternal friendship which "will be outpoured upon all and by all outpoured upon God, and God shall be all in all."²²

7. A Reflection

Aelred's *On Spiritual Friendship* was written for a 12th century monastic audience but his thought remains valuable to the concerns of all men and women of our own day who long for love and community. From the late middle ages onward, a distrust of personal relationships forced the study of friendship to remain dormant. Only in the 20th century has this task been taken up again with any seriousness. Thus, there is a direct link between modern explorers and the pioneer work done by this insightful Cistercian Abbot.

His analysis of human emotions is so accurate that it meets the standards of the 20th century and is applicable to concerns which range from improved communication and self-growth to sharing satisfying relationships and the quest for meaningful religious experience. In giving a positive value to human striving, he safeguards against despair at the all too possible failures in the realm of human relations, thus placing the answer to the question of why one should risk the pain of involvement in the merit of the striving alone regardless of the outcome. Moreover, his eschatological hope for a universal friendship presents a goal which contemporary hearts can appreciate and willingly strive after.

The "third-self" concept of friendship has only recently been brought to the level of our own explicit awareness: "It is as if love-energy from the inner core of one friend reaches out to the love-energy from the inner core of the other, and the two love energies fuse into a new unity, which becomes a new entity, a third-self of friendship."²³ Traces of third-self friendship are scattered throughout literature and frequently incorporated symbolically in music or in the kiss, so popular with Aelred. The third

21. Aelred, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

22. Aelred, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

23. James, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

self is given various names, but always it is a real spiritual entity, a meta-person, a spiritual-guide, and for Aelred it is Christ.

Conscious awareness of the third-self clarifies a focus towards which friendship can be directed. While Aelred warns that friendship is not easy, it has more appeal as a "way" to the modern mind which may be disenchanted with a more "cloistered" mystical approach. In combining a theoretical world-view with a practical approach, Aelred presents a doctrine of friendship containing both a goal and a way which offers an alternative to human relationships that goes beyond aggregation or collective absorption, the very alternative which is hungrily sought by so many today. His warmth and wisdom transcend cultural distance and the modern reader can also attest to the appropriate epitaph that was inscribed on his tomb: "*Et cito quam legitur tam cito religitur*—No sooner have you read him than you want to read him again."²⁴

Who is the third who walk always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?

—T. S. Eliot

The Waste Land

Part V: What the Thunder Said

24. Columban Heaney OCSO, "Aelred of Rievaulx: Relevance to Post-Vatican II Age," in *The Cistercian Spirit*, Cistercian Studies Series: Number Three, ed. by M. Basil Pennington OCSO, (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1970), p. 189.