

“There I Will Give You My Love”: Revisiting Bernard’s Four Degrees of Love alongside John Paul II

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Practical Insights

MANY OF OUR Cistercian monks and nuns, even if they are not too familiar with Saint Bernard’s writings, would be able to enumerate the four degrees of love that he describes in *De diligendo Deo*. Some of them would have read this work, if not entirely, at least in part. But has it been of any help to them to grow in their love for God in their ordinary lives? And does it help them in times of trouble, when the love for God seems to start growing cold, or when the heart starts getting too attached to something or someone different from the one to whom they professed their vows?

This article does not intend to be another analytical commentary on the four degrees of love. As Emero Stiegman points out, “[Saint Bernard] gives his readers no complex of theories about love, like a thinker subjecting an object to speculative inquiry; he gives a description of what he undergoes in his life and what his readers may observe in their own hearts.”¹ This is the goal of this article as well: to help contemporary readers keep finding in Saint Bernard a way to illumine what goes on in their lives and hearts.

As Saint Bernard says at the beginning of *De diligendo*, the wise need

1. Emero Stiegman, Analytical Commentary to *On Loving God*, Bernard of Clairvaux, CF 13B (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1995) 94.

a short answer to the question of “why *and* how God should be loved.”² But what about those who are not wise? What about those *who are beginners, not foolish*? In his own words: “How can we make them believe that it is the Bridegroom who deals thus with them, when they themselves cannot yet perceive what is happening to them?”³

I read Saint Bernard’s *Sermons On the Song of Songs* and Saint John Paul II’s *Catechesis on the Theology of the Body* during the months preceding my Solemn Profession. Both authors were a wonderful help for my preparation. Since then, I have begun to experience how their writings, despite their obvious differences, illumine each other. I realized particularly how the concepts of Saint John Paul II, closer to our contemporary thought, could help me better to understand the message that Saint Bernard was trying to convey to his audience when he talked about love of God and neighbor. Later on, I was glad to find out that I had not been the first one to make this apparently strange connection, but that Dom Augustine Roberts, ocsa, had preceded me.⁴

As Pope Francis describes it, the religious vocation is a call and an answer linked by love; the task before us is to be able to understand in prayer and read in our lives these signs of this love, so that we can be open both to God and others:

Becoming a priest or a man or woman religious is not primarily one’s own decision. I do not trust that seminarian or that woman novice who says, “I have chosen this path.” I do not like this! It won’t do! Rather, it is the response to a call, and to a call of love. I hear something within me that moves me, and I answer “yes.” It is in prayer that the Lord makes us understand this love, but it is also through so many signs that we can read in our life, in the many people he sets on our path. And the joy of

2. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Liber de diligendo Deo* 1.1 (hereafter Dil); Stiegman, 3.

3. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo super Cantica canticorum* [SC] 84.7; *On the Song of Songs IV*, trans. Irene Edmonds, CF 40 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1980) 193.

4. Augustine Roberts has written, “For the future it would be worthwhile to compare John Paul’s vision with the anthropology of medieval Christendom, especially with that of St Bernard of Clairvaux. This is because it seems that in these Wednesday Audiences John Paul II has tried to do for the third millennium what St Bernard did for the second in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*” (Augustine Roberts, “Spousal Meaning: John Paul II’s Anthropology for Monks and Nuns,” CSQ 44.2 [2009]: 191–228, here 194). Similarly, Cristiana Piccardo wrote, “We owe this understanding to Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body, which has, in a way, laid the foundation to a new anthropology. We are well equipped, now, to approach Saint Bernard’s ‘degrees of love’ with fresh insight” (*Living Wisdom*, trans. Eric Varden, MW 33 [Collegeville: Cistercian, 2013] 86).

the encounter with him and with his call does not lead to shutting oneself in but to opening oneself; it leads to service in the Church.⁵

Everyone would agree on the importance of love for human life, but when we come to the practical level—how to love, how we experience it, what are its proper expressions—then nothing is so clear cut. However, this call of love of which Pope Francis is talking, like the source of each vocation, is highly practical; it is “born from the gratuitousness of an encounter,” not from speculation on love; and it is not our own decision.

Pope Emeritus Benedict, in his encyclical letter *Deus caritas est*, begins with a similar approach: “We have come to believe in God’s love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”⁶ Christians can make this decision that gives direction to their lives only after the encounter with God’s love. But how do we encounter love? How do we encounter God’s love?

I believe that Saint Bernard and Saint John Paul II shared the desire of helping us to understand what is happening to us in the terrain of love and loving. We can say they both share a phenomenological approach to the reality of love. But they do not stop there; their analytical effort of the experience of love is directed toward guiding us in search of its truth and encourages us to cooperate with the grace that is being bestowed on us to follow this truth. Saint John Paul II says that his work *Love and Responsibility* is “the result above all of an incessant confrontation of doctrine with life (which is just what the work of a spiritual adviser consists of).”⁷ The writings of these two saints when read with this desire of finding light for our lives can bring truth and meaning to our most important but challenging experiences: our practical lessons on how to love. Let us look at these two spiritual advisers; they will help us to deepen our understanding of the call to monastic life as an experience of love. I will focus on Saint Bernard’s four degrees of love in *On Loving God*, and on

5. Address of Pope Francis at the meeting with seminarians and novices in the Paul VI Audience Hall Saturday, July 6, 2013. w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130706_incontro-seminaristi.html.

6. Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* 1.

7. Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II), *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, 1981) 15.

chapter two, “The Person and Love,” of Saint John Paul II’s *Love and Responsibility*.

A Few Preliminary Remarks

Loving God and loving a human being are not the same experience. As Raffaele Fassetta, OCSO, points out, “Bernard could scarcely express it in the cultural categories of his time, but it seems to me that this distinction between Christ, Bridegroom of the Church, and the Word, Bridegroom of the soul, is very pertinent on the psychological level as well, for it avoids all ambiguities of a too material representation of spiritual marriage.”⁸ Bearing in mind that we are not to make God a human partner, we also need to remember that we are called to love him with all our being.⁹

Writing of the theology of John Paul II, Carl Anderson and José Granados explain, “Love does indeed touch all the dimensions of human life. . . . Love is thus the thread that reconnects the disjointed compartments into which modern man has divided up his life, and so restores the unity of which today’s growing fragmentation increasingly robs us.”¹⁰ As religious, when we put an excessive accent on the spiritual realities, we risk that our love for God could lose the capacity of being the “thread that reconnects [our] disjointed compartments.” That single focus does not make us whole, and therefore we cannot become one with the Beloved. Also, as a by-product, if human love shows up, its discovery may convert the former search for God into something unreal.¹¹

The Cistercian Fathers, says Marsha Dutton, “conceive the love be-

8. Raffaele Fassetta, “The Christocentric and Nuptial Mysticism of Saint Bernard in the Sermons on the Song of Songs,” *CSQ* 49.3 (2014): 347–65, here 356.

9. See Mk 12:30.

10. Carl Anderson and José Granados, *Called to Love: Approaching John Paul II’s Theology of the Body* (New York: Image, 2009) 11.

11. Dom Bernardo Olivera commented, in his introductory words to the General Chapter in October 2005, “Once again I would like to offer a contribution along anthropological lines, in the context of our monastic formation. What has made me reflect on this subject is the departure from our monasteries of six or seven young adult monks during the past two years. In almost every case there were two common factors, namely, the discovery of human love embodied in a particular woman and the total relativity given to everything the man had previously lived. It would seem that the discovery of human love had converted his former search for God into something unreal” (www.citeaux.net/assisiz005/ag-conf-1-eng.htm).

tween God and man to be as ardent, as intimate, as real as that between a man and a woman.¹² The constant remembrance of the life of the historical Jesus, their use of allegory and imagination, and the resource of his sacramental presence are all routes to Christ, a Christ that is real, totally real, just as are their search for him and his search for them. Maybe this reality is what we have lost and need to recover. Our world has become virtual in so many ways: our relationships, our sources of information, our way of planning ahead—all come and go at the click of a button. We seem to decide what is real and what is not, and the decision depends greatly on the emotions we experience. There are always so many possibilities to choose from. In a virtual world there is no truth, only what is pleasant and what is not. The latter—what is not pleasant—will disappear with another click of a button. What is love in this kind of world? What sort of love do we look for?¹³

The School of Charity

John Paul II has challenged some common assumptions about the nature of love:

What does the “education of love” mean? Can love be improved by education? Is not love something complete from the start, something given ready made to a human being? . . . This is a very common assumption, especially among young people, but it is one which tends to prevent what we have called here the integration of love. Love so conceived is merely a psychological situation, and it seems unnatural to subject it to the dictates of objective morality.¹⁴

The words in this passage about the “integration of love” are absent from the vocabulary of our Cistercian Fathers, but not from their experience or teachings. William of Saint-Thierry affirms:

love is naturally implanted in the human soul by the Author of nature. But after she [the soul] has let this law of God slip by, it must be taught

12. Marsha L. Dutton, “Intimacy and Imitation,” *Erudition at God’s Service: Studies in Medieval Cistercian History XI*, ed. John R. Sommerfeldt, CS 98 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1987) 33–70, here 58.

13. Fr. Louis John Cameli has written, “For those who are thoroughly attached to the boundaries of a fully sufficient immanent humanism, there is love but there is no Love absolutely” (“The shape of love in an age of drift,” *Human Development* 37 [2016]: 42–51, here 50).

14. Wojtyła 139.

by a man. It is not to be taught as if it were something which no longer exists, but [taught] so that it may be purified and the way to be purified; [taught] so that it may increase and the way to increase; [taught] so that it may be strengthened and the way to be strengthened.”¹⁵

Where should this education begin? Bernard says, “Since we are carnal . . . our cupidity or love must begin with the flesh, and when this is set in order, our love advances by fixed degrees, led on by grace, until it is consummated in the spirit.”¹⁶ As he explains in his four degrees of love, Bernard begins with the flesh, as does John Paul II. They also share this basically positive vision of our nature, where we can trace the first manifestations of love and grace in action.

Love is experienced as an internal situation, unique and unreproducible, a drama whose plot people discover in themselves, one of great and absorbing importance in their inner lives.¹⁷ Because of the absorbing character of these experiences, we have the tendency to forget that our free will is still intact, able to decide how we should proceed. At moments of decision, the need for consideration¹⁸ is all the more urgent. As John Paul writes, “Truth is a condition of freedom, for if a man can preserve his freedom in relation to the objects which thrust themselves on him in the course of his activity as good and desirable, it is only because he is capable of viewing these goods in the light of truth and so adopting an independent attitude to them.”¹⁹ Similarly Bernard, in *De diligendo Deo*, says that those without this sense of truth and freedom are likely to “walk round in circles, naturally wanting whatever will satisfy their desires, yet foolishly rejecting that which would lead them to their true end, which is not in consumption but in consummation.”²⁰

The lyrics of many songs, old or new, often illustrate the experience

15. William of Saint-Thierry, *The Nature and Dignity of Love*, Prologue 2, trans. Thomas X. Davis, CF 30 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1981) 48–49. Emendations by the translator.

16. Bernard, Dil 15.39; CF 13B:40.

17. See Wojtyła 114.

18. Bernard defines *consideration* in this way: “Consideration . . . can be defined as thought searching for truth, or the searching of a mind to discover truth” (*De consideratione ad Eugenium Papam* 2.5; *Five Books on Consideration: Advice to a Pope*, trans. John D. Anderson and Elizabeth T. Kennan, CF 37 [Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1976] 52).

19. Wojtyła 115.

20. Bernard, Dil 7.19; CF 13B:22.

of love without any reference to truth, as in the familiar song from *West Side Story*:

I have a love, and it's all that I have.
 Right or wrong, what else can I do?
 I love him; I'm his, and everything he is I am, too.
 When love comes so strong,
 There is no right or wrong,
 Your love is your life.

* * *

One thing I know: I am his, I don't care what he is.
 I don't know why it's so, I don't want to know.²¹

Who would not have made these words his or her own at a certain time of life? Bernard and John Paul II, on the contrary, do not cease to insist on a reference to the truth as necessary for evaluating the experience of love.²² The love that does not want to know cannot fulfill its goal of giving direction and meaning to a whole life, because it does not take into account all the elements of the human person but only that person's sensitivity and sensibility. Love without reference to truth is an empty promise. Its initial sweetness hides the reality of the unbearable yoke of those who become slaves of their own will.²³ Often people blame love for actions against reason, as Francesca does in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Love, which absolves no one beloved from loving, seized me so strongly with his charm, that, as thou seest, it does not leave me yet."²⁴ To be healed from this blindness, the beacon of the Word of God, the teachings of the Church, and the guidance of our community in the daily *conversatio* are indispensable.

In a sermon on the Song of Songs, Bernard puts on the lips of the Bridegroom the following invitation: "Become beautiful and then touch me; live by faith and you are beautiful. In your beauty you will touch

21. "I have a love," *West Side Story*, music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.

22. See Wojtyła 112–13 for the phrase *the idealization of love*. This experience can have a parallel in the spiritual level when we project on Jesus our unfulfilled desires and expectations.

23. See Bernard, Dil 13:36; CF 13B:38.

24. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 1: Inferno* V.100, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford, 1939).

my beauty all the more worthily, with greater felicity.”²⁵ In the process of loving God, we put at stake all the dimensions of our being. Although the special graces of contemplation are always a gift from God, it is the spiritual combat, the ascetic process, that prepares us to receive them in the progressive surrender of ourselves. The Gospels trace the path for us: “Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it” (Lk 17:33).

The process of union with God is a journey in which little by little we leave behind the confines of our narrow self to reach God and our neighbor. For those in monastic life, the struggle is not so much in going from evil to good as in finding the true balance between the needs of our nature and the freedom from these needs in a sincere gift of self.²⁶ We may see some of the stages of this interior pilgrimage by walking through Saint Bernard’s schema of the four degrees of love alongside the parallel teachings of Saint John Paul II.

Revisiting the Four Degrees of Love

First Degree

At this stage I am *only aware of myself*.²⁷ I am centered on my own needs. I have come to the monastery attracted by some values that I have recognized in the monastic life. This attraction and the experience of a certain intimacy with God have been the main impulses that led me to abandon my former way of life. There is some sense of a call, of having been directed by a force outside myself, but I frame the response like this: I want this way of life if it is good for me. I believe that my desire for the monastic vocation and Christ himself is a longing for them for their own sake, but

25. Bernard of Clairvaux, SC 28.10; *On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh, CF 7 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1983) 96.

26. *Gaudium et Spes* puts this this way: “Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, ‘that all may be one . . . as we are one’ [Jn 17:21–22] opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 24).

27. Bernard, Dil 8.23; CF 13B:25.

in truth my response is very much conditional. It will depend on how I feel: am I happy?

All the elements that attract me are what Saint John Paul II calls the “raw material for love.”²⁸ They are the foundation for love to grow on, but insufficient in themselves to sustain any kind of commitment. As he says,

The human person is a limited being, not self sufficient and therefore . . . needs other beings. Realization of the limitation and insufficiency of the human being is the starting point for an understanding of man's relation to God. . . . This is “love as desire”, for it originates in a need and aims at finding a good that it lacks.²⁹

The impulse to take care of myself by following the values that attract me is a positive one. It is the way God is working in my nature and attracting me to himself, to him who is the Creator of my nature. Bernard writes, “Love—self love or carnal love—is not imposed by precept; it is planted in nature.”³⁰ Grace will need to *set in order what creation has given*.³¹

Sooner or later monastic life will start to reveal itself in many ways as being different from what I had expected, and the presence of brothers or sisters will force its way into my horizon.

In Saint Bernard's schema the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves is what stops the immoderate love of self. He describes this love not as a tender feeling or a sense of attachment—far from it; it is of a very practical nature:³² “O man, the law of life and order imposes on you the restraint of temperance, lest you follow after your wanton desires and perish, lest you use nature's gifts to serve through wantonness the enemy of the soul.”³³ Expressed this way, it is very simple: either you share your gifts with your neighbor or you share them with your enemy, as happens when you try to keep them only for yourself. Loving our neighbor is not an option, but a command that is shaped by the multiple services we are called to render to others in the ordinary life at the monastery. My will-

28. Wojtyła 139.

29. Wojtyła 80–81.

30. Bernard, Dil 8.23; CF 13B:26.

31. See Bernard of Clairvaux, *De gratia et libero arbitrio* [Gra] 6.17; *On Grace and Free Choice*, trans. Daniel O'Donovan, CF 19 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1977) 72.

32. See Bernard, Dil 8.23; CF 13B:25–26.

33. Bernard, Dil 8.23; CF 13B:25–26.

ingness to respond to this commandment saves me from myself. It will guard this “raw material for love,” this “love as desire” or “carnal love,” so that it can serve its purpose and lead me to the union with God. As John Paul II says, “It is not enough to long for a person as a good for oneself; one must also, and above all, long for that person’s good.”³⁴ He calls this kind of love “love as goodwill.” I am still far from selflessness in love in the first degree, but I will take my first steps toward it through my relationship with my neighbor.

It is significant that Saint Bernard’s method to make room in me for God is for me to strive to reach out to all my neighbors:

The soul must grow and expand, that it may be roomy enough for God. Its width is its love, if we accept what the Apostle says: “Widen your hearts in love” [2 Cor 6:13]. . . . And finally it grows and advances toward “mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” [Eph 4:13]. The capacity of any man’s soul is judged by the amount of love he possesses; hence he who loves much is great, he who loves little is small, he who has no love is nothing But if his love expands and continues to advance till it outgrows these narrow, servile confines, and finds itself on the open ranges where love is freely given in full liberty of spirit; when from the generous bounty of his goodwill he strives to reach out to all his neighbors, loving each of them as himself Indeed he has made himself vast.³⁵

Now communal life will start to regulate my needs and desire for pleasures, reminding me that my neighbor has the same rights as I do. Bernard says, “Thus carnal love becomes social when it is extended to others.”³⁶ This is a very basic expression of empathy. When such empathy is lacking, great desire for prayer and solitude instead of work and service should be called into question as expressions of self-seeking and not of the search for God.

The common discipline of the monastery will serve as the framework in which I start to find some balance between my needs and freedom from these needs. This balance is still very precarious, and so tribulations of different kinds will soon make their appearance.³⁷ This development

34. Wojtyła 83.

35. Bernard, SC 27:10–11; CF 7:83–84.

36. Bernard, Dil 8.23; CF 13B:26.

37. See Bernard, Dil 8.25; CF 13B:27.

may cause some panic: I came here to be happy, and this doesn't feel good. What next?

The biggest challenge now is to overcome the sense of disappointment. John Paul II has explained this response to these changes in my experience:

When emotional reactions are spent—and they are naturally fleeting—the subject, whose whole attitude was based on such reaction, and not on the truth . . . , is left as it were in a void, bereft of that good which he or she appeared to have found. This emptiness and the feeling of disappointment which goes with it often produce an emotional reaction in the opposite direction: a pure emotional love often becomes an equally emotional hatred for the same person.³⁸

Contrary to the unpleasant feelings related to this stage and the confusion they generate, Saint Bernard reminds me that all is well: God is gaining territory in me in this manner. When I feel I am trying my best and I still lack what is necessary for my life,³⁹ I can only pray (or leave). God needs to be loved first if I am to love my neighbor with purity, not for the purpose of keeping my good image before myself and others. As I am little by little deprived of my own resources, God will become my only resource.

Second Degree

In the experience of tribulations I discover God not only as my Creator but also as my protector.⁴⁰ As Bernard explains, “Thus God makes himself lovable.”⁴¹ I still go to God for my own advantage and not for God's sake, even though I am not aware of the selfish side of many of my prayers.

Discovering that I depend on God, even if for self-preservation, is not an insignificant insight. It certainly increases my humility.⁴² It also

38. Wojtyła 78.

39. See Bernard, Dil 8.24; CF 13B:26.

40. See Bernard, Dil 8.25; CF 13B:27.

41. Bernard, Dil 8.25; CF 13B:27.

42. As Bernard explains in a sermon on the Song of Songs, “I wish therefore that before everything else a man should know himself, because not only usefulness but right order demands this. Right order, since what we are is our first concern; and usefulness, because this knowledge gives

may introduce a sense of holy fear, which for Saint Bernard is so necessary in the process of conversion: “It is matter of prudence to know what you can do by yourself and what you can do with God’s help to keep from offending him who keeps you free from sin.”⁴³ To accept not only my dependence on God but my selfishness is not easy task. The process of self-knowledge becomes painful at this point, but it is a requirement on the path to God. Bernard writes, “In this way your self-knowledge will be a step to the knowledge of God; he will become visible to you according as his image is being renewed within you.”⁴⁴

As Saint John Paul II says, “It is impossible to put your trust in another human being, knowing or feeling that his or her sole aim is utility or pleasure. It is equally impossible to put your trust in a person if you yourself have the same thing as your main object.”⁴⁵ The time has come to leave behind a consumer attitude in my relationship with God and the community. I am being called to love in reciprocity, just as I am loved, to turn my conditional commitment into an unconditional one. The repeated experience of undeserved mercy will prepare me for the leap.

Third Degree

Bernard speaks directly to the way suffering turns humans to God: “If man’s tribulations, however, grow in frequency and as a result he frequently turns to God and is frequently freed by God, must he not end, even though he had a heart of stone in a breast of iron, by realizing that it is God’s grace which frees him and come to God not for his own advantage but for the sake of God?”⁴⁶ It is by the habit of turning to God for help in our frequent tribulations that the real intimacy with God is created. In this intimacy we, in the words of the psalm that Bernard often quotes, “taste and discover how sweet the Lord is.”⁴⁷

humility rather than self-importance; it provides a basis on which to build. For unless there is a durable foundation of humility, the spiritual edifice has no hope of standing. And there is nothing more effective, more adapted to the acquiring of humility, than to find the truth about oneself” (SC 36.5; CF 7:177–78).

43. Bernard, Dil 9.26; CF 13B:27.

44. Bernard, SC 36.6; CF 7:179.

45. Wojtyła 87.

46. Bernard, Dil 9.26; CF 13B:28.

47. Ps 33:9; Bernard, Dil 9.26; CF 13B:28.

We may have pre-tasted this sweetness even before entering the monastery, but it is only when we get used to “approaching him more frequently,”⁴⁸ as we realize that we depend more and more on him, that in Bernard’s words, “tasting God’s sweetness entices us more to pure love than does the urgency of our own needs.”⁴⁹ Now we do not go to him because we need something of him, but because we need him, we want to be with him. God has become our true home.

When God is our home, we can welcome our neighbor. John Paul II explains that reality in this way: “I desire a good for you just as I desire it for myself.”⁵⁰ My brother or sister is no more a competitor, a judge, or the one who should satisfy my needs, as Bernard writes: “This love is pleasing because it is free . . . It is just because it renders what is received. Whoever loves this way, loves the way he is loved, seeking in turn not what is his but what belongs to Christ.”⁵¹ Now serving my neighbor is also searching for God, because I know that my brothers and sisters belong to him. This love is not based on mere sympathy; it consists primarily in a commitment of the will.

Indeed, as John Paul II writes, “Man’s capacity for love depends on his willingness consciously to seek a good together with others, and to subordinate himself to that good for the sake of others, or to others for the sake of that good.”⁵² God is the good that I have desired from the beginning of this process. I have learned to seek him as I have gone through the lessons of how to walk with my brothers or sisters on this quest. Now I am ready, even in my weakness, to serve God through obedience for the good of all and the coming of the Kingdom.

Fourth Degree

Loving God and neighbor in this way is almost heaven, as Bernard explains: “For those who now possess that which will be never taken

48. Bernard, Dil 9.26; CF 13B:28.

49. Bernard, Dil 9.26; CF 13B:28.

50. Wojtyła 90.

51. Bernard, Dil 9.26; CF 13B:28.

52. Wojtyła 29.

away plainly experience what is to come: in a word, happiness.”⁵³ This is the happiness of the one who, he says, “no longer even loves himself except for God.”⁵⁴ I am no more a victim of what I feel, plan, want, or even the desire of my own happiness. As all my needs and cravings are set in order under the *law of life*,⁵⁵ I have discovered my dependence on God as my Creator. Paradoxically, this experience becomes the source of my deepest freedom. In my tribulations, God has revealed himself to me as my protector, and the discovery of his sweetness has enticed me to the point of forgetting myself. Who needs to control past, present, or future, myself or others, when I know that all has been taken care of already? I have learned that his ways are not like mine (see Is 55:8), but they are much better.

A little later Bernard returns to explaining the experience of this kind of self-forgetting love: “When will this sort of affection be felt that, inebriated with divine love, the mind may forget itself and become in its own eyes like a broken dish, hastening towards God and clinging to him, becoming one with him in spirit.” He portrays this experience as a sudden and fleeting one, but with enduring effects: “The mortal body weighs him down, the needs of the flesh bother him . . . brotherly love calls him back.”⁵⁶ But still nothing will make him forget the sweetest embrace of the Beloved, a foretaste of the eternal.

“To lose yourself, as if you no longer existed,”⁵⁷ as Bernard puts it, is no doubt “a divine experience.”⁵⁸ It does not imply the destruction of the self,⁵⁹ however, dissolved in the divinity, but on the contrary it is the manifestation of that which is in the person truly permanent. The “I” remains, but not self-centered anymore, no longer identified with roles or activities, ideas, or emotions, but totally given, abandoned in this loving relationship with my God, the God of all.

Besides the momentary experiences where this total freedom is felt as complete joy, Saint Bernard points out another path that shows the

53. Bernard, Gra 5.15; CF 19:71.

54. Bernard, Dil 10.27; CF 13B:29.

55. See Bernard, Dil 8.23; CF 13B:26.

56. Bernard, Dil 10.27; CF 13B:30.

57. Bernard, Dil 10.27; CF 13B:29.

58. Bernard, Dil 10.27; CF 13B:29.

59. “The ‘I’ far from being destroyed or impaired as a result is enlarged and enriched” (Wojtyła 97).

radical freedom of those in the fourth degree of love, martyrdom: "The strength of this love seized their souls so entirely that, despising the pain, they were able to expose their bodies to exterior torments. No doubt, the feeling of intense pain could only upset their calm; it could not overcome them."⁶⁰ The example of the martyrs illustrates in extreme circumstances the struggle and final liberation of all who have given themselves completely to God. They have received in this process the true balance between the needs of our nature and the freedom from these needs.

Even though the pain still upsets their calm, it does not overcome them, for as Bernard explains, their "strength is established in the power of God."⁶¹ Bernard is not portraying a stoic, never affected by anything, detached from everyone, but a believer and lover of God, and the brethren in him: "The satisfaction of our wants, chance happiness, delights us less than to see his will done in us and for us."⁶² This is the ripe fruit of learning how to love. If I fail, it is because I am still like Saint Peter at the time of his betrayal, as Bernard explains: "He sinned, not by hating or rejecting Christ, but by loving himself to excess."⁶³

John Paul II, in the section on celibacy in his catechesis on the Theology of the Body, does not hide the sacrificial part of choosing celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom:

It is natural for the human heart to accept demands, even difficult ones, in the name of love for an ideal, and above all in the name of love for a person. . . . Therefore in that call to continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, first the disciples themselves, and then the whole living Tradition of the Church, will soon discover the love that is referred to Christ himself as the Spouse of the Church, the Spouse of souls. He has given himself to them to the very limit, in the Paschal and Eucharistic mystery. In this way, continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, the choice of virginity or celibacy for one's whole life, has become in the experience of Christ's disciples and followers the act of a particular response of love for the divine Spouse. Therefore it has acquired the significance of an act of nuptial love, that is, a nuptial giving of oneself for the purpose of reciprocating in a particular way the nuptial love of

60. Bernard, Dil 10.29; CF 13B:31.

61. Bernard, Dil 10.29; CF 13B:31.

62. Bernard, Dil 10.28; CF 13B:30.

63. Bernard, Gra 12.39; CF 19:39.

the Redeemer. It is a giving of oneself understood as renunciation, but made above all out of love.⁶⁴

Monks and nuns through the centuries have wanted to follow Jesus, the first of martyrs, in this love *to the very limit*. The joy and the pain are the two sides of a total gift in which they have found the surprising but true balance between the needs of their nature and the freedom from these needs. Those in the fourth degree of love have forgotten themselves because their hearts fully belong to another. Joy is received, not sought, and suffering is accepted without avoidance: all and only for love.

As John Paul II says in *Love and Responsibility*, “Love forcibly detaches the person, so to speak, from this natural inviolability and inalienability. It makes the person want just that—to surrender to another, to the one it loves.”⁶⁵ A little earlier he had written, “In this sense, one person can give himself or herself, can surrender entirely to another, whether to a human person or to God, and such a giving of the self creates a special form of love which we define as betrothed love.”⁶⁶ And again, “The essence of betrothed love is self-giving, the surrender of one’s ‘I’. This is something different from and more than attraction, desire or even goodwill. . . . Two people give themselves each to the other.”⁶⁷

“There I Will Give You My Love” (Song 7:12)

In his 1979 encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul summarizes these ideas, echoing Bernard’s teaching:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself This . . . is why Christ the Redeemer “fully reveals man to himself” The man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of his being—he must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into him with all his own self, he must “appropriate” and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find

64. John Paul II, General Audience on April 28, 1982.

65. Wojtyła 125.

66. Wojtyła 97.

67. Wojtyła 96.

himself. If this profound process takes place within him, he then bears fruit not only of adoration of God but also of deep wonder at himself.⁶⁸

Both of our guides through this reflection share the most genuine sense of adoration of God, but also a deep wonder for the human being and how God's grace acts in us. They are therefore wonderful mentors to support us in the understanding of our own mystery, helping us to collaborate with God's action in our own nature. They know that love is the road that needs to be trodden, for as Bernard writes, "Neither fear nor love of self can change the soul. At times they change one's appearance or deeds, they can never alter one's character. . . . Charity converts souls because it makes them act willingly."⁶⁹

Toward the end of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* come these challenging words: "Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life."⁷⁰ What did Benedict mean by these words? Can we interpret them as the Benedictine form of the double commandment of love? When we make our vows, we bind ourselves to a group of brothers or sisters. Not only are they passive witnesses of our commitment to God, but this commitment also embraces them. We are going to walk *together* toward the Lord; our search for God is not independent from theirs. We vow to take them and let them take us on this journey, this pilgrimage, during which we all attend the school of love.

"There I will give you my love" (Sg 7:12), says the bride to the Bridegroom, the Bridegroom to the bride. "There," in my joys and tribulations, in my sisters and brothers, in my work and prayer. "There" is not an ideal place or reality; it is my neighbor and myself, one day after another.⁷¹

Thomas Merton once wrote, "I am sorry for having let myself be-

68. John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* 10.

69. Bernard, Dil 12.34; CF 13B:36.

70. RB 72.12; Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict in English* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1982) 95.

71. Jean Vanier declares this summons to community life as Christ's own call: "Jesus is saying to us: Come and live with these brothers and sisters who may squabble together like my first disciples, but this is where I am calling you today. It might be difficult, but it will be a place of growth in love for you. It is there that I will reveal to you my love" (*From Brokenness to Community* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992] 42). And Piccardo emphasized the essential core of this call: "The two fundamental characteristics of the Benedictine coenobium are obedience and belonging. There is a close relationship between obedience and stability, following and belonging. To obey is to remain fixed within God's will, belonging to the concrete space in which the will of God for me is made manifest" (151).

come so stupid and so torpid thinking more of myself than of what I owe to Your Love—and I owe You everything.”⁷² May we keep discovering in our Cistercian tradition sparks, reminders that will wake us up from any kind of forgetfulness; may we find in its pages and living examples the always new paths into the depths of love. We have experienced it: “Easily they love more who realize they are loved more.”⁷³

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72. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (1953; San Diego: Harcourt, 1979) 290.

73. Bernard, Dil 3.7; CF 13B:9.