

From *Spiritual Friendship* by Aelred of Rievaulx, 3.76-82. And 2.20-21, 26-27

(translated by M. Eugenia Laker, Copyright 1974 Cistercian Publications.)

Walter. I confess that I am still moved by the opinion of those men who think they live more safely without friends of this type.

Aelred. This is astonishing, since without friends absolutely no life can be happy.

Walter. Why, I ask you?

Aelred. Let us imagine that the whole human race has been taken out of the world leaving you as the sole survivor. Now behold before you all the delights and riches of the world—gold, silver, precious stones, walled cities, turreted camps, spacious buildings, sculptures, and paintings. And consider yourself also as transformed to that ancient state, having all creatures under your domination, “all sheep and oxen; moreover, the beasts of the fields, the birds of the air, and the fishes of the sea that pass through the paths of the sea.” Tell me now, whether without a companion you could enjoy all these possessions?

Walter. No, not at all.

Aelred. But suppose there were one person, whose language you did not know, of whose customs you were ignorant, whose love and heart lay concealed from you?

Walter. If I could not by some signs make him a friend, I should prefer to have no one at all than to have such a one.

Aelred. If, however, one were at hand whom you loved as much as yourself and by whom you were similarly loved, would not all these possessions, which before seemed bitter, become sweet and full of savor?

Walter. Indeed, they would.

Aelred. Would you not think yourself happier in proportion to the number of such companions?

Walter. By all means.

Aelred. This is that extraordinary and great happiness which we await, with God himself acting and diffusing, between himself and his creatures whom he has uplifted, among the very degrees and orders which he has distinguished, among the individual souls whom he has chosen, so much friendship and charity, that thus each loves another as he does himself; and that, by this means, just as each one rejoices in his own, so does he rejoice in the good fortune of another, and thus the happiness of each one individually is the happiness of all, and the universality of happiness is the possession of each individual. There one finds no hiding of thoughts, no dissembling of affection. This is true and eternal friendship, which begins in this life and is perfected in the next, which here belongs to the few where few are good, but there belongs to all where all are good. Here, probation is necessary since there is a mingling of wise and unwise; there they need no probation, since an angelic and, in a certain manner, divine perfection beatifies them. To this pattern, then, let us compare our friends, whom we are to love as we do ourselves, whose confidences are to be laid bare to us, to whom our confidences are likewise to be disclosed, who are to be firm and stable and constant in all things. Do you think there is any human being who does not wish to be loved?

Walter. I think not.

Aelred. If you were to see a man living among many people, suspecting all and fearing all as plotters against his own life, cherishing no one and thinking himself cherished by none, would you not judge such a man most wretched?

Walter. Yes, very evidently so.

Aelred. Therefore you will not deny that he is most fortunate who rests in the inmost hearts of those among whom he lives, loving all and being loved by all, whom neither suspicion severs nor fear cuts off from this sweetest tranquility.

Walter. Excellently said, and most truly.

Aelred. But, perhaps, it is difficult to find this perfection with respect to all in this present life, since that is reserved for us in the life to come, yet shall we not consider ourselves happier in proportion as more individuals of this type abound for us?

The day before yesterday, as I was walking the round of the cloister of the monastery, the brethren were sitting around forming as it were a most loving crown. In the midst, as it were, of the delights of paradise with the leaves, flowers, and fruits of each single tree, I marveled. In that multitude of brethren I found no one whom I did not love, and no one by whom, I felt sure, I was not loved. I was filled with such joy that it surpassed all the delights of this world. I felt, indeed, my spirit transfused into all and the affection of all to have passed into me, so that I could say with the Prophet: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.”

Gratian. Are we not to think that you have taken into your friendship all those whom you thus love and by whom you are so loved?

Aelred. We embrace very many with every affection, but yet in such a way that we do not admit them to the secrets of friendship, which consists especially in the revelation of all our confidences and plans. Whence it is that the Lord in the Gospel says: “I will not now call you servants but friends;” and then adding the reason for which they are considered worthy of the name of friend: “because all things, whatsoever I have heard of my Father, I have made known to you.” And in another place: “You are my friends, if you do the things that I command you.” From these words, as Saint Ambrose says, “He gives the formula of friendship for us to follow: namely, that we do the will of our friend, that we disclose to our friend whatever confidences we have in our hearts, and that we be not ignorant of his confidences. Let us lay bare to him our heart and let him disclose his to us. For a friend hides nothing. If he is true, he pours forth his soul just as the Lord Jesus poured forth the mysteries of the Father.” Thus speaks Ambrose. How many, therefore, do we love before whom it would be imprudent to lay bare our souls and pour out our inner hearts? Men whose age or feeling or discretion is not sufficient to bear such revelations.

In friendship are joined honor and charm, truth and joy, sweetness and good-will, affection and action. And all these take their beginning from Christ, advance through Christ, and are perfected in Christ. Therefore, not too steep or unnatural does the ascent appear from Christ, as the inspiration of the love by which we love our friend, to Christ giving himself to us as our Friend for us to love. ... And thus, friend cleaving to friend in the spirit of Christ, is made with Christ but one heart and one soul, and so mounting aloft through degrees of love to friendship with Christ, he is made one spirit with him in one kiss. ...

The spiritual kiss is characteristically the kiss of friends who are bound by one law of friendship; for it is not made by contact of the mouth but by the affection of the heart; not by a meeting of lips but by a mingling of spirits, by the purification of all things in the Spirit of God, and through his own participation, emits a celestial savor. I would call this the kiss of Christ, yet he himself does not offer it from his own mouth, but from the mouth of another, breathing upon his lovers that most sacred affection so that there seems to them to be, as it were, one spirit in many bodies. And they may say with the Prophet: “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Ps 132:1). The soul, therefore, accustomed to this kiss and not doubting that all this sweetness comes from Christ, as if reflecting within itself and saying, “Oh, if only he himself had come!” sighs for the kiss of grace and with the greatest desire exclaims: “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth” (Song 1:1). So that now, after all earthly affections have been tempered, and all thoughts and desires which savor of the world have been quieted, the soul takes delight in the kiss of Christ alone and rests in his embrace, exulting and exclaiming: “His left hand is under my heart and his right hand shall embrace me” (Song 2:6).