

# WILLIAM OF SAINT-THIERRY ON DEGREES OF BEATITUDE

## ON WHETHER THE SAINTS RECEIVE LOVE IN AN UNEQUAL MEASURE, AND ON HOW THIS COMES ABOUT

As I see it, there is one kind of love which is the result of desiring something, and there is another kind which comes from enjoying a thing and delighting in it. The first kind, which is the result of desire, does sometimes deserve to see its object. And the vision of the object of desire, in its turn, is given the favour of enjoying and delighting in the thing, while the delight brings in its wake the fullness of love. And now I thank Thee deeply, Lord, that Thou hast given me that great grace which I received when Thou didst speak to my heart and didst make some sort of reply to my questions. I clasp to my heart this grace which is a token of Thy Spirit's promise to bring me to the unending vision of Thee, and, having His pledge, I can wait happily for the promise to be fulfilled. And so I long to love Thee completely, and I love to yearn for Thee in this way. I run to Thee to clasp Thee in the same way that Thou gatherest me to Thyself, to love Thee perfectly at long last because Thou, Lord, hast first loved us. But can such perfect love of God be found anywhere, at any time? Dost Thou ever bestow on the soul which thirsts after Thee, living water that Thou art, such consummation of blessedness in Thy love, that it may be filled, sated to the point of saying, 'This is enough'? I cannot believe that anyone could have such an experience without fainting away. I cannot believe that such a one would be able to say, 'It is enough.' But how can we claim that love is perfect unless the soul is able to say that? Obviously we never can, and we must conclude that love in this life can never be perfect. But does this mean that the imperfect lovers, the unjust and the ungodly, will possess Thy kingdom? Will that be possible? For an unjust or ungodly man is one who does not feel in the least bound, who does not even realize that he is bound, to love Thee alone as much as a rational creature can love Thee. As for those in heaven, we know that

the Seraphim, which means in Hebrew 'fiery spirits' (for they burn through being so near to Thee and Thy brightness), love Thee more than does a soul who is less in importance than they. But even so, the one who is lowest of all in heaven, longs to love Thee as much as possible, and as much as Thou shouldst be loved. Perhaps that is what is meant by the words, 'on Him the angels long to gaze.'<sup>20</sup> And so those who are lower among the saints yearn to love Thee as much as those by whom they are surpassed in love. This yearning does not spring from any sort of rivalry, but from a desire to imitate and to be like those who are more holy. And if a soul which is lower among the saints does come to love Thee more deeply and completely, he will understand that Thou canst be loved yet more; that Thou canst never be loved enough, in fact. He will realize that he is bound to love Thee yet more, and that he should love Thee every bit as much as do the Cherubim and Seraphim. But one who desires something unattainable is unhappy and unsatisfied, and in the kingdom where there is complete happiness in the vision of Thee, with the fulfilment of all desire, unhappiness has no place.

What is Thy answer to that? I can suggest no answer, so I beg Thee, Lord, to speak because Thy servant is waiting to hear what Thou hast to say. Does everyone in heaven, great and small, love and long to love according to a sort of fixed degree which goes by rank? Does the fact that they all have Thee as the object of their love allow this to happen? Does the soul which loves less deeply see without envy that other souls receive the gift of a greater love? If he desires that gift, then he loves it. He loves it and even possesses it in those who have it in greater measure than himself. It is love that pours the same grace, though in unequal measure, into all who love the same object—namely Love—and who are happy together, rejoicing in the same Love.

The deeper love sinks into the senses, the more capacity they acquire for receiving it. They are filled, but without satiety. Love fills them, but does not lessen their desire. Instead it increases it; and yet there is none of that intensity and worry which we often feel while waiting for our desires to be fulfilled. Yes, it is love that is loved, and it is wonderful how love's delights drive from the lover any sort of

nausea which could come of being filled, or any trace of that tension which goes with awaiting fulfilment, or any suspicion of envy in regard to those who have received the gift of a more complete love. Love enlightens its lovers, and 'borrows glory from the Lord's glory'<sup>21</sup> as Saint Paul puts it. And in this light of love they see the Light which enlightens all men, while love brings forth in their souls a still deeper love. Love is the spring which is always flowing, without overflowing or drying up. These are the riches that are given to the man who loves and desires Thee. He always has at hand, always possesses, what he desires and loves. And so we can say that one who desires always loves to do so, and one who loves always desires to love. And Thou dost bless the man who desires and loves Thee, Lord, so that he is rich in what he loves and desires; but Thou dost this in such a wonderful way that he is never anxious and worried in his desire. Surely this is the eternal life of which the psalmist sings 'See if my heart is set on any false path, and show me the everlasting way.'<sup>22</sup> Here we have the aim of our striving set before us, and here, too, we have the attaining of our end described. To go along this everlasting way is to come to complete love in the vision of God. Of this the apostle speaks, when he says, 'not that I have already won the prize, already reached fulfilment. I only press on in hope of winning the mastery, as Christ Jesus has won the mastery over me. . . . I press on with the goal in view, eager for the prize, God's heavenly summons in Christ Jesus.'<sup>23</sup> And then he finishes with this very important sentence—'Meanwhile let us be all of the same mind, all follow the same rule, according to the progress we have made.'<sup>24</sup>

—William of Saint-Thierry (between 1070 and 85–1148), Cluniac Abbot of Saint-Thierry or Theoderic, later (from 1135), Cistercian monk at Signy, chapter 3 of his *On Contemplating God* (*De contemplando Deo*, written between 1121 and 24), translated from the Latin by Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker, and published by The Saint Austin Press, London, in 2001, pages 21–25. *On Contemplating God* first published by A. R. Mowbray & Co., London, in 1955.

## NOTES

References are to the Vulgate [translators' introduction, p. 9].

<sup>20</sup> 1 Saint Peter 1:12.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18.

<sup>22</sup> Psalm 139[138]:24.

<sup>23</sup> Philippians 3:12–15.

<sup>24</sup> Philippians 3:16.



\* Cf. Saint Matthew 11:11 and Saint Luke 7:28. Saint John the Baptist and the lesser in the kingdom.

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