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THE HOLY SPIRIT IN MEDIEVAL SPIRITUALITY AS REFLECTED IN THREE DISCOURSES OF LEADING MEDIEVAL WRITERS

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The pursuit of piety was at the heart of Medieval life and thought; one of its important aspects was an awareness of the Spirit's indispensable role in producing holiness in Christians' lives. This article will briefly explore the Spirit's role in Medieval spirituality as it is found in three discourses: Aelred of Rievaulx's *Spiritual Friendship*, Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, and Anselm of Canterbury's *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*. A study of these works will show how the Holy Spirit is critical to the spirituality of these three monks. For Aelred, the Spirit has a significant role in the formation of friendship, fundamental to Aelred's personal holiness. For Bernard, the Spirit is imperative to the spirituality of the church. Without the Spirit, the church will not seek to have the love of Christ, for it is the Spirit that incites her to desire such love. Finally, for Anselm, the procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son can affect our knowledge of the triune God, which can also impact our spirituality.

AELRED OF RIEVAULX'S *SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP*

Born in Hexham, Northumbria, England, in about 1110, Aelred produced several treatises on spirituality. One of them, *Spiritual Friendship*, shows how Christian friendship has bearing on Aelred's spirituality. As Mark F. Williams says, Aelred's pursuit of holiness 'placed a high value on personal friendships based upon integrity, honesty, and ingenuousness.'¹ The significance of friendship in Aelred's piety was evident when he proclaimed, 'In human affairs there is no goal that is holier than friendship, nothing more useful, nothing more difficult to find, nothing that is sweeter to experience, nothing more enjoyable to maintain. For friendship bears fruit in this life as well as in the life to come.'² Elsewhere, he added,

¹ Mark F. Williams, introduction to Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Mark F. Williams (Scranton: University of Scranton Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1994), p. 11.

² Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 44.

I delighted in the pleasure of being with my friends more than in anything else [...]. [T]o me nothing was more pleasant or more delightful or more useful than to seem to be loved and to love in return.³

After a long search, Aelred found true friendship in the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx in Yorkshire; there, he developed godly companionships with his fellow monks. In 1147, he was called to serve as abbot of this monastery, where 'he would spend the rest of his life, preaching, writing, and gradually building up the community until it had almost doubled in size.'⁴ It was at Rievaulx that Aelred composed his *Spiritual Friendship*, completed shortly before his death in 1167.

In the prologue, Aelred expressed his reason for the work:

Since I wished to be able to love in a spiritual manner but could not, I read very much about friendship in the writings of the holy [Church] Fathers. However, since I found no aid in them, I began to write about spiritual friendship and to set down for myself the rules of a pure and holy affection.⁵

Aelred divides the volume into three sections: the first discusses 'the nature of friendship, noting its origin or cause'; the second, 'its advantages and its excellence'; and the last, 'how and among what sorts of people friendship is able to be preserved unbroken until the end.'⁶

To highlight what he called true or spiritual friendship, Aelred contrasted it with carnal and worldly friendship, which is

created by an agreement in vices, while hope of gain spurs on worldly friendship, and similarity of character, goals, and habits in life makes for a bond of friendship among good people [...]. Worldly friendship [...] is created by desire for temporal goods and things. It is always full of deceit and deception; in it there is nothing certain, nothing constant, nothing secure.⁷

In contrast, spiritual friendship, by which Aelred means 'true friendship,'

should be desired not with a view to any worldly good, nor for any reason extrinsic to itself, but from the worthiness of its own nature, and the feeling of the human heart, so that it offers no advantage or reward other than itself

³ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴ Williams, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 13.

⁵ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 28.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 35–36.

[...]. [It] is born among good people through the similarity of their characters, goals, and habits in life.⁸

But judging from Aelred's concept of friendship, what really distinguishes spiritual from carnal friendships is Christ. Friendship is 'to be formed in Christ, advanced according to Christ, and perfected in Christ.'⁹ It focuses not on the friend but on Jesus. In short, there is no true friendship without Christ. For this reason, although Aelred benefited from the Roman orator Cicero's *On Friendship* (44 BC), the English monk was not fully satisfied with this work, because Cicero penned it from a pagan point of view. Aelred insisted that this true, spiritual 'friendship cannot exist among the wicked' or those who are without Christ.¹⁰

Aelred also asserted the Holy Spirit's role in Christian friendship: 'One friend clings to another in the spirit of Christ, and thus makes with him "one heart and one spirit."¹¹ Aelred has in mind the words of Luke:

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common (Acts 4:31–32, ESV).

Using this text, Aelred points out that two friends become one heart and soul through the Spirit of Christ. In other words, for Aelred, the third person of the Trinity unites two friends together, making them 'a single spirit in a single kiss.'¹²

Aelred derived the idea of a 'single kiss' from Song of Solomon 1:2. And as our other authors we will cover below will also show, the Song of Solomon casts the highest form of human friendship (marriage) and its various expressions of mutual love (e.g., a holy kiss between husband and wife) which are then highly suitable and paradigmatic for application to all friendships—provided they are wrought by the work of the Spirit. Commenting on this verse, Aelred stated that

in one kiss two spirits meet one another, and they are mixed together and so made one. From this mingling of spirits there grows up a kind of mental

⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹² Ibid., pp. 46–47. He is particularly thinking of two friends of the same sex.

agreeableness, which elicits and joins together the affection of those who kiss.¹³

He continued,

So we might talk of different kinds of kisses: the kiss of the flesh, the kiss of the spirit, and the kiss of discernment. A kiss of the flesh is made by a coming together of two lips, while a kiss of the spirit is made by a coming together of two souls, and the kiss of discernment results from the outpouring of favor through the spirit of God.¹⁴

Of these three types, Aelred underscored the kiss of the spirit in connection to Christian friendship; he reasoned that this sort of kiss

is proper for friends who are bound under one law of friendship. For it comes about 'not through physical contact of the mouth but through mental affection'; not by a joining of the lips but by a mingling of two spirits; and from the spirit of God that purifies all things and imparts a heavenly savor from its participation in the act.¹⁵

He even argues that this kind of kiss, which is wrought by the third person of the Trinity, is

the kiss of Christ, although he offers it not from his own mouth but from the mouth of another, inspiring that most holy affection in those who love one another, so that it appears to them as though one spirit indwells many different bodies.¹⁶

Aelred thus picks up the fact that Song of Solomon is paradigmatic of the marriage, that of Christ and his church; and as the mystical union by faith is wrought by the Holy Spirit, so it is like a kiss the Spirit creates between Christ and his bride. It is fitting this be the work of the Holy Spirit, who, as Anselm will discuss more below, is that 'bond of love' (*vinculum amoris*) between the Father and the Son, who breathe forth the Spirit as their Love.

Despite his emphasis on the kiss of the spirit, Aelred was not altogether against the practice of physical kissing among friends of the same gender:

¹³ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 47–48.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

The kiss of the flesh is to be neither offered nor received, except for definite and honorable reasons—for example, as a sign of reconciliation, in place of words, when two people who had been mutual enemies become friends; or as a sign of peace, as when those who are about to partake of communion in church show their inner peace by means of an external kiss; or as a sign of affection, such as is permitted to happen between a husband and wife, or such as is offered and accepted by friends who have long been apart; or as a sign of catholic unity, such as when a guest is received.¹⁷

Yet, acutely aware of people who abuse physical kissing, the English abbot warned his readers to avoid any evil form of kissing.

As Aelred himself observed, his portrayal of friendship in the monastery is very similar to the relationship between husband and wife, especially the notion of friendship as the merging of two souls and his approval of physical kissing. For this reason, even one of his contemporary friends said to him, ‘I can see that friendship of this type is not common, nor are we accustomed even to dream of it being as you describe it.’¹⁸ As a result of advocating this rare sort of friendship, some modern scholars unfortunately think Aelred was homosexual or that his treatise promotes homosexuality. However, Aelred’s writings do not give evidence for this allegation. What is important to note here is the fact that for Aelred, Christian friendship is a vital vehicle for personal piety; in addition, for Aelred the Holy Spirit, not sensuous love, plays a significant role in forming this particular friendship.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX’S *SERMONS ON THE SONG OF SONGS*

A native of France, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), like Aelred, was also a monk in the Cistercian Order, which rigorously followed the Rule of St. Benedict. Through his life and works, Bernard greatly influenced the spirituality of those both within and without the Cistercian Order.¹⁹ But his sermons particularly impacted the lives of his fellow monks, inspiring them to know and love Christ more. These sermons include a series on the Song of Solomon, which Bernard began in 1135 and ‘that was to continue, with breaks while he was absent from Clairvaux, until his death in 1153.’²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁹ See G. R. Evans, foreword to Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans, intro. Jean Leclercq, O.S.B. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 1–3.

²⁰ Introduction to Bernard of Clairvaux, ‘Sermons on Song of Songs’, in *Selected Works*, p. 209.

Ewert H. Cousins, in his preface to Bernard of Clairvaux's *Selected Works*, rightly observes, 'Not all of Bernard's spiritual writings deal directly with love, but in the total corpus of his works love is by far the dominant theme.' Cousins continues,

It is in 'Sermons on the Song of Songs' that Bernard's spirituality of love receives its most comprehensive expression. The central theme of these sermons is intimacy: intimate love between the Bride and the Bridegroom, between the soul and Christ.²¹

Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* was likewise deeply Christocentric. This Christocentrism naturally springs from Bernard's allegorical interpretation of Song of Solomon—that the bride and the bridegroom are symbolic images of the church and Christ. Throughout his sermons, however, the French monk also accentuated the relationship between the individual soul and Christ.²² Also, despite his profoundly Christocentric exposition of the book, Bernard's work is full of references to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Sermons 8, 17, and 18 are particularly pneumatological in tone. For instance, in sermon 8, the French preacher declared that the kiss in Song of Solomon 1:2 is the Holy Spirit; thus, the verse should read, 'Let him kiss me with Spirit of his mouth.' Here the church is asking 'boldly to be given the kiss, that is, the Spirit in whom the Father and the Son will reveal themselves to her.'²³ This claim is reinforced by Bernard's interpretation of John 20:22 and John 15:16:

'He breathed on them,' it says, and that certainly means that Jesus breathed on the apostles, that is, the primitive Church, and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (Jn. 20:22). That was the kiss. What was it? A breath? No, but the invisible Spirit, who is so bestowed in the breath of the Lord that he is understood to have proceeded from the Son as well as from the Father (Jn. 15:26).²⁴

In this statement, Bernard noticeably showed support for the Western inclusion of the *filioque* ('and [from] the Son') in the Nicene Creed. It should be remembered that the Eastern churches renounced this inclusion, maintaining that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. The Western churches, however, contended that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (*filioque*). This theological issue was the theological difference behind the schism of the Eastern (Greek) and Western

²¹ Ewert H. Cousins, preface to Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, pp. 8–9.

²² Cousins, preface to Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, p. 10.

²³ Bernard of Clairvaux, 'Sermons on Song of Songs', p. 237.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 236–37.

(Latin) churches in 1054. During Bernard's time, a century had already passed, but the issue was still hotly discussed.²⁵ It is no wonder, then, that the French abbot touched on this subject in his sermons. We are kissed by Christ with the 'Spirit of his mouth,' just as, in an analogous way, the Father and Son enjoy the mutual Love the Spirit is between them.

In his exposition of Song of Solomon 1:2, Bernard raises an interesting point: the bride does not say, 'Let him kiss me with his mouth' but rather 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.' According to him, the church does not ask Christ to kiss her with His mouth, because such a kiss is 'reserved for the Father alone.'²⁶ The kiss of the mouth is 'the supreme kiss [...the] highest kiss, which is beyond description and which no creature has experienced.'²⁷ That kiss exists only between the Father and the Son: 'The Father kissing the Son, pours into him in full the mysteries of his divinity, and breathes the sweetness of love.'²⁸ He further states, 'No creature has been given the privilege of witnessing this eternal unique and blessed embrace. Only the Holy Spirit is witness, and able to share their mutual knowledge and love.'²⁹

Bernard further told his audience that the 'mutual love and knowledge between him who begets and him who is begotten' is the 'sweetest and most mysterious kiss.'³⁰ Although the kiss the church receives is not a kiss from Christ's mouth, it is still satisfying, for it is the very Spirit of Christ. Being kissed with the kiss of his mouth is nothing but being given the third person of the Trinity.³¹

Bernard's elucidation of Song of Solomon 1:2 unfolds some essential functions of the Spirit in the lives of Christians. First, it is through the Spirit that Christians can enjoy Christ's love, since Christ kisses them through his Spirit. Without the blessed Spirit, no soul can experience Christ's tender care. Second, as already mentioned, the Father and Son reveal themselves to the church through the Spirit. Consequently, knowing the first and second persons of the Trinity apart from the third is utterly impossible. In this way, the third person of the Trinity stands as the mediator between the church and the other two persons. Quoting from 1 Corinthians 2:10, Bernard proclaimed, 'But God revealed himself to us through his Spirit.'³² Finally, it is the Spirit who 'prompts the Bride's

²⁵ Ibid., p. 236.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 239.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 236.

³¹ Ibid., p. 237.

³² Ibid., p. 238.

boldness [to ask for a kiss], and it is he whom she trustingly asks to come to her when she asks for a kiss.³³ Therefore, when Christians ask for a kiss, it is the work of the Spirit. Bernard sees the Holy Spirit as vitally important in the spirituality of the church, especially with regard to her relationship with Christ.

ANSELM OF CANTERBURY'S *ON THE PROCESSION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT*

Like Bernard, Anselm (1033–1109) supported the addition of *filioque* to the Creed in the East-West controversy on the procession of the Holy Spirit. Anselm was born in Aosta, Italy, and was regarded as the most learned scholar of his time. In 1060, he entered the monastery of Bec in central Normandy. There, in 1078, at the age of forty-five, the Benedictine monk became abbot. In 1093, he was appointed archbishop of Canterbury in England, and it was during this time that he penned *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*, started in 1098 and completed in 1102.³⁴

In this highly philosophical work, Anselm challenged the Greek Christians on their view of the procession of the Spirit. Whereas Christians in the East believed that the Spirit proceeded from the Father alone, Anselm, along with the Christians in the West, argued that the Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son. According to Davies and Evans, Anselm's main argument states that

only if the Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son is there that symmetry in the relations of the persons of the Trinity which would seem to be required by what we know of the nature of God.³⁵

Writing as a Christian philosopher, Anselm reasoned that

if the Greeks deny that the Holy Spirit exists and proceeds from the Son because the creed is silent about the matter, they should likewise deny that the Holy Spirit exists and proceeds from God because the same creed is silent about the matter. Or if they cannot disavow the latter, they should not be

³³ Ibid., p. 237.

³⁴ Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, introduction to Anselm of Canterbury, *Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. vii–ix.

³⁵ Davies and Evans, introduction to Anselm of Canterbury, *Major Works*, p. xix.

afraid to profess with us that the Holy Spirit exists and proceeds from the Son, since they do not find this statement in the same creed.³⁶

Here Anselm, whom many historians consider the father of scholasticism, used logic to refute the Greeks' position. To further bolster his case, the scholastic doctor, counterclaiming the Greek position, says,

If the Holy Spirit is from the Father, since he is from God who is the Father, we cannot deny that the Holy Spirit is also from the Son, since he is from God who is the Son.³⁷

Then, citing John 10:30, he adds that the Greeks,

when they read that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, of whom the Son says, 'I and the Father are one,' should profess with us that the Holy Spirit undoubtedly also proceeds from the Son, since the Father and the Son have the same substance.³⁸

Moreover, in defence of his conviction, Anselm quoted John 20:22: 'And when he had said this, he breathed on them [the disciples] and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."' Anselm believed that Jesus 'did this so that we understand that the Holy Spirit proceeds from him.'³⁹ In this verse, Jesus tells His disciples,

The Holy Spirit comes out of the depths of my body and from my person, in like manner know that the Holy Spirit, whom I indicate to you by this breath, comes out of the recesses of my divinity and from my person.⁴⁰

Why does the whole issue of *filioque* matter to Anselm? For him, if the Spirit does not proceed from both Father and Son, 'Christian faith is destroyed.'⁴¹ That is, if *filioque* is not true, the perfect harmony in the relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is ruined. Remember that for Anselm such perfect unity in the Trinity is basic to our understanding of the nature of God. Of course, in Anselm's mind, a proper knowledge of God leads to right living. Thus, he wrote the book not only to defend

³⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, 'On the Procession of the Holy Spirit', trans. Richard Regan in *Major Works*, p. 403.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 404.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 413.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 408.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 429.

Western teaching but also to protect the Christian life that emanates from this teaching.

We have seen how Aelred and Bernard both use the doctrine of the Spirit as Love from the Father and the Son to explain and elucidate the Spirit's work in the love between Christ and the church. Anselm has a similar sense of this; he recognizes that the Trinity bears upon the life of the Christian deeply, even in the most intimate things: in speaking of the kiss between Christ and his church, made by the Spirit, as both bridegroom and bride are united in love.

CONCLUSION

To sum up our study, we see the critical role the Holy Spirit has in Medieval spirituality. For Aelred, Christian friendship was a vital vehicle for his personal piety, and the Spirit has a significant role in forming this particular friendship. For Bernard, without the Spirit, the church cannot experience the love of Christ and no soul can know God, for God reveals himself through his Spirit. Finally, for Anselm, the procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son can affect our knowledge of the triune God, a knowledge that also informs and shapes our spirituality.