

Book One

The Origin of Friendship



Book One: An Overview

In this first book, Aelred weaves a number of important themes into his text. For one thing, his selection of the dialogue form reveals something about his understanding of the nature of friendship and the search for truth. Aelred wishes not to instruct “from above,” but to discuss the nature and origin of friendship with a close friend. Because Jesus is present in their midst and in the bond they share, this dialogue moves both horizontally and vertically, toward neighbor and toward God. By including Christ in the discussion, Aelred has turned the dialogue into a meditation, one we can correctly call “a prayerful conversation with God.” His dialogue, in other words, involves not only his conversation with friends, but also with God. To benefit fully from it, we should read it in a slow, meditative fashion, in much the same way a monk would approach a sacred text during *lectio divina*. In such a reading, silence becomes an important mediator between the text and its reader. Through it, Jesus, the quiet and unobtrusive third partner in the dialogue, speaks to the heart and reveals deep insights into the meaning of Christian friendship.

We should also note that Aelred’s ideas appear not only in those passages that he specifically attributes to himself, but at times even on

the lips of his friend Ivo. For this reason, we can also say that his treatise sometimes reflects the movement of his own inner thoughts. To verify this claim, we need only to compare Aelred's words in his Prologue about how "the sweet name of Jesus" (no. 5) and the "salt of Scripture" (no. 5) are later expressed by Ivo in Book One (no 7). By placing his own thoughts in the mind and on the lips of his close friend, he conveys the close harmony of heart and mind that is so essential to those bound together in the friendship with Christ.

As in the Prologue, Aelred continues to make good use of the four main sources of his treatise. He chooses a literary form that follows closely that of Cicero's *On Friendship*. He then uses scripture, the writings of the saints, and his own personal experience of friendship in Christ to shed light on Cicero's sound-but-limited insights into human friendship. Aelred obviously gives priority to the content of his Christian sources over that of the pagan. In the Christian sources, moreover, the order of priority moves from scripture, to the writings of the saints, and lastly, to his own personal experience. Aelred, in other words, believes he speaks with more authority when quoting from scripture than when citing a saint or referring to his own experience of friendship. We would do well to keep this order of priority in mind as we go through the treatise.

In Book One, Aelred also has much to say about the relationship between charity and friendship. To understand the distinction, it is important to see that he presents it against the general background of salvation history and the doctrine of Original Sin. Before humanity's fall from grace, charity and friendship were one and universal in scope. After the fall, however, they split apart, with charity retaining its universal extension, and friendship limited to a select few. In the kingdom to come, Aelred believes that charity and friendship will again be united in Christ's love. Against this important backdrop, he speaks of a further breakup of friendship after the Fall into carnal, worldly, and spiritual relationships. In his mind, the first two focus respectively on pleasure and advantage, and are apparent, rather than true, friendships. Spiritual friendship alone is authentic and is a present-day manifestation of the kingdom to come.

For Aelred, the separation of charity and friendship after the Fall, and the further proliferation of friendship into varying types, depicts the world into which each of us is born. He believes that the need for companionship inscribed in our hearts increases with our deepening experience of life, and results in a vast spectrum of relationships that must be regulated by the carefully reasoned sanctions of law. Such governance allows true friendship to flourish by helping us grow in wisdom, transforming our

inordinate passions into virtuous intentions and desires, and preventing us from being negatively influenced by any of the lesser kinds of friendship. It is reflected in the very rules of the monastery where the dialogue takes place, which indicate to Aelred and Ivo at the end of Book One that it is time to stop for the evening meal and resume the conversation at a later time.