

Introduction



Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167) was a twelfth-century Cistercian abbot and well-known spiritual writer, whose treatise, *Spiritual Friendship*,¹ is widely considered a classic of Christian spirituality. Inspired by Roman statesman and orator Marcus Tullius Cicero’s philosophical dialogue, *On Friendship*,² Aelred approaches his subject from a decidedly religious standpoint, examining both the theoretical and practical aspects of friendship in the light of faith in Christ. Christian friendship, he maintains, is all about extending the fellowship of Christ to another. The more two persons grow as friends, the more they should sense the gentle, unobtrusive, yet abiding presence of this quiet third partner in their lives. He affirms this belief when talking to his friend Ivo at the outset of Book One, stating “Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, in our midst.”³

Plan and Purpose

When writing his treatise, Aelred follows the dialogue format used by Tullius (as Cicero is also called). Although popular and widely used in both classical antiquity and much of Christian history, this literary genre seldom appears in today’s religious literature. When first encountered, it may seem complicated, and even a bit off-putting. Rather than developing a particular argument in a straightforward, linear fashion, a dialogue, as its name suggests, proceeds by way of discussion, with two or more characters often presenting different points of view in their search for truth. When reading a dialogue, a person does not follow a single line of reasoning, but engages in a lively conversation. At its best, dialogue invites the reader to become more than an isolated thinker—he or she becomes an active participant in a group discovery.⁴

In our present time, unfortunately, a sense of active engagement offered by dialogue has the potential to be somewhat dulled by the reader’s lack of familiarity with the literary form, as well as by the distant historical and cultural context in which Aelred wrote. As such, one of my main purposes

in offering a commentary embedded in the text is to offset this unfortunate handicap by helping today's reader enter into the dialogue more easily, and thus discover its freshness and present relevance. In seeking to make Aelred's teaching more accessible, I examine each of the treatise's three books in detail, draw helpful distinctions, and clarify its insights. I do so without compromising Aelred's thought and, for this reason, include Sr. Mary Eugenia Laker's classic English translation for those who wish to benefit more directly from his discourse.⁵ I also pose pertinent questions to help readers probe his thought still further and discover its relevance for their own lives. By examining the work in this way, I hope to encourage others to recognize the value of Aelred's teaching on friendship and to see it as an important dimension for growth in the spiritual life today.

Aelred's Life and Writings

Most of what we know about Aelred's life comes from Walter Daniel's *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*, which appeared shortly after the abbot's death in 1167, and the scant autobiographical information that Aelred provides in his own works.⁶ Aelred was born in 1110 in Hexham in Northumberland near the border with Scotland. He was the son of Eilaf, a married priest, who came from a long line of priestly ancestors whose hereditary charge was to serve as the guardian of the shrine of St. Cuthbert at the cathedral in Durham. However, with the arrival of the Gregorian Reform movement in the mid-eleventh century and its strict demands for priestly celibacy, the days of the married clergy in the Western Church were numbered. In 1083, Aelred's grandfather left Durham for Hexham after the local bishop put the shrine under the charge of monks from Jarrow and instructed the married clergy either to become monks or leave. In 1113, Hexham itself was given over to the care of Augustinian canons, and Aelred's father was left with scant funds to meet his family's needs. In 1138, after years of hardship and dwindling resources, Aelred's father surrendered his remaining claims to Hexham and at his death became a professed member of the monastic community of St. Cuthbert at Durham.

The change of fortunes in Aelred's family due to mandatory celibacy for clergy did not negatively affect Aelred's education or career. Aelred came from a learned family, with strong ties to the noble class. He probably began his education with a tutor at Hexham and then continued it in a school at Durham. At the age of fourteen or fifteen, he was sent to the court of King David I of Scotland to further his education as a member

of the nobility. Aelred thrived in his new surroundings and, before long, found himself charged with a position of responsibility, possibly that of steward of the king's table. Aelred remained at court for roughly nine years, and it was probably during this time that he first read Cicero's *On Friendship*. This work would have a lasting impression on him and provide a model for his own treatment of the subject.

Although Aelred was successful and popular at the king's court, he appears to have been unhappy with his life of luxury, discontent with the superficial nature of his ties, and yearning for something more. In 1134, while on his return from a mission to the archbishop of York, Aelred had occasion to visit the newly established Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx. This monastery had been founded just two years earlier through the monks of Citeaux and the sponsorship of a local lord, Walter Espec. Aelred was so impressed with what he saw that within two days he found himself again at the monastery gate seeking admission.

A man of Aelred's high social caliber, and with such sincere and honest intent, was welcomed with open arms by the fledgling community at Rievaulx. Gaining entrance into a monastery, however, was one thing; perseverance in the monastic life was quite another. The transition from courtly life to the strict rigors of the Cistercian following of Benedictine monasticism was no doubt very difficult for Aelred. Many of the pleasures of life to which he had grown accustomed while at the king's court were now no longer available. In the monastery, he was given the bare essentials for a life completely dedicated to the perennial praise of God through liturgy and the recitation of the psalms, manual labor, and spiritual reading. For Aelred, the contrast between before and after could not have been greater. What he gave up by way of earthly comfort, however, was replaced by the deep inner peace that the Cistercian life evoked. Aelred rose to the occasion and made this new, demanding, yet spiritually enticing world his own. He flourished in his new monastic setting just as he did at the court of King David.

For the most part, Aelred spent his first nine years in the monastery as a novice and professed monk. In 1142, he was sent to Rome as the representative of the abbot to represent the monastery's position concerning the elected successor of the archbishop of York. On his way back to England, it is possible that he found his way to Clairvaux and made the acquaintance of St. Bernard. Upon his return to Rievaulx, he was made novice master of the monastery, a position that he kept for a relatively short period of time. In 1143, he was chosen to lead a group of monks to establish a new monastery at Revesby. Four years later, in 1147, he

was elected abbot of Rievaulx, a position he would hold until his death in 1167.

As a writer, Aelred left behind a substantial body of work noted for its quality and breadth of insight. His spiritual works include: *The Mirror of Charity* (1142–43), *Jesus at the Age of Twelve* (1153–57), *A Rule of Life for a Recluse* (1160–66), *The Pastoral Prayer* (1163–66), *Dialogue on the Soul* (1163–66), *Spiritual Friendship* (1164–67), and several collections of sermons. His historical works include: *The Genealogy of the Kings of England* (1153–54), *The Battle of the Standard* (1155), and *The Life of Saint Edward the Confessor* (1163). His hagiographical works include: *The Life of Saint Ninian* (1154–60), *The Saints of Hexham* (c. 1155), and *The Nun of Watton* (1158–65). A collection of about three hundred of his letters, moreover, survived in England until the fifteenth century.⁷

Aelred's Spiritual and Theological Outlook

Aelred's spiritual and theological outlook relates closely to his Cistercian vocation. The Cistercians were a late-eleventh-century reform of Benedictine monasticism. Founded at Cîteaux (Burgundy) in 1098 by Robert of Molesme with twenty companions, their basic approach to monasticism was to reject anything not stated explicitly in the Benedictine Rule. Although the community had a rough beginning and was at one point even in danger of extinction, its fortunes were greatly enhanced by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who entered Cîteaux in 1112 with a group of thirty noble companions. Bernard would become one of the most influential churchmen of his day and was a great promoter of the Cistercians. During his lifetime he oversaw a remarkable expansion of the order and eventually became known as its second founder.⁸

The Cistercians were monastic rigorists and interpreted St. Benedict's Rule to the letter. They clothed themselves solely according to what was explicitly stated: a tunic of wool, a cowl of the same material, and a scapular for work. They slept on mats with only a pillow and a blanket of wool for bedding. Their daily lives centered around common prayer, private devotion, and manual labor. Rejecting all revenues of an ecclesiastical or feudal nature, they built their monasteries in uninhabited forests or marshlands where, with the help of lay coadjutors known as *conversi*, they settled or reclaimed many of the interior regions of Europe. The Cistercians simplified the divine worship (*opus dei*), stripping from it centuries of liturgical accretions. They also did away with elaborate church

art: crosses of gold or silver were not permitted; chalices could only be of silver; liturgical vestments such as chasubles and albs could not contain ornaments of silver, silk, or gold; their architecture and interior furnishings were simple but tasteful. All in all, the Cistercians wanted to reconcile the text of the Rule of Benedict with their private spiritual lives, their worship, and their source of revenue. They tried to restore the balance of work and prayer so highly regarded in the Rule. Their liturgy, work, prayer, and even their legislation were all an attempt to preserve to the best of their ability the letter of the Rule.⁹

As monks, the Cistercians were also deeply influenced by the monastic approach to theology. Monastic theology was an extension of the patristic tradition. Its goal was compunction, the desire of heaven, the wisdom gained from a true Christian gnosis. According to M.D. Chenu, it “was an anticipation of paradise where all dialectic would be ludicrous, where wisdom would absorb all science, even sacred science.”¹⁰ In the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux was one the great representatives of the monastic approach to theology. Aelred, whom his own contemporaries called the “Bernard of the North,” was another.¹¹

Monastic theology had five major characteristics. In the first place, it was *experiential*. The monk desired a personal knowledge of God and used learning as a means of achieving it. For this reason, prayer and study were inexorably linked. Through them, the monk came to a deeper understanding of himself and was thus able to give greater praise and glory to God. By contemplating the mysteries contained in Holy Writ, creation, and the human soul, the monk sought a close affective union with his creator.

In the second place, monastic theology was *symbolic*. The Neo-Platonic background of monastic thought enabled the cloister dweller to view all of reality as a visible reflection of God’s glory. Everything functioned as a symbol of another reality and expressed both a similarity and a difference with its transcendent referent. The nondemonstrative method of monastic theology was closely linked with *meditatio* and *allegoria* (literally, “to say something other”). The symbols discovered in creation, Holy Writ, and the liturgy (not to mention the human soul) carried the monk toward the contemplation of the divine mysteries.

In the third place, monastic theology was *traditionalist*. It was very cautious of any attempts to change the symbolic system arranged for the expressed purpose of leading the monk to an experience of and ultimate union with the divine. This does not mean that the monk held a static view of the past or that he could not think progressively in concrete situations. It did mean, however, that he was terribly wary of novelty for novelty’s

sake, especially when it came to formulations concerning the divine mysteries. Because the monk used the symbols of theology *to lead him to an experience of God*, he was very hesitant to change them simply to make them more rational and systematic.

In the fourth place, monastic theology emphasized *the epistemological role of love*. Love's power to unite heightens the monk's desire for God and brings about in him a connatural knowledge of the divine. This intuitive knowledge brings with it moments of intense insight that reveal a deep sharing in the life of the divine. These insights come to the individual by the inner illuminating light of God and contribute to his interior, spiritual growth. The affective life of the monk was thus intimately tied to his intellectual activity. Reason and will worked together in the closest harmony; love could understand what the mind often could not even begin to comprehend.

Finally, monastic theology placed *limitations on the use of reason and secular learning*. Reason, it was thought, could get in the way of theology's clearly stated purpose of union with God. Vain curiosity could distract the monk from prayer. The concern for clarity could move spiritual experience to the periphery of theological thought. Argument and speculation could replace growth in charity as the purpose of learning. For reasons such as these, secular knowledge was thought to have little value in itself and was considered useful only to the extent that it helped the monk in his spiritual journey. It was to be used with extreme caution and, at all times, submitted with care to the traditional judgments of faith.¹²

Aelred's spiritual outlook was affected by all of the above. The physical rigorism that led the Cistercians to settle Europe's interior wastelands reflected an inner conviction that the whole universe needed to be reclaimed for God, especially the wild and unruly nature of man. Putting down roots in these harsh, forboding places pointed to an interior journey where the savage and unruly passions of the soul had to be confronted and tamed. Aelred's reflection on his own personal experience was a primary source for his spiritual teaching. Along with traditional sources of scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers (especially St. Augustine), it provides a fundamental point of reference for gauging progress in the spiritual life. Aelred wanted to experience God, not merely learn about him. He believed that creation was rife with symbols that reflected the identity of a loving and compassionate creator. Love, in his mind, was both the way of God and the way to God. It offered a knowledge of God that came not through intellectual concepts, but through a connatural union of wills. Friendship, he believed, was a way in which this love could

be experienced on earth. Impressed as he was by the learning in a secular work such as Cicero's *On Friendship*, he was well aware of its inherent weaknesses and set out to write his own treatise on friendship precisely because he believed that the Christian faith could transform human friendship and raise it to new heights.

Aelred's spiritual vision represented the best that the Cistercians and the monastic approach to theology could offer and flowed into his vision of the cosmos, Church, and society. For him, the universe and everything in it was created according to a hierarchical pattern by a loving and caring God. Man is a microcosm of this cosmos, and his fall from grace had repercussions throughout the whole created order. The great disfigurement of sin is rectified by the refigurement of grace made possible through Christ's redeeming action. As a result of this action, the wounds of human nature are healed and people are able to move away from their self-centeredness and walk once more in a humble, loving relationship with God and one another.¹³

The Church, for Aelred, is the fellowship of saints in heaven and on earth. It enjoys communion with God, yet is still on a pilgrim journey; it is a reflection of God's intrinsic unity and his concern for humanity's welfare. Aelred distinguishes three fundamental orders in the Church (clerics, monks, and laity), but introduces many variations within them (solitaries, monks, regular canons, secular clergy, and married and unmarried laity). All are called to embody the Christian virtues, especially love, humility, and patience. The Church possesses a hierarchy of order (bishops, priests, deacons) and a hierarchy of holiness (monks, clergy, laity). These holy ranks complement each other and are important for the life and governance of Church and society. They reflect the hierarchical pattern embedded in all of reality, including the hierarchical ordering of divine love itself.¹⁴

When he entered Rievaulx in 1134, Aelred made a fundamental choice about the direction his life would take. This decision marks a turning point, and reveals many of his core beliefs about the spiritual life. For one thing, he turned his back on the world and a promising ecclesiastical or courtly career to embrace a life that was both physically demanding and devoted to the perennial praise of God through the recitation of the psalms, spiritual reading, and manual labor. He did so because his desire for God was so strong that it outweighed all worldly considerations and led him to embrace a way of life that was most conducive to his own personal conversion. Entering the monastery, for Aelred, was not a condemnation of the world he left behind, but a genuine response to a heartfelt call to

turn his life completely over to God and to participate in the building of God's kingdom on earth that life in the monastery represented.

The monastery, for Aelred, was a beacon of light in a world immersed in shadow and darkness. It pointed to a world yet to come, but already present. This eschatological, "already-but-not-yet" character of monastic life permeates much of his writing and has a great deal of significance for his treatise on friendship. The cloister was a greenhouse where the seeds of the kingdom could swell, sprout, and reach fruition. Within its cloister walls, it was possible for true friendship in Christ to take root, deepen, and mature. These close, intimate bonds were concrete signs of God's loving presence in the world, and mirrored those of the kingdom.

Spiritual Friendship

Although Aelred wrote *Spiritual Friendship* (1163–64) late in life, the work stands in continuity with his earlier spiritual writings. This is true especially with regard to his first work, *The Mirror of Charity* (1142–43), which he wrote at the request of Bernard of Clairvaux to provide a firm theological foundation for the Cistercian life. This treatise contains in germ form the key insights into the nature of love that would come to full term in later works such as *Spiritual Friendship*. Its theme is that the Cistercian life embraces Christ's cross, a yoke made easy to bear through love, which in turn is generated by the cross. In many ways, Aelred's treatise on friendship is nothing but a deeper development of this single intuition.¹⁵

Aelred's theory of love as expressed in *The Mirror of Charity* provides an important backdrop for understanding his theory of spiritual friendship. His approach focuses on the threefold experience of what he terms *attraction*, *intention*, and *fruition*.¹⁶ *Attraction* has to do with the immediate, desirable effect that someone or something has on the mind. This effect occurs naturally and comes from the sensible impressions made on the mind by the outside world. *Intention*, by way of contrast, concerns the will's inclination toward a particular person or object. It comes about by a decision to pursue someone or something as a specific goal. *Fruition* results from this decision and concerns our enjoyment of the benefits of the desired person or object. This enjoyment is the fruit of attaining that for which we long.¹⁷ To cite one simple example: I see a cup of water and am drawn to it (*Attraction*); I move toward it and pick it up, because I have decided to drink it (*Intention*); I quench my thirst and experience delight (*Fruition*).

In a world without sin, these three elements of love would be unhindered in their movement toward the good. In a world corrupted, however, by humanity's fall from grace, the powers of the soul have been weakened, and it is possible for any of these elements to tend toward evil.¹⁸ To put it another way: I can feel an attraction toward the idea of robbing a stranger (*Evil Attraction*); I can freely choose to rob a particular stranger (*Evil Inclination*); and I can enjoy the money gained from the successful robbery (*Evil Fruition*). For Aelred, only the power of Christ's redeeming grace can heal the weakened powers of the soul and enable a person to love in a way commensurate to the dignity of his nature. This grace transforms our intellectual pride into humility and heals our defective wills so that we can love.

With regard to friendship, grace enables us to see ourselves as we truly are, and befriend someone in a way that our attraction to, inclination towards, and enjoyment of him or her are upright and well ordered. *Spiritual Friendship* demonstrates how the love of friends, healed by grace, mirrors the love of God. The work contains both theoretical material about the nature of Christian friendship, as well as practical suggestions about how to deal with difficulties that invariably arise among friends.

Spiritual Friendship is composed of a Prologue and three Books. The Prologue introduces the work through a brief autobiographical note and a statement of Aelred's purpose for writing the treatise. Book One deals with the origin and nature of friendship. In it, Aelred talks with Ivo, a younger monk of the monastery, about the origins of true friendship. He uses Cicero's definition of friendship as a point of departure, yet finds Cicero's definition lacking the insights of divine revelation (namely, the revelation that true friendship, like all things worthwhile, begins and ends in Christ). Aelred goes on to discuss the various types of friendship and arrives at a threefold distinction: the carnal, the worldly, and the spiritual. He also examines the relationship between charity and friendship, and concludes that they were united before Adam's fall, separated after it, and are destined to be rejoined in the kingdom to come. During our time on earth, charity can exclude friendship, but friendship can never exclude charity.¹⁹

Book Two focuses on the fruit and perfection of friendship. It takes place some years later. Ivo is dead, and Aelred now enters into conversation with two younger monks of his monastery named Walter and Gratian. Walter has read the recently discovered paper containing Aelred's original discussion with Ivo, and now wishes to know more about the fruition of

friendship. Gratian's appearance widens the discussion and brings some welcome light comic relief to the conversation.

In the course of their discussion, Aelred tells Walter and Gratian that true friendship is eternal and bears fruit in both this life and the next. He likens the various stages of friendship to a threefold kiss: the carnal, the spiritual, and the intellectual (what today we would call the "mystical"). The first is physical; the second, a mingling of the spirits of two friends; the third, a mingling of a person's spirit with the Spirit of God. He goes on to say that only the good can become true spiritual friends, and that Christ demonstrated the proper limits of friendship when he laid down his life. Aelred cites many examples from scripture to support his claims.²⁰

Book Three continues the discussion of Aelred, Walter, and Gratian, and deals with the conditions necessary for unbroken friendship. It is by far the longest and most practical of the three books. In it, Aelred talks with Walter and Gratian about the various stages by which two people become friends. These include: selection, probation, admission, and perfect harmony of life. With regard to the selection of potential friends, Aelred outlines the various vices that would disqualify a person as a candidate for spiritual friendship, and goes into detail about dissolving a "friendship" in the initial stages once its lack of authenticity becomes clear. When speaking about probation (the "testing" of a potential friend), he describes the various qualities to be tested in a candidate for friendship. While the idea of testing potential friends might seem strange to modern readers, for Aelred it is essential. Spiritual friendship, he maintains, is so important for our lives that we should not enter into it lightly, and likewise should be very careful when selecting our friends and testing their worthiness. When discussing admission, Aelred outlines the qualities that need to be continually fostered, and describes how one should go about cultivating them so that friends will live in communion with each other and achieve true harmony of life. All during this time, Walter and Gratian raise objections and ask for clarifications. Aelred, in turn, cites examples from sacred scripture, the Church Fathers, and his own personal experience to clarify matters.²¹

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