Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

Aelred of Rievaulx

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C ISTERCIAN SPIRITUALITY AND CHRISTIAN FRIENDSHIP have each featured in 'Traditions of Spiritual Guidance',¹ so for Aelred to be treated in his own right might seem unnecessary. After all, this twelfth-century abbot of a Cistercian community in Yorkshire is known almost exclusively for his teaching on friendship, so what more can there be to add? As I hope will become clear, a tighter focus on Aelred himself provides the opportunity for discovering in his theology both a great richness and a direct relevance to contemporary spirituality. While Aelred writes of and for monks, his reflections on how human and divine love intersect reach beyond the celibate friendships of the cloister to marriage and all human relationships.

The context of Aelred's reflections is twofold: the monastic traditions, both old and renewed, within which he lived and thought and prayed, and the circumstances of his own life. He brought these two together in articulate and insightful ways, and his thinking forms a unique offering for us, living eight centuries and countless worlds away from the tranquillity of the wooded valley of the Rye in the first half of the twelfth century.

The context of the Cistercian reform

The Cistercian reform is an extraordinary phenomenon to observe across that gap in time, space and sensibility. Within a very small number of years, houses of 'white monks' springing from the 'New Monastery' at Cîteaux were to be found all over Europe, attracting men of high ideals and great personal gifts.

The wider cultural context was one in which the development of 'courtly love' was effecting a profound change in how individuals related one to another. We risk greatly underestimating the measure of this change if we think merely of troubadours and knights errant (in their scrubbed Hollywood versions or otherwise). The revolution in relationships in our own period, with its visible origins in a revaluing of women but with effects on all the ways we relate, pro-

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vides a better parallel. Just as these changes in our day have been both accompanied and furthered by much discussion, so it was in Aelred's day: 'Never did so many people talk so much or so well of love as in this twelfth century.'² Understandings of relationships based in feudal structure and the expectations of mutual protection and advantage were giving way to more complex, more demanding, and potentially more rewarding insights into the nature of human love.

The Cistercian reform can be seen as embodying this general development in a particular way, that of the monastic life, and in its turn influencing the wider culture both by lived example and by the theology of relationships that developed out of that living. The appeal was to those who valued both the heroic and the affective: a rule of life of heroic simplicity and rigour to be lived out in a community that was seen as a school of love, rule and community bringing men to the experience of the love of God. The Cistercian fathers' understanding of human nature was a fundamentally optimistic one. The likeness of God may be tarnished in human beings, but the image of God remains as defining our true nature. Central to that nature is our capacity to love: obscured and open to abuse as it is, our capacity to love is what makes us capable of union with God. For individuals striving towards God, it is in loving that the likeness of God is restored in us.

This optimism was built on an emerging confidence that close human relationships could enhance the spiritual life. The Desert Fathers had stressed apatheia, 'the weaning of worldly affections in order to make larger the spiritual dimension . . . What was important was withdrawal and distance from one's fellow human beings.'3 Even they had not been consistent, but 'had alternately treasured their friends as guides and helpers on the way to virtue, and rejected any personal entanglements which could keep them from the purity of heart which they prized above all'.⁴ The re-evaluation of human relationships characterizing the time of their foundation allowed the Cistercians to draw on classical and biblical language and to develop a more positive anthropology that was a true Christian humanism. The development of this theology of the human was indeed made necessary by the gap that they discovered between, on the one hand, the philosophical and theological positions that were parts of their inheritance, and, on the other, the lived community and biblical imagery that were their contemporary experience. (In this experienced gap, as in other ways, we may feel these distant contemplatives to be kindred spirits.)

Aelred the man

It was in this setting that Aelred eventually found his home. He was son and grandson of the parish priests of Hexham. In his grandfather's day mandatory clerical celibacy was one of those newfangled theological ideas from the Continent, though by Aelred's time the new discipline was taking hold, and his father eventually retired from his benefice in favour of a community of canons. The young Aelred's family had the means and the contacts to ensure both his education to a high standard and his placement as a youth in the Norman-influenced court of King David of Scotland, where he grew up as a companion of the young Prince Henry. Exactly what office he eventually held is unclear: he himself refers to being experienced 'only in matters of the kitchen', but some writers portray him as having been Steward of the royal household. What is abundantly clear from his later life, even if totally ignored by his first biographers,⁵ is that he had great gifts both in administration and leadership.

Equally clear is that Aelred was a man with a deeply affective nature. He was involved in at least one sexually active relationship while he was at David's court, and his powerful emotions were at the time a source of great anxiety for him, bringing him to the verge of the suicidal.⁶ His own account of this aspect of his life borrows heavily from Augustine's *Confessions*, and is stronger on rhetoric than on information. What is beyond argument is that all the great attachments of his life (recorded and celebrated in his writings), were to men, and that the turbulence of his feelings persisted after his entry into monastic life. As novice-master he had constructed for himself a cistern under the floor of the noviciate in which he could immerse himself in icy water to subdue his passions.⁷ That it is impossible to make any definitive judgement about his sexuality has not prevented countless gay men from finding Aelred to be an appropriate, attractive and effective patron.⁸

In 1134, at the age of twenty-four, Aelred made what appears to have been intended as a passing visit to the newly founded monastery of Rievaulx, while staying on the King's business in the house of its Lord and patron Walter Espec. The next day he returned, again initially only to visit, but in the event to stay for the remaining thirty-one years of his life. 'He felt, looking back on his youth, that love had made him a pagan. But in the first Cistercian monastery that he visited, he saw at once how love could make him a saint.'⁹

Within seven years he was novice-master, but after a matter of months he went to Rievaulx's daughter-house of Revesby as its founding abbot. Four years later he was elected Abbot of Rievaulx. When he died on 12 January 1167, after twenty years of ruling the abbey, he left a flourishing community with six hundred choir monks and lay brothers packing the monastic church on great feasts. That Rievaulx grew fast, even by the standards of the Cistercians of those days, was due to Aelred's understanding of what his monastery should be. Walter Daniel's *Vita* has Aelred saying:

Remember ... that it is the singular and supreme glory of the house of Rievaulx that above all else it teaches tolerance of the weak and compassion for others in their necessities ... All, whether weak or strong, should find in Rievaulx a place of peace ... The house which withholds toleration from the weak is not to be regarded as a house of religion.¹⁰

A simple chronicling of his recorded achievements in terms of books and letters written, journeys made to General Chapters, visitations undertaken of houses for which he carried responsibility, sermons preached on great occasions both ecclesiastical and civil, disputes mediated and so forth, makes it clear that here was a man of extraordinary energy and drive, who had a noteworthy influence on the events of his day. As a writer of history – he seems to have judged this the important aspect of his writing – he was a noted chronicler of events also.

Aelred and the theology of love

But it is not as a maker or as a recorder of history that he is remembered. Most of his letters have vanished, but a good number of sermons exist still, alongside the major works for which he is best known. In all of these, something of the sweetness of his nature comes through, despite the barriers of time and translation (as does his sharp, if gently wielded, sense of humour). Chief among the major works are two: *The mirror of charity*, written probably while he was novice-master and later Abbot of Revesby, and *Spiritual friendship*,¹¹ apparently written in two parts, and completed only towards the end of his life. In the *Mirror*, written at the prompting

of St Bernard, Aelred develops a general theology of love. *Friendship*, it seems fair to assume, was undertaken as much to clarify and work out his own self-understanding as with any particular readership in mind. In it he moves from the general to the specific, and explores the place of friendship in the spiritual life – specifically within the monastic setting.¹²

In the Mirror, Aelred builds on the existing foundations of that distinctively Cistercian anthropology already noted. At first sight, much of the book seems to consist of a tapestry of biblical texts. Biblical images and the texts that carried these images were the normative and almost the exclusive furniture of the minds of these monks: it is difficult for those of us whose lives are not so totally immersed in the liturgy of the hours and the eucharist to realize the degree to which this is true. One guiding image dominates the Mirror, that of the sabbath: perhaps the richness that this image holds for Aelred tells us something of what we have lost by reducing our thinking about the sabbath to matters of obligation and observance.¹³ For Aelred, the sabbath takes its origins in God's sabbath, God's rest on the seventh day as recorded in Genesis. God's rest is the source of our rest and our peace, and it is also our goal: when we come to abide in God, as the Father and the Son abide in each other, then we shall share that rest, the shalom of God which is identical to God's love - God's very being:

He reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other by his ever present and omnipotent majesty, but he disposes all things gently, restful and resting in his own ever calm charity. Charity alone is his changeless and eternal rest, his eternal and changeless tranquillity, his eternal and changeless Sabbath . . . For his charity is his very will and also his very goodness, and all this is nothing but his being. Indeed, this is for him to be always resting, that is, always existing, in his ever gracious charity, in his ever peaceful will and in his ever abounding goodness.¹⁴

The two sabbaths

Before we come to the sabbath of God's love, we experience two other sabbaths, each embodying an experience of love that forms us to be able to experience God's love:

Let love of self, then, be man's first sabbath, love of neighbour the second, and love of God the sabbath of sabbaths. As we said above,

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the spiritual sabbath is rest for the spirit, peace of heart, and tranquillity of mind. This sabbath is sometimes experienced in love of oneself, it is sometimes derived from the sweetness of brotherly love, and, beyond all doubt, it is brought to perfection in the love of God.¹⁵

Aelred is clear: love cannot be divided in the way we might think it both can and should be:

Although there is an evident distinction in this triple love, a marvellous bond does exist among the three, so that each is found in all, and all in each. None of them can be possessed without all. And when one wavers they all diminish . . . Somehow, then, love of neighbour precedes love of God. Likewise, love¹⁶ of self precedes love of neighbour. It precedes it, I say, in sequence, not in excellence . . . Of course, a certain part of this love [of God], even if not its fullness, necessarily precedes both love of self and neighbour . . . That a person may love himself, the love of God is formed in him; that one may love one's neighbour, the capacity of one's heart is enlarged. Then as this divine fire grows warmer little by little it absorbs the other loves into its fullness, like so many sparks . . . these three loves are engendered by one another, nourished by one another, and fanned into flame by one another. Then they are all brought to perfection together.¹⁷

The peace of the first sabbath is that of the tranquil conscience, when the person finds, within themselves,

nothing disturbed, nothing disordered, nothing to torment and worry him, but rather, everything pleasant, everything harmonious, everything peaceful, everything tranquil . . . This gives rise to marvellous security, and from security to marvellous joy, and from joy to a kind of jubilation which bursts out yet more devoutly in God's praise the more clearly [the soul] recognises whatever good there is in her is his gift.¹⁸

The second sabbath is well described by Charles Dumont, monk of Scourmount and one of the great twentieth-century scholars of Aelred:

The monk enters the second Sabbath when he opens out to others . . . His capacity to love grows larger by the very practice of love. The brotherly affection which develops in community enlarges and

increases one's capacity to love ... Just as in St Bernard, the second degree in Aelred's journey of return to God is the obligatory passageway, the decisive trial which frees the monk from the principal obstacle to love: egoism or self-centredness. But this love of others, this fraternal peace, is possible only for someone who is himself inwardly at peace. These two degrees, then, work together. Love of self and love of neighbour represent a purification, a catharsis of the heart by which it frees itself from tensions and divisions and recovers its unity.¹⁹

What Dumont describes as 'this tranquil and optimistic assurance of the bond between nature and grace in different relationships'²⁰can be experienced by modern readers as certainly refreshing, perhaps reassuring, and maybe even prophetic in its Judaeo-Christian humanism. It might, however, appear naïve to those schooled either by the Rule of St Benedict or by the works of Sigmund Freud.

Friendship and the building of community

The Fathers of western monasticism had two great concerns regarding friendships and community life. The first was that any other love could only compete with and detract from the direct love of God. The second was rooted in the risk (perceived as the near inevitability) of factionalism on the part of the monks and inequity of treatment of members of the community on the part of the abbot and his officials. What might today be seen as a matter of equal (or greater) concern, namely the possibility of sexually active relationships developing, receives little discussion in the monastic literature, though the penitentials and moral texts of the centuries around Aelred's time make it clear that sexual activity between men was seen as gravely sinful.²¹

Aelred's views on each of these concerns are both optimistic and realistic.²² To the first he opposes the particularly Cistercian anthropology we have already noted. Put simply: we have one capacity for love; it is that capacity which enables our ultimate union with God; we grow in our capacity for loving by loving – ourselves and our fellow men and women as well as God 'directly'. It is this same insight which leads Aelred to assert that genuine love between particular members of a community can only build up the whole community.

To the third concern, though more ours rather than his, Aelred was far from blind. In the *Rule of life for a recluse* written for his

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sister, he laments (in somewhat hyperbolic tones) the loss of his own virginity at the court of King David, and writes of 'that abominable sin which inflames a man with passion for a man or a woman for a woman'.²³ In the *Mirror* he writes scathingly of some of those 'who govern the Church':

To enter the homes of some our bishops – and still more shameful, some of our monks – is like entering Sodom and Gomorrah. Effeminate, coiffeured young men, dressed up like courtesans, strut around with their rumps half bare. Scripture says about them: *They have put the boys in brothels.*²⁴

Closer to home, he offers the cautionary example of 'very chaste ascetic men who detested every trace of dissoluteness with the greatest horror', but who move from a virtuous attachment to a younger monk, inspired by the other's holiness of life, to finding increasing pleasure 'at the sight of them (and, I might say, their embrace), until 'they could scarcely keep company with them without some titillation of vice'.

But it is important to note that it *is* a cautionary tale. Where more recent writers might command that the attachment be broken at once, Aelred's conclusion is clearly open to the possibility that such attachments may find their way back to a better form:

When our attachment, however rational or even spiritual, extends itself to someone of suspect age or sex, it is extremely advisable that it be held back within the bosom of the mind and not permitted to spill over into inane compliments or soft tendernesses, unless perhaps, because of this, the attachment may occasionally develop maturely and temperately until virtue loved and praised may be more fervently practised.²⁵

Christ the third in our midst

Overall, it seems that Aelred combined his characteristic realism and optimism in this aspect of life also – his own life and those of his monks. He is an unashamed romantic when reflecting on the monks he has loved, and it was a matter of note that he allowed demonstrations of affection among members of his community. 'He did not treat them with the pedantic imbecility habitual in some silly abbots,' says Walter Daniel in Chapter 31 of the *Vita*, 'who, if a monk takes a brother's hand in his own, or says something they do not like, demand his cowl, strip and expel him. Non sic Aelredus, non sic. Not so Aelred, not so.'

Perhaps Douglas Roby sums it up best in his introduction to the Cistercian Publications edition of *Friendship*: 'Aelred, in other words, seems to have had not only confidence in his own ability to deal with the sexual component of his friendships, but to have trusted his monks to be able to do the same. Nor is there any evidence that Aelred's confidence was misplaced.'²⁶

Aelred's book on Spiritual friendship encompasses a good deal of his life – in the double sense of being composed in two parts widely separated in time, and of treating of a dimension of life that was of great importance to him. It takes the form of a series of conversations between Aelred and various monks, and opens with a sentence which can serve to sum up the whole of its teaching: 'Ecce, ego et tu, et spero quod Christus tertius est inter nos. Here we are, you and I, and I hope that Christ is the third in our midst.' The dialogues and the personalities of each of the monks involved reach out across the distances of time and translation with a freshness which a summary cannot hope to emulate.

On definite friendship

From Cicero's De amicitia Aelred draws a working definition of friendship which includes both good will and charity. Aelred sees the first as referring to our rational choice or judgement to benefit another, and the second to our enjoyment of our natural affection for another. In the life of heaven we will be able to love in perfect freedom, judgement and feelings going hand in hand. But in the present world true love is undermined by cupidity: we cease to love for the sake of the object of our love, and turn to our own enjoyment. In heaven the love we should experience for all in response to the command and example of God, and the love in which we take delight, will come together, and it will no longer be necessary to distinguish charity and friendship. But until then we run the risk of false loves and friendships, and so must limit our attempts at friendship to those who are good. (And because our present human experience of friendship involves this aspect of limitation, Aelred does not agree with the proposal that we can say 'God is friendship', while agreeing to 'Those who abide in friendship abide in God'. But the closing lines of the book, looking to the fullness of life, see beyond these limits.)

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There are two forms of false friendship, says Aelred: carnal friendships and self-seeking friendships. In carnal friendships the delight and enjoyment we feel dominate the friendship, and reason and judgement find no place. Such friendships are typical of the young – childish – and while they can lead to sin, and in so doing demonstrate that they lack good will (in the sense of a rational decision to benefit another), since to lead another to sin is never to benefit them, they have within them at least the element of 'charity' in the sense of attraction and enjoyment. Self-seeking friendships, by contrast, have rationality but lack charity. Jean Leclercq points out that the monks contributed significantly to a key task of these centuries, that of learning to form friendships not grounded in calculated balances of mutual advantage:

It was the monks who contributed most to the rediscovery of a type of friendship which had almost disappeared from literature after the invasions: pure disinterested friendship which solicits no favours ... People had to relearn to love one another without ulterior motives, to write to each other to give pleasure, or to do another good without seeking material advantages.²⁷

We might just be tempted to think that carnal friendships pose the greater risk today, but I suspect Aelred identifies two perennial distortions of friendship.²⁸ But we should note that each is a distortion, not a negation: true friendship is the perfection of the false, not its opposite. With care, each can grow into true, spiritual friendship. If I may quote myself at this point:

Here it is our common usage which handicaps us, for while Aelred's use of 'spiritual' takes in all (including man's relationship with God) that is most truly human, we tend to think of 'spiritual' as excluding just those aspects of our living that are experienced as most comfortingly human.²⁹

There are those whom it is difficult to befriend, such as the irascible, the suspicious, the garrulous and the fickle. We need to test our potential friends, not in the sense of provocation or manipulation, but by observing whether or not they demonstrate the loyalty, good intentions, discretion and patience necessary between friends. Initially small acts of trust and openness allow me to see whether this person to whom I am drawn is capable of being a friend 'with whom I can go forward to Christ's friendship'.³⁰

Friendship and the love of God

It is when Aelred turns to the way in which our friendships relate to God's love that we touch the deepest and richest aspects of his theology of love. Charles Dumont expresses it most directly:

This experience is not simply that of the soul's efforts in its struggle against the passions. It is at the same time the experience of grace ... This re-ordering of our love draws us near to God, makes us cleave to him, and, by that very fact, brings us into conformity with him and makes us partakers of the divine nature. It deifies us.³¹

When it is true of friends that 'the purpose of their friendship is not only to love one another, but in loving one another to love God as well', then 'their friendship is the activity of God's love working freely between them'. In such a friendship 'we learn what form our love must take if we are to attain the happiness of loving God and others as God has always loved us . . . we not only learn to love as God loves, but through that love we are changed, we become Godly'.³²

So it is in loving that we become godly - and in the love that is friendship that we experience this most fully, and are most profoundly transformed. And this is an image of the reality of the God who is love, as two short extracts from Aelred's sermons make clear:

But since the rational soul cannot give anything to God, he created a great many creatures having the same nature, so that in this way the likeness to divine goodness might appear through the services they render mutually to one another.

Almighty God could no doubt grant instant perfection to everyone and bestow all the virtues on each of us. But his loving arrangement is that we should need one another.³³

So love, and the friendships which in a fallen world are a necessity rather than a diversion or a danger, teach us how to love God, transform us as well as teach us, and allow us a foretaste of the divine life of giving and receiving in plenitude.

We make our way back to God not as solitary travellers, but as fellow-pilgrims, shoulder-to-shoulder en route to a Kingdom that has always been our home. But our return to God takes place in a special kind of relationship we have with one another. We journey to God through the friendships we have with one another in Christ. Spiritual friendship is our return to God. It is not just that as we seek God we find ourselves alongside others; rather we must seek God communally because God is found not apart from, nor even at the end of, but always in and through the friendships of those whose life is one in Christ.³⁴

And in the life of the resurrection, as Aelred expresses it in the closing words of his book, 'this friendship, to which here we admit but few, will be outpoured upon all, and by all outpoured upon God, and God shall be all in all'.³⁵

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NOTES

1 Michael Casey, 'The Cistercian way', *The Way* vol 37, no 1; Deborah Smith Douglas, 'No greater love: reclaiming Christian friendship', *The Way* vol 35 no 1 (1995).

2 G. Dumeige, Richard de Saint Victor et l'idée chrêtienne de l'amour (Paris, 1952), p 3.

3 Brian McGuire, 'Looking back on friendship: medieval experience and modern context', *Cistercian Studies* vol XXI no 2 (1986), p 125.

4 Douglas Roby, Introduction to Cistercian Publications edition of *Spiritual friendship* (q.v.), p 16.

5 But the early biographers were in fact highly selective hagiographers, and Aelred's image has been diminished in consequence. As Marsha Dutton points out in her Introduction to the *Vita Aelredi* of his contemporary and friend Walter Daniel: "The man whom Gilbert of Hoyland remembered as a man of wit and passion, "endued with a ready understanding but a passionate affection", is all but invisible in Walter's portrayal of a gentle, sensitive, humble abbot'.

6 Mirror, I, 79.

7 Vita, 16. This was a not uncommon ascetic practice in his time, anticipating by six or seven centuries the time-honoured use of the cold bath for the same purpose in the English public schools.

8 While Aelred as novice-master and abbot encouraged friendships and the expression of affection among his monks, he was very clear that 'carnal ties' were to be cut ruthlessly: 'This is the hard way of righteousness', *Sermones de tempore et de sanctis* (in Migne *PL* 195, 322c), cited in Brian Bethune, 'Personality and spirituality', *Cistercian Studies* vol XX, no 2

(1985), p 101. The point is worth making, since Aelred appears in some recent quasi-scholarly literature as effectively advocating what could only be described as 'monastic free-love'.

9 G. Webb and A. Walker, *The mirror of charity*, translated and arranged (London: Mowbrays, 1962).

10 Ch 29 in F. M. Powicke's translation (London, Nelson, 1950), pp 36-38.

11 The definitive English editions are published in the Cistercian Fathers Series by Cistercian Publications, CF 17 and CF 5 respectively. All references are to these editions, except where noted.

12 The pastoral prayer, relatively recently recognized as Aelred's, is rich beyond this author's ability to discuss. It is available in the Cistercian Fathers Series, in CF 2, *Treatises* and *The pastoral prayer*, and appeared in *The Way*, July 1964, as 'The prayer of a superior'. It repays prayerful reading by present-day superiors.

13 The Hassidim, equally living a life soaked in biblical imagery, have much to teach us here. 14 *Mirror*, I, 19, 55 and 56, quoting Wis 8:1.

15 Mirror, III, 2, 3.

16 Aelred uses the word *dilectio*, which calls to mind the phrase of Julian of Norwich: 'He loves us and *enjoys* us . . .'

17 Mirror, III, 2, 3 and 4.

18 Mirror, III, 3, 6.

19 C. Dumont, Introduction to Cistercian Fathers edition of Mirror, p 37.

20 Ibid., p 38.

21 And cf note 8 above.

22 Perhaps the charge of naïveté is easier to lay at his door the more we are taken in by the partial image of Aelred in Walter Daniel's *Vita*.

23 In Treatises and The pastoral prayer, cf note 12, section 32, p 93, and section 15, p 64. 24 Mirror, III, 26, 64, quoting Joel 3:3.

25 Mirror, III, 28, 67 and 68 (modern readers may wonder whether the ascetics here 'protest too much').

26 Friendship, Introduction, p 22.

27 Jean Leclercq, The love of learning and the desire for God (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), p 181.

28 A recently published book begins by quoting a newspaper advertisement that appeared in 1990, promoting the services of a financial analysis firm referred to as D&B: 'I'm 30,000 feet over Nebraska and the guy next to me sounds like a prospect. I figure I'll buy him a drink, but first I excuse myself and go to the phone. I call D&B for his company's credit rating. Three minutes later I'm back in my seat buying a beer for my new best friend', M. Scott Peck, A world waiting to be born (London: Arrow, 1994), p 3.

29 Brendan Callaghan, 'Friendship and love in Aelred's theology', *The Month* (April 1981), pp 133-136.

30 Friendship, II, 21.

31 C. Dumont, Introduction to Cistercian Publications edition of Mirror, pp 36 and 33.

32 Paul Waddell, Friendship and the moral life (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp 107-108.

33 Sermones in Pentecostem, II and de Tempore, VII. The first is quoted in C. Dumont, 'Personalism in community according to Aelred of Rievaulx', Cistercian Studies vol XII, no 4 (1977), pp 261–262, the second in Aelred Squire, Aelred of Rievaulx, a study (London: SPCK, 1969), p 69. (Aelred Squire's important book has rightly been republished by Cistercian Publications.)

34 Waddell, Friendship and the moral life, note 32, p 107.

35 Friendship, III, 134.