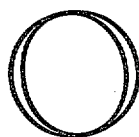


SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

By ROBERT MURRAY



ON A SUBJECT where it would be easy to ramble, it is best to start by defining the scope of this article and how terms will be used.

1. The persons here considered are those committed to evangelical celibacy, in relation either to others likewise committed, or to friends in another state of life. For brevity's sake I shall use the word 'celibate' in the above sense, with reference both to religious (including secular institutes) and to priests, whether secular or regular; I abstract from the theoretical questions concerning the basis of celibacy for secular priests, and consider here all who are in fact committed to celibacy.

2. The kind of relationship considered is that which is experienced as focused on one or a few special friends yet not as excluding others. In this article 'spiritual friendship' will be used to mean such a relationship on the part of 'celibates' as defined.

3. The primary context considered is that of friendship between men and women, but many remarks will be applicable, or relevant, also to special friendships with persons of the same sex. In the context envisaged, I shall concentrate on those instances where the warmth of the friendship causes two kinds of tension to be felt:

4. The tension which may arise between the special relationship and the christian relationships entailed by one's state of life (religious community, wider ministry, etc).

5. The tension which may arise with the commitment to celibacy itself, because the affective quality of the friendship makes one or both partners conscious of their sexuality.

The Situation Today

Today a number of reasons converge to make a serious consideration of spiritual friendship most timely. The 'copernican revolution' brought about by modern psychology and a renewed look at biblical ideals of love have caused a revulsion against an interpretation of evangelical chastity in negative and defensive terms, such as too often in the past has kept celibates of either sex infantile for want of the natural maturing process of contact with the other sex. Such a

training, unless corrected by experience, could lead to an emotional withering which appeared as pitiful in practice as it was alien to the example of Christ. At Vatican II and in the subsequent documents on the religious life, the Church has resolved to work for reform wherever religious training has failed to encourage a proper maturing process or has hindered the development of a Christ-like apostolic attractiveness. The result for most religious women has already been a revolution; a greater freedom and mobility, the modification of religious habits which in retrospect look like suits of armour, and far more frequent and close contact with men – priests, religious or laymen – as collaborators or as fellow-students. Though most priests and male religious already enjoyed greater mobility, so that they have not undergone such dramatic change, the present questioning of the value of celibacy, and the comparative ease with which laicization and dispensation from vows is obtained, have made it none the less urgent for male celibates to consider seriously their affective life, its genuine needs, possibilities and dangers.

In this situation it is not surprising that the possibility of spiritual friendships, cultivated at the risk of tension but with the deliberate aim of deepening commitment to celibacy, has been commended in recent years, both between religious of both sexes and between priests and women.¹ The fact that from some such experiments the course of true love has often run smoothly to the altar does not mean that the reasoning was unsound, for the critical situation of evangelical celibacy today (as sketched above, and elsewhere in this issue) is an objective fact; something *must* be done, and not merely defensively but constructively.

The object of this article is to review some historical examples of loving relationships successfully lived out by celibates, and then, in the light of traditional spiritual teaching, to summarize some principles which seem necessary if such a way of friendship is to foster both mature development and apostolic fruitfulness without leading to a renunciation of vows made to Christ.

The Early Centuries

A full treatment of this subject would need to start from the example of Christ himself,² who lived in celibacy but (most unusually for

¹ E.g. (for religious) Vann, G.: 'Love among the Saints', in *Life of the Spirit*, Aug.-Sep. 1953, adapted in his introduction to *To Heaven with Diana* (London, 1960), pp 49-57; (priests and women) Luise Rinser, *Zölibat und Frau* (Würzburg, 1967).

² Cf Jean-Nesmy, C.: 'Les amitiés du Christ', in *La Vie spirituelle*, CX (1964), pp 673-86.

a rabbi of his time) in close friendship with women as well as with men, as especially Luke makes clear; but the limitations of an article justify us in concentrating on Christ's followers, while not forgetting his own example.

The origins of the consecrated celibate life in christianity remain obscure despite much debate by scholars. The interpretation of the relationship with 'virgins' discussed by St Paul is disputed, as can be seen by comparing the Jerusalem Bible with the revised standard version or the New English Bible; there is, in fact, no unified tradition on the subject.¹ As for the origins of monasticism, many scholars now look to the jewish sectarian movement now known through the Qumran discoveries; its members seem to have developed the ascetical vows of the *nazirim* in a direction untypical of main-stream judaism (which stressed the excellence of marriage), with an inner circle of celibate members. It seems likely that syriac-speaking christianity, arising in northern Mesopotamia, developed under the influence of this type of judaism.² Like the Qumran community, the earliest christian communities in the syriac area described themselves as 'the Covenant', and it appears (however strange many may find it) that baptism was at first reserved to those who vowed celibacy and were called 'Sons and Daughters of the Covenant'. The often-repeated view that the monastic life began in Egypt must be corrected; we see the earliest forebears of monks and nuns in the syrian 'Covenant' communities.

The evidence is that at first these consecrated men and women often lived together in a 'spiritual marriage', either both starting as virgins, or modifying the actual married state by renouncing sexual relations. By this renunciation they expressed their desire, and affirmed the possibility, of living as 'eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake' and of anticipating in this life the future condition of the resurrection, in which Christ had said 'there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage, but they are like the angels in heaven'.³ Thus began the tradition of calling the consecrated celibate life 'the angelic life', while the partners in these 'spiritual marriages' were called 'beloved' (*agapetoi*) and the women 'virgin companions' (*parthenoi süneisakttoi, virgines subintroductae*).⁴ This movement seems

¹ Cf Massingberd Ford, J.: 'St Paul, the Philogamist (1 Cor vii in Early Patristic Exegesis)', in *New Testament Studies*, XI (1964-5), pp 326-48.

² Cf Vööbus, A.: *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, I, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, Subsidia 14 (Louvain, 1958).

³ Mt 19, 12; Mt 22, 30.

⁴ Cf Vööbus, *op. cit.*, I, esp. pp 78-83; Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p 9 (*agapetos, angelikos*), pp 1317-8 (*süneisaktos*).

to have been common to the main Church and to the gnostics; the latter in their apochryphal writings appeal to the example of Christ and call Mary Magdalen his 'consort' (*koinonos*) and the intermediary for secret revelations between Christ and the other disciples.¹ But so far from their permitting any hint of a sexual relationship, they taught that in the 'kingdom', which they aimed to anticipate, sexuality would be 'transcended' by absorption of the female into the male. This teaching is found also in fathers generally considered orthodox.²

It is not surprising, however, that human nature found the tension too great and reacted in either of two ways. On the one hand we find self-castration and other ascetical excesses which are generically termed 'encratite'; many in the syriac language area fell for marcionism and it was the cradle of Mani, the founder of manichaeism with its total dualism and hostility to the body.³ On the other hand, as one would expect, there was often a natural slide from 'spiritual' to sexual love, which caused the Church definitively to reject this earliest way of celibate life and even, to a great extent, to bury its memory. *Virgines subintroductae* became almost a dirty word, and from the fourth century it has been general for 'charismatic' movements which claim to 'transcend' sexuality to be accused (often, perhaps, correctly) of opening the door to sexual license.⁴ From this reaction stems that tradition of warning against intimacy between celibates and the opposite sex, and of preventing it in practice, which we must take into account when considering the principles concerning spiritual friendship.

Yet, as we examine some of the earliest writers who, in one context, stress this note of warning, in another context we find that they had beloved friends, closely united with them in devotion to Christ, to whom they wrote long and intimate letters. St Jerome, whose tortured attitude to sexuality and marriage is the subject of a pathological case-study by D.-H. Nodet,⁵ shows a more attractive side in his relationship with the widow Paula and her daughters who followed him to Palestine. A happier example, though in great

¹ Cf *The Gospel of Philip*, ed. R. McL. Wilson (London, 1962), pp 96-7.

² E.g. 2 Clement (end) and Aphrahat XXII (*Patrologia Syriaca* I, 1016-17).

³ Cf Vööbus, *op. cit.* esp. pp 138-69; *The Acts of Thomas*, ed. A. F. J. Klijn (Leiden, 1962).

⁴ Cf *Mystique et Continence* (*Études Carmélitaines*, 1952), section III, 'Quelques hérésies'.

⁵ 'Position de St Jérôme en face des problèmes sexuels', in *Mystique et Continence*, pp 308-56.

suffering, is that of St John Chrysostom and the widow and deaconess Olympias, about fifteen years his junior, whose director he had become during his brief and painful attempt to govern the church of Constantinople (398-404). John's last three years were spent in exile, still harried by his merciless imperial persecutors and broken in health, with a fatal internal complaint. In these circumstances he wrote the series of letters to Olympias, which are among the classics of spiritual direction and friendship alike.¹ As in almost all these relationships, we have the letters only of the man, but they reflect what must have been in the woman's. John grieves more for Olympias's pain at his pain, than for himself, and writes at great length to strengthen her spirit. Though he always addresses her with courtly honorifics, a strong and tender love shows through constantly, revealing how John feels their separation and longs for the comfort of personal presence no less than Olympias; he asks her to be cheerful so as to cheer himself up, in return for his own love for her.² It is evident that spiritual strength passed not only from John to Olympias, but that her love sustained him in those bitter last years of his prematurely broken life.

The Middle Ages

It is surely no accident that the period of the epic romances, of Dante and of the rise of the modern love lyric, also produced some of the greatest classics of mystical love, and also many records of spiritual friendship. To set these in their proper context by reviewing the theological treatises on both divine and human love which were, it seems, hardly less popular in their way than the tales of Lancelot or Tristan, would be too vast a task for this essay.³ A central place would have to be given to St Aelred of Rievaulx, the spirit of whose own monastic regime is reflected in his dialogue *De Spirituali Amicitia* (about 1160).⁴ Though he does not here consider friendships between men and women (and elsewhere takes a traditionally severe line), much that he says calls irresistibly to be extended to this context, especially since both the tone of many pages and the example

¹ Ed. Anne-Marie Malingrey, *Sources Chrétiennes*, 13 (Paris, 1947), ed. 2, with the Life of Olympias, 1968. The introduction is excellent.

² E.g. esp. letter 8, 11-13 of Malingrey (= Letter 2 in Migne, PG 52, 568-72).

³ A useful recent survey is *The Symbolism of Love in Medieval Thought*, by Johan Chydenius (Helsinki, 1970).

⁴ *Christian Friendship*, tr. with introduction and notes by Hugh Talbot (London, 1942). Cf *Aelred of Rievaulx*, by Aelred Squire (London, 1969).

of his own life shows a very warm affectivity in action. While the classic tradition of warning against intimacy continued, to be summed up with penetrating realism by Walter Hilton in his translation of Lewis de Fontibus's *Eight Chapters on Perfection*, in the chapters 'Of Perils of Holy Love' and 'How Ghostly Love is turned into Fleshly Love',¹ the fourteenth-century hermit Richard Rolle balances his own warnings with other more favourable reflexions. Friendship between men and women is lawful and even meritorious, he says, if pursued in devotion to God's will. If women saw they were despised by men they would get depressed and perhaps despair of their salvation. Behind this quaint male condescension, however, Richard shows a sane and relaxed appreciation that affection between the sexes is natural and its pleasures innocent; he firmly takes sides against the (thomist) view that there are no morally indifferent acts. Sin, he implies, is only in giving way to disordered passion. He reprehends irresponsible advances to women, especially by priests, but maintains that 'God wants women neither to be despised by men nor seduced with vain flattery, but in all holiness and religiousness to be faithfully and lovingly instructed, to the health of their soul and body'.²

To turn to actual examples, St Francis and St Clare immediately spring to mind, followed by St Catherine of Siena and Bl Raymond of Capua. (Here at least we have the woman's letters.) But without doubt the most beautiful record of spiritual friendship from the middle ages is in the letters of Bl Jordan of Saxony, second Master General of the Dominicans, to Bl Diana d'Andalò and other early sisters of the Second Order, which Gerard Vann has presented so charmingly in *To Heaven with Diana*.³ Though we lack Diana's letters, Jordan's (dated between 1222 and 1236) show abundantly the depth and tenderness of their mutual love in Christ. Again and again he expresses, even more explicitly than Chrysostom, their mutual longing to be together, which both of them forewent almost entirely in joyful sacrifice for Christ's sake. Only if we remember the context of total consecration to Christ, contemplative prayer, penitential life and voluntary waiting for love's fulfilment in union with Christ in heaven, can we avoid misunderstanding the tone of these letters. They express a union of hearts surely as total as has ever been

¹ *Minor Works of Walter Hilton*, ed. Dorothy Jones (London, 1929), pp 98-100, 109-12.

² *Incendium Amoris*, ed. M. Deanesly (Manchester, 1915), pp 263-4, my translation.

³ London, 1960.

achieved even in the context of married love, yet entirely unpossessive, each unreservedly inspiring the other to a deeper love of Christ and a wider love of others in Christ.¹

What has happened to sexuality in such a relationship is a question similar to that which arises from the equally tender language used by medieval monastic writers to brethren of their own sex; for example, Lanfranc, St Anselm and Gondulph in the eleventh century and the early cistercians in the twelfth.² The post-freudian world may come to its own conclusions; the Church's mind, formed in the spirit of love and truth and expressing its glad recognition by canonization, knows that men and women, across or within the sexes, have been enabled by grace to reach a harmony of sexuality and spirit, neither by use nor by repression but by joyful sacrifice, and have 'anticipated the resurrection'.

The Counter-Reformation Period

The age in which the state of the consecrated celibate life moved its enemies to destroy it and its friends to repair it by vigorous reform or by new foundations, by no means excluded the possibility of spiritual friendship; on the contrary, we find it sustaining the activity of many of the greatest rebuilders of the Church. If the intimate tones of Jordan are not heard again, one senses the reality of a similar experience in the relationships of St Teresa of Avila to St John of the Cross and Antonio Gracian, of St Catherine of Genoa to Ettore Vernazza,³ and perhaps even, as Hugo Rahner judges, recognizable in some cases under the heavy brocade of severe formality in St Ignatius Loyola's correspondence with women.⁴ Affection comes to clearer expression in the circle of the widow Vittoria Colonna, who was a source of spiritual strength and stability not only to the layman Michelangelo but also (with mutual spiritual benefit) to Reginald Pole, the future cardinal, in his exile.⁵

In England under the penal laws, as the network of recusant Catholic centres became established, one must suppose that many of the chaplains must have lived on terms of deep spiritual friendship

¹ Cf. esp. letters (Vann) 15, 24-5, 28-9, 35, 40 (cf Chrysostom!), 43, 46 (cf Dante's vision of Beatrice), 47 (an expression of physical empathy), 50.

² Cf Talbot (Aelred on Friendship) pp 19-20, 131-2, 119-29.

³ Cf von Hügel, F. *The mystical Element of Religion as studied in St Catherine of Genoa and her Friends* (London, 1908), I, pp 314-35.

⁴ Cf Rahner, H.: *St Ignatius Loyola: Letters to Women* (Edinburgh-London, 1960).

⁵ Cf Schenk, W.: *Reginald Pole, Cardinal of England* (London, 1950), pp 90-107.

with the families who, by maintaining them, shared a life lived only a precarious step away from martyrdom. There is no published memorial of such a relationship, but a corner of the veil is lifted, perhaps, in one of Fr Henry Garnet's letters to Anne Vaux from the Tower, which ends 'Farewell, ever dearest to me in Christ, and pray for me'.¹

The greatest example, of course, in this period – perhaps the one which springs first to mind in the whole of christian history – is that of St Francis de Sales and St Jane Frances Frémyot de Chantal. Accounts are so easily available, both in the enormous series of letters by both and in good biographies, that it may suffice here to say less, even though the importance of the example would call for more. It is evident that human attraction was strongly in play from the start, and it seems that the relationship in its early phase found expressions which the saints later felt must remain a secret between their consciences and God.² For the rest, the fundamental pattern of this friendship is like that which we have seen in earlier examples: total devotion to Christ, a life of deep prayer and abnegation, a love expressed not in possessiveness but in generous encouragement to love others in Christ, and partnership in great works for the Church, such as we have seen in earlier examples and find also in St Francis de Sales's younger contemporaries, St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac.

Recent Times

If the majority of examples mentioned so far have been canonized saints, more recent times afford instances which need not seem so unapproachable. In the last century one thinks of Père Lacordaire and Mme Swetchine³ and, in his way, Newman, whose circle of warm friendships included such as that with Mother Margaret Mary Hallahan.⁴ In our own century, though one may not trespass beyond what is published, Evelyn Waugh's life of Ronald Knox shows how this priest of truly evangelical chastity was rejuvenated

¹ Foley, H.: *Records of the English Province SJ*, IV (London, 1878), pp 105: *Vale mihi semper dilectissima in Xto.*

² Stopp, Elizabeth: *Madame de Chantal, portrait of a saint* (London, 1962), pp 80, 193. Many expressions in the published letters are hardly more reserved than those of Jordan; see the examples quoted by J. Brodrick in the introduction to Herbert Vaughan's *Letters to Lady Herbert* (see below, p 69) pp xxi-xxii.

³ Cf Chocarne, B.: *Le R.P.H. – D. Lacordaire* (Paris, 1867), I, pp 175–84 etc.

⁴ Cf Dessain, C.S.: 'Heart speaks to Heart', in *The Month*, N.S. 34 (1965), pp 360–7.

by a friendship which was to sustain him during his grinding work of translation and for the rest of his life.¹

Published material, however, gives us outstanding examples. We have the whole series of letters, lasting nearly forty years, which Herbert Vaughan, founder of the Mill Hill Fathers and later cardinal of Westminster, wrote to the widow and convert Lady Herbert of Lea.² She lovingly treasured every one, but unfortunately he destroyed all hers. It is a remarkable collection, very typical of late Victorian (and especially clerical) society, yet also an authentic continuation of the great tradition of spiritual friendship based on a profound and shared spiritual life. What is more 'modern' is Vaughan's freeness with expressions of love and his subtly intimate discussions of their relationship. Though he frankly admits what others guessed, that in Lady Herbert he found again his dead mother, and though at the same time he uses the paternalistic address 'daughter', he shows an intense concern with spiritual equality, with due recognition that their giving and helping goes both ways, and that they stand in emotional freedom towards each other.³ Manning had introduced them and, thanks to Vaughan's complete openness with him, continued to bless the relationship.⁴ In time the tone becomes simply that of relaxed friendship. 'Darling' or 'dearest sister' occur no more, nor are long letters exchanged by return of post in the middle of a very busy life; but the perfect intimacy continues to the end of Vaughan's life. One cannot overestimate what this relationship did for Vaughan as priest and bishop, and therefore for the Mill Hill missionaries and for the Church, as well as for Lady Herbert in her painful life after becoming a catholic. Their bodies rest together at Mill Hill.

My last example is Teilhard de Chardin. In 1950 he acknowledged feelings of 'general, almost worshipping, homage for the sex (*celles*) whose warmth and charm have passed drop by drop into the blood of my most treasured ideas . . . Nothing has developed in me except under a woman's regard and influence'.⁵ To a sane woman with a sense of humour such language is at best amusing, at worst irritating; and for most english readers it is not commended any more by Teilhard's romantically grandiose and abstract philosophy of

¹ Cf Waugh, E.: *Ronald Knox* (London, 1959), pp 247-75.

² *Letters of Herbert Cardinal Vaughan to Lady Herbert of Lea, 1867-1903*, ed. Shane Leslie (London, 1942).

³ E.g. pp 24, 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 58.

⁵ *Le coeur de la matière* (1950), my translation. Cf *Teilhard Review* 4,2 (1969), p 96.

sexuality and its role in the future of man.¹ Yet when we consider the man himself – truly a man's man, a totally committed religious and, one may say, a martyr of obedience – and the importance in his life of his friendships with his cousin Marguerite and with Leontine Zanta,² we see yet another who stands in the great tradition of spiritual friendship, and understand how these relationships sustained Teilhard de Chardin on his lonely way. As for his speculations about man's ultimate 'transcendence' of sexuality, they take us back, for all their modern jargon, strangely close to the earliest christian meditations on the future life in the resurrection, and these depend on a word of our Lord which may be mysterious, but whose tendency is clear.

Some Principles for Spiritual Friendship

1. First and throughout, it is evident that spiritual friendship, to be and remain possible, must remain truly and honestly within the context defined at the beginning of this article. It presupposes, and perpetually requires, a life of true self-consecration to Christ, fed by regular prayer and fidelity to one's state of life. If both friends are religious, the fundamental test will be fidelity to rule and openness with superiors and spiritual directors; if the friendship is between a priest and a woman not in religion, to these tests will be added seriousness about one's obligations to the church community and especially, if the woman is married, a sensitive and generous fidelity to her husband, no less than as if he were Christ himself.

In general it must be said that the conditions for a true spiritual friendship in Christ (as defined here) are unlikely to be present for young religious or seminarians, or even in early years after ordination. Both partners need to be settled in their state of life; otherwise the question may arise whether one is being serious about one's own intentions for the future, or fair to the other's intentions and expectations.

2. Sooner or later one or other is likely to become aware of their sexuality, and this may quickly bring obsessive desire of the other's company and great tension. It is best for this to be foreseen; then when the force of nature is felt, it must be faced calmly and without

¹ Cf Rideau, E.: 'La sexualité selon le Père Teilhard de Chardin', in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, XC (1968), pp 173–90 and the interpretations (opposed both to each other and to Rideau) of D. Sullivan and M. Day in *Teilhard Rev.* 4,2 (1969), pp 93–7.

² *The Making of a Mind: Letters from a Soldier-Priest 1914–9* (*Genèse d'une pensée*) (London, 1965); *Letters to Léontine Zanta* (London, 1969).

panic, as a natural reaction. It may help to remember St Thomas's wise reflexion that, because we are men and not angels, a human act accompanied by a natural reaction ('passio') is not more imperfect but more perfect for man, because more truly human. He applies this expressly to natural reactions in love, which may lead to sin if they are allowed to direct the will, but not if they follow from a rightly loving will. 'For this belongs to the warmth of charity, which consists in the fact that the love which is in the "superior part" by its vehemence overflows so as to cause a reaction in the "inferior part"'.¹

Once this 'overflow' is recognized, a sensible restraint in expressions of love (and subjects of conversation) will be desirable for as long as tension is felt, and it will be necessary to do all possible, with realism and humour and especially with the help of a spiritual director, to avoid encouraging the imagination.

3. *Realism* about chosen states of life, about the personalities of both partners, and about where the relationship is going, is, in fact, the fundamental requirement for a healthy development of spiritual friendship. The claims of the chosen state of each have been considered above.²

As regards the personalities and their relationship, realism requires that each should consider what is possible and helpful (or the opposite) for the other. Again, realism will demand the banishment of either condescending paternalism or sentimental worship; in fact, these two false attitudes tend to go together and to impair many relationships between the sexes (and not least often in marriage). All authors from Aristotle on have insisted that true friendship requires equality, and this need is especially felt in spiritual friendship, even if the relationship is also one of spiritual direction. St Francis de Sales asks St Jane Frances not to call him 'Monseigneur', while apologizing that he feels the need to keep his distance to the extent of calling her 'Madame';³ Chrysostom and Jordan alike safeguard psychological equality by stressing the mutuality of need and of benefits received, and Vaughan repeatedly discusses the claims of mutuality and equality, as we saw. The working-out of this equality of different and complementary characters is the whole delight of friendship, as it is a large part of the joy of marriage. Its guides and guardians are loving teasing and laughter.

¹ *De Veritate* 26, 7, ad 7. For the general principle, Cf. *S. Theol.* 1/11, 24, 3.

² *Supra*, p 70.

³ Letter 71, 21st Nov., 1604.

Thirdly, realism about where the relationship is going. Here the essential activity will be discernment of spirits, practised apart, together, and with the help of a good director. It is true that today discernment of spirits is increasingly talked about, but that few have much idea of the game, let alone experience and skill. In many contexts it is indeed difficult to see how it is to be practised; but any relationship of love, where one's deeper feelings are engaged, is a situation ready made for practice and for learning by it. For example, when the lover sees the friend rightly and properly exchanging signs of love or interest with another (according to context, say a pupil, fellow religious, husband etc.), the heart's reaction – jealous, generously delighted, or mixed – is an instant test of the good or bad 'spirit', on the basis of which one can build up experience of the signs and then the fundamental patterns of the 'spiritual' and the 'carnal' in the adventure of love. Here the wisdom of the gospel and of tradition will help; the characteristics of true love are taught us¹ and developed by the saints, while the ways of self-delusion have been subtly analysed since long before psychoanalysis began. Walter Hilton's account, referred to above, is as realistic today as when it was written.

4. As experience is gained, its results can be extended so as to help us find more truly Christ-like paths in other relationships which are less immediately rewarding or easy. The generous quality by which the true spirit of christian love will be recognized leads us to the last main principle of spiritual friendship; it is not possessive and must not be exclusive. In marriage, love, including its sexual expression, is focused on one person in total and mutual self-giving. When this bears fruit in children, each partner can add a new dimension of generosity to love of the other, which can now be shared with children born of the original love. In spiritual friendship, love is focused on one or a few, but the renunciation of sexual union allows each to remain 'free of' as well as 'free with' the other; the relationship is one of mutual self-gift and commitment which is yet open to sharing with others, a sharing which is the proper fulfilment and fruitfulness of the relationship. Readiness for such sharing will be (as said above) one of the primary tests of truly christian love, whether the relationship is between the sexes or within the same sex. St Benedict and other monastic guides warn against any 'particular

¹ Cf 1 Cor 13; 1 John 4.

friendship' whatever, as though it can only hurt the community;¹ this was not the experience or teaching of St Aelred, whose community was open to anyone who would commit himself, and included some who responded little to Aelred's love, as well as others whose hearts beat as one with his. But these friendships were the cement in the wider union of the community. In the same way the love developed by a special relationship in the heart of Clare, Diana, Jane Frances and many others was not a private treasure but fed their communities as well as a wider apostolate.

Evangelical chastity renounces sexual union but not personal love. If one's spiritual way leads to focusing such love on one or few, it must be made fruitful by extending to many what has been learned of few. The asceticism of spiritual friendship on its positive side consists in the practice of this generous sharing, and the joy of this sharing swallows up the pain which nature feels. The way of spiritual friendship is a special way of the cross, but one in which the joy of the resurrection flowers forever anew. It has its risks and failures, but so has marriage. In fact, nothing good is ever achieved without risks. Again and again spiritual friendships have been a source of strength to those who have been God's instruments for renewal or new developments in the Church. Today, when the Church is paying dearly for years of inadequate and too negative training of priests and religious, the ideal of spiritual friendship, rightly understood and generously followed, could prove a beacon to some in danger of losing the way they undertook for love of Christ.

¹ Cf Talbot, H. (*Aelred on Friendship*), pp 21-22, 131-2.