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## “LIKE A BOAT IS MARRIAGE”: AELRED ON MARRIAGE AS A CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE

MARIE ANNE MAYESKI

*This study of Aelred of Rievaulx's understanding of marriage as a Christian state of life first considers his work in the context of earlier written sources and the debates about marriage in the twelfth-century schools; it then exposes Aelred's thinking on the sacramentality of marriage, the position of woman in the marriage relationship, and the importance of marriage in relation to the common good, that is, the socioeconomic order. Much of Aelred's thought remains applicable to Christian marriage today.*

READERS OF MEDIEVAL theological and ascetical literature are familiar with the frequent use of nuptial typology to express the vagaries, challenges, and delights of the mystical ascent. Most often these allegorical commentaries and treatises show little interest in, or awareness of, the realities of Christian marriage, especially in its day-to-day glories and difficulties. It may come as a surprise, therefore, to discover in the works of Aelred of Rievaulx, several short passages on the institution of marriage that reveal not only this monk's understanding of its potential grandeur as a Christian vocation but also a practical appreciation of its challenges. Aelred (ca.1110–1167), Abbot of Rievaulx from 1147 to his death, was one of the first generation of Cistercian theologians whose work is increasingly appreciated by students of medieval theology. He is the author of numerous works: treatises on the soul, friendship, and charity, an exegetical treatise on the Lucan story of Jesus lost in the Temple, a treatise of instructions for women recluses as well as many homilies, and, finally, several historical works. The passages to be discussed here are a somewhat theoretical consideration in Aelred's *On Spiritual Friendship* and two brief passages of biblical commentary in his *Sermons*.

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### THE EARLY TRADITION ABOUT MARRIAGE

Before delving into Aelred's texts, however, a comment on the prevailing theology of marriage in Aelred's time is essential. The story of the development of the sacrament of marriage and its supporting theology is both complex and convoluted. Several threads of development, distinct but intertwined, constitute the tradition as it developed from the end of the patristic period until the twelfth century. One thread is the narrative of the church's efforts during that period to gain public control over the institution of marriage in order to obviate both clandestine marriages and the easy dissolubility of valid unions. Second, there was the attempt to exercise pastoral activity toward married persons and give a Christian character to the married state of life. This would be accomplished by adding certain liturgical elements to various rituals of celebrating marriage and by applying certain biblical injunctions to the married state. Third, the theologians had struggled to identify the *mysterion* or *sacramentum* in marriage and to define its nature. This was especially important since the contracting and celebrating of marriage during the patristic period remained a familial and civil event throughout the early Middle Ages. Finally, there was the attempt, beginning in the second half of the eleventh century, to identify marriage as a sacrament in the strict sense—one of the seven—and to identify the *res* of marriage as a sacrament. It is important to trace the general lines of development and to note some elements in this tangle; against this background, the significant difference of Aelred's approach becomes obvious. Here, however, I cannot provide the full history of this tradition; fortunately it has been done elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

In the earliest period, marriage remained a completely secular act; the church seems to have intervened only in the marriages of slaves and clergy, permitting some "marriages of conscience" kept secret from secular authorities.<sup>2</sup> Textual evidence shows that by the fourth century there were priestly blessings for marriage, a kind of ritual framework for a contractual process that remains strictly under the control of the families involved. As the church turned its attention to the Christianization of the Germanic tribes, it concentrated on promoting the theory of consensus based on Roman law, which emphasized the mutual consent of the individuals to be wed. In some cases, priests served as outside witnesses to this consensus and were present to bless various tribal rites such as the feast and the entry of the couple into the marriage chamber. A nonobligatory liturgical rite for marriage, originating in Rome and involving a veiling of the bride,

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Theodore Mackin, S.J., *The Marital Sacrament* (New York: Paulist, 1989) and Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Sacrament of Marriage* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Sacrament of Marriage* 247.

remained in force in some areas; it was permitted to those of exemplary life and marrying for the first time but obligatory for clergy.<sup>3</sup>

During the Carolingian period, we find a growing tendency to make marriage an ecclesiastical affair. Church authorities began to assume the moral and religious task of identifying impediments to marriage: incest (marrying within forbidden relational degrees), marriage by abduction, and the right of the king or feudal lord to give a girl in marriage to anyone he chose. In the eighth century, there was the first synodal decree that marriages between nobles and lay commoners were to be contracted publicly.<sup>4</sup> As kingly power weakened in the tenth century, bishops acquired more jurisdictional power over marriage, but it was only in the late-eleventh and twelfth century that the church obtained complete jurisdiction and began regulating even the civil consequences of marriage, absorbing the enacting of the contract and the cultural symbols into its rituals. According to Edward Schillebeeckx, theological reflection on the sacramentality of marriage was a consequence, not a cause, of the church's assuming juridical control of marriage. As regional episcopal authorities integrated marriage ceremonies into the mainstream of liturgical life, they gradually became aware of the similarities between rites of marriage and other liturgical rites, including the paradoxical connection with the veiling of consecrated virgins.<sup>5</sup> But one must remember that until the mid-eleventh century, marriage was considered essentially a civil and social reality—its Christian character being given primarily through the virtuous lives of the couple—and that the church's jurisdictional activity regarding marriage began with its disciplinary control over clerical marriage.

Given the essentially secular nature of marriage as accepted by the church for a thousand years, it is informative to look at the theological reflections that arose both to substantiate the church's admittedly limited intervention and to offer pastoral direction to Christians who married. Three biblical passages thread their way through the theological developments. One was Christ's presence at the marriage feast of Cana (Jn 2), generally regarded as Christ's blessing of the married state that included it in the plan of redemption. Paul's use of marriage as an analogy in Ephesians 5 was not associated with marriage but applied exclusively to a theology of the church, as Paul himself intended; this would remain true for the whole first millennium, although Augustine would appropriate

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 260–62.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 264–67.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 160–80. Mackin concurs; see *Marital Sacrament* 276. Schillebeeckx affirms that the link between the veiling of consecrated virgins and that of the bride contributed to an understanding of marriage as a sacrament. Mackin notes a scholarly disagreement about how these ceremonies affected one another but holds that their mutual interaction was ultimately important. The connection may subtly echo Aelred's thought.

the analogy as an argument for the indissolubility of marriage: husband and wife are indissolubly united to one another because they symbolize the one church united to the one Christ and Savior. Nonetheless, the indissolubility of marriage (understood to be applicable to all marriages, not just that of Christians) rested most firmly on Christ's logion in Mark 10: 1–12.

Theodore Mackin identifies Isidore of Seville as the “last of the Western Fathers” who summed up the theological legacy about marriage and transmitted it to early medieval thinkers. In his *De ecclesiasticis officiis*, Isidore presents his understanding of Christian marriage. He affirms that marriage is part of God's plan in Eden with Eve created for both companionship and procreation, and that she would have remained primarily a companion, a *solatium* or comfort in Adam's loneliness had sin not entered the picture. Isidore says quite explicitly that, despite God's first command to “be fruitful,” sexual intercourse came only after sin and exile from Eden. An abundance of troubles follow upon the first sin: childbirth becomes painful and, Isidore affirms, “many and different tragedies and sorrows” beset the married state. While marriage remains good in itself—though less good than virginity and widowhood—it involves sin through its entanglement with “the things of the world.” He believes that monogamy is the divine mandate, established both by the creation itself and by the words of Scripture. Isidore cites Paul (1 Cor 7) rather than Christ's words in Matthew (Mt 19:1–12) and notes that monogamy is what—following Augustine—makes marriage the analogy or sacred sign of Christ and the church.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequent early medieval writers took up and developed these foundational ideas in a variety of ways, stressing that marriage is always of less value than consecrated virginity, yet it still remains a gift of God. Rabanus Maurus is exceptional for having emphasized that intercourse in marriage is “clean and holy.”<sup>7</sup> Commentators who follow Augustine, like Isidore of Seville and Paschasius Radbertus, argue otherwise, allowing that intercourse is without sin only if motivated by the desire for children, and connecting the wife's salvation with childbearing, though she always

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 238–40. Mackin cites the relevant passages in English; I have used his translations.

<sup>7</sup> Mackin notes that Maurus is also anomalous in “dealing with marriage as it is lived by spouses instead of as idealized” and cites a lengthy passage from Maurus's commentary on Ephesians in which he claims that the wife is not inferior by nature and is often superior to her husband. Indeed, Maurus writes, “whether these women are to govern their husbands or to fear them I leave to the reader to decide” (Mackin, *Marital Sacrament* 270 n. 48). On Maurus's fair and even laudatory treatment of women prophets, see Marie Anne Mayeski, “‘Let Women Not Despair’: Rabanus Maurus on Women as Prophets,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 237–53.

remained “a grievous burden” to her husband.<sup>8</sup> The subjection of wife to husband is assumed throughout the tradition, and some writers (e.g., Rabanus Maurus) make a point of reinforcing its importance by referring to Ephesians 5.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine introduced the language of “*sacramentum*” to the discussion of marriage, precisely in relationship to marital fidelity. He brought Paul’s thought in Ephesians 5 to bear upon the need of husband and wife to remain faithful to one another and calls marriage “a *sacramentum*,” that is, a sacred sign or type, revealing something about the great *mysterion* of Christ and the church. Because marriage symbolizes Christ’s relationship to the church, marriage receives a certain sacred character. But Augustine also seems to mean “*sacramentum*” in its common usage in the Graeco-Roman world, to indicate a contractual bond, especially of a religious nature, that imposes “sacred” obligations. In any case, the word “*sacramentum*” does not have its full and later meaning, neither in Augustine, nor, indeed, in the later medieval writers who took up his thought. In each and every case, medieval exegetes assumed that the passage in Ephesians 5 is about the church’s relationship to Christ (Paul’s own meaning); derivatively, it mandates monogamous marriage, which analogously reveals something about the relationship between Christ and the church.<sup>10</sup>

It was the early Scholastics—canonists and theologians—who began more systematically to consider the nature of sacramental marriage and to develop some of the earlier themes. The rapidly expanding field of canon law moved the Scholastics to theorize more practically on what constituted a valid marriage even while they brought a new understanding of Aristotelian categories to bear on Augustine’s initial work on *sacramentum* as sign. The question of validity focused on two specific moments in the formulation of the marriage contract: the free assent by both partners and the consummation of the contract by sexual intercourse. Eventually, both assent and consummation would be considered integral to a valid and indissoluble marriage. But a wider range of opinions about the nature of marriage played into the debate. One group of theologians considered the essence of marriage to be found in sexual intercourse, and the desire for it was considered the content of the mutual assent. Others, most significantly Hugh of St. Victor, held that marriage was essentially a spiritual communion, in which all of life was shared; what marrying couples expressed in their consent was a desire for this spiritual communion. This group of

<sup>8</sup> According to Mackin (*Marital Sacrament* 243, 269 n. 21), it is Paschasius Radbertus who most strongly makes this point.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 240–42. The passage from Rabanus Maurus that Mackin cites is from Maurus’s *Commentariorum in Genesim Libri Quattuor* 1.7.

<sup>10</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Sacrament of Marriage* 281–86.

theologians was particularly concerned to define marriage in such a way as to include the marriage of Mary and Joseph, though they recognized that sexual intercourse was a usual, though not necessary, part of marriage. Still other theologians referred back to Isidore of Seville's definition of marriage as a social reality designed for the creation and maintenance of the family. These various positions reflected differing views about the human institution of marriage as primarily sexual, interpersonal, or social in character.<sup>11</sup> Eventually these views would coalesce, but in the twelfth century and in subsequent church legislation the emphasis would remain on mutual consent and sexual consummation. In regard to the sacramental nature of marriage, it was only in the very early twelfth century that reflection on Augustine's theory of the sacred sign had matured into the notion of specific sacred signs as effecting grace. The *septenarium*, or list of seven sacraments, emerged just at the beginning of the twelfth century; by the second half of that century it is found in all Scholastic authors.<sup>12</sup> The list included marriage, a fact that Schillebeeckx finds surprising since "marriage was not regarded at this time as having a power of grace, but only as being a sign of a more sublime mystery."<sup>13</sup>

### AELRED AND THE TRADITION

Just at the time when Aelred was exercising his teaching role as abbot, the Scholastics were focussing their attention primarily on two aspects of marriage: what constituted a valid marriage and whether marriage was to be considered a sacrament. He cannot have been unaware of these debates and discussions. Nor was he ignorant of the antecedent literature on the subject. He would have known the salient themes in the work of his predecessors: (1) marriage was good in all ways before the Fall, but since then, though it remains essentially good, in practice it is almost always sinful; (2) the sinfulness in marriage derives principally from sexual activity which, though necessary and good for the procreation of offspring, is otherwise at least venially sinful; (3) as a Christian vocation marriage is intrinsically inferior to the state of consecrated virginity; and (4) marriage is a contractual partnership between a man and a woman in which the woman's chief obligation is submission. The submission of woman to man in the social order generally and more specifically in marriage was an enduring legacy of the earliest centuries. It was founded on the alleged inferiority of her nature, according to Platonic philosophy, and reinforced by her responsibility for original sin, deduced from a patriarchal reading

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 291–92.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 328.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

of Genesis 2.<sup>14</sup> Against the background of those themes, Abbot Aelred crafts a different point of view.

### Marriage as Friendship

The first passage to be considered comes early in Aelred's treatise on *Spiritual Friendship*.<sup>15</sup> This work, in the form of a dialogue, seems to have been composed shortly after Aelred's election as Abbot of Rievaulx in 1147. The opening conversation is between the visiting Abbot Aelred and Ivo, a younger monk and friend who poses the question that initiates the theme. Ivo asks about spiritual friendship in general and then specifies the distinctions he would like to pursue. He wants to know spiritual friendship's "nature and value, its source and end, whether it can be cultivated among all,"<sup>16</sup> and so on. After some preliminaries such as the definition of friendship (principally Cicero's) and the distinctions among carnal friendship, worldly friendship, and spiritual friendship, Ivo requests an explanation of "how friendship first originated [within the human community]."<sup>17</sup> It is an important question. From the point of view of the early Scholastic method, friendship is to be understood through one of the four Aristotelian causes. From the perspective of monastic theology, the question reveals Ivo's desire to understand friendship in relation to the natural world, which was understood to be the first revelation of the divine will, and which was confirmed as well as completed by the redeeming work of Christ.

Aelred responds by paraphrasing Cicero: "nature itself impressed upon the human soul a desire for friendship, then experience increased that desire, and finally the sanction of the law confirmed it."<sup>18</sup> It is within the context of inquiry into causes and the divine creative will that Aelred pens the passage in question. Referring to the biblical narrative traditionally understood to reveal the origin of marriage, Aelred locates the origin of friendship in the very act of human creation:

<sup>14</sup> See Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1982) 27–75.

<sup>15</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (hereafter *SF*), Cistercian Fathers 5, trans. Mary Eugenia Laker, S.S.N.D. (Washington: Cistercian, 1974) 63. My citations will give the book number, paragraph number, followed by the page number(s) of the translation in parentheses. For the critical Latin edition see *Aelredi rievallensis opera omnia*, vol. 1, *Opera ascetica*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 1 (hereafter CCCM), ed. Anselm Hoste and C. H. Talbot (Turnholt: Brepols, 1971) 287–350. I quote the Latin only when its nuance is critical to the argument.

<sup>16</sup> *SF* 1.5 (52).

<sup>18</sup> *SF* 1.51 (61–62).

<sup>17</sup> *SF* 1.50 (60).



Finally, when God created [the human person], in order to commend more highly the good of society, he said: "It is not good for the man to be alone: let us make him a helper like unto himself." It was from no similar, nor even from the same, material that divine Might formed this helpmate, but as a clearer inspiration to charity and friendship he produced the woman from the very substance of the man. How beautiful it is that the second human being was taken from the side of the first, so that nature might teach that human beings are equal and, as it were, collateral, and that there is in human affairs neither a superior nor an inferior, a characteristic of true friendship. Hence, nature from the very beginning implanted the desire for friendship and charity in the human heart, a desire which an inner sense of affection soon increased with a taste of sweetness. But after the fall of the first man, when with the cooling of charity concupiscence made secret inroads and caused private good to take precedence over the common weal, it corrupted the splendor of friendship and charity through avarice and envy, introducing contentions, emulations, hates and suspicions because human morals had been corrupted.<sup>19</sup>

Aelred situates the beginnings of both marriage and friendship in the narrative of Eve's creation. By asserting their common origin, he affirms that marriage is a kind of species of the genus friendship; both are established by the single creative active of God. In other words, marriage is friendship of the highest order, and everything that Aelred affirms about friendship can be attributed to the divinely ordained institution of marriage. This is a personalist understanding of marriage, significantly different from the thought of other theologians, both prior to and contemporaneous with Aelred, who begin with contract and law. This understanding grounds the rest of his theology of marriage, particularly with respect to women.

Aelred affirms that both marriage and friendship are intended for the good of society, and that it is the creation of woman that makes both possible. Indeed, her creation in some way "commends very highly" the good of society, and at the end of the passage he refers explicitly to "the common weal." He suggests that marriage and friendship, in equal and parallel ways, make the common weal attractive and desirable rather than merely a duty that might be grudgingly acquiesced in. Whatever else this connection may imply, it certainly gives the attraction between man and

<sup>19</sup> *SF* 1.57–58 (63). "Postremo cum hominem condidisset, ut bonum societatis altius commendaret: *Non est bonum, inquit, esse hominem solum; faciamus ei adiutorium simile sibi.* Nec certe de simili, uel saltem de eadem materia hoc adiutorium diuina uirtus formauit; sed ad expressius caritatis et amicitiae incentium, de ipsius substantia masculi feminam procreauit. Pulchre autem de latere primi hominis secundus assumitur, ut natura doceret omnes aequales, quasi collaterales; nec esset in rebus humanis superior uel inferior, quod est amicitiae proprium. Ita natura mentibus humanis, ab ipso exordio amicitiae et caritatis impressit affectum, quem interior mox sensus amandi quodam gustu suauitatis adauxit" (*Opera ascetica* 298–99, italics original).

woman, as the attraction between friends more generally, a positive role to play in the common good.

It is the creation of the woman that reveals the possibility of both marriage and friendship. The first is obvious; the latter remarkable. The Ciceronian definition of friendship, to which Aelred is committed even as he enriches it, requires equality between the friends, and Aelred is careful, precise, and detailed in affirming that the Genesis passage reveals that equality. He draws out the details of woman's creation from the side of the man, noting that "human beings are equal and, as it were, collateral, and that there is in human affairs neither a superior nor an inferior, a characteristic of true friendship." For Aelred, the biblical account of the creation of the woman affirms her equality with the man and her orientation to the man as her partner in contributing to the good of society—the common weal—through marriage and through her position as a fit friend for the man.

Even more significantly, however, Aelred affirms that God makes the woman not just from the same material but "from the very substance of the man." Aelred does not use the words of the Nicene formula by which Christians affirm that Jesus is "consubstantialem Patri," but, by using the phrase "ipsius substantia" he echoes it. The relationship between man and woman, of divine creation, is a relationship between equals that is not only analogous to the intimate union between the Son and the Father but also a participation in it. This point, as well as Aelred's personalist view of marriage, is reaffirmed a few pages later: Aelred notes that friendship is impossible without charity and that genuine charity is a share in the divine life. He concludes, "He that abides in friendship [or the marriage-friendship] abides in God, and God in him."<sup>20</sup> For Aelred, marriage as friendship is a necessary preparatory stage on the way to full union with God.

Aelred, affirms that woman is a "particularly clear inspiration to charity and friendship."<sup>21</sup> Perhaps her power to inspire exceeds that of other friends because friendship in marriage is sacramentalized (a subject under debate at the time). Or Aelred may simply mean that marriage, being a closer and more intimate union than other friendships, gives the wife more power to inspire. Aelred suggests the latter when he acknowledges, in this context, that the natural desire for friendship and marriage, embedded in human nature through the creative act of God, is "soon increased with a taste of sweetness." The Latin text uses both "*affectus*" and "*gustu*

<sup>20</sup> *SF* 1.70 (66). "Quod tamen sequitur de caritate, amicitiae profecto dare non dubito, quoniam: *Qui manet in amicitia in Deo manet, et Deus in eo*" (*Opera ascetica* 301, italics original).

<sup>21</sup> *SF* 1.57–58 (63) translates the Latin "ad expressius" as "clearer," but in Latin the comparative can also mean "very" or "particularly," especially when the author does not complete the comparison, as here.

*suauitatis*.” This is Aelred’s typical vocabulary for describing the full human response that includes, indeed underscores, its affective dimension. In the writings of Aelred and other Cistercians, we see love for the divine mysteries and especially for the person of Christ grounded in faith, but love becomes a full human response only when contemplation, using reason and imagination, generates an affective response.<sup>22</sup> Connected to the story of woman’s creation and, thus, to the institution of marriage, the use of this vocabulary suggests the attraction and pleasure of sexual intimacy that can cement the marital friendship and stimulate the partners to greater benevolence and charity.

Even sin does not entirely disrupt the natural tendency and wholesome dynamic of marriage. What sin does is introduce concupiscence that cools charity and, most significantly, causes “private good to take precedence over the common weal.” According to Aelred, the corruption of friendship and marriage is not to be found in sexual feelings per se nor, in marriage, in their expression. Indeed, unlike his contemporaries in the marriage debate, Aelred does not isolate the sexual component of marriage either for praise or for blame. He does not remind his readers that procreation is a primary purpose of marriage—as the various blessings for the married couple in contemporary sacramentaries do—nor does he condemn marital sexual activity as, at least potentially, sinful. If, as Aelred has asserted from the beginning, marriage and friendship are for the good of society, then their perversion is rather in the subordination of the common good to the personal and private satisfactions of the friends. Marriage is a social reality designed to promote the higher, common good. What wars against the proper harmony of marriage, as well as against all friendship, is “avarice and envy” from which flow “contentions, emulations, hates and suspicions.” Aelred’s thought places marriage squarely in the daily, concrete world of economic activity, politics, dynastic struggles, and ordinary practical concerns. What threatens the perfect friendship of marriage and its building up of the common good are the temptations and troubles inherent in the obligation of husband and wife to engage in that world.

These reflections suggest Aelred’s contribution, intentional or not, to the discussion of marriage as sexual, interpersonal, and social.<sup>23</sup> Clearly

<sup>22</sup> On this point, as with others, there are subtle differences among Aelred, Bernard, and William of St. Thierry. See Marsha Dutton, “Intimacy and Imitation: The Humanity of Christ in Cistercian Spirituality,” in *Erudition at God’s Service*, Cistercian Studies 98, ed. John R. Sommerfeldt (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1987) 33–69. Of the three, Aelred most positively views human affectivity. See also Marie Anne Mayeski, “A Twelfth-Century View of the Imagination: Aelred of Rievaulx,” in *Noble Piety and Reformed Monasticism*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1981) 123–29.

<sup>23</sup> See above, pp. 5–6.

his notion of marriage as friendship makes marriage above all interpersonal, and his understanding of its position in the world of civic and economic activity also makes it social. But for him procreation is not, as it was for other theologians, the *point du depart* of theological reflection on marriage. The fruition of human friendship is, rather, an intimate companionship that enables the married Christian to persevere in the ordinary vicissitudes of human life. “Friendship, therefore, heightens the joys of prosperity and mitigates the sorrows of adversity by dividing and sharing them.”<sup>24</sup> Spiritual friendship comes to fruition in greater intimacy with God, a deeper stage of Christian perfection. “And a thing even more excellent than all these considerations, friendship is a stage bordering upon that perfection which consists in the love and knowledge of God, so that man [sic] from being a friend of his fellowman [sic] becomes the friend of God, according to the words of the Savior in the Gospel: ‘I will not now call you servants, but my friends.’”<sup>25</sup> In this passage on friendship (of which marriage is a subset) Aelred presents a view of marriage that does not limit its fruitfulness to procreation but encompasses all that makes up “the common good,” including, of course, the bearing and rearing of children but also much more in the world at large. In his sermons Aelred presents marriage in a similar social and economic context.

### Marriage and the Marketplace

In Section 4 of Sermon 22 for the Nativity of Mary,<sup>26</sup> Aelred engages in an extended allegorical commentary on Sirach 24:19–20. In the Vulgate, the passage begins with an invitation from Wisdom: “cross over to me,” be satiated and experience the sweetness beyond that of honey. In commenting on this verse, Aelred constructs a scene in which Christ, incarnate Wisdom, calls out this invitation, and the Abbot muses about the possible obstacles that the human person must “cross over” to be united with the Lord. What follows is a brief discourse on Christian vocation.

Like a boat is marriage contracted in faith in Jesus Christ. But this boat is flimsy and rickety and ships great quantities of water in its hold; and unless it is bailed out all the time it quickly sinks. For there are many worldly preoccupations in this profession of faith. They very often involve sins—even if not always damnable, then certainly still many. Unless these are bailed by almsgiving and generous works

<sup>24</sup> SF 2.13 (72).

<sup>25</sup> SF 2.14 (73).

<sup>26</sup> The critical edition is *Aelredi Rieuallensis sermones I–XLVI: Collectio Clareauallensis prima et secunda*, CCCM 2a, ed. Gaetano Raciti (Turnholt: Brepols, 1989); where the Latin is given, the citation will be to the page number in Raciti. The English translation is by Theodore Berkeley and M. Basil Pennington, *Aelred of Rievaulx: The Liturgical Sermons*, Cistercian Fathers 58 (hereafter *LS*) (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 2001), cited by sermon number, section number, and, in parentheses, the page number to the translation.

of mercy; they sink the boat so it cannot reach port. Yet the profession [of faith] in Christ's cross during this life is a boat and by this boat a person can cross over to Christ. Anyone, however, who, after professing marriage, falls into adultery or other damnable sins, leaves the ship and then sinks. No one can cross the sea unless he returns to his boat through repentance.<sup>27</sup>

The first obstacle to union is the sea "of this present world," which can be crossed only in a boat. The boat is "the profession [of faith] in Christ's cross," and, as Aelred develops his thought, he posits two species or models of this boat, distinguished by their relative strength and dependability. The first boat, as the citation above notes, is marriage and, not surprisingly, it is identified as the weaker boat. The second is monastic life, the stronger and better boat.<sup>28</sup> But both boats are expressions of the one faith in the cross of Christ, and both will bring their occupants safely to the harbor of union with Christ if those who choose their respective boat remain in it, although the boat of marriage requires continual bailing, not mere abiding. The parity attributed to the married and monastic states is more significant than the differences between them described by Aelred, especially in a Christian world and in a theological debate about marriage that privileged the monastic state as the paradigm of Christian life. The words "profession of faith" today suggest sacramental language, and one might therefore surmise that Aelred is here entering into the twelfth-century debate on including marriage in the list of the seven sacraments. It is more likely, given the context, that Aelred here refers to the common vocation of all Christians that flows from the profession of faith made in baptism.<sup>29</sup>

The boat of marriage is described by three adjectives: "flimsy," "rickety," and "shipping great quantities of water." Aelred does not develop "flimsy" or "rickety," but he is precise about the water that pours into the flimsy boat, threatening to overwhelm it. It is the turbulent sea of worldly

<sup>27</sup> *LS*, Sermon 22.4 (307). "Quasi nauis est coniugium quod fit in fide Iesu Christi. Sed debilis est ista nauis et ruinoso, et recipit multum de aqua maris in sentina sua et, nisi fugiter exhauriatur, cito mergitur. Sunt enim multae occupationes saeculi in ista professione, et incurrunt saepissime, etsi non damnabilia, certe multa alia peccata, quae, nisi per eleemosynas et magna opera misericordiae hauriantur, mergunt istam nauim, ut non possit uenire ad portum. Quia tamen in ista uita est professio crucis Christi, nauis est, et potest homo per istam nauim transire ad Christum. Quicumque autem post professionem coniugii cadit in adulterium uel cetera damnabilia, exiuit homo ille de nauis, et ideo mergetur, et non poterit transire hoc mare, nisi forte iterum redeat ad nauim suam per paenitentiam" (Raciti 176-77).

<sup>28</sup> *LS*, Sermon 22.3 (307).

<sup>29</sup> The first church document that refers to marriage as a sacrament comes from the Council of Verona (1184). Not until the Council of Trent does a church document identify marriage as a sacrament that confers grace. See Charles E. Curran, *Issues in Sexual and Medical Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1978) 10.

concerns, the preoccupation with the transitory but demanding challenges of making a living and raising a family. According to Aelred, the particular difficulty of marriage, from the perspective of a Christian vocation calling one to union with Christ, is that the married are obliged to face the same temptations of ordinary life that beset all secular Christians. Appropriately, then, Aelred takes care to give an accurate and nuanced moral evaluation of these obstacles; they “very often involve sins,” which, even if they are not “damnable,” can yet sink the boat because they are many. At the same time, these engagements in the economic order, possibly sinful as they may be, are clearly distinguished from the “damnable sin” of adultery by which a married person abandons the boat that can bring him or her to God. Again, Aelred does not point to marital sexual activity as a particular danger in marriage. Adultery, however, is like the act of a monk who “returns to the world”:<sup>30</sup> a complete rejection of one’s commitment. In contrast, the turbulent sea of worldly preoccupations is the very context and content of married life; more, those preoccupations form part of the very obligations of the married. The boat of Christian marriage can bring the partners safely to the heavenly shore, but to reach it, those in the boat must constantly bail.

One must take the bailing metaphor seriously. Bailing is a series of actions taken to counteract the inflooding water and to rid the boat of its threat; analogously, Aelred recommends certain actions—specifically “almsgiving” and “generous acts of mercy”—that can counteract the worldly preoccupations that threaten the married couples’ return to God. Penitential acts such as almsgiving are, to be sure, recommended as effective against all sin, but Aelred, in using the bailing metaphor, suggests that they are a remedy specific to the sea of worldliness that threatens marriage. Almsgiving and generous acts of mercy both imply the “new world” of the early twelfth-century Anglo-Norman world of Aelred: urban, mercantile, and fostering trade. These developments affected the institution of marriage and the position of women. By the twelfth century, the bride’s dowry was increasingly the economic foundation of marriage,<sup>31</sup> thus marriage was often delayed until a sufficient dowry was collected. For townswomen, the dowry often equated to her acquisition of skills and capital for entry into the world of the guilds and the small shop.<sup>32</sup> The matrimonial boat was therefore a commercial vessel.

<sup>30</sup> LS, Sermon 22.5 308.

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages* (New York: Hambleton Continuum, 2006) 16.

<sup>32</sup> On the delay of marriage see Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Golai (London: Routledge, 2003) 179–80; Claudia Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages,” in *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 2, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, trans.

In this sermon Aelred points out the potentially negative impact of these social changes on the “fragile boat of marriage” and suggests the ways in which Christian married folk can ameliorate the dangers or, in Aelred’s words, constantly bail out the boat. Almsgiving can counteract the greed that all too easily accompanies overinvolvement in the world of commerce where growing disparity between rich and poor increases the need for generous acts of mercy. A new and growing economic environment creates new temptations for Christian laity, committed to the responsibilities of married friendship, to subvert the common good to their own personal ends. Committed Christians among the clergy and laity were concerned about the growing social preoccupation with the acquisition of wealth. Most of the various reform movements envisioned a return to evangelical poverty,<sup>33</sup> and contemporary moralists were reshaping the catalogs of vice and virtue to highlight the growing danger of greed.<sup>34</sup> Aelred’s fellow Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux elucidates the stages of growth in the love of God; he envisions greed as the opposite of divine love and, paradoxically, a potential starting point toward God.<sup>35</sup> It is likely, therefore, that what Aelred sees as the fragility of the boat of marriage is precisely the obligation of married couples to participate daily in economic life. Not sinful in and of itself, this obligation can engross one’s entire attention and become an obstacle to spiritual growth. As Aelred says in Sermon 24, “temporal wealth and worldly occupations are like a chain by which the devil holds persons bound so they cannot be free to ascend God’s stairway”<sup>36</sup> or, one might add, to bail out the fragile boat of marriage.

In another portrait of marriage—found in Sermon 21, a commentary on Proverbs 31 that celebrates the “strong woman”—Aelred links marriage to shared economic activity and portrays the husband as particularly grateful for the economic and spiritual partnership of his wife. In the extended

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Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1992) 282–303; and Maryann Kowalski and Judith M. Bennett, “Crafts, Gilds and Women in the Middle Ages,” *Signs* 14 (1989) 474–501.

<sup>33</sup> Marie-Dominique Chenu, “The Evangelical Awakening,” in *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, ed. and trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester Little (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968) 239–69.

<sup>34</sup> Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature* (East Lansing: Michigan State College, 1952) 93–97.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard’s portrait of his contemporaries, lively and still familiar, begins, “Today you see many men who already have great wealth and possessions still laboring day by day to add one field to another (Is 5:8) and to extend their boundaries (Ex 34:24)—with greed which knows no bounds” (“On Loving God” 6.18, in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. and foreword G. R. Evans, intro. Jean Leclercq, pref. Ewert H. Cousins [New York: Paulist, 1987] 188).

<sup>36</sup> *LS*, Sermon 24.25 (336).

allegory, the strong woman is the soul bound to Christ who is her husband, but Aelred clearly says that the comparison of Christ and the soul to a husband and wife is “drawn from human experience”<sup>37</sup> and is not an elaboration of the traditional Pauline motif. He goes on to give a vignette that does indeed echo human experience. The husband “goes out confidently and confidently he returns, knowing that whether he is absent or present, she will not let in any adulterers, listen to any debauchers, attend to any deceivers.” According to the needs of his business, when absent, “confidently he commits his goods to her.” For her part, the wife “fears chastely, she loves perfectly; she loves her husband not for his possessions but for his very self. She fears, not being beaten, but being left even for a little while.”<sup>38</sup> It is a small portrait of a marriage in which personal and sexual fidelity is intertwined with commercial activity. The picture is idealized, to be sure, but realistic details, such as the possibility of the husband’s beating his wife, slip in. The business motif is present in the biblical text itself, and the slight but telling details that Aelred adds reflect the world of modest shopkeepers that was so much a part of twelfth-century towns.

Here, then, in Sermon 21 Aelred gives us a simple summary of his estimation of marriage. It is one of two ways in which a baptized Christian can live out a faith commitment to the cross of Christ. Though inextricably linked to the world and its affairs, both social and economic, marriage can bring the partners to union with Christ if they persevere faithfully in their commitment to Christ in one another and if they take appropriate ascetical measures to offset the distractions and temptations that the world of commerce sets in their path. Aelred’s view, as expressed in this Marian sermon, is founded on a theology of marriage that, though not explicitly sacramental, understands marriage as confected and confirmed in a faith commitment to Christ. It is also a practical perspective, cognizant of the specific world in which the married Christians of Aelred’s day, especially those of more modest social status, lived out their commitment.

A Christian may respond to the call of Christ in the vocation of marriage, the saintly Abbot Aelred affirms, confident that it will bring her to Christ, knowing that it expresses her commitment to his cross. Her commitment will involve a continual struggle: she will have to engage fully in the economic sphere of the common good even while fighting against its myriad temptations. She will have to work at fidelity. But she enters the boat of marriage as her husband’s friend and equal partner in sailing and bailing and will reach the other side together with him. Their friendship, with its sweetness and challenges, will give her a foretaste of divine love and become “a stage bordering upon that perfection which consists in the

<sup>37</sup> *LS*, Sermon 21.16 (293).

<sup>38</sup> *LS*, Sermon 21.16, and 21.17 (294).



love and knowledge of God.” From “being a friend” to her husband, she will become “the friend of God.”<sup>39</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

Aelred’s reflections on marriage as a Christian state in life read significantly differently from those of his contemporaries in the schools. Like them and indeed more than they, he is interested in the nature of the human institution of marriage that has somehow been incorporated into the divine plan of salvation at work in Christ. But, whereas they focus their attention on sexual consummation and procreation as the distinctive character of marriage, Aelred understands the interpersonal and social nature of marriage to be better understood under the category of friendship. Aelred believes that in Genesis 2 God reveals this understanding of marriage. Further, the Scholastics’ arguments, following the lines laid down by previous theologians, are marked by convictions about the obligation of women to submit to their husbands, and twelfth-century theologians generally are unable completely to resist the influence of the Augustinian legacy affirming that all sexual activity is tainted by sin, even in marriage. By contrast, Aelred is persuaded by the category of friendship to find in the creation narrative the equality of women; it is probably his knowledge of actual marriages, gained through pastoral experience, that enables him to understand how the partnership of marriage works in the real world. His anthropology consistently views human life and action as permeated by grace and oriented toward the good. Together with his understanding of the real temptations of the lay environment, his anthropology resists the imputation that all sexuality is sinful.

But the most significant difference between the arguments of the Scholastics and the thought of Aelred rests in their starting points and distinct intentions. The early Scholastics were reflecting upon the canonical legislation that church authorities had formulated to extend jurisdiction over marriage, and upon the liturgical rites that had arisen to integrate a familial and social institution into the church’s liturgical life. Their intention is to more perfectly identify the place of marriage in the life of the church and to justify the church’s control. Aelred’s starting point is Christian life and the range of vocations within it. He implicitly roots the vocations of marriage and monasticism in the common, deeply personal commitment of Christians to Christ that comes from the profession of faith in baptism. Aelred’s intent is essentially pastoral: to identify the means by which married Christians can bring their baptismal commitments to fulfillment and to encourage them to do so.

<sup>39</sup> *SF* 2.14 (73).

He also wishes to expand his monks' understanding of their own vocation, seen in relation to the common Christian calling.

These pastoral and theological intentions led Aelred to insights that might well have enriched the church's theology, had they been incorporated into the work of the Scholastics. But he lived at the exact moment when monastic theology, which up to now had been the mainstream of preceding centuries, diverged from the Scholasticism that would come to dominate the tradition and increasingly ignore monastic theological contributions. The loss of Aelred's rich understanding of marriage is one more reason to deplore the growing gaps between monastic, pastoral theology and Scholasticism. Had these two theological traditions remained in closer conversation, the church's teaching about marriage might earlier have come to the fruition we find, for instance, in *Lumen gentium*, chapter 5, "The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church." There the council fathers consider marriage within the full range of Christian vocations unified by a common call and shared evangelical values. That chapter reads like a continuation of Aelred's teaching, but it does not render superfluous the further riches to be gained from his thought.

Aelred's understanding of marriage as friendship leads us to John's Gospel and specifically to Jesus' words at the Last Supper: "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is about. I have called you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything that I heard from my Father" (Jn 15:15). For Aelred, the intimate, personal relationship of Jesus to the beloved disciples is the model for the marital relationship; this conception adds a rich dimension to the Pauline teaching on the corporate relationship of Christ to his bride, the church. Jesus speaks specifically of disclosure connected with friendship. Far more than the sharing of an economic destiny or even of the physical intimacies of a sexual relationship, marriage as friendship is a covenant to share the secrets of the heart and the intimate graces of one's life in Christ. Aelred speaks precisely of this kind of sharing in many places in the *Spiritual Friendship*.

But Aelred does not devalue participation in a common economic destiny. For him, the marketplace is precisely the context in which the husband and wife, partners in all aspects of life, work out their salvation. Together they produce and preserve their goods for the well-being of the family. Together they make the difficult decisions required by justice and mercy. Together they bail out the waters of worldly temptation and row against the tide of worldly self-interest and "the private good." Theirs is a commitment to the cross of Christ that requires a firm commitment to the "common weal," and only by fulfilling their public vocation can they arrive safely at the shore of salvation. Attending as he does to both the intimate relationship and the public responsibilities of marriage, Aelred's challenges to those called to the vocation of marriage still ring true.



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