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## 'Where Have You Vanished?': Aelred of Rievaulx's Lamentation on Simon

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## “Where Have You Vanished?”

### Aelred of Rievaulx’s Lamentation on the Death of Simon

Anna Harrison

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*In his lamentation on the death of his friend, Simon, Aelred responds to a centuries-long suspicion about grief by mounting an apology for mourning that is in keeping with a larger Cistercian trend. Aelred’s chief preoccupation in the lamentation is, however, to emphasize the productivity of grief, both for the living and for the dead. Aelred associates the desire to reunite with the beloved dead with stimulating the mourner’s desire for heaven as location for the longed-for reunion, and he conceives of the pain associated with bereavement as payment for the sins of the deceased.*

“Where have you gone? Where have you vanished? What shall I do? Where shall I turn?”<sup>1</sup> In these words, we are privy to a long-ago ache, an exclamation of bewilderment, fear, and hurt that the twelfth-century Englishman Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-67) penned, lately bereaved at the death of his “sweetest friend” and fellow monk, Simon.<sup>2</sup> Within Aelred’s autobiographically-inflected treatise on the Cistercian life, *The Mirror of Charity*, we find a chapter given over to the author’s anguish over his friend’s death.<sup>3</sup> Aelred was in his early thirties and had been at the foundation of Rievaulx, in

1 To Gil Klein, for his patience with tears as well as with medieval texts and their modern readers.

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Aelred, *Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:109, 61: “Quoabisti, quorecessisti? Quidfaciam? Quomevertam?”

2 Aelred, *Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:103, 59: “dulcissimus amicus.” There is a large body of literature on Aelred’s relationship with Simon, which figures prominently in John Boswell’s groundbreaking study on homosexual desire, love, and sex in the Western Christian Middle Ages; Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance*, 221-26. My consideration of Aelred’s grief over Simon’s death does not depend on whether or not we characterize Aelred as gay or his feelings toward Simon as homoerotic.

3 The *Mirror* is a composite work, different portions of which Aelred wrote at different times and which he seems to have compiled into a single whole during the first half of the 1140s and at the request of Bernard of Clairvaux. For the work’s composition, see: Wilmar, “L’instigateur du *Speculum Caritatis*,” 371-95; Roby, “Introduction,” 9; Dumont, “Introduction,” 28, 50, and 55-63; McGuire, *Brother and Lover*, 63; Dutton, “Cistercian Laments,” 26-31.

York, for almost a decade when, in the early 1140s, Simon died, occasioning one of the most delicate and decisive expressions of loss in the medieval monastic tradition. Consisting of a little over eight printed pages and comprising the final section of the first of the *Mirror's* three books, the lamentation takes its place in an established literary tradition that goes back at least to the fourth-century Bishop Ambrose of Milan's grief-filled response to the death of his brother Satyrus, a genre that Aelred would have known at least in the form of the exquisite defense of grief that his Cistercian contemporary, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1150) – that towering twelfth-century intellect – composed on the occasion of his own brother's death.<sup>4</sup>

In his lamentation, Aelred responds to a centuries-long suspicion about grief that we find in late antique Mediterranean and medieval western Christian contexts, mounting an apology for mourning that is in keeping with a larger Cistercian trend.<sup>5</sup> Aelred's chief preoccupation in the lamentation is, however, other. It is to emphasize the *productivity of grief* – both for the living and for the dead. I argue, first, that Aelred associates his desire to reunite with his beloved with stimulating Aelred's own desire for heaven as location for the longed-for reunion, a desire that pushes Aelred to cultivate the holiness that is progress toward God and concomitant with salvation. I then argue that Aelred conceives of the pain associated with his bereavement as payment for the sins of his dead friend, and in this way benefits Simon; specifically, Aelred regards his grief as launching Simon into heaven.

Aelred dedicates a portion of the lamentation to defending his grief in light of the inherited assumption that grief betrays despair over

4 Hoste, "Monastic Planctus," 385-98, considers the range of sources that may have influenced Aelred, and he compares side-by-side passages from the *Mirror* with Bernard's sermon on the death of his brother, Gerard. Dutton also reviews parallels between Aelred's lamentation and Bernard's ("Cistercian Laments," 4.), which seems to have been Aelred's immediate source; McGuire, *Difficult Saint*, 144. The *Mirror* is Aelred's first literary work (Dumont, "Introduction," 32), and Bernard's sermon on Gerard may have been among the first works Aelred read upon entering the monastic life (Hoste, "Monastic Planctus," 396).

5 Dutton, "Cistercian Laments"; Harrison, "Jesus Wept," 433-67. Aelred's lamentation is one of several that men in the Cistercian order produced in the twelfth century, including that which Gilbert of Hoyland wrote when Aelred died, and which are reflective of the period's preoccupation with emotion, interiority, self-scrutiny, and friendship.

the eternal fate of deceased and/or that it is a testament to disbelief in the immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body, claims of paramount importance to medieval Christians. Aelred insists both that his sorrow is not a sign of despair over his friend's place in the afterlife and that his tears are not a mark of faithlessness. He pronounces to the contrary: he rejoices, he declares, that God has transferred Simon from death to life, from labor to rest, from misery to blessedness.<sup>6</sup> Simon has been freed from the fetters of the flesh, so that his soul flies upward, toward Christ's embrace; Aelred is confident, too, that Simon's body, now dead, will rise again on the last day. While his love for Simon fuels Aelred's craving for the renewed presence of his friend, reason, Aelred writes, knows better.

Taking as one of his several models for mourning the biblical figure of Rachel (Mt 2:18), on whose grief over her children, among the dead in the slaughter of the innocents, he elaborates, Aelred tells us that he weeps for Simon because he is attached to Simon, just as Rachel was attached to her children. And just as Rachel would not have her children brought back from the dead and subject once more to life's woes, so, too, and on the same account, Aelred does not wish for Simon to be returned to him.<sup>7</sup> And yet, as Aelred reminds us, citing the Gospel passage, "Rachel weeping for her children refused to be consoled" (Mt 2:18),<sup>8</sup> underscoring the depth of her distress – and his. "I grieve for my most beloved friend, he who was one heart with me, who has been snatched from me," Aelred explains, "*and* I rejoice that he has been taken up..."<sup>9</sup> Aelred does not demand of himself that his faith in his friend's celestial bliss quash his own sense of loss, or that reason subdue emotion. Aelred admits the force both of his sorrow and of Simon's joy, dissolving the tension between the uneven emotions on the basis of his love

6 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:103, 59.

7 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:105, 60, and see 1:34:104, 59-60.

8 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:105, 60: "Rachel plorans filios suos noluit consolari."

9 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:106, 60: "Doleo dilectissimum meum, unicordem meum mihi ereptum, caudeo eum in aeterna tabernacula assumptum."

for his friend. Asserting Christ's tearstained sorrow over the death of Lazarus was likewise animated by such love, Aelred claims it as authorization for his own lament. "How he loved him," announces Aelred, quoting from the account in John's Gospel of Jesus' weeping over the death of his friend, Lazarus (Jn 11:35).<sup>10</sup>

Addressing his fellow monks, who are among the *Mirror's* intended audience,<sup>11</sup> Aelred perceives, so he says, their astonishment at his tears, and he cries out: "You are even more astonished that Aelred goes on living without Simon,"<sup>12</sup> just as Aelred wondered that, as he discloses, Simon's "soul that was one with mine could, without mine, cast off the chains of the body,"<sup>13</sup> alluding to the strength of bond between the two men that must have been well-known among their companions in the monastery and to which Aelred does not hesitate to give voice, recalling aspects of their relationship as he lingers on the intensity of his grief and explores its psychology. "I loved you because you received me into friendship from the beginning of my conversion," Aelred confesses, turning his words now to Simon.<sup>14</sup> And he reminisces that it was upon his arrival at the monastery of Rievaulx that he, then in his mid-twenties, met the man with whom he formed a fast and enduring friendship, the basis of which was Aelred's admiration of Simon's youthful conversion to the monastic life and perseverance in its rugged demands. Aelred enumerates the virtues Simon possessed – each of which calls to

10 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:112, 63: "Quomodo amabat eum." Aelred concedes that at least an aspect our attachment (*affectus*) to one another, or affection for another, is a weakness, one that Jesus takes on deliberately when he wishes to do so but which does not overcome him as it does us. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) when his friend Lazarus died, but he did so not because sorrow overwhelmed him but for our benefit, to give us leave to weep without concern. For Bernard's sense of Jesus as model mourner, see Harrison, "Jesus Wept."

11 Dumont, "Introduction," 50.

12 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:98, 57: "Quis enim non miretur Aelredum sine Simone vivere."

13 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:112, 63: "Mirabar animam illam quae cum mea una erat, sine mea corporis exui posse compedibus."

14 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34: 109, 61: "Dilexi te, qui me ab ipso intio conversionis meae in amicitiam suscepisti."

mind qualities especially prized in late medieval monastic circles and all of which, Aelred contends, served to correct his own shortcomings. Aelred notes Simon's humility (which blunted Aelred's pride), his tranquility (which calmed Aelred's restlessness), and his seriousness (which checked Aelred's levity). The rule of their order limited conversation, but "his face spoke to me," Aelred declares, remarking on Simon's appearance (modest), his gait (mature), and his silence (without resentment).<sup>15</sup> Portraying Simon as friend, mentor, and model, Aelred praises the monk as commanding imitation.

Simon's death was sudden, Aelred was not at the bedside, and as he recounts, his initial reaction to learning Simon had died was one of incredulity. He recalls in writing that later, when gazing at Simon's dead body, the sense of unreality persisted: "my mind was in such a stupor that even when his body was at last naked for washing, I did not believe he had passed on."<sup>16</sup> Continuing to examine his response to Simon's death, Aelred wonders why he went so long (he does not relate how long) without weeping and concludes that exactly the intimacy of their friendship and the hard blow of the loss rendered this death, for a time, inconceivable. When grief-filled emotion finally came, Aelred begged pity (Jb 19:21) from the monks' in his charge.<sup>17</sup>

What a marvel that I am said to live, when such a great part of my life,  
so sweet a solace for my pilgrimage ... has been taken away from me.  
It is as if I had been eviscerated, as if my unhappy soul torn were to  
pieces. And am I said to be alive? O miserable life, O suffering life, to  
live without Simon!<sup>18</sup>

Giving free reign to tears of desolation, Aelred inserts himself in a line of Old Testament mourners. Jacob wept for his son, Joseph

15 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:107, 60: "Loquebatur mihi aspectus eius."

16 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:112, 63: "Tantus quippe stupor mentem invaserat meam, ut etiam nudatis iam ad lavacrum membrum, transisse non crederem."

17 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34: 98, 57.

18 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:104, 59: "Mirum tamen, si vivere dicendus sum, cui ablata est tanta portio vitae meae, tam dulce solatium peregrinationis meae ...." Quasi auulsa sunt viscera mea, quasi dilaniata infelix anima mea. Et vivere dicor? O miserum vivere, o dolendum vivere, sine Simone vivere.

wept for his father, David wept for Jonathan; Simon alone was all these to Aelred.

Weep, then, wretched man, for your dearest father, weep for your most loving son, weep for your sweetest friend. Let waterfalls burst from your wretched head; *let your eyes bring forth tears day and night* (Jer 9:18). Weep, I say, not because he was taken up but because you were left behind.<sup>19</sup>

Poignant reminders of their shared past pepper the text – “How sweet it was to live together”<sup>20</sup> – as do fantasies of a common future – “How sweet it would be to return together to the homeland.”<sup>21</sup>

Tightly woven through Aelred’s foray into the intricacies of his grief is an insistence – familiar from much late medieval religious literature – that pain does not go to waste, a determined avowal of the meaningfulness of the varied sufferings that accompany each of us throughout our life.<sup>22</sup> The pain of his bereavement, to Aelred, *must* have meaning; it cannot have been purposeless. A monk whose life’s commitment was to work towards his own salvation and that of others, especially his brothers, Aelred understands his grief as forwarding Simon’s and his own soul’s redemption.

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Aelred’s literary excursion through his reaction to Simon’s death suggests that a desire to reunite with his friend energizes the mourner’s already established determination to imitate aspects of Simon’s life. “Here now, O Lord, I shall follow in his footsteps so that in you I may enjoy his company,”<sup>23</sup> Aelred pledges, newly recommitted

19 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34: 104, 59: “Plora, ergo, miser carissimum patrem tuum, plora amantissimum filium tuum, plora dulcissimum amicum tuum. Rumpantur cataractae miseri capitis, deducant oculi lacrimas per diem et noctem. Plora, inquam, non quia ille assumptus, sed qui tu relictus.

20 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:98, 57: “Quam dulcis fuit simul vivere.”

21 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:98, 57: “Quam dulce foret simul in patriam redire.”

22 The most insightful discussion of the role of one person’s pain in easing the suffering of another is Bynum, *Holy Feast*. For the power of one’s pain to assuage the torment and speed the release of souls in purgatory, see Newman, “On the Threshold of the Dead,” 108-36

23 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:107, 60: “Sequar hic, Domine, itinera eius, ut in te fruar consortio eius.” As Brian Patrick McGuire (*Brother and Lover*, 65) has observed, Aelred’s experience of Simon’s death seems to have precipitated a resurgence of commitment on his part to the monastic life.

to modeling himself after his mentor in the wake of Simon's death. This is because Aelred knows that the reunion with Simon for which he longs can only take place in heaven; he must, therefore, become worthy of beatitude, by becoming more like his friend, if he is to rejoin his friend. Grief, as Aelred tells it, is productive because it is movement toward salvation. The march heavenward as Aelred paints it is *not* in this instance sustained by a yearning for God but a pining for the other who is beloved.<sup>24</sup> And yet, this longing *will* propel Aelred toward heaven, he is confident – and thus bring him closer to God. We see here a notion that will contribute to among Aelred's most famous formulations, that "he who dwells in friendship dwells in God, and God in him,"<sup>25</sup> which we find in his *Spiritual Friendship*, written probably toward the end of Aelred's life,<sup>26</sup> and years after the death of Simon. In this later work, Aelred considers true friendships formed in the monastery to argue that there is no conflict between love of friends and love of God, since God is the source of the love by which we love our friends;<sup>27</sup> and, in a celebrated dictum, proclaims that "friend cleaving to friend in the spirit of Christ is made one heart and one soul with Christ."<sup>28</sup> There is a close connection between the lamentation and *Spiritual Friendship* on another account. In *Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred associates love between friends in the here-and-now with the love the saints have for one another in heaven. Friendship on earth is a foretaste of

24 If we consider the *Mirror* in light of Aelred's claim in *Spiritual Friendship* that between human and divine love there is no substantial difference but only a difference of degree (Aelred, *Spir. Amicitia*, 3:87), the divide between heaven and earth, desire for Simon and desire for heaven, becomes even less sharp. See Dumont, "Introduction," 51, for parallels between *Spiritual Friendship* and book 1 of the *Mirror* with regard to their consideration of human and divine love. The lamentation, according to Dumont, is "proof that it is possible for true charity, very human charity, to exist in a cloister," and in this way illustrates the *Mirror's* larger focus on conforming human love to divine love; *ibid.*

25 Aelred, *De Spir. Amicitia*, 1:70, 301: "Qui manet in amicitia, in Deo manet, et Deus in eo" (1 Jn 4:16).

26 Dumont, "Introduction," 27.

27 Aelred, *De Spir. Amicitia*, 2:20, 306; Roby, "Introduction," 20.

28 Aelred, *De Spir. Amicitia*, 2:21, 306: "Amicus in spiritu Christi adhaerens amico, efficitur cum eo *cor unum et anima una*" (Acts 4:32).



the experience of the saints, who enjoy perfect friendships among themselves.<sup>29</sup> In the *Mirror*, Aelred calls out to Simon, applying to his friend a quotation from the Gospel of Matthew.

I sent on ahead my first fruits, sent on my treasure, sent on no small part of myself. Let what remains of me follow after you. *Where my treasure is, there let my heart be also* (Mt 6:21).<sup>30</sup>

My point is this: because, as Aelred believed, his love had joined him in one heart with his beloved, because Simon's soul had become a part of his own soul,<sup>31</sup> Aelred can in some sense claim that his love for his friend means *he himself* already resides in heaven, and, therefore, his love for Simon really already *is* that of saint for saint – or, a participation in the celestial love the blessed enjoy. Perhaps exactly his grief-soaked love over Simon's death was the crucible in which Aelred forged his confidence in the power of friends to draw each other heavenward, toward God.<sup>32</sup> But this is a question for another time.

In any case, it is not merely *his* salvation that Aelred believes his grief advances but also Simon's. "Weep, I say ... because you were left," Aelred instructs himself, and then he tells us that his tears are a sacrifice he offers to Christ on Simon's behalf, payment for the sin with which Simon may have left this life. "Either pardon [his sins] or impute them to me," Aelred entreats God.<sup>33</sup> "*Me*, let *me* be struck, let *me* be scourged. I will pay for everything. I ask only that you do not hide your blessed face from him, take away your sweetness, or

29 Aelred, *De Spir. Amicitia*, 3:79, 333-34; Roby, "Introduction," 19-20.

30 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:106, 60: "Praemisi primitias meas, praemisi thesaurum meum, praemisi non modicum mei portionem. Sequatur ad te quo mei restat. Ubi est thesaurus meus, ibi sit et cor meum."

31 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:106, 60.

32 Anselm Hoste noticed decades ago that Aelred elaborates themes in his lamentation on Simon that he will develop in later writings; "Monastic Planctus," 397. Aelred remembers Simon's death in the last portion of book three of his *Spiritual Friendship*; *De Spir. amicitia*, 3:119, 345. Lefler, *Theologizing Friendship*, calls these last passages of *Spiritual Friendship* "the crowning moment of his [Aelred's] whole theological enterprise."

33 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:113, 64: "aut ignosce, aut mihi imputa."

delay your caring consolation.”<sup>34</sup> Aelred’s plea depends on the late medieval Christian understanding of redemption. Christ paid on the cross the debt for original sin, and baptism was participation in this payment, which washed the soul clean of the original debt. But during the course of a lifetime, a baptized Christian accumulated new debt for sinful works committed and for works omitted, for sinful feelings and for sinful thoughts. The late medieval priest might offer the contrite person God’s forgiveness in the context of confession, and the larger penitential system provided a way for the sinner to pay his debt through the taking on of penalty due to sin. But death cuts short the possibility of making reparation for what the soul owes to God. Because he is just, Christ does not waive the payment that is due to him from the soul who dies indebted. Because he is merciful, he does not consign all sinners to eternal suffering. Sinful souls destined for salvation pass through a period in purgatory, where God purifies and exacts payment through punishment. All of purgatory’s inhabitants will eventually wend their way to heaven; it is a matter of how long and how acute the suffering they must first endure.

Aelred, sure that Simon will experience eternal felicity is, nevertheless, unsure that this joy will be Simon’s immediately following death. For however holy Simon’s life, Aelred erred on the side of cautious uncertainty when it came to his friend’s post-mortem state. Exactly this uncertainty carved out a space in which Aelred might play a determining role in his friend’s salvation, allowing him to assert his continuing importance to the man whom he treasured and over whom he wept. The Christian God of the late Middle Ages did not care *who* paid what the sinner owed as long as payment was made. This is the larger context within which medieval people offered to God their own suffering as payment on behalf of sinners languishing in purgatory, at a distance from Christ. This bald assertion of one person’s ability to substitute her sufferings for another’s is testimony to our period’s confidence in the intimate relationality

34 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34: 113, 64: “Ego, ego percutiar, ego flageller, ego totum pendam; tantum, quaesco, ne illi abscondas beatam faciem tuam ne illi subtrahas dulcedinem tuam ne illi differas piam consolationem tuam.”

of human beings known as the communion of saints. Aelred's pain, powered by love and joined to his own confidence in God's mercy, is payment for any debt Simon may have left unsettled. Although he does not explicitly say so, his offering seems to Aelred to have secured the intended result.

Directly after Aelred offers God the sacrifice of his tears and in a meditative leap through time and space, Aelred arrives at Simon's bedside, taking up in his imagination a proximity to his dying friend that was denied him in reality. As Simon's death approaches, Aelred hears his beloved cry out "Mercy! Mercy!"<sup>35</sup> and then Aelred exclaims:

What is this I see, my Lord? As if with my own eyes, surely, I seem to see ... [Simon] ... freed by ineffable joy, absorbed into the immense sea of divine mercy.... his soul, washed in the fountain of divine mercy, put down the weight of sin. ....<sup>36</sup>

Although Aelred does not make plain the claim, it seems evident that he attributes to his watery grief the triggering of God's mercy, which, washing over Simon, loosened from him any stain of sin, freeing him into the joy of eternity.

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Aelred knew that his were not the only tears that fell for Simon, or so he says. "Bear patiently with my tears, my sobs, the groaning in my chest,"<sup>37</sup> he implores his brothers and then later observes, "Why do I blush? Do I weep alone? Look at how many tears, how many sobs, how many sighs surround me!"<sup>38</sup> remarking on the sorrow that overran their household when Simon died. Convinced of their com-

35 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34: 113, 64: "Misericordiam, misericordiam."

36 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34: 114, 64: "Quid est quod inueor, mi Domine? Videor mihi certe quasi oculis cernere ... ineffabili gaudio resolutam, dum cerneret pecata sua, immense hoc pelago divinae miserationis absorpta.... Libet intueri animam illam, fonte divinae misericordiae dilutam, deposito pondere peccatorum...."

37 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:98, 57: "Patienter ergo ferte lacrimas meas, gemitum meum, rugitum pectoris mei."

38 Aelred, *De Spec. Caritatis*, 1:34:112, 157. "Quid erubesco? An solus ploro? Ecce quot sunt undique lacrimae, quot gemitus, quot suspiria!"

mon need and of the value of his insights to his community – to all his readers – Aelred offers his understanding of his bereavement so that they can make it their own, shaking off whatever hold fear that faith and grief are incompatible may have on them and sure, too, of the meaningfulness of their heartache.<sup>39</sup>

Let me conclude. Grief has a history. When Aelred brandished his ability to reconcile faith with grief he was in continuity with Bernard of Clairvaux's lamentation on Gerard. But Aelred is more comfortable in his ability to hold together both faith and grief than was Bernard. Perhaps liberated, at least in part, by the older man's sermon, Aelred's justification for mourning is less anxious, although it is still necessary. With his assertion of the worth to self and other of the grief associated with bereavement Aelred is, however, in territory largely uncharted by his Cistercian predecessor. My work in thirteenth-century sources suggest that this was a notion that took root and flowered in the monastic context of the century following his own.<sup>40</sup>

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In the writings of this long-departed monk is an insistence on the value to self and other of grief that is starkly at odds with a modern penchant to diminish grief's value and mute its expression, which sometimes shows itself in that banal retort to tears shed for the newly deceased, "she's better off now." While we may reject Aelred's declaration of the salvific power of mourning, his assertion may be, nonetheless, an impetus to those of us who have ourselves lost much to our too long, too hard grief to give up on the search for some redemptive meaning in our own tears.

39 For Aelred's sense of shared sentiment among members of the monastic community, see Dumont, "Personalism in Community." For Aelred's sense of himself as model to the monks to whom he was abbot as well as to his readers and his eagerness to communicate his experiences to others, see Dumont, "Introduction," 20 and 40.

40 Harrison, "Joy of the Saints."

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