



Aelred of Rievaulx (ca. 1110-1167)

by Eugene Rice

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A depiction of Aelred of Rievaulx from a medieval illuminated manuscript (ca 1140).

Abbot of the Cistercian convent of Rievaulx in northern England in the middle of the twelfth century, Aelred was a specialist in the theory and practice of friendship.

Aelred was born around 1110 in Hexham, Northumberland, son of a Saxon priest. He was educated at the court of King David of Scotland. Although he might have been expected to pursue a more worldly course, in 1134 he decided to enter the Cistercian monastery, Rievaulx Abbey.

In 1142, on a journey to Rome, Aelred met St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who asked him to write about friendship. The result was his first major work, *Speculum Caritatis* (*The Mirror of Love*), a treatise especially important for its celebration of an intimate relationship he had enjoyed with a recently deceased monk, Simon.

In his writings on friendship, Aelred distinguished three kinds: carnal, worldly, and spiritual friendship.

Carnal friendship is a mutual harmony in vice which begins when lustful eyes allow into the mind images of beautiful bodies. Its governing principle is pleasure. Aelred was familiar with the practice of it.

Under the guise of good advice and in a context of lamenting his promiscuous youth, he offered his sister, a cloistered nun, a hint of how he had sometimes sinned and how badly: "Do not imagine that men in the absence of women and women in the absence of men cannot defile themselves, for the detestable sin that inflames a man with passion for a man (*vir in virum*) or a woman for a woman (*femina in feminam*) is judged more serious than any other crime."

Moreover, he opens a little window on lived reality when he scolds two old monks who still sleep together in the same bed, cuddle, and kiss, yet claim to have no fear for their chastity because their genitals are powerless to commit sin.

The governing principle of worldly friendship is utility. Utility exploits the human impulse to love and be loved. Preoccupied with temporal advantages, it follows the purse.

True friendship, however, is grounded in Christ and, like chastity, is a gift of God's grace. Aelred based his conception of spiritual friendship on a metaphysics of the kiss. When a friend kisses his friend in the spirit of Christ not only do their two souls and hearts become one, the soul of each begins a journey through the degrees of love to union with Christ, who in turn will kiss them and make them one in spirit with him.

Aspiring to this kiss, the saintly soul cries out: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (Song of Songs 1:2). Christ's kiss is the origin of all true friendship, defined now as the sacred mutual affection that binds two friends, several friends, a community of brothers, and makes them one.

Aelred regularly cultivated spiritual friendships with the younger monks of Rievaulx. His emotional

investment in these crushes is sufficiently illustrated by his love for Simon. Aelred was about twenty-four when Simon entered the monastery. Simon was about fourteen, frail, of distinguished birth and remarkable beauty. He fasted until he was faint with hunger, then ate grass.

Aelred called Simon "my gentlest friend," "my beloved brother," and "the one-in-heart with me." When the boy died young, Aelred was broken-hearted. Death, he lamented, tore Simon from "my embrace, from my kisses, from the sight of my eyes. It was as if my body had been eviscerated and my helpless soul rent in pieces. . . . O wretched life, O grievous life, a life without Simon."

Aelred used the story of the "disciple whom Jesus loved" to reassure critics who doubted the chastity of his transports. The beloved disciple, his virgin head nestled (as Aelred would have it) in the flowers of Jesus's virgin breast, would serve for centuries as an icon of masculine love, testimony from the Gospels to set against the negative prohibitions of Paul, and a comfort to believers.

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About the Author

Eugene Rice, who died on August 4, 2008, was Shepherd Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University. His last book, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, was awarded prizes by the American Society of Church History, the American Catholic Association, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Historical Association. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, he instituted Columbia University's first "Seminar on Homosexualities" and served as an adviser to Columbia University Press for its series on gay and lesbian studies. At the time of his death, he was working on a history of Western homosexualities.