

## OF THE DEGREES OF CHARITY: I

Translated by CLARE KIRCHBERGER

*The Treatise of Charity has until recently been considered to be the work of Richard of Saint-Victor. It was found, though without attribution of authorship and often without title in Mss. collections of his works, often in conjunction with his undisputed treatise on The Degrees of Violent Charity. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it was sometimes given to St Bernard from whose works and letters passages are borrowed. But the tradition that it was Richard's prevailed and it was printed in the early editions of his works. Recent research by M. Dumeige,<sup>1</sup> who has edited both texts, has established that three of the early mss. which contain the treatise, give the name Ivo to the author: 'Dilecto dom. Severino Dyonisii suppriori, frater Yvo'. (Chalons 330, xiii cent., corroborated both as to title and author in Ms. Harleian 23851, xiv cent. and Bologna, A.2126, xv cent.) M. Dumeige admits that he has not been able to trace the identity of either Ivo or Dom Sévérin. They were not Victorines or Cistercians of Richard's period.*

*The work itself is very attractive and critics of Richard's theories on charity have found it consistent with ideas in the De Trinitate and The Degrees of Violent Charity. It is perhaps more personal, direct and humane than Richard's usual approach.*

### To Severinus

#### CHAPTER I: THAT CHARITY IS INSUPERABLE

**B**ELOVED friend in the heart of Jesus Christ. The left hand of the Bridegroom be under your head and his right hand embrace you! I am compelled, dearly beloved, by the urgency of your love for me to write something about charity for you, and to presume beyond my powers and far beyond my low station; indeed I seem to be pouring out from my emptiness and to be giving what I do not possess. It is only with difficulty I tell you that my mind consents to say something about it, for I

<sup>1</sup> G. Dumeige, *Ives, Epître a Severin*; Richard de Saint-Victor, *Les Quatre Degres de la Violente Charite*. Paris, 1955.

feel that neither my heart nor my tongue can speak of this subject worthily. How can a man speak of love who does not love or feel the power of love? There is abundant matter on other subjects in books, but this is altogether an inward thing or it is nowhere, for it does not translate the secrets of its delights from outside to within, but transmits them from within outwards. Therefore only the man who arranges his words according to the dictates of his heart, can speak fitly of love. So do not be surprised if I prefer to hear another rather than to speak of it myself. I should like to hear a man who would dip his pen in his heart's blood, for when the conscience dictates what the tongue speaks, the teaching is true and to be revered; charity will suggest it and the spirit utter it. You are mistaken if you take me to be such a man and I should be mistaken also.

As charity believes all things it is filial in you to think me better than I am. But it is hard that people should think well of me for qualities which I do not possess and if I had them I ought properly to be ignorant of them. For if a man loves something which is not, but which he thinks exists, it is not the love or loving which is non-existent, but the thing loved. O the great power of charity which calls into being things which are not as much as those that are! O powerful virtue that carriest away all things yet robbest no man, makest all thine own but deprivest none, and dost acquire by loving, the good thing thou lovest in another! And yet it might be that the good thou dost be done in vain; but it is not possible that I should love uselessly. But the power of love that you seek is at hand, and is there any man who can resist it? It subjects all things to itself and compels all things to serve its own ends. It overcomes enemies by loving and makes friends of them though they be unwilling. For though it may have rivals, it has no enemies. For it alone does not fail in adversity, for 'it is patient'; it does not revenge wrongs, for 'it is kind'; it is not troubled by the good fortune of others, for 'it envieth not'; it is not pricked by a bad conscience, for 'it acteth not perversely'; it is not exalted by honour, for 'it is not puffed up'; it does not try to take the lead, for 'it is not ambitious'; it is not ruled by covetousness, for 'it seeketh not its own'; it is not resentful of wrongs, for 'it is not provoked to anger'; it is not defiled with sinister suspicions, for it 'thinketh no evil'; the wrongdoing of others does not give it pleasure, for it 'rejoiceth not in iniquity; but it is not blinded by

error, for 'it rejoiceth in the truth'; persecutions do not break it, for it 'beareth all things'; treachery does not harden it, for 'it believeth all things', yet not all men; it is not swallowed up in despair, for 'it hopeth all things'; it is not cast down by impatience, for it 'endureth all things'. That is, it patiently awaits all that God has promised, for the separation of death never slays it, for 'charity never falleth away'. . . . It is not overcome even by death, for it is strong as death, yea even stronger, for that death was compelled to die in the Redeemer's death. O insuperable virtue of charity which hast conquered that invincible One and him to whom all things are subject, thou hast made subject as it were to all, when God conquered by love, humbled himself taking the form of a servant, was made not only a man but a reproach among men and rejected by the people. Because of the great charity wherewith he loved us, in his anger he could not contain his mercies, so that he gave up that beloved soul of his to his enemies, for his friends' sake, so that he might take away both the terror and power of death from them. And if he was strong in opposing God, how much more shall he prevail against men?

Hence comes also that intrepid constancy of heart of believers by which, despising torments and mocking at death, they return home joyfully through the jaws of death. 'O death, where is thy sting?'<sup>2</sup> For now it is not a sting but a jubilant song, for in thy own person thou takest a wide and happy path out of misery into the kingdom. It is the work of charity that they do not fear to die for him and in him, but are glad since they see that he has loved them so much that willingly he was condemned to a most shameful death, that they themselves might not die. They marvel at and embrace in Christ that ecstasy of love, whereby for the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, despising human shame. They are not ashamed to pay back in kind, and urged on by the insults of his passion, as if they were pricked on by arrows, they throw themselves unrestrainedly into the abyss of love, into the depths of charity, asking only one single thing: 'What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that he has rendered to me?'<sup>3</sup> Thus, being out of their minds—but their insanity is sane and holy—they think that they love but little who are so greatly loved. Truly the strength of love is not measured by reason for

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. xv, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm cxv, 12.

according to the Apostle it passeth knowledge in its power.<sup>4</sup> It is not afraid for it casteth out fear. It is not kept back by weakness for it is made perfect in infirmity. Truly that omnipotent strength which makes this weakness powerful, changes the things that seem ready to harm us into helpful things; so that supported by it, Christ's soldiers fight unafraid, and sure of victory they pass through danger quite safely and fear neither demon nor man. So Paul, having enumerated many dangers in which he has triumphed gloriously, adds the cause of his triumph, saying: 'In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us'.<sup>5</sup> Amidst the shining lances of enemies raging on every side, and darts flying around, he sleeps safely in Christ who alone is potent to extinguish the burning darts of the most evil one, for charity is not quenched by many waters. Again, love covers and masters a multitude of sins and shall it not prevail against the dying flies of temptations? It does prevail and overcome and makes that Jebusite people and the others of the stock of Canaan pay service of tribute and turns them into opportunity for the exercise of virtue. Certainly it is a greater sign of power to throw down an attacking enemy than one who is on the defensive. In the same way charity should not cut off temptations lest they arise, but when they have arisen lay them low so that they may not develop. And so it should not be called a strong virtue but the strength of virtues, in that all of them become virtues by receiving their strength from charity. Thus it is the life of faith, the strength of hope, the driving power of all things and the marrow of the virtues. It is charity which orders life, kindles the affections, inspires action, corrects excesses, establishes good customs; it is able to do everything and prevails in all things and even in some way makes omnipotence impotent. For is it not this which prevailed when Moses firmly withstood divine justice and power? 'Let me alone', he said, 'that my wrath may wax hot against this people.'<sup>6</sup> You hear! 'Let me alone!', and doubt not that God was held back, but only by the power of love. Do you ask 'whose love?' The love of that faithful servant who refused to be made the great and glorious head of a great nation,<sup>7</sup> was not as is usual, held back

4 Eph. iii, 19.

5 Rom. viii, 37.

6 Exodus xxxii, 10.

7 *ibid.*

by carnal affections, but lest the glory of God should be assailed by the poisonous darts of blasphemy, he said: 'Let not the Egyptians say, I beseech thee: He craftily brought them out, that he might kill them in the mountains',<sup>8</sup> nor could he bring them into the land of promise. Why should not power and righteousness give way where charity from such a pure heart did not so much ask as urge? O how much we suffer the lack of such men who would offer themselves to God for our sins and appease his anger and avert his vengeance! 'There is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee.'<sup>9</sup> It is only the power of love that can hold back God. He not only suffers himself to be held back by it but complains by the prophet that he is not held by it. 'And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none.'<sup>10</sup> He seeks someone to present himself before his anger, for it is certainly the divine property to have mercy and to avenge the stranger. . . . Therefore the power of charity restrains the outstretched hand of God, lest it avenge. It treads down Satan under its feet and pours coals of fire on the heads of its enemies. It is powerful not only against flesh and blood, but also against principalities and powers of that darkness, against spiritual wickedness in high places; it is strong in adversity but stronger in prosperity. The love of Christ alone despises the flatteries of fortune whether she smile or frown, it spits upon them, for it rejoices in a sweeter savour. In respect of this every sweetness is bitter and all gladness is mourning; all lovely things are ugly and all delight is a burden. Now concerning the insuperability of love let this suffice, and if it seems inadequate, for the subject is very extensive, yet may it be of use for your instruction. Now let us proceed to the insatiable character of love.

*(To be continued)*

8 *ibid.*, v, 12.

9 *Isaias* lxiv, 7.

10 *Ezech.* xxxii, 30.