

LETTER 4

HELOISE TO ABELARD

To her only love after Christ from his own in Christ.

I am very much surprised, my love, that contrary to the custom in writing letters, indeed, contrary to the natural order of things, you have been so bold as to put my name before your own in the salutation of your letter. You have thus put the woman before the man, the wife before the husband, the maidservant before the master, the nun before the monk, the deaconess before the priest, and the abbess before the abbot. According to the rules, it is proper for those who write to their superiors to place before their own names the names of those to whom they are writing. But in writing to inferiors, those who take precedence in rank should take precedence in the order of writing.

We have also been not a little amazed that you have added to the desolation of those whom you should have consoled and moved us to the tears you should have dried. Which of us could read or hear without weeping what you wrote at the end of your letter: "If the Lord should deliver me into the hands of my enemies, so that they prevail over me and slay me," and the rest? Oh, my dearest, what was your state of mind when you thought this? How could you bear to say it? May God never so forget us, his servants, as to let us survive you! May he never grant that life to us which would be harder to bear than any kind of death! It is for you to perform the last rites for us, to commend our souls to God, and to send ahead to him those whom you have gathered together for him, so that you may no longer be anxious about them and may follow us the more gladly as you have greater assurance of our salvation. Spare us, I beg you, my lord, spare us words like these, which make the wretched even more wretched. Do not take away from us before our death the very reason for our existence. "For today, today's troubles are enough," (Matt. 6:34) and that day, shrouded in every kind of bitterness, will bring with it enough sorrow to all those whom it may find here. Why is it necessary, as Seneca says, to anticipate evil and to lose one's life before death?¹

¹ Seneca, *Ad Lucilium* 24.1.

You ask me, my own, to have your body brought to our cemetery if by any chance you should end your life away from here, so that you may reap a richer fruit from our prayers in their constant remembrance of you. But how can you suspect that your memory could ever slip away from us? Will that be a time for prayer when our utter distress will give us no peace, when the mind will not retain its reason or the tongue its use of speech, when the demented spirit, enraged against God himself rather than at peace, will not so much appease him with prayers as besiege him with complaints? Then, in our misery, we shall have time only for weeping, we shall not be able to pray and we must hasten to follow you rather than to bury you. When, in losing you, we shall have lost our life, we shall not be able to live at all after you have left us, and I hope that we may not live until then. The mere thought of your death is as death to us. What would the reality be, if it should find us living?

May God grant that we never pay this debt to you as your survivors; that we never give to you at life's end the help for we hope from you! May we precede, not follow, you in death! Spare us, I implore you, at least spare her who is yours alone, by refraining from these words which pierce our souls as if they were swords of death, so that what precedes death is harder to bear than death itself. The heart crushed by sorrow knows no peace, and the mind enslaved by disturbing emotions cannot devote itself sincerely to God. Do not, I beg you, hinder the divine service to which you have especially dedicated us. When something is inevitable and will, when it comes, bring with it the most profound grief, we must hope that it will come suddenly and not torture us for a long time beforehand with useless fears that no foresight can remedy. The poet is well aware of this when he prays to God:

May what you have in store
Be swift and sudden
Let the minds of men
To future fate be blind.
Allow our fears to hope.²

But what hope is left for me if I lose you? What reason have I for continuing in this pilgrimage, in which I have no solace but you, and the only comfort I have in you is that you are still alive? I am forbidden all other pleasure in you, and I am not allowed to enjoy your presence, which might at times restore me to myself again. If only it were not wicked to say that God has been cruel to me in every way! O cruel kindness: O luckless Fortune, who has used against me every weapon at her disposal, so that she now has none left with which to vent her anger on others. Her quiver was full and she has emptied it against me, so that others need not fear her attacks. If she had another weapon left, it could not find another place to wound me. Her only fear is that, with so many wounds, death may end my torments. Although she does not cease destroying me, she is still reluctant to hasten my death.

² Lucan, *Pharsalia* 2.14, 15.

Of all those who are wretched, I am the most wretched, of all the unhappy, the most unhappy, since the eminence I attained by your choice of me among all women is matched by the fall, so grievous for both of us, that has laid me low! The greater the height a person reaches, the heavier the fall in its crashing! What woman even among the noble and powerful has Fortune ever ventured to place before me or to make my equal? What woman has she then so cast down and overwhelmed with grief? What glory did she give me in you, and what disaster did she bring on you through me! And in both respects, to what extremes did she not go, observing no measure either in good or in evil? To make me the most miserable of women, she first made me the happiest, so that when I should think of what I had lost, the consuming bitterness of my sorrow should equal my overwhelming loss. The more I loved what I had possessed, the more I must grieve for what I have lost, and the most exquisite joy and pleasure must end in the extreme of sorrow.

To make this outrage arouse still greater indignation, all the laws of equity have been utterly perverted in our case. While we were eagerly enjoying the delights of love, and to use a stronger, if an uglier, expression, we were abandoning ourselves to fornication, the divine judgment spared us. But once we had made the unlawful lawful, and had covered the shame of fornication with the honor of marriage, the Lord in his wrath laid his heavy hand upon us, and he who had tolerated our unchaste bed would no longer tolerate it after it had become chaste. The suffering that you endured should have been punishment enough for any man caught in adultery. But what others deserve for adultery, you incurred as the result of a marriage by which you hoped to make amends for all your offense. The punishment that adulteresses bring on their lovers, I, your own wife, brought on you and not while we were giving ourselves up to those early pleasures, but when we were already separated and living chastely, when you were presiding over your school in Paris and, at your command, I was living with the nuns at Argenteuil.

We had parted from one another so that you might give more attention to your classes and I might devote myself more freely to prayer and meditation on the Holy Scripture. It was while we were living more chaste and holy lives that you alone atoned in your body for the sins we had both committed. Although both of us were guilty, you alone were punished, and you who deserved less paid the whole penalty. Since you had made amends by humiliating yourself for me and by elevating me and all my family, you had rendered yourself less deserving of punishment, both before God and in the eyes of those betrayers.

How unhappy I am, to have been born to be the cause of so great a crime! If only the ancient, baneful influence of women did not afflict most severely the greatest of men!³ So we have the warning against women in Proverbs (7:24-27):

Heed well, my son, let not this warning be given in vain; do not let her steal your heart away, do not be enticed with her beckoning. Many the wounds such a

³ Heloise here invokes the old misogynistic thesis of man's destruction by women, but she later undermines this prejudice when she stresses their idea of ethical intentionality: She cannot be held responsible for Abelard's downfall since she did not intend it.

woman has dealt; a brave retinue she has of men murdered; truly her house is the grave's antechamber, opens the door into the secret closet of death.

In Ecclesiastes (7:26–28), it is said:

Here is a mind that has passed the whole world of things in review. And this I have ascertained, death itself is not so cruel as woman's heart that wheedles and beguiles, as woman's clutches that release their captive never. God's friends escape her; of sinners she makes an easy prey.

The first woman at once snatched away her husband captive from Paradise, and she who had been created by the Lord as his helpmate turned out to be his downfall. Unaided, Delilah overcame that strong Nazirite of the Lord whose conception had been announced by an angel. Blinded and betrayed to his enemies, his misery finally drove Samson to destroy himself in the destruction of his enemies (Judg. 13:3; 16:4–31). Even Solomon, the wisest of all men, was so infatuated with a woman whom he had joined to himself, and she drove him to such a pitch of folly that he whom the Lord had chosen to build his temple—after he had rejected his father David, a just man—was plunged into idolatry to the end of his life. So he abandoned the worship of God that he had earlier devoted himself to preaching and teaching (3 Kings 11). It was from his wife, who nagged him into cursing God, that the holy Job sustained the last and most severe of his assaults (Job 2:9).

For the most cunning tempter knew very well, as he had discovered time after time, that men's downfall is most easily brought about through their wives. He finally directed his accustomed malice against us and attacked you through marriage, when he could not overcome you through fornication. Not being permitted to make evil use of an evil thing, he made evil use of a good thing. Thank God that the evil one did not involve me in guilt through my own consent, as he did the women whom I have mentioned, though he did, as it turned out, make me the cause of the crime that was committed. But even if I am innocent at heart, and did not, by my own consent, incur guilt in the commission of that crime,⁴ yet many sins had preceded it that do not leave me entirely free of guilt. For a long time beforehand I had been enslaved to the delights of carnal pleasure, and I earned then what I am suffering now. The consequences of my earlier sins have justly become a punishment for me. This tragic outcome must be attributed to our sinful beginnings.

If only I could do sufficient penance for this crime, to compensate in some measure, by a long and sorrowful repentance, for the pain you suffered from the infliction of that wound! If only I might suffer throughout my life in sorrow of mind, as I deserve, what you endured for one hour and thus make amends to you at least, if not to God! If I honestly reveal the weakness of my miserable soul, I cannot think of any penance by which I could appease God, whom I am constantly accusing of extreme cruelty in that outrage. In my rebellion against

his dispensation, I offend him by my indignation rather than appease him by the atonement of penance. However severely one may mortify the body, how can it be called penance for sins if the mind still retains the will to sin and seethes with its old desires?

It is easy for anyone, by confessing, to accuse himself of his sins and even to mortify his body in external atonement. But it is most difficult to uproot from the heart the desire for the most intense pleasures. So when the holy Job says (10:1): "I will speak out, come what may," that is, I will unloose my tongue and open my mouth in confession to accuse myself of my sins, he immediately adds: "My soul is too embittered for silence." Explaining this text, St. Gregory says:

There are some who confess their faults aloud, yet do not know how to lament what they confess and they tell with joy what should be deplored. For this reason, the man who detests his faults in words must needs do this in bitterness of soul, so that this bitterness may punish him for that which his conscience makes him accuse himself in words.⁵

Observing how rare this bitterness of true penance is, St. Ambrose says: "It is easier to find men who have kept their innocence than those who have done penance for their sins."⁶ Those delights of lovers that we enjoyed together were so sweet to me that I cannot condemn them; nor can I really banish them from my mind. Wherever I turn, they appear before my eyes to arouse my desires. Even when I am asleep, their illusions plague me. In the most solemn moments of the Mass itself, when prayer should be especially pure, the impure fantasies of those pleasures so obsess my wretched soul that I am more concerned with these base acts than with my prayers. When I should be lamenting what I have done, I long instead for what I have lost. Not only what we did together, but the various times and places of our love-making are so entwined with you and so vividly impressed with your image in my mind, that in my thoughts I do everything again with you, and even sleep brings no release from these illusions. Sometimes my thoughts are betrayed by the movements of my body, and they inspire words that slip out unawares.

Truly I am wretched, and I may well utter the cry of a soul in pain (Rom. 7:24): "Pitiable creature that I am, who is to set me free from a nature thus doomed to death?" If only I could truthfully add what follows: "The grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." This grace has come to you unsought, my dearest, and with one wound of your body has cured you of these stings of the flesh and healed many wounds in your soul. In that act in which God seemed most hostile to you, he proved most merciful, like the truest of physicians, who spares us no pain in his efforts to cure us.

But my youthful ardor and my experience of the most intense pleasures inflame the longings of my body and the urgings of desire, and since I am so vulnerable, their assaults are the more severe. I am called chaste by those who do

⁴ Here Heloise again invokes the doctrine of intentionality.

⁵ Gregory, *Moralia in Job* 9.1, 43, 44: PL 75, 896c.

⁶ Ambrose, *De Poenitentia* 2.10: PL 16, 542a.

not see the hypocrite in me. They make a virtue of purity of the flesh, though virtue pertains to the soul rather than the body. If I have won some worldly praise, I deserve none from God, who examines our thoughts and desires and sees into the hidden places. I am considered religious in these times when there is little religious life that is not hypocrisy, when he is praised most who does not offend the opinions of men.

Perhaps it seems to some degree praiseworthy and in a way acceptable to God, if a person, regardless of his intention, does not give scandal to the Church by his outward actions, and if the unbelievers do not, because of him, blaspheme the name of God, and if the order to which he belongs is not defamed among the worldly. This is also a kind of gift of God's grace, whose bounty makes it possible for us not only to do good, but also to refrain from evil. But refraining from evil is fruitless if it is not followed by doing good, as it is written (Ps. 36:27): "Offend no more, rather do good." Neither is of any avail if it is not done for the love of God.

At every moment of my life, God knows, I have always feared offending you, not God. I have tried to please you, rather than him. It was your command and not the love of God that led me to the religious life. See how unhappy, how unspeakably wretched, is the life that I am living, if I endure all this for nothing here, and can look forward to no future reward. For a long time my pretense has deceived you, as it has deceived many others, into mistaking hypocrisy for piety. So you ardently commend yourself to my prayers, demanding of me what I expect of you. Do not, I beg you, have such confidence in me that you cease helping me by your prayers. Do not, I beg you, think that I am healthy and so withdraw the grace of healing from me. Do not believe that I am not in need and put off aiding me in my necessity. Do not consider me strong, or I may collapse and fall before you can sustain me.

False praise of themselves has injured many and withdrawn the protection they needed. Through Isaiah, the Lord exclaims (3:12): "Those who call you happy, my people, are deceiving you, luring you into false paths." And he says through Ezekiel (13:18): "Out upon them... the women who stitch an elbow-cushion for every comer, make a soft pillow for the heads of young and old. Men's souls are their prey." On the contrary, Solomon says (Eccles. 12:11): "Sharp goads they are to sting us, sharp nails driven deep home, these wise words left to us by many masters"—that is to say, they do not know how to soothe wounds, but only how to make them. I beg you to stop praising me, for fear that you will deserve the base name of flatterer and be accused of lying, or that the wind of vanity may blow away whatever good you think there is in me if you praise it. No one skilled in medicine diagnoses an internal disease by examining merely the external appearance.

No one earns any merit with God for what is common to the bad and good alike, such as external actions, which hypocrites perform with greater care than saints.⁷ "There is no riddle like the twists of the heart; who shall master them?"

⁷ Both Abelard and Heloise predicate their lives and work on their strict theory of intentionalist ethics.

(Jer. 17:9). There are paths of men that seem right and in the end they lead to death. It is rash for men to judge concerning that which is reserved for the divine judgment alone (Prov. 16:25; 14:12). So it is written (Ecclus. 11:30): "Never call a man happy until he is dead," which means, do not praise a man while your praise can make him unpraiseworthy. Your praise is also more dangerous to me because it is so welcome, and the more completely it captivates and delights me, the more eager I am to please you in every way. Be fearful about me always, I implore you, rather than confident, so that I may always have the help of your anxious care. You should be especially fearful now, when there no longer remains in you a remedy for my incontinence.

I do not want you to say, by way of exhorting me to virtue and urging me to struggle, that "strength is perfected in infirmity" (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9), and that "the athlete will win no crown, if he does not observe the rules of the contest" (2 Tim. 2:5). I am not seeking any crown of victory. To keep out of danger is enough for me. It is safer to avoid danger than to engage in battle. No matter what corner of heaven God places me in, I shall be satisfied. No one there will envy anyone else, since everyone will be content with what he has. To add the weight of authority to my opinion, let us listen to St. Jerome: "I acknowledge my weakness; I do not wish to fight in the hope of victory, for fear that I may finally lose it. Why should one give up what is certain and pursue the uncertain?"⁸

⁸ Jerome, *Ep. adversus Vigilantium* 16: PL 23, 367b.