

## LETTER 5

### ABELARD TO HELOISE

*To the bride of Christ from his servant.*

Four topics, I recall, make up the whole of your last letter, in which you have made very clear the distress you have suffered. First of all, you complain that my putting your name before my own in the salutation of the letter I sent you is contrary to the custom in letter-writing and even against the natural order of things. Second, you say that when I should have comforted you, I have instead added to your desolation and provoked the tears I should have dried. And you quote my request "that if the Lord deliver me into their hands, so that prevailing against me they kill me," etc. Third, you bring up your old and unceasing complaint against God, I mean, about the circumstances of our conversion to him and the cruelty of that treacherous outrage to my body. Finally, you counter my praise of you with accusations against yourself and an urgent request that I should no longer be so presumptuous. I have decided to reply to each of these points in turn, not so much to justify myself as to instruct you and urge you to agree more willingly to what I ask, as you come to realize that it is reasonable. I hope that you will be more willing to listen to me in those matters that concern you, as you find me less to blame in my own affairs, and that you will be more hesitant to criticize me when you see that I am less deserving of reproach.

Now about the inverted order, as you call it, of my salutation, you will find, if you consider it closely, that it accords with your own view. It is clear to everyone, as you yourself pointed out, that when one writes to his superiors, he puts their names first. But you should realize that you became superior to me when you became my lady and were made the bride of my Lord, in accordance with what St. Jerome writes to Eustochium, "my lady Eustochium . . . for I should address the bride of my Lord as 'lady.'"<sup>1</sup> What a blessed exchange of nuptials that was when, after first being the wife of a wretched man, you were raised up and placed on the nuptial couch of the sovereign King. This honor carries with it the privilege of being placed not only before your husband, but also before all the other servants of that King. So you should not be surprised that I commend myself, whether

<sup>1</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22, *ad Eustochium* 2: PL 22, 395; CSEL 54, I, 1, 145.

living or dead, to your prayers especially, since it is a well-established privilege of wives to have greater power of intercession with their lords than other members of their households, being consorts rather than servants.

As a figure of such women, the queen and bride of the great king is described in the words of the Psalm (44:10): "At my right hand stands the queen," as if to say plainly that, standing at her husband's side, she is intimately joined to him, and walks abreast with him, while everyone else stands aside or follows after. Rejoicing over the excellence of this prerogative the bride of the Song of Songs exclaims (1:4), as also, I may say, did the Ethiopian woman whom Moses married (Num. 12:1): "Dark of skin, and yet I have beauty, daughters of Jerusalem. So the king has loved me and brought me into his bedchamber." She also says (1:5): "Take no note of this Ethiop color: it was the sun that tanned me."

Although these sayings apply in general to the contemplative soul, which is called particularly the bride of Christ, yet even the habit you wear proclaims that they apply more expressly to you. The outward garb of black and coarse clothing, like the weeds of faithful widows in mourning for the husbands whom they have loved, shows that in this world, as the Apostle says, you are widows indeed and made desolate, to be supported by offerings from the Church.<sup>2</sup> It is also the sorrow of such widows over their Bridegroom who has been put to death, that the Scripture commemorates in the words (cf. Matt. 27:61): "Women sat by the tomb weeping and lamenting the Lord."

The body of the Ethiopian woman is black outside and, from this point of view, she appears less beautiful than other women; yet within she is not unlike them, but is in many ways whiter and more beautiful, as in her bones and teeth. It was this whiteness of the teeth that was praised in the spouse in the words (Gen. 49:12): "His teeth are whiter than milk." She is black, then, externally, though beautiful within, because in this life she is afflicted physically with frequent adversities and tribulations; and, so to speak, she becomes dark in her external appearance, as the Apostle says (2 Tim. 3:12): "All those who are resolved to live a holy life in Christ Jesus will meet with persecution." Just as white is the symbol of good fortune, adversity is quite properly symbolized by black. She is white within, in her bones, as it were, because her soul is endowed with virtues, as it is written (Ps. 44:14): "She comes, the princess, all fair to see." The bones that are within and surrounded by external tissue give strength and firmness to the flesh they support and sustain. Thus they signify the soul that gives life to the body in which it dwells, sustaining, moving, and ruling it, and imparting well-being to it.

The soul's whiteness or beauty consists in the virtues that adorn it. Again, the bride is black outside because, being still an exile in her pilgrimage here, she keeps herself lowly and humble in this life so that when she has reached her true home, she may be raised up in the life to come, that life which is hidden with Christ in God.<sup>3</sup> The true Sun has changed her color in this way, since the love of her celestial Bridegroom so humbles her and afflicts her with tribulations that good fortune may not puff her up. He changes her color in this way—that is,

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Tim. 5:3, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Col. 3:4.

he makes her different from those to whom earthly things are the breath of life and who seek the glory of this world. This is so that she may become through humiliation a lily of the valley,<sup>4</sup> not a lily of the mountain like those foolish virgins who, puffed up with pride in their bodily purity and external austerity, withered in the heat of temptation. Quite rightly did the bride tell the daughters of Jerusalem, that is, the imperfect members of the faithful, who deserve the name of daughters rather than sons, not to be surprised. This is as if she were to say plainly: "That I so humble myself and endure adversities so manfully is not a result of my own virtue, but the grace of him whom I serve."

It is quite otherwise with the heretics and hypocrites who, as long as others are looking at them, are in the habit of humbling themselves strenuously in the hope of earthly glory and so enduring much to no avail. We are forced to marvel exceedingly at those who suffer humiliation or tribulation in this way, since they are the unhappiest of men, who will enjoy neither the goods of this life nor those of the life to come. With this clearly in mind, the bride says: "Do not be surprised that I do this." But we should be surprised by those who, burning with a desire for earthly praise, fruitlessly deprive themselves of worldly advantages and are wretched both here and hereafter. Such was the chastity of those foolish virgins against whom the door was shut.<sup>5</sup>

She is right in saying, as we noted, that it is because she is black but beautiful that she was loved and brought into the king's bedchamber, that is, into the secrecy and peace of contemplation, and to the couch of which she says elsewhere (Cant. 3:1): "In the night watches, as I lay abed, I searched for my heart's love." In the very ugliness of her blackness, she loves the hidden rather than the open and the private rather than the public. The wife who is of such a color desires the intimate rather than the public enjoyment of her husband, and wishes to be caressed in bed rather than seen at table. It often happens that the bodies of black women are as sweet to touch as they are unpleasing to see, and the pleasure derived from intimate joys is more satisfying and agreeable than that enjoyed in public. So, to cherish them, their husbands take them into their chambers rather than displaying them to the world. To apply this metaphor, the spiritual bride first says: "Dark of skin, and yet I have beauty," and then properly adds, "and so the king has saved me, and brought me into his bedchamber." Each term thus corresponds to another: that is, "beauty" to "he loved me," and "dark of skin" to "he brought me into"; beautiful inwardly, as I have said, because of the virtues the spouse loves and dark outside because of bodily tribulations and adversities.

This darkness—of bodily tribulations, I mean—easily uproots the love of earthly things from the hearts of the faithful, raises them to desires for eternal life, and often elevates them from the tumultuous life of this world to the solitude of contemplation. This is what happened to Paul, as St. Jerome says, in the beginnings of our monastic way of life.<sup>6</sup> This lowly state, with its coarse garments, seeks a hidden rather than a public existence, and the most extreme humility and privacy

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Cant. 2:1.

<sup>5</sup> See Matt. 25:1–13.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome, *Vita Pauli primi eremite* 5.6: PL 23, 21–22.

that are especially in harmony with our calling should be preserved. For costly apparel encourages one to go out in public and no one seeks it except for the empty glory and pomp of the world, as St. Gregory shows when he says: "No one decks himself out in these fineries in private, but where he can be seen."<sup>7</sup>

This chamber of the bride I mentioned before is that to which the Bridegroom himself invites us when he says in the Gospel (Matt. 6:6): "But when you are praying, go into your inner room and shut the door upon yourself, and so pray to your Father," as if to say, "not in the streets and public places, like the hypocrites." He calls an inner room a place apart from the crowds and the gaze of the world, where one can pray quietly and purely. Such places are the retreats of monastic solitude, where we are bidden to close the door, that is, to block all approaches, so that the purity of our prayers may not be tarnished by any chance and our unhappy souls ravished by what we see.

We still find it hard to bear with many of our calling who scorn this counsel, or rather this divine precept, and who open the doors of the cloister and choir and shamelessly celebrate the divine services in full view of both men and women; especially when, on solemn feasts, they deck themselves out in the most costly garments, just as if they were worldlings like those before whom they parade themselves. In their judgment, the more splendid the outward adornment and the more sumptuous the banquet, the more solemn the feast.

It is better to be silent than to speak harshly of their miserable blindness, which is so completely contrary to the piety of Christ's poor. These men, becoming completely Jewish, follow custom rather than rule and abrogate the commandment of God. Because of their traditions they are concerned, not with what should be done, but with what is customary, in spite of the fact that, as St. Augustine reminds us, the Lord said, "I am Truth," and not "I am custom."<sup>8</sup> Let him who wishes commend himself to the prayers of such men, which are said with the doors open. But you, whom the heavenly King has brought into his chamber and who repose in his embrace, with the doors closed you give yourselves completely to him. The more closely you cling to him—for, as the Apostle says (1 Cor. 6:17): "The man who unites himself to the Lord is one spirit with him"—the purer and more efficacious your prayer will be, I trust, and for this reason I seek your help more urgently. I believe also that you will pray for me more devoutly because we are bound to one another more closely by the greater bond of charity.

If I have distressed you by mentioning the danger in which I am immersed and the death I fear, I have done this only at your request or rather, your urging.<sup>9</sup> You say in the first letter you wrote to me:

For the sake of Christ who still in some measure protects you, we beg you to keep his servants and yours informed by frequent letters about the tempests in which you are tossed, so that we, at least, who are all that is left to you, may share your

<sup>7</sup> Gregory, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 2, 40.3: PL 76, 1305b.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *De baptismo contra Donatistas* 3.6 (9): PL 43, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Here we see evidence that Heloise maintained a copy of Abelard's letters. Therefore, it is not surprising that their community of the Paraclete would retain full copies of their founders' correspondence.

sorrow and your joy. Those who sympathize with a person in sorrow usually bring him some consolation, and the burden borne by many is easier to carry and endure.

Why did you charge me to share my anxiety with you, as you forced me to do by your urging? Is it right for you to rejoice when I am tormented by such despair of my life? Do you wish to share only in joy but not in sorrow, and to rejoice with those who are joyful, but not to weep with those who mourn?<sup>10</sup> There is no more certain distinction between true and false friends than that the former are with us in adversity and the latter only in prosperity.

Do not say these things, I beg you, and stop complaining in this way, which is so far distant from the heart of charity. Even if you still feel injured by this, I am nonetheless obliged, placed as I am in the most extreme danger and in daily despair of my life, to look to the salvation of my soul and to make provision for it while I can. If you truly love me, you will not regard this foresight as hateful. On the contrary, if you have any hope of divine mercy for me, you will be the more eager to see me freed from the troubles of this life, as you see more clearly how intolerable they are. You may be sure that anyone who would free me from this life would rescue me from the most intense suffering. The penalties that await me hereafter are uncertain, but there is no doubt about those from which I would be delivered here.

The end of every unhappy life is welcome and anyone who is really sympathetic and compassionate with the anxieties of others wants to see these ended, even when it means a loss to themselves, if they truly love those whom they see in trouble and consider not their own advantage, but the benefit of those who are in distress. So a mother, because she cannot bear to see her child's suffering, desires that the illness in which he has been wasting away for a long time should be brought to an end, even by death. She would rather lose her child than keep a companion in misery.

No matter how much one delights in the presence of a friend, he is still willing to have him happy though absent, rather than present but wretched. For no one can endure the sufferings he cannot relieve. But you are not allowed to enjoy my presence, even in my misery. Unless you are looking to your own advantage, I do not see why you would prefer that I should live on miserably rather than die happily. If you want my miseries to be protracted for your own advantage, you prove yourself an enemy, not a friend. If you recoil from seeming an enemy, I beg you once again, stop complaining.

I approve of your refusing praise for yourself, since in this you show yourself more praiseworthy. We are told (Prov. 18:17): "An innocent man is the first to lay bare the truth," and (Luke 18:14): "The man who humbles himself shall be exalted." I trust that your heart may be in harmony with the words of Scripture. If it is, your humility rings true and it will not evaporate before my words of praise. But be careful, I beg you, not to seek praise by seeming to flee from it and not to reject in words what you seek in your heart. Among other things,

<sup>10</sup> See Rom. 12:15.

St. Jerome writes about this to the virgin Eustochium: "We are influenced by a natural evil tendency. We gladly lend an ear to flatterers and, though we may say that we are unworthy of it and a warm blush colors our face, our heart within is gladdened by this praise."<sup>11</sup>

This was the kind of cunning displayed by the wanton Galatea, as Virgil describes her. By fleeing she sought what she desired and, by pretending to reject her lover, she aroused him all the more. As Virgil says: "She flies to the willows, but wishes first to be seen."<sup>12</sup> Before she hides, she wants to be seen in flight, so that she may be more successful in obtaining the youth's company, which she would appear to disdain. So, too, when we appear to recoil from the praises of men, we call forth more praise and when we pretend to want to hide ourselves, so that no one may see in us anything praiseworthy, we encourage the unwary to further praise, because we seem more worthy of it. I mention these things because they often happen, not because I have any doubt of your own humility. But I want you to refrain from even making such statements, in order not to appear to those who do not know you so well, to seek glory, as Jerome says, by fleeing from it.<sup>13</sup> My praise will never puff you up, but will encourage you instead to better efforts and the more anxious you are to please me, the more eagerly you will embrace what I praise. My praise is no proof of your piety, to let you take any pride in it. We should not take it seriously when a man is praised by his friends, any more than we should believe his enemies when they slander him.

At last I come to that old and everlasting complaint of yours, by which you rashly seek to blame God for the circumstances of our conversion rather than glorifying him as you should. I had thought your bitterness of soul had vanished long ago, as you saw the working out of what is so clearly a plan of God's mercy. Because this bitterness is so damaging to you, consuming body and soul alike, it is the more distressing and troubling to me. If, as you claim, you are eager to please me in every way, give this up, so that in this one thing, at least, you will not torment me, but will give me instead the greatest cause for rejoicing. By complaining in this way, you can neither please me nor reach eternal blessedness with me. Can you bear to let me go without you, after saying that you would follow me even into the fires of hell? For this reason, if for no other, try to be religious, so that you may not cut yourself off from me, whom you believe to be hastening to God.<sup>14</sup> You should be the more willing to do this since the destiny that awaits us is so blessed, and our companionship will be more delightful because it will be happier.

Remember what you have said. Recall how you wrote that, though in the manner of our conversion, God seemed to turn against me, he was, it is now clear, most merciful to me. In this respect, at least, you should be pleased with his plan, which has been so salutary for me, or rather, for both

<sup>11</sup> Jerome, *Ep. 22, ad Eustochium* 24: PL 22, 410; CSEL 54, I, 1, 176.

<sup>12</sup> Virgil, *Eclagues* 3.65.

<sup>13</sup> Jerome, *Ep. 22, ad Eustochium* 27: PL 22, 410; CSEL 54, I, 1, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Letter 2.

of us alike, if the intensity of your grief would let you listen to reason. Do not regret that you were the cause of so great a benefit, for you should have no doubt that you were especially created by God to bring it about. Do not mourn because I have endured this, unless at the same time you will let yourself be saddened by the benefits that are your reward from the sufferings of the martyrs, and even from the death of the Lord. If this had happened to me justly, would you find it easier to bear and be less wounded by it? Certainly, if it had happened thus, it would have been more disgraceful for me, and more praiseworthy for my enemies, since the justice of the deed would have earned praise for them, and by my guilt, I would have merited contempt. There would then be no one to reproach for what was done and no one to feel compassion for me.

Yet in an effort to lessen the bitterness of your grief, I shall show that it was both just and profitable for this to happen to us, and that God avenged himself on us more justly when we were married than when we were engaged in fornication. You know that after we were married, when you were living with the nuns in the abbey at Argenteuil, I came to visit you secretly one day, and you remember what, in my unbridled lust, I did with you even in a place in the refectory, since we had nowhere else to go where we might be alone. You know, I say, that this shameless act was committed in that holy place, dedicated to the most exalted Virgin. Quite apart from my other sins, this deed deserved a far greater punishment.

What shall I say about the earlier sins of fornication and the shameful impurities that preceded our marriage? What about my most heinous act of treachery, by which I so basely turned your own uncle against you, while I was living all the time in his house? Who would not consider him justified in betraying me when I had earlier shamelessly betrayed him? Do you think the momentary pain of that wound was sufficient punishment for such wicked crimes? Is even this heavy penalty enough to pay for such evil deeds? What wound, do you think, would satisfy the justice of God for so scandalous a desecration of a sacred place dedicated to his own mother? Surely, unless I am very much mistaken, it was not that most salutary wound which was to avenge these crimes, but the sufferings I endure daily and unceasingly.

You know, too, that when I sent you pregnant to my own country, you were disguised in the sacred habit of a nun and by this pretense you irreverently mocked the religious state to which you now belong. So you may well consider how fitting it was for God's justice, or rather, his grace, to draw you against your will into the religious life that you had not hesitated to profane, and to ordain that you should make atonement in the very habit against which you had offended. The truth of reality thus provides a remedy for the lying pretense and makes amends for your deception. If you wish to add what we have gained from the divine justice shown to us, you could call what happened to us not so much an act of God's justice as a gift of his grace.

So, my beloved, see and understand how the Lord has fished us up from the depths of this most perilous sea by the dragnets of his mercy and how against our will he has rescued us, shipwrecked as we were, from this great whirlpool

of Charybdis,<sup>15</sup> so that each of us can seem justified in exclaiming: "The Lord is concerned for me."<sup>16</sup> Think again and again of the grave dangers into which we had plunged ourselves and how the Lord has saved us from them, and tell always with the most heartfelt thanksgiving what great things he has done for our souls. By the example of what happened to us, you should console all sinful souls who despair of God's mercy, so that all may come to realize what is in store for those who fall on their knees and pray, seeing what great benefits he has bestowed upon sinners, even against their will. Consider, then, the most sublime plan of the divine clemency in our behalf and how the Lord mercifully turned his judgment into correction, and how wisely he makes use even of evil and in his kindness removes wickedness by administering a remedy to both of our souls by the just wound of one part of my body. Compare the disease with the remedy. Think what we deserve and marvel at his compassionate love.

You know how shameful were the acts to which my unbridled lust enslaved our bodies, so that no reverence for goodness or for God, even in Passiontide or on any other solemn feasts, kept me out of the quagmire of this filth.<sup>17</sup> Even when you were unwilling and struggled and remonstrated against it, very often I used threats and blows to force you, who were naturally weaker, to consent. The flames of desire had so welded me to you that I preferred those wretched and obscene pleasures, which I blush even to name, to God as well as to my own true self. In no other way did God in his mercy seem able to execute his plan than by forbidding those pleasures to me beyond all hope.

So most justly and mercifully, although by your uncle's terrible act of treachery, I was enabled to grow better in many ways by being deprived of that part of my body which was ruled by lust, which was the seat and source of my concupiscence. Thus that member which had brought about all my misdeeds was justly punished, and by suffering expiated its sins of delight and removed me from the mire into which I had, so to speak, plunged myself, both body and soul. So I was made more fit for the holy altar, in the sense that no carnal defilement could keep me from it any longer. How mercifully did God will me to suffer in that member the privation of which was salutary for my soul and yet he did not disfigure my body or hinder me in the performance of my priestly duties! On the contrary, this privation prepared me the more fully for all good deeds, the more completely it freed me from the heavy yoke of lust.

When the divine grace deprived, or rather, cleansed me of those vile members which from their performance of actions of extreme baseness are called "shameful," and do not have a name of their own, what else did it do but preserve the clean and pure by removing the filthy and vile? Some philosophers who sought this purity most zealously, as we have read, laid violent hands on themselves in order to rid themselves entirely of this curse of concupiscence.

<sup>15</sup> *Charybdis*: In Book 12 of the *Odyssey*, Charybdis is the sinister whirlpool that Odysseus famously eluded.

<sup>16</sup> Ps. 39:18.

<sup>17</sup> The Church forbade intercourse during certain feast days and days of the week, even for married couples.

Even the Apostle begged the Lord to take away this sting of the flesh, but he was not heard.<sup>18</sup> That great Christian philosopher, Origen, is an example of one who, wishing to extinguish this fire altogether, did not hesitate to lay hands on himself.<sup>19</sup> This was as though he took literally the words that those are truly blessed who have made eunuchs of themselves for the kingdom of heaven, and believed that they truly fulfilled the precept of the Lord regarding members that are a scandal to us, that we should cut them off and cast them away from us. He would have considered the prophecy of Isaiah as historically true rather than a mystery, in which the Lord prefers eunuchs to others of the faithful, saying (Isaiah 56:4, 5): "Who keeps my Sabbath? Who makes my will his choice? A place he shall have in this house, within these walls of mine, a memorial; son nor daughter his name could so perpetuate; such a memorial I will grant him as time shall never efface."

But Origen was very guilty when he sought a cure for sin by a crime against his body and, with zeal for God, it is true, but not according to knowledge, he made himself liable to the charge of homicide by laying hands on himself. It is evident that at the suggestion of the devil or through the greatest self-deception, he did to himself what through God's mercy another did to me. I escape guilt, I do not incur it. I deserve death and I obtain life. I am called and I resist the call. I am plunged in sin, and I am drawn unwillingly to pardon. The Apostle prayed but was not heard. He persisted in prayer but did not obtain his request.<sup>20</sup> Truly "the Lord is concerned for me." I will go and tell what great things the Lord has done for my soul.

And you, my inseparable companion, who have shared both in guilt and in grace, join with me in an act of thanksgiving. The Lord is not unmindful of your salvation, indeed, he has you well in mind, for by the holy portent of your name, he signified from the beginning that you would be especially his, when he named you "Heloise," that is, "divine," from his own name, "Heloim."<sup>21</sup> In his mercy, I repeat, he has ordained to make provision through the one for the two whom the devil tried to destroy through one of them. Shortly before this happened, he united us by the indissoluble bond of the nuptial sacrament, since I wanted to keep you forever whom I loved beyond measure; yes, even by this means he managed to convert both of us to himself. If you had not been bound to me in marriage already, at the urging of your kinsmen or through delight in the pleasures of the flesh, you could easily have clung to the world after I had left it.<sup>22</sup>

See, then, how concerned the Lord has been for us, as if he were preserving us for some noble purposes and as if he were offended and grieved that these talents

<sup>18</sup> 2 Cor. 12:8.

<sup>19</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6, 7. See: Explanatory Notes, "Origen."

<sup>20</sup> Ps. 39:18.

<sup>21</sup> Abelard's desire for Heloise's (and all) names to have significance is perhaps of more importance than the fact that this connection with the Hebrew (which he did not know) is unwarranted.

<sup>22</sup> Did Abelard's reasons for inducing Heloise to take the veil include some fear that she might marry another?

of learning that he had entrusted to both of us were not to be used for the honor of his name; as though he feared that his most unchaste and lowly servant would prove the truth of the saying that (Ecclus. 19:2): "women are a trap for the loyalty of the wise." We know that this certainly happened to the very wise Solomon. But think how much interest on the talent of your wisdom you return to the Lord every day, since you have borne many spiritual daughters to him, while I am utterly sterile and labor to no avail among the sons of perdition.

What a detestable loss it would have been, how lamentable a misfortune, if you had given yourself up to gross carnal pleasures and borne in pain a few children for the world, whereas you have now become the joyful mother of a numerous progeny for heaven! Then you would have been no more than a woman, whereas now you transcend humanity and turn the curse on Eve into the blessing on Mary. How unbecoming it would be if those holy hands which now hold the sacred books were to be performing the lowly duties of a woman's care! The Lord himself has stooped to lift us up from the corruption of this filth, from the pleasures of this mire, and to draw us to him by the same kind of violence with which he struck down Paul and converted him,<sup>23</sup> and perhaps, by our experience to keep other learned persons from like presumption. In order that such presumption may not afflict you, I beg you not to be vexed by his paternal correction, but to listen to what is written (Heb. 12:6): "It is where he loves that he bestows correction; there is no recognition for any child of his without chastisement," and elsewhere (Prov. 13:24): "Spare the rod and you are no friend to your son." This punishment is passing, not eternal; it is purgation, not damnation. Listen to the prophecy and be comforted (Nahum 1:9): "There shall be no second visitation," and "there shall not rise a double affliction." Consider that sublime and excellent teaching of Truth (Luke 21:19): "It is by endurance that you will secure possession of your souls." "Patience is worth more than valor; better a disciplined heart than a stormed city" (Prov. 16:32).

Does not the innocent, only-begotten Son of God move you to tears of compunction, he who for you and for all sinners was seized, dragged off, beaten, and with a veil over his face, was mocked and struck, spat upon, crowned with thorns, and then raised up between thieves on that most infamous gibbet of the cross, to die at last such a horrible and execrable death? Keep always before your eyes, my sister, your true Bridegroom and that of the whole Church, bear him always in mind. Look upon him as he goes forth to be crucified, carrying his cross for you. Be one of the crowd, one of the women who mourned and lamented over him, as Luke tells us (23:27): "Jesus was followed by a great multitude of the people, and also of women who beat their breasts and mourned over him." To them he turned kindly and as an act of mercy foretold that ruin would come upon them to avenge his death, for they could have avoided it if they had been wise.

It is not for me that you should weep, daughters of Jerusalem; you should weep for yourselves and your children. Behold a time is coming when men will say, 'It

<sup>23</sup> Acts 26:14.

is well for the barren, for the wombs that never bore children, and the breasts that never suckled them.' It is then that they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' If it goes so hard with the tree that is still green, what will become of the tree that is already dried up?<sup>24</sup>

Suffer with him who willingly suffered for your salvation and grieve for him who was crucified for you. In your thoughts stand always beside his tomb, and mourn and weep with his faithful women of whom it is written, as I have said before: "The women sitting by his tomb in tears lamented the Lord." Prepare along with them the ointments for his burial, but the better ones—I mean the spiritual ointments, not the material. It is the spiritual perfumes he asks for; the material ones he will not accept. In doing these things, be filled with all love and devotion.

He himself exhorted the faithful to sorrow and compassion when he said through Jeremiah (Lament. 1:12): "Look well, you that pass by, and say if there was ever grief like this grief of mine." This means, how are you to grieve in compassion for anyone who is suffering, when I alone, though innocent, am atoning for what others have done. This is the way by which the faithful pass from exile to their own true country and in the cross from which he cries out, he has raised up a ladder for us. The only-begotten Son of God was slain for you (Isaiah 53:7): "He himself bows to the stroke." For him alone you are to grieve in compassion and in your sorrow to pity him. So you may fulfill what the prophet Zachariah foretold of devoted souls (12:10): "Never was such a lament for an only son, grief so bitter over first-born dead."

Think, my sister, how sorrowful is the lamentation of those who love the king over the death of his first-born. Consider the mourning of the household, the sorrow of the entire court, and when you come to the bride of the only-begotten son who is dead, you will not be able to bear her wailing. This should be your lamentation, my sister, this should be your cry of sorrow. You have joined yourself to this Bridegroom by a happy marriage. He bought you and redeemed you with his own blood. Think how great is his right to you and how precious you are. The Apostle, considering the price paid for him and weighing his worth by the price paid and wondering what return he should make for so great a grace, says (Gal. 6:14): "God forbid that I should make a display of anything, except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world stands crucified to me, and I to the world."

You are greater than the heavens, you are greater than the world; the Creator of the world became the price paid for you. What, I ask you, did he see in you, he who needs nothing, that he should strive to win you, even to the agony of so horrible and ignominious a death? What did he seek in you but yourself? He is the true Lover, who desires you yourself, not what is yours. He is the true friend, who said when he was about to die for you (John 15:13): "This is the greatest love a man can show, that he should lay down his life for his friends." It was he who truly loved you, not I. My love, which involved us both in sin, should be

<sup>24</sup> Luke 23:27-31.

called lust, not love. I took my fill of wretched pleasures in you, and this was all I loved. You say I suffered for you, and perhaps this is true, but rather through you, and that against my will; not for love of you, but because I was driven to it; not for your benefit, but to your sorrow. But he suffered for you, and brought you salvation. Willingly he suffered for you, who by his Passion cures every ill and takes away all suffering.

I implore you, let all your devotion, all your compassion, all your grief be for him, not for me. Mourn over the great and iniquitous cruelty done to the Innocent One, not over that just and fair punishment inflicted on me, or rather, as I have said, that supreme act of grace for both of us. You are not righteous if you do not love justice, and you are most wicked if you knowingly resist the will of God, or rather, his generous grace. Weep for him who restored you, not for him who violated you. Mourn for your Redeemer, not your defiler. Lament over the Lord who died for you, not your servant who still lives, or rather, is now for the first time freed from death. Take care that the reproach which Pompey hurled at the grieving Cornelia may not, in all its venom, be applied to you: "Pompey survives the battle, but his greatness is gone. What you weep for is what you loved."<sup>25</sup>

Pay attention to this, I beg you, and blush to show approval of the shameful acts that we committed. Accept patiently then, my sister, what has happened to me mercifully. This was the father's rod, not the pursuer's sword.<sup>26</sup> It was a father who struck to correct, not an enemy who struck to kill. He prevented death by this wound; he did not cause it. He pierced with steel in order to cut out the infection. He wounds the body in order to heal the soul. He should have slain me and instead he gives me life. He cuts out uncleanness in order to leave what is clean. He punishes once so as not to punish eternally. One suffers a wound to spare two from death. Two shared the guilt, but one was punished. In this also God showed mercy for the weakness of your nature, and in a way justly. As a woman you were naturally weaker, yet you were stronger in self-control and so you were less deserving of punishment.

I thank the Lord for this also, that he spared you from punishment then and kept you for your crown. On the one hand, to save me from utter ruin, by one wound of my body he quenched for all time that burning passion by which, through unrestrained desire, I was wholly consumed. On the other hand, so that you might win a martyr's crown by enduring the constant urgings of the flesh, he left in your heart the much more intense passions of youth. You may be weary of hearing this and forbid me to say it, yet evident truth must be spoken. For him who must continue the fight, there is also a crown in store, since (2 Tim. 2:5): "the athlete will win no crown, if he does not observe the rules of the contest." But there is no crown waiting for me because I have no reason left for struggling. For one from whom the sting of concupiscence has been removed there is nothing left to fight.

<sup>25</sup> Lucan, *Pharsalia* 8.84–85.

<sup>26</sup> See: Wheeler, "Origenary Fantasies," for an argument that Abelard treats his castration as appropriate paternal punishment.

Yet I think it worth something that, though I shall win no crown, I may nonetheless escape the penalty, and by the pain of a brief punishment, I may perhaps be spared many eternal pains. It is written of this wretched life of man, or rather of beasts (Joel 1:17): "Beast on dung-heap rots." I do not complain because my merit decreases, since I am confident that yours is increasing. We are one in Christ, one flesh by the bond of marriage. I do not feel myself cut off from anything that is yours. Christ is yours, for you have become his bride. Now, as I said before, you have me as your servant whom you once acknowledged as your master. But now I am bound to you by spiritual love, rather than subject to you through fear.

So I trust the more in your power to intercede for us with him, hoping to obtain through your prayers what I cannot achieve by my own, now especially when dangers and torments press upon me every day, and leave me no life of my own or time to pray, or to imitate that blessed eunuch who enjoyed authority in the palace of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, having charge of all her treasures, and who came from afar to worship in Jerusalem. When he was returning, the apostle Philip was sent by an angel to convert him to the faith, a grace he had already merited by prayer and constant reading of the Scriptures. When he did not cease to perform these exercises, even during his travels—though he was a man of great wealth and a Gentile—by the divine favor he happened to come upon a passage of Scripture that offered to the apostle a most fitting occasion for his conversion.<sup>27</sup> In order that nothing may hinder this request of mine or put off its fulfillment, I hasten also to compose a special prayer with which you may implore God on our behalf.

God, who from the beginning of man's creation did sanction the great sacrament of nuptial union by forming woman from a rib of man, and who has elevated marriage to the highest honor by being born of a woman and by the first of your miracles, and who has granted me as it pleased you this remedy for the intemperance of my weakness, despise not the prayers of your handmaid, which I pour forth in the sight of your majesty for my own excesses and those of my beloved. Pardon, O kindest one, yes, kindness itself, pardon our many and most grievous crimes, and may the multitude of our offenses experience the plenteousness of your ineffable mercy. Punish the guilty now, I beseech you, that you may spare them in the life to come. Punish us now, so that you may not punish me eternally. Take up the rod of correction against your servants, not the sword of anger. Be to us a purifier, not an avenger, merciful rather than just, a kind father, not a harsh master. Test us, O Lord, and put us to the proof, as the prophet asked for himself, as if to say, "First examine my strength, and according to it moderate the burden of temptations." This also the blessed Paul promised your faithful, saying (1 Cor. 10:13): "Not that God will play you false; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond your powers. With the temptation itself, he will ordain the issue of it, and enable you to hold your own."

You have joined us together, O Lord, and you have separated us when it pleased you and as it pleased you. Now, O Lord, what you have begun in mercy, finish most

<sup>27</sup> Acts 8:27ff.

mercifully. And those whom you have separated from one another in the world, unite to you forever in heaven, O you our hope, our portion, our expectation, our consolation, Lord who is blessed world without end. Amen.

Farewell in Christ, bride of Christ, in Christ fare well, and in Christ dwell. Amen.

## LETTER 6

### HELOISE TO ABELARD

*To him who is hers in species, from her who is singularly his.*

I do not wish to give you the slightest reason to accuse me of disobedience in anything. So following your command, I have put a rein on the outpouring of my boundless grief, in this way restraining myself, at least in my letters, from writing words against which it is not merely difficult but impossible to guard oneself in speech. For nothing is less in our power than the heart, and we must obey it since we cannot rule it. When its urgings goad us, we are unable to repress it. Nor can we prevent the heart's sudden impulses from breaking out into action, and expressing themselves still more readily in words, which are, it is said, the most spontaneous "signs of the passions."<sup>1</sup> As Matthew writes (12:34): "It is from the heart's overflow that the mouth speaks." I shall, therefore, keep my hand from writing what I cannot keep my tongue from saying. If only the suffering heart were as ready to obey as the writer's hand!

Yet you can give me some consolation in my sorrow, though you cannot altogether banish it. As one nail drives out another,<sup>2</sup> so a new idea displaces an earlier one; when the mind is concentrating on a single theme, it is forced to turn away from past thoughts, or at least to interrupt them.<sup>3</sup> And the more honorable and important the thought to which we turn, the more intensively it occupies the mind and detaches it from other concerns.

All of us who are servants of Christ and your daughters in Christ now make, as supplicants, two requests of your paternal kindness, and we consider the answers to them most essential to us. One of these is that you will please instruct us concerning the origins of women's religious life and the authority for our calling. The other is that you draw up in writing and send us a rule that is

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *De interpretatione* 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.35.75; Jerome, *Ep.* 124, *ad Avitum* 14.

<sup>3</sup> Heloise here and often works in a different modality than Abelard—for her the base texts are often "classical": rhetorical [Cicero]; poetic [Ovid]; patristic [Jerome]. See Katharina Wilson and Glenda McLeod, "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence," *Listening to Heloise*, pp. 121–42.