

St. Bernard's Four Degrees of Love

The attached sermon was given by Dom Augustine Moore, O.C.S.O., It summarizes a section from St. Bernard's "On Loving God." The original piece is large and thick, this sermon outlines St. Bernard four degrees of love in a simple concise way.

Love, "the barometer of your Spiritual Growth"

St. Bernard's *Four Degrees of Love* are:

1. Loving Self for One's own sake
2. Loving God for One's own sake
3. Loving God for God's sake
4. Loving Self for God's sake

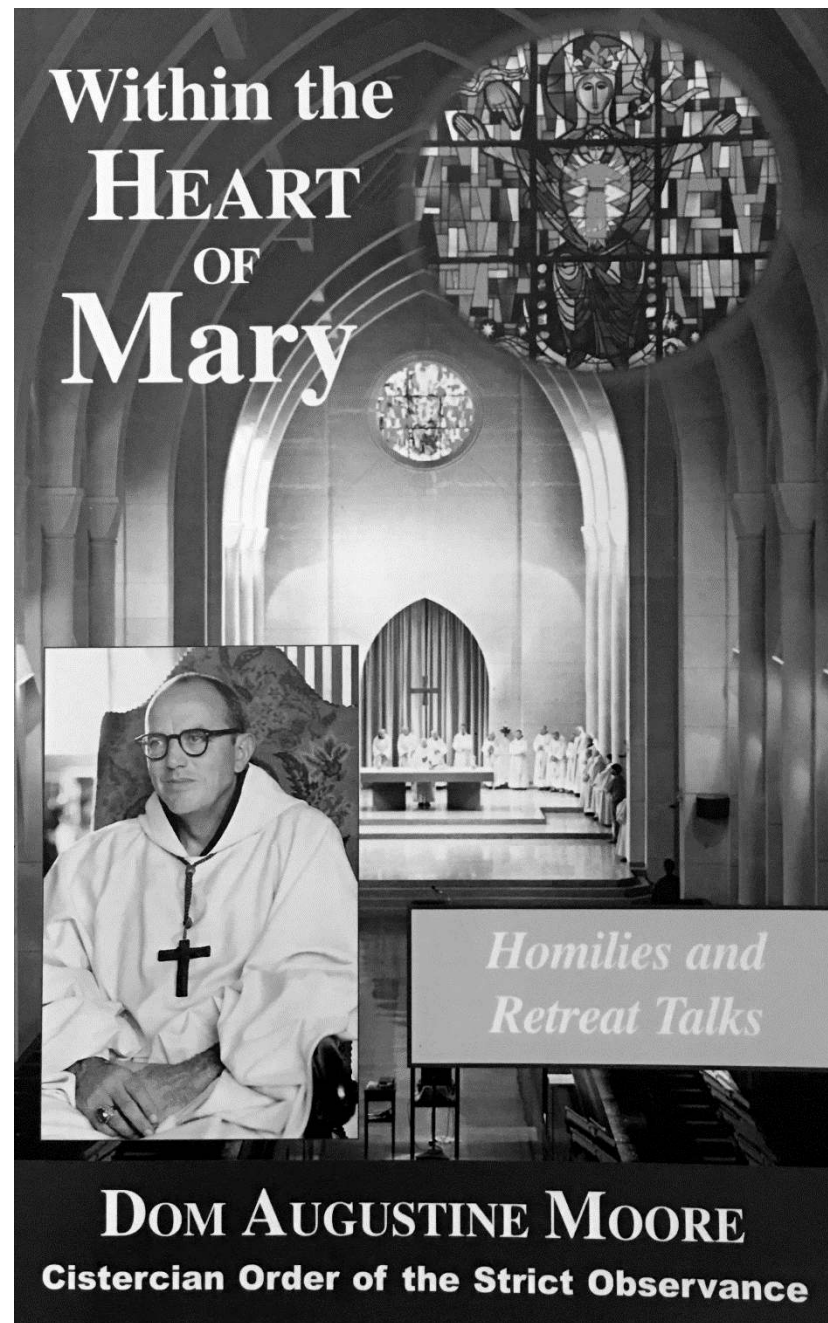
As you read the four stages it is good to examine your spiritual journey and reflect on your movement through the four degrees.

The movement is not linear; it is circular, it overlaps, and merges at times.

Spend some time in thought, contemplating your own maturity in love and contemplate how that impacts your Spiritual Growth.

The piece is from a collection of his homilies and retreat talks given by Dom Augustine at the Cistercian community of Our Lady of Holy Spirit Abbey in Conyers Georgia. <http://www.trappist.net/> He was abbot of the abbey for 26 years.

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One of the elements in our monastic life is the house visitation. Every two years, the abbot of the motherhouse spends some time interviewing the monks of a daughterhouse and dialoguing with the whole community about its basic values such as liturgy, the public prayer, spiritual reading, meditation, silence, and enclosure.

The time of visitation is filled with moments of grace and renewed efforts at living the monastic life. A retreat is somewhat like a personal visitation. It is a time when we dialogue with God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the holy Spirit.

With this in mind, I am having recourse to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the shining lights of our order in the 13th century. St. Bernard developed the four degrees of love as the barometer of the spiritual life.

The first degree of love is to love ourselves for our own sake. Some call this the law of self-preservation. We focus on our own need and pleasure as a priority. I think each one of us has had the experience of looking out for ourselves. We are surrounded by a culture of materialism, sensual excess, and chemical indulgence that wants to help us take care of our "needs." Persistent love for one's self, however, results in inherent miseries.

In the second degree of love, we love God for our own sake. We can understand this by reflecting on the moments in our life when we needed God to help us in a situation. We are moved to the point where we have finally gotten around to loving God, but it's all for what I'm going to get out of it — some particular need which I have and God can help me fill it.

Concern for one's neighbor is a stepping-stone to the second degree of love, according to St. Bernard. Faced with one's own problems and those of the neighbor, we come face to face with the necessity for outside help. As the second step in Alcoholics Anonymous

reads, "We come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."

St. Bernard describes the second degree of love this way:

If a man has a great many tribulations and as a result he frequently turns to God and frequently experiences God's liberation, surely even if he had a breast of iron or a heart of stone (Exodus 11:19; 36:26), he must soften toward the generosity of the Redeemer and love God not only for his own benefit, but for himself.¹

In the second degree of love, we love God for our own benefit but not yet for God's sake. St. Bernard has this beautiful way of saying that when you do this often enough, and God comes through, then you begin to love God for who he is. This is the third degree of love. You begin to say, God is pretty wonderful. All of a sudden, you just love God for himself.

We have moved from loving ourselves for our own sake to loving God for God's sake. The more we have the need of going to God and having him come to our need, we develop a love of God for himself.

This intimacy with God helps us to know and understand the infinite goodness of God that is splendid in every facet of his being. If we love mountains, oceans; and sunsets, how much more do we love their creator? We love God — period.

St. Bernard continues, "He who trusts in the Lord not because he is good to him but simply because he is good truly loves God for God's sake and not for his own."

St. Bernard's fourth degree of love is fascinating. Some spiritual writers may point toward it, but no one except St. Bernard comes right out and says it. The fourth degree of love is to love oneself for God's sake. In our awareness of God's goodness towards us is the realization of how important we are in God's eyes.

In your love for someone else, you might be able to get around to this fourth degree: "If this person really loves me and wants to make a lifelong commitment, I must be pretty good. Therefore, I love myself for this person."

In the third degree of love, you just love God for himself because he's so wonderful. In the fourth degree, you realize that you live within

the light of God's love. You're a part of his program. We have been created, redeemed, and sanctified out of love, so we love ourselves but for his sake.

We take care of ourselves out of gratitude for all God has done for us. We show our love for God by being concerned for ourselves as his instruments. If God has done so much for us, then we must guard and cherish his possession to show our love for him. Loving ourselves in the fourth degree is different from loving ourselves for ourselves.

Can we get to this fourth degree? I think somehow we can, if we just stay conscious of how much God has done for us.

Theologian Karl Rahner (d. 1984) was fascinated with the whole idea of God creating us out of love. The Trinity doesn't need a thing. The three persons of the Trinity have infinite wisdom and love among themselves. They didn't need us for personal satisfaction. But that infinite love caused them problems because love is diffused, and love just has to give of itself. So, we were created. God inundated this human nature of ours with so much love, grace, and power.

St. Bernard says, "Happy is the person who can attain the fourth degree of love and loves himself only for God's sake." We have to keep repeating — *loves oneself but only for God's sake*.

When will this flesh and blood (Matthew 16:17), this vessel of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7), this earthly dwelling (Wisdom 9:15) grasp this? When will it experience this kind of love, so that the mind, drunk with divine love and forgetting itself, making itself like a broken vessel (Psalm 30:13), throw itself wholly on God and, clinging to God (1 Corinthians 6:17)...

The Latin word *expurgare* means "to clean." The Latin phrase is beautiful — "and we go clean out to God." I cleave to God so that God's spirit is one with my spirit. Then he quotes the Psalmist: *Though my flesh and my heart fail, God is the rock of my heart, my portion forever. But those who are far from you perish; you destroy those unfaithful to you* (Psalm 72:26).

As I mentioned earlier, St. Bernard's fourth degree seems to be a mystical experience:

I should call him blessed and holy to whom it is given to experience even for a single instant something which is rare indeed in this life. To lose oneself as though you did not exist and to have no sense of yourself, to be emptied out of yourself (Philippians 2:7) and almost annihilated, belongs to heavenly, not to human love.

In the fourth degree of love, we are in harmony with God and live for him according to his will.

But since Scripture says that God made everything for himself (Proverbs 16:4; Revelation 4:11) there will be a time when he will cause everything to conform to its Maker and be in harmony with him. In the meantime, we must make this our desire: that as God himself willed that everything should be for himself, so we, too, will that nothing, not even ourselves, may be or have been except for him, that is, according to his will, not ours.

I use this text to point out the importance of desire. We have to be people of great desire. That desire has to be all-pervading. I think the mothers and fathers among us could understand this desire. It is a pervading desire for our children.

We translate this to be the desire for union with our Lord. That is the reason St. Benedict stresses *lectio divina*. By reading the New Testament prayerfully, our desire to be united with him quickens.

The other day, I visited one of the brothers in the hospital. Driving back through the traffic, I felt the Lord's presence. I said, "This is pretty darn good." We can think about those moments in our life when God's loving presence was there, but maybe we did not realize it.

We have enough things in each day to almost depress us. There are negative things afoot in the world. We owe it to ourselves and to our Lord to believe that we can be present to him. I think it's valid to say that the fundamental principle in the spiritual life is living in the presence of the Lord. We can be very close to our Lord.

The basic theology behind the Jesus Prayer tradition, which began with the Orthodox Russians, is the presence of God through prayer. The Orthodox Russians say the Jesus Prayer a thousand times a day

until it finally becomes a part of them. For ourselves, it's good to have something remind us of God's presence.

A picture of your family could be a reminder of the Lord's presence. I think most people, though, have a spiritual phrase like "Thank you, Jesus" that brings them back to the reality of Jesus' presence.

There was a monk here who was always clearing his throat, whether in choir or anywhere else. It used to drive retreat masters crazy. So many of the monks came in to see me as abbot, and we talked about this business of the presence of God. For some monks the Sacred Heart statue in our cloister garden reminds them of Jesus' presence. For others, the reminder is every time the bell rings. It was easy at Gethsemani Abbey, because the bell would ring on the quarter hour. Many of the monks said that this particular brother's "ah hem" was a cue for God's presence to them.

We must be careful of this whole attitude, especially in our American culture, of picking ourselves up by our bootstraps. To be close to the Lord is not dependent upon our efforts alone. We have to remember that it's grace that does it.

Patience is the word. It comes from *patior*, meaning "to suffer." Remember that God moves us *suavetur*, softly and sweetly. There shouldn't be any tension in being in the Lord's presence. The moment we get too agitated, we get back into that Pelagian business — "I've got to be transformed overnight. I'm not going to wait around here for months and months. It's got to be right now." Instead, we can pray for the grace of patience with self, others, and even our Lord.

Personally, when I am agitated, I tell God, "Okay, this is yours," and I say a short prayer to the holy Spirit. It is amazing how a short prayer of offering calms the soul.

NOTES

1. Source of all quotes: St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "On Loving God" in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. Gillian R. Evans, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Mahwah, 1987).