

# LETTERS

## LETTER 18

### GREATNESS OF THE SOUL

1. O sweet, dear child, be wise in God!<sup>69</sup> For you have great need of wisdom, as has every man who wishes to reach conformity with God; for wisdom leads very deep into God. But nowadays no one either will or can acknowledge what he needs in the service of love he owes. O you have much to do if you are to live the Divinity and the Humanity and come to full growth, according to the measure of the dignity in which you are loved and destined by God!<sup>70</sup> Conform wisely and valiantly, as one undaunted, to all that is meet for you, and act in all things according to your free nobility.

13. God, who is powerful and sovereign above all power, gives enough to all men out of his omnipotence and pure benevolence. This he does not by his own exertion, or procurement, or gifts from his own hand, but through his rich omnipotence and mighty messengers, that is, his divine perfections. They serve him, govern his kingdom, and give to all men what they need, according to the glory and rights of him who is Lord over them. And each of his perfections gives according to the condition of its birth and function. Mercy gives God's gifts to all the indigent people who are utterly poor and ensnared in all sorts of vices, because of which they remain infamous and ragged. Charity guards the common people of the kingdom and gives each of them what he needs. Wisdom arrays all the noble knights who, in burning desire, labor with great combat and fierce assault for noble Love. Perfection gives the peers of the kingdom the lordship over their land, like the sovereign dominion of the sovereign soul I am speaking of who, with a sovereign and perfect will and perfect works, has obtained her noble mode of living by all the will of Love.

37. Justice directs these four virtues, in order to condemn or commend what they do.<sup>71</sup> In this way the emperor himself remains free and in peace, because he commands the officials to administer the law and invests the kings, dukes, counts, and chief peers with the high feudal tenure of his domain and the true legal rights of Love. This same Love is the crown of the blessed soul,<sup>72</sup> who can help all according to their needs while, at the same time, seeking after nothing of its own except in the love of its Beloved. This is what I meant when I last wrote you about the three virtues:

## HADEWIJCH

To have compassion for all,  
But to take nothing under your protection,

and the other things I told you.

51. In this manner earnestly maintain the noble perfection of your invaluable and perfect soul. But consider the meaning of this. Remain undivided and withhold yourself from all meddling with good or bad, high or low; let everything be, and keep yourself free to devote yourself to your Beloved and to content him whom you love in Love. This is your real debt, which, according to the truth of your nature, you owe to God and to those with whom you live in him—thus to love God in simplicity and seek after nothing but this single Love who has chosen us for herself alone.

63. Now understand the deepest essence of your soul, what “soul” is. Soul is a being that can be beheld by God and by which, again, God can be beheld. Soul is also a being that wishes to content God; it maintains a worthy state of being as long as it has not fallen beneath anything that is alien to it and less than the soul’s own dignity. If it maintains this worthy state, the soul is a bottomless abyss in which God suffices to himself;<sup>73</sup> and his own self-sufficiency ever finds fruition to the full in this soul, as the soul, for its part, ever does in him. Soul is a way for the passage of God from his depths into his liberty; and God is a way for the passage of the soul into its liberty, that is, into his inmost depths, which cannot be touched except by the soul’s abyss. And as long as God does not belong to the soul in his totality, he does not truly satisfy it.

80.<sup>74</sup> The power of sight that is created as natural to the soul is charity. This power of sight has two eyes, love and reason. Reason cannot see God except in what he is not; love rests not except in what he is. Reason has its secure paths, by which it proceeds. Love experiences failure, but failure advances it more than reason. Reason advances toward what God is, by means of what God is not. Love sets aside what God is not and rejoices that it fails in what God is. Reason has more satisfaction than love, but love has more sweetness of bliss than reason. These two, however, are of great mutual help one to the other; for reason instructs love, and love enlightens reason. When reason abandons itself to love’s wish, and love consents to be forced and held within the bounds of reason, they can accomplish a very great work. This no one can learn except by experience. For wisdom does not interfere here or try to penetrate this wonderful and fathomless

## LETTERS

longing, which is hidden from all things; that is only for the fruition of love. *In this joy the stranger shall not intermeddle* (Prov. 14:10)—or anyone outside of Love. To gain it the soul must be nursed with motherly care, in the joy of the blessedness of great love, and disciplined by the rod of fatherly mercy; moreover it must cling inseparably to God, read its judgments in his countenance, and thereby abide in peace.

112. Now when this noble soul turns back to men and human affairs, it brings a countenance so joyous and so wonderfully sweet from the oil of charity that in all things willed by charity it turns to men with mercy. But from the truth and justice of the judgments it has received in the divine countenance, it appears to ignoble men awesome and unheard-of (Exod. 34:29–30). And when these ignoble men see that the soul is then wholly arrayed according to truth and well-regulated in all ways, how fearful and alarming it is to them! They must give way to it under the pressure of Love. But they who have been chosen for such a state in union with Love and are not yet full grown for it possess already, in their capacity, the omnipotence of eternity; yet this is unknown to themselves and also to others.

130. Thus reason secretly gives its light. This power of sight of the soul enlightens the soul in all the truth of God's will. For he who reads his judgments in God's countenance works becomingly, in conformity with the truth of the laws of Love. The law of Love is to be obedient; this is contrary to the way of acting of many aliens. And he must work not like anyone else, but according to truth. He is subject to no one save Love alone, who holds him fettered in love. No matter what anyone else would have said, he speaks according to Love's will. And he does service and performs the works of Love according to her will night and day in all liberty, without delay or fear and without counting the cost, according to the judgments he has read in Love's countenance. These judgments remain hidden from all who, on account of alien motives or alien things, forsake the works of Love because they are scorned among aliens, who prefer and judge it better that their will, rather than Love's will, be done. For they have not come to the great countenance of omnipotent Love, by which we may live free in the midst of every kind of distress.

154. You must know this liberty, and you must also know those who serve for its sake. People judge all sorts of things for themselves, and in this way, under the delusion of greater liberty, they scorn the works of Love; they do so indeed with great worldly wisdom. And

## HADEWIJCH

so as to neglect the commandments of Love, some issue contrary commands.<sup>75</sup> But a noble person who wishes to keep his rule of life, following what enlightened reason teaches him,<sup>76</sup> does not fear the aliens' commands or counsels, no matter what torment befalls him in consequence, be it scandal, disgrace, indictments, insults, desertion, imprisonment, homelessness, nakedness, or utter want of every sort of thing man ought to have. He is not afraid to be ready to show obedience to Love in all that she wills, and to devote himself to her in truth, in all things and through all troublesome works, in the joy of his heart with all the power of Love.

174. By your whole life, then, you should gaze fixedly at God with the sweet eyes of single affection, which always seeks the service of the Beloved with delight. That is, you should contemplate your dear God cordially, yes, much more than cordially, so that the eyes of your desire, both together, remain fixed to the countenance of your Beloved by the piercing nails of burning encounters that never cease. Then for the first time you can rest with Saint John, who slept on Jesus' breast<sup>77</sup> (John 13:23–25). And this is what they do who serve Love in liberty; they rest on that sweet, wise breast and see and hear hidden words (Job 4:12)—which are ineffable and unheard-of by men—through the sweet whisper of the Holy Spirit.

189. You should always look fixedly on your Beloved whom you desire. For he who gazes on what he desires becomes ardently enkindled, so that his heart within him begins to beat slowly because of the sweet burden of love. And through perseverance in this holy life of contemplation, wherein he continually gazes on God, he is drawn within God. Love ever makes him taste her so sweetly that he forgets everything on earth. Then he is determined that, whatever befalls him at the hand of aliens, he will deny himself nine hundred times rather than neglect to perform one iota of the service of that worthy love of which *Christ is the foundation* (1 Cor. 3:11).

### LETTER 19

## TO HAVE NOTHING BUT GOD

God be with you and give you  
True knowledge of the methods of Love;  
May he enable you to understand