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Richard of Saint Victor and His Idea of Wisdom and Love

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Abstract

This study examines Richard of Saint Victor's conception of wisdom and love, understood as the ultimate ends of human life and deeply connected with the notion of care. For Richard, authentic care requires discerning the true object of concern: the human being as a rational creature created for happiness through knowledge and love of God. His anthropology highlights the dignity of man, composed of body, reason, and affection, and called to participate in divine happiness. Richard develops a spiritual pedagogy in which the ordering and moderation of affections—fear, sorrow, hope, love, joy, hatred, and modesty—are indispensable for the path toward contemplation. Through an allegorical reading of Jacob, his wives, and their children, Richard presents a symbolic itinerary where the progression of affectivity and reason leads ultimately to contemplation, embodied in Benjamin. This contemplative fulfillment transcends both fear and greed, liberating the human being from self-centeredness and opening him to love and divine wisdom. The work demonstrates Richard's synthesis of Platonic, Augustinian, and Victorine traditions, proposing a transformative vision of the human person: happiness is inseparable from love, and wisdom is achieved not through rational argument but through the lived experience of love that surpasses reason.

Keywords: wisdom; love; contemplation; Plato; Augustine; Victorines; reason; will



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“The soul of any human being is compelled, whenever it feels strong pleasure or great pain about something, to consider that what it is precisely experiencing is the most evident and true, when in fact it is not. [. . .] for every pleasure and pain, as if it had a nail, nails it to the body, fixes it there and makes it corporeal, producing in it the opinion that the things the body affirms at that moment are true.” (Platón 1986, pp. 77–78)

“What great peace for the heart, what great tranquility it is, therefore, not to desire any of the distractions of this world, not to feel fear before its adversities!”¹ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 93)

“Where love is, there our eyes are: we gladly look at what we ardently love.”² (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 67)

1. Introduction

Love (Amor) and wisdom (Sapientia) are presented by Richard as ultimate ends to be reached by the human being, and he closely relates both concepts to the idea of care—a care that every human being is in need of, for without it, it will be difficult to achieve wisdom and love.

The issue of care is undoubtedly one of extreme importance and not an easy one to address. There are many perspectives from which it can be studied, and the first, as I

conceive it, is to determine what the object (formal object) of that care should be, what its purpose should be, what should concern us, what we should take care of. Once this is decided—and it is by no means simple—we may consider the second question: how to care, what type of care must be put into practice. This will be my starting point and itinerary, and to answer it I will turn, in this case, to one of the great thinkers of the twelfth century: Richard of Saint Victor.

The twelfth century is one of extraordinary effervescence in all areas, a century of extraordinary economic, demographic, social, and cultural development, in which thinkers such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter Abelard, William of Saint-Thierry, John of Salisbury, Bernard of Chartres shone; in which schools multiplied that would give rise to universities in the thirteenth century, especially Chartres and the school where Richard carried out his activity, the Abbey of Saint Victor.

In 1108, William of Champeaux, a famous master of dialectic at the cathedral school of Notre Dame in Paris, after heated disputes with Peter Abelard—his student who prided himself on having defeated his master (Peter Abelard 2001, p. 44)—withdrew with some of his disciples to a chapel dedicated to Saint Victor. In 1113, King Louis VI of France established there an abbey of regular canons under the rule of Saint Augustine, giving birth to the new school (Longère 1991).

The new school prided itself on addressing all the questions studied in the most relevant schools of the time, such as biblical exegesis, in which the school of Laon stood out (Andrée 2012, pp. 257–81; 2014, pp. 5–16); the study of the quadrivium, reading Plato and Boethius, for which the school of Chartres was famous (Jeauneau 1995); it certainly paid special attention to the trivium, and far from neglecting anthropology, it paid close attention to it, particularly in connection with a central question: the relationship between wisdom, reason, and love; the issue of mystical contemplation as the fulfillment of all our longings, studied by Cistercians such as Bernard of Clairvaux or William of Saint-Thierry (Leclercq 1966; García-Lomas 2025).

The fact is that the school soon gained fame beyond the country's borders, attracting to its classrooms, among others, a key thinker for the institution and for Richard himself: Hugh, who soon occupied the founder's chair and became one of its most influential representatives (Baron 1966).

We know little about Richard, although his most impactful and suggestive works have crossed the centuries to our own day, always arousing renewed interest. What we know comes from a seventeenth-century canon of Saint Victor, Jean de Toulouse, and the history of the abbey he wrote. He does not tell us about Richard's birth, although he does call him *scotus*, suggesting he may have been of British origin. We do know, however, that Richard eventually directed the school, like his predecessor Hugh, becoming subprior in 1159, prior in 1162, and finally dying in 1173 (Sicard 2015).

Yet the lack of biographical data today contrasts with the great impact of his person and work at the end of the Middle Ages, earning him a prominent place in the tenth canto of Paradise in Dante's *Divina Commedia*:

“See flame there the ardent spirit
Of Isidore, of Bede, and of Richard,
Who in his contemplation was more than man.”³ (Dante Alighieri 2021, Paradiso,
X, 130–132, p. 123)

Of his extensive production, in which he addressed exegetical, theological, and spiritual issues, it is only just to highlight, at least, those of interest for our present question: *De Trinitate* (Ricardo de San Víctor 2015), the *Liber exceptionum* (Ricardo de San Víctor 1958), the *Benjamin maior* or *De contemplatione* (Ricardo de San Víctor 2013), his *Benjamin minor* or *De*

praeparatione animi ad contemplationem (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022), to which we will devote special attention, his striking *De quatuor gradibus violentae caritatis* (Ricardo de San Víctor 2007), his most widely circulated work in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and finally, the *De exterminatione mali et promotione boni* (Ricardo de San Víctor 1855, PL 196, 1102–1116).

2. The Question of Care: An Anthropological Question

When Richard addresses, as I understand it, the issue of care, the first thing he does is ask about what we are—about that which must be cared for, that which deserves care, that which ought to be cared for. Here lies the core of the matter.

The anthropological conception from which one begins is key, for everything else will derive from it. “No one values rightly who ignores himself, who does not take into account the conditions of his dignity,”⁴ wrote Saint Bonaventure in his *De perfectione vitae ad sorores* (San Buenaventura 2000, p. 231). What constitutes the dignity of the human being, that dignity which makes him worthy of care? What is it in man that must be cared for, in such a way that not caring for it would mean neglecting the man himself? These are the central questions we must face.

Richard affirms in his *Liber exceptionum*: “God, supremely good and immutably good, knowing that his happiness could be shared and in no way diminished, created the rational creature in order to make it a partaker of his happiness”⁵ (Ricardo de San Víctor 1958, p. 104). This is a statement of utmost importance. Man has been created to be happy, to participate in divine happiness; this is his radical vocation, one that he cannot renounce, for it constitutes him—a vocation that must be promoted, and that it is madness, supreme evil, to hinder. In this vocation lies his extraordinary dignity, as María José Zegers has shown in her excellent works on Richard (Zegers 2025b, 2025a).

Richard adds in the same work: “He made him in his image and likeness: in his image according to reason, in his likeness according to love. In his image according to the knowledge of truth, in his likeness according to love of virtue. In his image according to intellect, in likeness according to affection [...] so that [...] by knowing and loving God he might possess, and possessing might be happy”⁶ (Ricardo de San Víctor 1958, p. 104). Thus, three are the gifts with which God has created man: reason or intellect, according to the image; affection, the capacity to love, according to the likeness; and something else, not mentioned in the cited text but very present in Richard’s thought: the body. For God decided that the rational creature we call human, unlike the angelic, “had to exist in bodies of clay”⁷ (Ricardo de San Víctor 1958, p. 104).

The body, like intellect and affection, is not an evil; it is a gift, a grace, that constitutes us as what and who we are. God, supremely and immutably good, according to Richard (note 5), willed nothing evil for human nature, a nature of extraordinary dignity, called to be happy by knowing and loving in both body and soul.

In the same way that the Platonic tradition conceived of the human being as fallen, imprisoned, in need of liberation in order to become what he truly was, Richard understood that our present condition does not correspond to that willed by God, but rather to the condition into which we have led ourselves, a corrupted, deformed condition. Ignorance, concupiscence, and disease—unwilled by God—are the sad consequences of an original sin we must gradually repair.

The body, as noted, is not evil; disease is, and it must be treated in order to restore the body’s proper health. The body is not even the origin of evil; nevertheless, we must be careful, for the body has a unique condition, being the means through which we relate to the world, and the way by which we experience intense pleasures and pains, which always have the power to overwhelm.

When Plato, in the *Phaedo* passage I cited at the beginning, stated that each pleasure and pain, as if with a nail, nails the soul to the body, fixes it and makes it corporeal, leading it to believe that the things the body affirms are true, he indicated something of extraordinary importance, on which the medieval thinker would meditate. It is indeed a shattering fact, by no means minor, that when someone seeks to break, to corrupt a person completely, making him deny his deepest loves, those realities he considers sacred and untouchable, without which he ceases to be who he is, falling into despair as his world collapses into an ominous torrent of meaninglessness, two terrible strategies are employed: threatening with pain and torture, or promising excessive pleasures and bribes. Temptation takes advantage of the fear and greed that lie in every human heart, making him finally consider that what he most deeply longs for is nothing other than the absence of pain and the enjoyment of pleasure—like any irrational living creature, incapable of loving and knowing. (It is not my intention to suggest that Ricardo is a reader of Plato, but rather that, as a reader of Augustine, he embraces certain key ideas from the Platonic tradition).

3. Conversion and Liberation: Beyond Fear and Greed

Richard's strong thesis is clear and powerful: the human being, insofar as he is a person, is essentially relational, called to love and to know. But greed and fear prevent us from going beyond ourselves, beyond what is ours, to encounter what we truly long for. They prevent us from liberating ourselves from the cave, from the chains we tighten more and more, from the prison we may become to ourselves, as Saint Bernard beautifully expressed in his *On Loving God* (*Liber de diligendo Deo*):

"There are those who praise God because he is powerful, others because he is good to them, and others because he is good in himself. The first are slaves and full of fear. The second are hirelings and dominated by greed. The third are sons and honor their father. Those who fear and those who are greedy look only to themselves. The love of the son, on the other hand, does not seek its own interest."⁸ (San Bernardo de Claraval 1993, p. 349)

Only he who does not seek his own interest can live in accordance with his essential vocation. Opening himself to what is not himself, to what in no way is or can be him, he can glimpse the truth and, truly, love.

"I think Scripture refers to this: *The law of the Lord is perfect, converting souls*. For it is the only thing capable of tearing the soul away from love of itself and of the world, and turning it toward God. Neither fear nor self-love are capable of converting the soul. . . .

[. . .] The servant's law is the fear that invades him. The hireling's law is the greed that dominates, attracts, and distracts him. None of these laws is pure or capable of converting souls. Charity (love), on the other hand, converts souls and makes them free as well."⁹ (San Bernardo de Claraval 1993, pp. 349, 351)

It is indeed a conversion, a conversion of the heart, healing, liberation, as Saint Augustine had confessed (this is the central theme of his Confessions), and Ricardo glosses beautifully: "Where love is, there our eyes are: we gladly look at what we ardently love"¹⁰ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 67).

Turned inward upon himself, man will never be happy, will never attain that for which he was created: wisdom, the contemplation of the truth and the good that sustain all things joyfully, that illuminate by vivifying; contemplation that translates into a new love, free and unbound, as is the love of the God who is love. "What great peace for the heart, what great tranquility it is, therefore, not to desire any of the distractions of this world, not to feel fear before its adversities!"¹¹ Richard exclaims (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 93).

The question of care, therefore, for Richard, as it was for his master Hugh (this, as is well known, is a central issue in his *Didascalicon*) (Hugo de San Víctor 2011), is crucial. We must not neglect the body, for it is a gift and as such must be valued. But above all, we must take care not to mistake the true object of our care. The dignity of every human being lies in this: that by the very fact of being human, even fallen, ignorant, wretched, subject to disease, pain, and need, he is still called to be happy. That, as we saw, is his vocation. But happiness is intimately tied to love, to the capacity to love proper to the rational creature, not merely to the capacity to avoid pain or to feel pleasure, which we share with non-rational beings.

This is the reason that leads Richard to examine, with utmost care and attention, everything concerning love and the way it manifests itself; to study its degrees, the dangers of improper love and the blessings of divine love—charity—which he analyzes in his striking work *De IV gradibus violentae caritatis* (Ricardo de San Víctor 2007), on which Juan Rosado has carried out an excellent study (Rosado 2022). The work begins with these moving words: “I am wounded by love (Cant. 5:8). Charity compels me (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14) to speak of charity. Gladly will I spend myself (cf. 2 Cor. 12:15) in service of charity.”¹² (Ricardo de San Víctor 2007, p. 345).

It is likewise this reason that moves him to inquire not only into what contemplation itself may be, as he does in his *Benjamin maior*, but—what I propose to reflect on here—into the path that leads to contemplation, a subject treated with exceptional care and subtlety in his *Benjamin minor*.

Here the issue of care takes on special importance, for the question is how to care for ourselves in such a way that we attain what we can and ought to attain: wisdom, contemplation, in which happiness resides. To this end, Richard offers a surprising allegorical reading of the biblical story of Jacob, his wives, their handmaids, and his children, the last of whom, Benjamin, represents the final stage of the human being’s progress toward happiness.

4. Awakening and Listening: From Love of Wisdom and the Desire for Justice

“Benjamin, a young adolescent, in ecstasy (Ps. 67:28)”¹³ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 39). With this citation from the Psalms Richard begins his text. And he continues: “Let young adolescents listen to what is said of an adolescent; let them awaken at the voice of the Prophet: Benjamin, a young adolescent, in ecstasy.”¹⁴ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 39).

As Heraclitus did, who was aware of the need to awaken the sleepers, whom he called “workers of what happens in the world”¹⁵ (Heráclito 1986, p. 358), and as Socrates did, conscious that his mission, entrusted by dreams and oracles, was to awaken his fellow citizens (Platón 1986, pp. 168–73), Richard urges us to awaken, not to be lulled by the murmur of the world, forgetting our dignity and vocation.

“Many,” he adds, “some through science, others through experience, have learned who Benjamin is. Those who have known him through science, let them listen with patience; those instructed by experience, let them listen with delight. For whoever has once been able to know him through the teaching of experience—I say this with conviction—will never tire of hearing what is said of him, however lengthy. But who is able to speak of him as befits? He surpasses in beauty all the sons of Jacob (Ps. 44:3).”¹⁶ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 39).

Jacob represents the rational creature embodied—the human being—who can only reach the contemplation for which he was created if his greatest gifts, affectivity and reason, are ordered toward their proper end: charity, that is, the light of divine wisdom. What is especially interesting, however, is that according to Richard, the ordering of reason and

affection would not be possible if there were not, rooted in the deepest part of man, love of wisdom and the desire for justice, represented in the biblical text by Jacob's two wives: Rachel and Leah.

"All men by nature desire to know" (Aristóteles 1994, p. 69)—thus Aristotle began what we know as the *Metaphysics*. "Nothing is loved [...] with more ardor than this wisdom, nothing is possessed with more sweetness. Therefore all want to be wise"¹⁷ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 41)—thus Richard ends the first chapter of his *Benjamin minor*.

But Richard's conviction, which he shares with Augustine and all fervent Platonists, is that there can be no access to truth without a commitment to the good. If justice is not loved—if one does not love doing what ought to be done—then there can be no wisdom. And this is a point of particular interest.

Richard has no doubt that all want to be wise, but the problem, he says, is that in truth we do not decide to want to be just: "For all could have been just if they had truly willed it. In fact, to truly love justice is already to be just, whereas you may love wisdom greatly and yet lack it"¹⁸ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 41).

Again, Augustine resonates in Richard's words. In Book VIII of the *Confessions*, particularly in chapters 8–11, Augustine admirably described how, though desiring to know, he resisted conversion, resisted awakening, resisted being freed from his chains:

"Thus I did many things, all those in which willing was not the same as being able. But I did not do what I most delighted in, what, if I had only willed it, I could have done at once. For as soon as I willed it, I would truly have willed it. In all this, to will was to be able, and to will was already to do. And yet I did not do it."¹⁹ (San Agustín de Hipona 2007, p. 331)

"I was the one who willed and also the one who did not will. Truly, it was I. But I neither wholly willed nor wholly did not will"²⁰ (San Agustín de Hipona 2007, p. 335), wrote the great medieval authority. And in chapter 11 he added something extraordinary: "Hesitating to die to death and live to life, the evil that had grown familiar prevailed within me over the good that was strange. And the closer came the moment when I was to change and become another man, the greater the horror it inspired in me"²¹ (San Agustín de Hipona 2007, p. 336).

It is clear: without healing the affections, it is impossible to reach contemplation, to be wise and happy. But perfect justice, which "does not reject the goods of this world when they are necessary"²² (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 43), commands us to love—love without restriction—and not to direct our love toward ourselves, not to place all our effort in enjoying pleasures and avoiding all pain, in attaining power and recognition. "Is there anything more absurd and costly in the eyes of those who love this world?"²³ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 43). And, "Who are those who speak according to the world? Take note: those who speak against love"²⁴ (San Agustín de Hipona 2002, p. 131), Augustine had declared in his commentary on the First Letter of John.

Benjamin, the culmination of the journey toward perfect happiness, will be the son of Rachel, of the love of wisdom, of illumined reason—but he cannot be born before Leah, the desire for justice, "the affectivity inflamed by a divine breath"²⁵ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 47), has borne fruit.

5. The Path to Wisdom: The Happiness of Contemplation and Love

It is now that the question of care takes on its greatest importance. We are neither mere reason nor mere affection, nor a pure combination of both powers. As we well know, we are corporeal beings, we live in the flesh, and this is why, as Richard notes, our affection is mediated by sensibility and our reason by imagination. According to the Victorine master's

interpretation of the biblical text, these are represented by the handmaids of Leah and Rachel: Zilpah and Bilhah.

The detailed descriptions of the handmaids—of imagination and sensibility, of their functions and weaknesses—are extraordinary, but I will not dwell on them now. It is important to note, however, that “each of these maidservants, as is well known, is so necessary to their mistresses that without them the whole world could apparently give them nothing; for without imagination reason would know nothing, without sensibility affection would take delight in nothing.”²⁶ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 49).

But we must be extremely attentive and take care of ourselves, for although sensibility and imagination are meant to serve Leah and Rachel, “Zilpah likes to get drunk, [and] the wine for which Zilpah thirsts is the enjoyment of pleasure”²⁷ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 51). “The whole world is not enough to satisfy the desires of sensibility”²⁸ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, pp. 51–53). And imagination, Bilhah, in turn resounds uncontrollably in the ears of the heart, overwhelming us with the deafening noise of poor thoughts born from us and turned back upon us. “Who does not know the loquacity of Bilhah or the drunkenness of Zilpah, except perhaps one who does not know himself?”²⁹ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 53).

What, then, must we take care of first? Without a doubt—as we have already suggested—sensibility, the servant of affectivity, for without healing the affection we cannot progress toward happiness. This is why Leah must be the first to have children, understood here as ordered affections.

“The principal affections are seven,” says Richard, “which arise one after another from a single affectivity of the spirit: hope and fear, joy and sorrow, hatred, love, and shame”³⁰ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 55). And all of them may be either ordered or disordered. The point is that only when ordered can they be considered true sons of Jacob—that is, proper to the human being, appropriate to his dignity.

The first of Leah’s sons is Reuben—ordered fear—born of the contrast between the evil committed and the mercy of the God who loves tenderly; a fear filled with humility and gratitude. Without this, without fearing to do evil, without fear of God, there is no path to wisdom. What do we truly fear? Here the care begins.

The second son of Jacob must be Simeon—ordered and moderated sorrow—born of repentance. Before what do we feel the most piercing sorrow? Of what do we truly repent?

The third son is Levi, who cannot be born before the previous ones and cannot be absent if they are present. This is hope—hope in love, in forgiveness, true consolation in a world where the evil that pains us assails us day after day. To despair, or to hope in a disordered way, is to renounce ourselves. Hope, rightly ordered, keeps us on the way. And “after the birth of hope, which also grows and progresses day by day, comes love”³¹ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 61). This is Judah, “the one who confesses”³² (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 61); the one who, filled with admiration, praises. And now we begin to love ardently the one we once only feared. Where, then, is our hope placed? What do we truly love? This is the question we must ask ourselves.

But Richard affirms: “If love of wisdom does not progress, without doubt it quickly dies out”³³ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 65). It is time, therefore, for Rachel to bear fruit.

“No one should doubt that whoever has been able to love invisible goods wishes immediately to know them and desires to see them through the eyes of intelligence. And the more Judah grows—that is, love—the more intensely Rachel burns with the desire to bear children, that is, the desire to know.”³⁴ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 67)

The protagonism, however, now passes to imagination—Bilhah, Rachel’s handmaid. Human imagination, rational imagination, is the power we have to make present the

image of anything when we wish. And it is here that we must be careful, for not every image is beneficial. Imagination too, if it is to serve its mistress, must be ordered. Unable yet to see directly, through pure intellection, that which we love, we need imagination. But imagination can also present to us as passionately desirable what does not deserve such desire.

First must be born Dan, then Naphtali. The role of Dan is to imagine future evils—the deserved evils awaiting those who give themselves over to evil—allowing the spirit to repress seductive thoughts that could easily lead us to delight in what does not guide us to the goal. Naphtali, for his part, takes imagination one step further in its ordering: he envisions the future goods promised to those devoted to the good, igniting what Richard calls the flame of good desires, raising us “through the properties of visible things to the knowledge of invisible things”³⁵ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 87).

Imagination and sensibility—indispensable, extraordinary gifts—require, as we see, careful tending. And once what Richard calls the wanderings of the imagination have been ordered, it is possible—now, at last—to moderate and order the desires of the senses. It is time, therefore, to speak of the new, key children of Zilpah: Gad and Asher—moderation in prosperity, contempt for worldly glory, and patience in adversity, which gladly endures the world’s tribulations for the sake of love.

It is possible for human beings not to govern their actions by greed and fear; it is possible—here lies their astonishing dignity—to love, not to seek themselves in every act, placing their heart beyond the pleasures and pains they undoubtedly feel. But it is by no means an easy matter; rather it is tortuous and labyrinthine. For as the Victorine master notes, “The actions carried out through Gad and Asher, which seem admirable in the eyes of men, often cause the one who performs them to pass from timidity to pride and from humility to arrogance”³⁶ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 105), closing in upon himself once more, seeking himself in every act.

But if, humbly, we love, then it is possible for a new son of Leah—of affection—to be born in us: Issachar, true joy, the intimate experience of the sweetness of each moment lived, small in comparison to the future fullness, Richard says, but great compared to any apparent joy provided by the delights of the world. And indeed, moved by emotion, he writes: “You instill in our spirits a small drop of the immense sea of happiness, but you completely intoxicate the spirit in which you instill it”³⁷ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 123).

Richard understands that the enjoyment of this sweetness—which he calls the joy of the heart—possible only if we have progressed sufficiently in our path of perfection (a perfection, an excellence, that belongs to us by virtue of who we are), makes possible something of great importance: the ordering of our hatred, another son of Leah—Zebulun. And I say of great importance because here decisive matters are at stake.

Ordered hatred is directed—and cannot be otherwise—against vices, against everything that prevents goodness, the key to happiness and the joy to which every human being is called, from triumphing and spreading effortlessly, gladdening our hearts. But when love and sweetness are lacking in the heart, human beings cannot truly care for others. Thus, often, as the Victorine master subtly observes, “what they do out of hatred for men they believe—or pretend—to do out of hatred for vices. [. . .] I ask them to consider whether they truly love those whom they correct”³⁸ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 137). We are not Zebulun if we are more inclined to wound than to protect, if we are not more willing, ultimately, to endure evils than to cause them. No one is Zebulun “if he trembles before the dangers of the sea, which represent the tribulations of this world, if he does not tenderly receive and lovingly comfort those long wearied by storms and finally cast upon the shore”³⁹ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 139).

At this point, finally, the birth of Dinah becomes possible: serene modesty, tender shame, opposed to the kind that arises from wounded pride, from the experience of dishonor, of having been caught and thus exposed disgraced, of having one's beloved reputation damaged. True modesty is born instead from overwhelming gratitude and the sincere recognition of our condition—without which it turns into vanity, vainglory.

Fear, sorrow, hope, love, joy, hatred (anger), modesty—known in other contexts as the passions of the soul—are the affections that move us. Far from being obstacles to our full realization, far from preventing us from fulfilling our vocation and therefore to be mitigated or extinguished, they are *sine qua non* conditions of our happiness. They need to be ordered to their proper end, but not only ordered—for things are not linear or simple, always having two sides—they must also be moderated. Otherwise, their excess brings about their degeneration: fear turns into despair, sorrow into bitterness, hope into presumption, love into flattery, joy into indifference, anger into rage, and modesty into mere vanity.

It is clear, then, that the affections must be moderated, discerned carefully, for otherwise the order of the affections—this is what virtues are—could neither be preserved nor perfected. And without virtues, without ordered affections, it is not possible to be happy, not possible to attain wisdom.

Rachel, ordered reason, as we know, desires wisdom, and therefore this is the moment, finally, for her—and not her handmaid—to bear fruit, to give birth to her firstborn: Joseph—moderation and prudential discernment.

This aspect of Richard's proposal is extremely interesting, for here, as he understands it, and with clear Augustinian resonance, the maxim "know thyself" plays a crucial role. "Our Joseph must fully know, as far as possible, the state and the inner and outer dispositions of man. He must search with subtlety and investigate with diligence not only what kind of person he is but also what kind of person he ought to be"⁴⁰ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 203).

What makes the human being a creature of special dignity? What elevates him above all other beings that inhabit the earth? Socrates pointed to the distinctive fact that man can know that he does not know, that what he knows is not what he longs to know, and that therefore his desire to know, of which Aristotle speaks, is not satisfied with the knowledge of this world. In other words, he is capable of knowing that he does not know is in truth much closer to wisdom than being certain of the worldly knowledge he clings to as the wisdom he desires. This is learned ignorance, this is awakening, this is, ultimately, self-knowledge. The Socratic dialogue is the effort to confront the interlocutor with himself, to bring him into such a situation that he cannot but face himself and begin the task of self-knowledge—or flee in terror.

But what is it that we encounter in the innermost depths of ourselves that reveals our ignorance, our poverty? What is it that enlightens us to know that we do not know, that sets us on the path to wisdom, that, drawing us out of ourselves, opens a way? "In vain does he lift up the eyes of his heart to the contemplation of God who is not yet able to see himself"⁴¹ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 205). Yet "once the mirror has been cleaned—and once he has looked attentively at it for a long time—a certain radiance of divine light begins to shine intermittently for him, and a great ray accompanied by an unusual vision begins to appear before his eyes"⁴² (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 207). And now, "seeing and admiring the presence of this light within himself, the spirit is set ablaze in an incredible way and takes courage to see the light that is above him"⁴³ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 207). Now he truly desires to know; now he truly knows that he does not know. And "hoping, he conceives; desiring, he gives birth; and the greater his desire grows, the nearer is the delivery"⁴⁴ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 207)—the birth of Benjamin, the grace of contemplation.

Self-knowledge surpasses in depth and radicality all the philosophy and science of this world; it is the condition of possibility of authentic philosophy, of the ardent desire to see, to enjoy, to taste, to savor that which, in making itself known, allows us to know ourselves; it is the longing for wisdom.

But, being so, our guide warns: “Let no one think, then, that he can penetrate into the brilliance of that divine light with arguments; let no one believe that he can comprehend this with reasonings”⁴⁵ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 209). When Benjamin is born, Rachel dies. “Raised above herself, carried away in ecstasy, all human reason succumbs before the experience of contemplating the light of divinity”⁴⁶ (Ricardo de San Víctor 2022, p. 209)—which is love; love that undoes us.

To trust in the possibility of unprovable love, of unbounded, untamable, priceless love—in the absurdity of love—is already to set out on the path to wisdom. To love without measures imposed from outside of love itself is to attain wisdom, the wisdom to which every ignorant person is called.

“Love, and do what you will.”⁴⁷ (San Agustín de Hipona 2002, p. 135)

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Notes

- ¹ “Quanta enim, putas, pax cordis est vel tranquillitas, nulla huius mundi oblectamenta concupiscere, nulla eius adversa formidare?” (C. 26).
- ² “Ubi amor, ibi oculus; libenter aspicimus, quem multum diligimus.” (C. 13).
- ³ “Vedi oltre fiammegiar l’ardente spiroD’Isidoro, di Beda e di RiccardoChe a considerar fu piú che viro.” (Paradiso, X, 130–132).
- ⁴ “Nihil recte aestimat qui se ipsum ignorat, qui conditionem suae dignitatis non pensat.” (L. I, 5).
- ⁵ “Deus summe bonus et immutabiliter bonus, sciens suam beatitudinem communicari posse et minui omnino non posse, fecit creaturam rationalem, ut eam faceret beatitudinis sue esse participem.” (L. I, C. I).
- ⁶ “Fecit autem eam ad imaginem et similitudinem suam: ad imaginem suam secundum amorem virtutis. Ad imaginem suam secundum intellectum, ad similitudinem suam secundum affectum. Sic opifex fecit Deus creaturam rationalem ad imaginem et similitudinem suam, ut per hoc quod facta esset ad imaginem Dei Deum cognosceret, et per hoc quod facta esset ad similitudinem Dei Deum diligeret, et cognoscendo et diligendo Deum possideret, et possidendo beata esset.” (L. I, C. I).
- ⁷ “Jussit autem conditor ipsius partem eius in sua simplici puritate subsistere, scilicet naturam angelicam, partem vero illius lunetis corporibus inesse, videlicet naturam humanam.” (L. I, C. I).
- ⁸ “Est qui confitetur Domino quoniam potens est, et est qui confitetur quoniam sibi bonus est, et item qui confitetur quoniam simpliciter bonus est. Primus servus est, et timet sibi; secundus mercenarius, et cupit sibi; tertius filius, et defert patri. Itaque et qui timet, et qui cupit, uterque pro se agunt. Sola quae in filio est caritas, non quaerit quae sua sunt.” (XII, 34, Inquit Epistola de caritate ad sanctos fratres cartusiae).
- ⁹ “Quamobrem puto de illa dictum: *Lex Domini immaculata, convertens animas*, quod sola videlicet sit, quae ab amore sui et mundi avertere possit animum et in Deum dirigere. Nec timor quippe, nec amor privatus convertunt animam. [...] Sit itaque servo sua lex, timor ipse quo constringitur; sit sua mercenerio cupiditas, qua et ipse arcatur, quando tentatus abstractus et intellectus. Sed harum nulla, aut sine macula est, aut animas convertere potest. Caritas vero convertit animas, quas facit et voluntarias.” (XII, 34, Inquit Epistola de caritate ad sanctos fratres cartusiae).
- ¹⁰ See Note 2.
- ¹¹ See Note 1.
- ¹² “Vulnerata charitate ego sum. Urget caritas de charitate loqui, libenter me impendo charitatis obsequio, et dulce quidem, et onmino delectabile de dilectione loqui.”
- ¹³ “Beniamin adolescentulus in mentis excessu”. (C. I).
- ¹⁴ “Audiant adolescentuli sermonem de adolescente, euigilent ad uocem Prophetarum: *Beniamin adolescentulus in mentis excessu*”, (C. I).

- 15 “τοὺς καθεύδοντας οἶμαι ὁ Ἥ. ἐργάτας εἶναι λέγει καὶ συνεργοὺς τῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ γινομένων.” (Frag. 75).
- 16 “Quis sit Benjamin iste, multi nouerunt, alii per scientiam, alii per experientiam. Qui per doctrinam nouerut audiant patienter, qui per experientiam didicerunt audiant libenter. Qui enim eum experientiae magisterio semel nosse potuit, fidantar loquor, sermo de eo, quamuis prolixus, illum satiare non poterit. Sed quis de eo digne loqui sufficiat? Est enim *speciosus forma prae* omnibus *filiis* Iacob, et Rachel generare decuit.” (C. I).
- 17 “Nichil enim hac, ut diximus, sapientia ardentius diligitur, nil dulcius possidetur. Hinc est enim quod sapientes omnes esse uolunt, pauci tamen admodum esse sapientes possunt.” (C. 1).
- 18 “Immo omnes utique iusti forte esse potuissent, si esse iusti perfecte uoluissent. Iustitiam enim perfecte amare, est iam iustum esse. Sapientiam et multum diligere potes, et ipsa carere potes.” (C. 2).
- 19 “Tam multa ergo feci, ubi non hoc erat uelle quod posse: et non faciebam, quod et incomparabili affectu amplius mihi placebat et mox, ut vellem, possem, quia mox, ut vellem, utique vellem. Ibi enim facultas ea, quae uoluntas, et ipsum uelle iam facere erat; et tamen non fiebat.” (L. VIII, C. 8, 20).
- 20 “Ego eram, qui volebam, ego, qui nolebam; ego eram. Nec plene volebam nec plene nolebam.” (L. VIII, C. 10, 22).
- 21 “Haesitans mori morti et vitae vivere, plusque in me valebat deterius inolitum quam Melius insolitum, punctumque ipsum temporis, quo aliud futurus eram, quanto propius admovebatur, tanto ampliorem acutiebatur horrorem.” (L. VIII, C. 11, 25).
- 22 “Copiam mundo ad necessitatem non respuit.” (C. 3).
- 23 “Sed ab huius mundo amatoribus quid stultius, quid laboriosius esse reputatur?” (C. 2).
- 24 “Qui sunt qui de mundo loquuntur? Attendite qui contra caritatem.” (VII, 3).
- 25 “Affectio est diuina inspiratione inflammata.” (C. 4).
- 26 “In tantum unaquaeque ancillarum dominae suae necessaria esse cognoscitur, ut sine imaginatione ratio nichil sciret, sine sensualitate affection nil saperet.” (C. 5).
- 27 “Zelpha temulenta [...] Vinum quod Zelpha sitit, gaudium est voluptatis.” (C. 6).
- 28 “Ad satiandum sensualitatis appetitum totus mundus non sufficit.” (C. 6).
- 29 “Sed garrulitate balae seu temulentia Zelphae quis nesciat, nisi forte qui seipsum ignorat.” (C. 7).
- 30 “Principales ergo affectus septem sunt, qui ab una animi affectione alternatim surgunt, Spes uidelicet et timor, gaudium et dolor, odium, amor et pudor.” (C. 8).
- 31 “Sic utique post spem natam, et per cotidiana incrementa proficientem, nascitur amor.” (C. 12).
- 32 “Id est confitens.” (C. 12).
- 33 “Absque dubio studium sapientiae si non proficit, citius deficit.” (C. 13).
- 34 “Nulli dubium quia qui potuit bona inuisibilia diligere, quin uelit statim cognoscere, et per intelligentiam uidere, et quanto plus crescit Iudas, affectus uidelicet diligendi, tanto amplius in Rachel feruet desiderium pariendi, hoc est studium cognoscendi.” (C. 14).
- 35 “Per rerum uisibilium qualitatem, surgit ad rerum inuisibilium cognitionem.” (C. 22).
- 36 “Solent enim quae per Gad et Aser fiunt hominibus miranda, abstinentiae uidelicet et patientiae opera, operantem non timidum sed tumidum reddere, non tam humilem quam contumacem efficere.” (C. 30).
- 37 “Modicum quiddam de tanto felicitatis pelago mentibus instillas, mentem tamen quam infundis plene inebrias.” (C. 37).
- 38 “Quae ueraciter exequuntur odio hominum, exercere se putant uel simulant odio uitiorum [...] Seipsos, quaeso, interrogent utrum in ueritate diligant, quos quasi instigante Zabulon tam acerbe castigant.” (C. 41).
- 39 “Si contra marina mundanae pressurae discrimina trepidat, nisi tempestatibus diu fatigatos, et tandem littoribus eiectos blande excipiat et benigne foueat.” (C. 42).
- 40 “Debet hic noster Ioseph totum interioris et exterioris hominis statum et habitum, in quantum possibile est, plene cognoscere, nec solum qualis sit, uerum etiam, qualis esse debeat, subtiliter quaerere, diligenter inuestigare.” (C. 70).
- 41 “Frustra cordis oculus erigit ad uidendum Deum, qui nondum idoneus est ad uidendum seipsum.” (C. 71).
- 42 “Exterso autem speculo et diu diligenter inspecto, incipit ei quaedam diuini luminis claritas interlucere, et immensus quidam insolitae uisionis radius oculis eius apparere.” (C. 72).
- 43 “Ex huius igitur luminis uisione quam admiratur in se, mirum in modum accenditur animus et animatur ad uidendum lumen quod est supra se.” (C. 72).
- 44 “Esperando enim concipit, desiderando parturit, et quanto amplius crescit desiderium, tanto appropinquat ad partum.” (C. 72).
- 45 “Nemo ergo se existiment ad illius diuini luminis claritatem argumentando posse penetrare; nemo se credat humana illud ratiocinatione posse comprehendere.” (C. 74).
- 46 “Ad illud nim quod, supra se eleuata, et in extasi rapta, de diuinitatis lumine conspiciat, omnis humana ratio succumbit.” (C. 73).
- 47 “Dilige, et quod vis fac.” (VII, 8).

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