

The lives of the saints often document the intensity of the feelings they held for their friends – a loving intimacy that by turns deepened their closeness to God / **By JOHN CROWLEY**

Encounters of the heart and soul

DURING MY years as Bishop of Middlesbrough, a favourite outing was across the North Yorkshire Moors to the well-preserved ruins of Rievaulx Abbey, 20 miles to the north of York. Rievaulx was the first Cistercian monastery in the north of England, founded in 1132. In 1147 Aelred, born in Hexham, the son of a married priest, was elected abbot. By the time of his death in 1167, the community numbered more than 600 monks and lay brothers, a phenomenal scale of growth.

St Aelred emerges as one of the most attractive personalities of the Middle Ages. His kindness and gentleness won many to him. He called the monastery “a school of love”, and encouraged the cultivation of true friendship among his brethren as a reflection of their friendship with and love for Christ. Traditionally, monks are warned of the dangers in forming “particular friendships”, but Aelred insisted that a monk who suppressed his natural capacity for friendship was incapable of truly loving God: “God is friendship, and he who dwells in friendship dwells in God, and God in him.”

“I call them more beasts than men,” he wrote in *Spiritual Friendship*, the best known of his books, “who say life should be led so that they need not console anyone nor occasion distress or sorrow to anyone, who take no pleasure in the good of another, nor expect their failure to distress others, seeking to love no one and be loved by none.”

In *What is the Point of Being a Christian?*, Timothy Radcliffe, a former master of the Dominican order, reflecting upon the traditional caution against “particular friendships”, writes: “St Aelred warned Religious against ‘a love that in addressing itself to all, reaches no one’. Drawing near to the mystery of love will also mean that we shall love particular people, some in friendship, some with deep affection, and maybe some more passionately.”

Down the centuries, one finds many examples of priests, Religious and other vowed celibates whose lives have been transformed by their experience of intimate friendship. It has released within them a new apostolic energy, flowing directly from this enlargement of their hearts.

St Gregory Nazianzen, the fourth-century Bishop of Constantinople, wrote of his friendship for St Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea: “As



John Henry Newman, seated, wished to be buried with Ambrose St John, left

time went on we admitted our affection to each other and acknowledged that philosophy was the common object of our ambition. From then we were all in all to each other, sharing the same roof, the same table, the same sentiments, our eyes on the one goal, as our mutual affection grew ever warmer and stronger.”

In a turbulent century, when theological disputes were threatening to sunder the Church, Gregory and Basil’s lifelong loving relationship galvanised them to do great things for God. “We seemed to have a single soul animating two bodies,” Gregory recalled. “The sole ambition of both of us was virtue, and a life so led in view of future hopes as to sever our attachment to this life before we had to depart from it ... And, if it is not too much to say it, we were for each other a rule and a scale for the discernment of good and evil.”

Like Aelred an Anglo-Saxon by birth, St Boniface spent the first half of his life as a monk in Devon but felt a growing desire to return to his family roots in order to proclaim

the Good News of Jesus Christ. Initially he preached in Frisia, but later Pope Gregory II commissioned him to return to Germany. He travelled huge distances in missionary journeys through Hesse and Thuringia. So successful was his preaching that eventually he was named Bishop and then Archbishop of Mainz. But, nearing 80, he was given permission to return to Frisia, his first mission field. There, along with a group of his companions, he was murdered on 5 June 754.

St Lioba, a distant relative of Boniface, entered the Benedictine abbey of Wimborne in Dorsetshire as a young woman. So inspired was she by Boniface that she began a correspondence with him which blossomed into deep friendship. “I send you this little gift,” she was to write to him, “not because it is worth your consideration but so that you may have something to remind you of my humble self, and so not to forget me when you are so far away; may it draw tighter the bond of true love between us forever.”

Eventually Boniface requested the abbess of Wimborne to send Lioba and a group of other nuns to help him in his mission, and to establish monastic communities for women in Germany. He provided them with a monastery in Mainz. It was only then that the two friends met face to face for the first time.

BONIFACE and Lioba gained great spiritual and emotional support from their intimate friendship, spurring them both on in their apostolic labours. Boniface, on the eve of his fatal final mission, expressed his desire that after Lioba’s death she might be buried with him “so that their bodies might await the Resurrection and be raised together in glory to meet the Lord and be forever united in the kingdom of his love”. After Boniface was martyred, Lioba made frequent visits to his tomb at the abbey of Fulda, and when she died in 780 her body was buried in the abbey church close to her soul-friend’s tomb.

Blessed Jordan of Saxony entered the Dominican order in 1220 and became St Dominic’s successor as master in 1222. Blessed Diana d’Andalo was a close friend of Dominic and made her religious profession at his hands in 1219. Four years later, two years after Dominic’s death, she established a Dominican convent for contemplative nuns in Bologna under the auspices of Jordan, with whom she had developed a warm relationship. His letters to her (alas, none of hers to him survive) are a remarkable witness to the creative power of love between two persons committed to their religious vocation. “Let it not be a heavy burden on you, beloved, that I cannot all the time be with you in the flesh, for in the spirit I am always with you in love unalloyed ... I console myself with the thought that this separation will not last forever ... soon we will be able to see each other, endlessly, in the presence of God’s Son Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever.”

In one of his last letters to Diana, written in 1236, just a year before his death, Jordan writes: “Within our hearts is the ardour of our love in the Lord, whereby you speak to

me and I to you ... [God] is the bond whereby we are always bound together; in him my spirit is fast knit with your spirit, in him you are always without ceasing present to me wherever I wander."

MANY STORIES reflect the loving bonds of friendship between St Francis and St Clare, and the trust that Francis placed in her wisdom and counsel. After his death in 1226, Clare lived on for another 27 years, and within her lifetime additional communities were established elsewhere in Italy, France and Germany. It was during those years that Clare's friendship with Agnes of Prague became a source of profound spiritual consolation and emotional support for them both.

Agnes, daughter of the king of Bohemia, renounced a glittering way of life to join the growing band of women from around Europe attracted to the path being blazed by Clare and her first companions. Their relationship deepened to such a degree that Clare, shortly before her death, began her final letter to Agnes: "To her who is the half of her soul and the special shrine of her heart's deepest love ... and, of all the others, her favourite daughter."

Clare and Agnes had been able to communicate only rarely, such were the difficulties in exchanging handwritten letters across long distances. But those few letters reflect a growing intimacy, as Clare spurs Agnes on to the heights of love "in the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ". And it was in that downward way of poverty that Clare wanted to confirm Agnes above all else. "Therefore you have cast aside your garments, that is, earthly riches, so that you might not be overcome by the one fighting against you, and that you might enter the Kingdom of Heaven through the straight path and the narrow gate."

St John Henry Newman emerges as one of the most eminent and attractive figures of the nineteenth century. His mind was nourished more by the Fathers of the early Church than by the scholastic thinkers in which most of his Catholic contemporaries were schooled. Highly sensitive, he suffered greatly from the misunderstandings that surrounded his journey into the Catholic Church. Some of his close Anglican friends felt betrayed, while in the Catholic Church he encountered a painful lack of warmth and trust. Against that background, one friendship in particular gave him comfort and support when most needed.

AMBROSE St John first encountered Newman, 15 years his senior, as an undergraduate at Oxford. He joined Newman at the chapel of Littlemore, became a Catholic about a month before Newman in October 1845, and they were ordained priests in Rome at the same time. When Newman founded the Oratory in 1848, St John was one of the first members. After St John died in 1875, Newman wrote: "I have ever thought no bereavement was equal to that of a husband's or a wife's, but I feel it difficult to believe that any can be greater, or any one's sorrow greater, than mine."

Newman paid tribute to his beloved friend on the final page of his *Apologia*, dedicated



Sixteenth-century portrait of Sts Clare and Francis of Assisi by an unknown artist

to all his Oratorian brothers but especially to "dear Ambrose St John, whom God gave me, when he took everyone else away; who are the link between my old life and my new; who have now for 21 years been so devoted to me, so patient, so zealous, so tender; who have let me lean hard upon you, who have watched me so narrowly, who have never thought of yourself, if I was in question". He directed that he himself be buried in the same grave as St John.

In 1879, at the age of 78, Newman was created a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII. It was belated recognition of his outstanding contribution to the Church and the wider world. A motto had to be chosen, and he went to a saying of St Francis de Sales which meant much to him: *Cor ad cor loquitur* (Heart

speaks to heart). For all his giftedness of intellect, Newman reached out most naturally to others through the warmth of his person-to-person relationships.

These loving friendships each speak with their own distinctive voice, but there are common features too, whether those relationships are between men, between women, or between men and women. In every instance the intimate, loving friendship they shared released a new zest and joy in their lives, which in turn led to a widening out of their capacity to love others more freely and generously. And in every case there was an overarching certainty that their love was a gift from God and led back to God.

The lives of many priests and Religious down the ages have been immensely enriched by their special friendships. Sometimes this gift of love given and received with such force will not have come without considerable challenge to their vows of celibacy. All will have had to chart an authentic way of honouring both their religious vocation and their love for each other. Within the vulnerability that such a gift of self demands, they will have come to a fresh understanding of what St John meant when he said: "God is love, and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them" (1 John 4:16).

John Crowley is Bishop Emeritus of Middlesbrough.

ONLINE EVENTS

Catholic Marriage in the 21st Century

with Ruth Gledhill, Sister Gemma Simmonds
and Dr Helen Costigane

Join our distinguished panel for a fascinating discussion on the current rules and ethics surrounding sacrament of marriage within the Catholic Church.

Tuesday 31 August: 18:00-19:00 BST

The Social Mission of the Church in a Post-Covid society

with Raymond Friel, Daisy Sbrlin,
Damian Howard SJ and Clare Watkins

Join us for a fascinating panel discussion on the supporting role that the Catholic Church must plan as we recover and rebuild after the pandemic.

Thursday 23 September: 18:00-19:00 BST

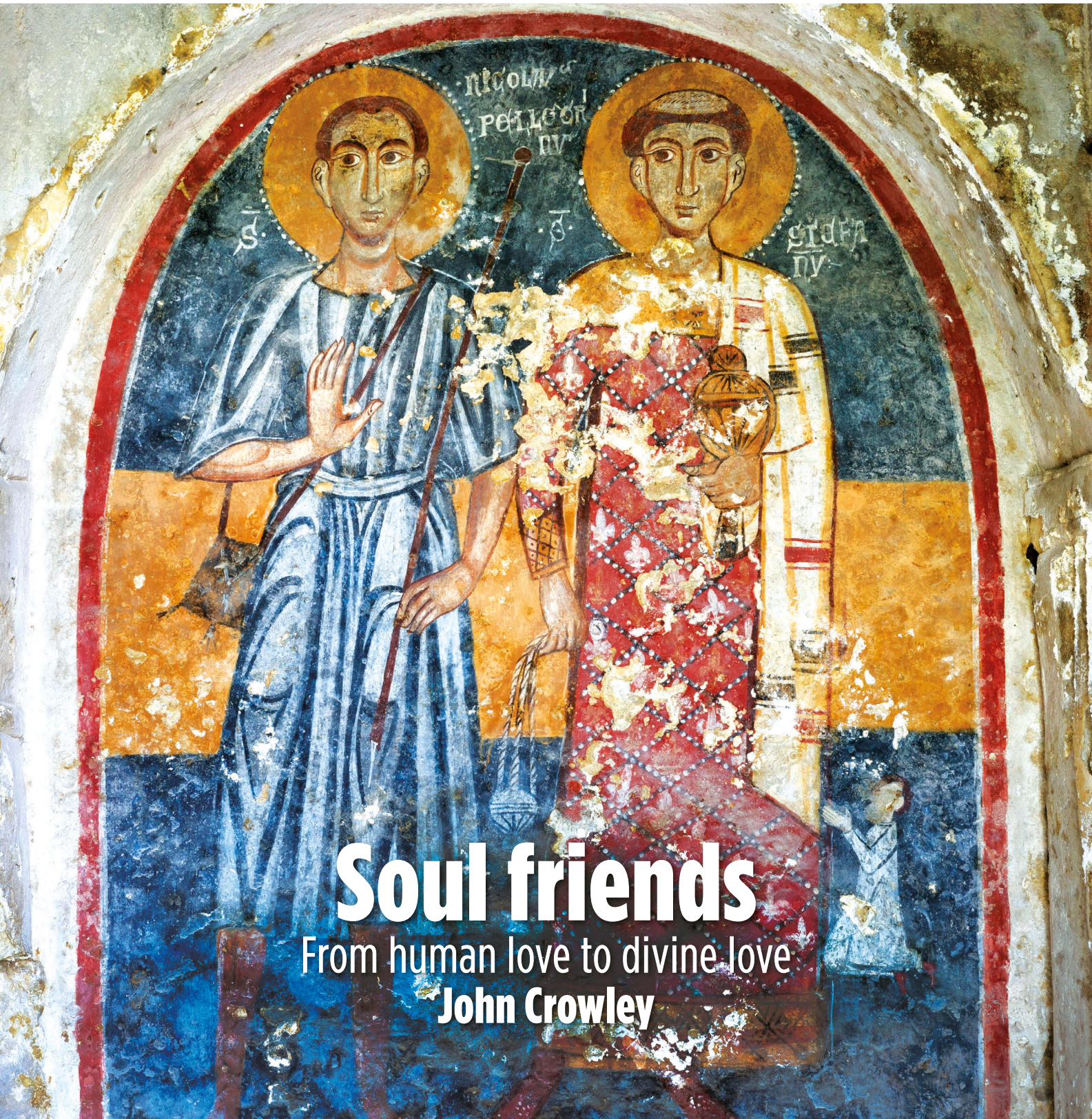
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