Anselm’s Letters to Gunhild, Daughter of King Harold

St Anselm, shortly after becoming archbishop of Canterbury on 4 December 1093, wrote to a runaway nun, begging her to return to the nunnery. When first published, the letter was headed ‘He urges a certain lady to return to the habit and intention’, i.e. to the nun’s dress and way of life which she had abandoned. (In Schmitt’s edition\(^1\) of Anselm’s works this is Letter No. 168.) Wilmart noticed that in a manuscript the letter is headed ‘To the nun Gunhild, daughter of King Harold. He urges her to return to the habit which she had abandoned.’ Wilmart also found a manuscript of a second letter to the same nun. He published it in 1928.\(^2\) (In Schmitt’s edition this is Letter No. 169.)

Before Wilmart made this discovery all we knew of Gunhild Harold’s daughter was that when she was adult and while she was living with the nuns at Wilton she began to go blind. St Wulfstan, bishop of Worcester, on a visit to the nunnery, was told about her. He thought he owed it to her father’s memory to help her, so he made the sign of the cross before her eyes and her sight was restored.\(^3\) Since Wulfstan died in 1095 he healed her before her elopement in 1093.

In Letter 168 Anselm says that he is writing because it is impossible for him to visit Gunhild. (He is in the south, e.g.

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London or Canterbury, and she is in Count Alan's castle at Richmond in Yorkshire.) In Letter No. 169 he says that Gunhild has lived at the nunnery from infancy. (Perhaps her mother died soon after her father, and the child was taken to the nunnery to be safe from Norman violence.) Anselm recalls an occasion when he had spoken face to face with Gunhild, after which she had written a letter to him assuring him that she meant to persevere in the religious life. (Southern\(^4\) suggests this was in 1086, seven years before the elopement. Perhaps the abbess had asked Anselm to interview Gunhild and make sure that she had a genuine vocation.) Anselm tells her that the pleasures of this world are vanity; her parents were king and queen, but now are worms and dust. (If her mother was a queen, she was Aldgyth of Mercia, who married Harold some time after the death of her Welsh husband Gryffith on 5 August 1063. Aldgyth certainly bore Harold a son, also called Harold.\(^5\) The editor Schmitt in a footnote says Gunhild's mother was not Queen Aldgyth but Edith Swan-neck, Harold's concubine. I think it rash to reject Anselm's statement. The abbess must have known whether Gunhild was illegitimate or a princess, and would have told Anselm before he interviewed Gunhild. If she is Aldgyth's daughter, she was aged between 26 and 29 when she eloped.) Anselm tells us that the man who ran off with her was Count Alan the Red; he had died shortly after the elopement, and Gunhild had settled down with his younger brother Count Alan the Black, heir to his vast estates. Anselm supposes that Gunhild and Alan the Red had loved each other passionately, but that Gunhild had other motives, such as disappointed ambition; she had at one time hoped to become an abbess.


In 1093 Alan the Red was in his middle fifties, and was arranging with King Malcolm of Scotland to marry Malcolm's daughter, aged about 13, who was being educated by the nuns at Wilton. According to Eleanor Searle, William Rufus forbade the match, and Count Alan consoled himself by taking Gunhild instead. His motive was not love but the hope of winning the goodwill of the Englishmen on his estates by marrying an English heiress. Southern (262) however thinks that William Rufus did not interfere. Count Alan went to the Wilton nunnery to inspect his promised bride, Malcolm's daughter; he met Gunhild there, and fell in love.

These two letters of St Anselm have not previously been translated.

Letter 168. To the nun Gunhild daughter of King Harold. Anselm urges her to return to the nun's habit which she has laid aside.

Anselm, by God's appointment archbishop of Canterbury: to his beloved sister and daughter, according to the flesh the daughter of King Harold, Gunhild, bidding her to despise the world, not Christ, and to love Christ more than the world.

If I could, I would very gladly be talking to you, sister whom I truly love in God, because the charity with which I wish everyone to be saved, and the duty laid upon me, require of me that I feel a brotherly and fatherly affection for you and through this affection feel anxious about the salvation of your soul. But since we do not have a chance of talking together, I am compelled to write, to show what I think about you and what I want you to do.

I beg you therefore not to despise the affection which I feel for you for God's sake with a view to God's honour and your salvation; I beg you not to reject my advice. For if you are willing to do as I

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I beg you not to reject my advice. For if you are willing to do as I say, be sure that in the end you will be glad of it, and there will be great joy in the presence of the angels of God over you. But if you refuse, be sure that you will be very sorry, and you will have no excuse at the stern judgement of God. Sister, I have heard that you have long worn the habit of the consecrated life. How you have cast it aside, what has happened to you, what you have done, is not hidden but too well known.

Consider therefore now, my dearest, how a man’s embrace and fleshly pleasure differ from Christ’s embrace and the pleasure of chastity and the heart’s purity. I do not mean Christ’s bodily embrace but the embraces which a soul who is his familiar friend enjoys through love and desire of him with a good conscience. Consider, I say, how great the difference is between these two pleasures. I am not now speaking of lawful marriage. Consider, I say, what purity there is in the spiritual pleasure, and what impurity in the fleshly pleasure; consider what the spiritual pleasure promises and what the fleshly pleasure threatens; what hope there is in the spiritual pleasure, what a delightful expectation of Christ, what security and consolation even in this life, what fear of God’s judgment there is in the fleshly pleasure, what confusion even in this present life. Consider what sort of act it is to despise Christ the bridegroom when he promises the kingdom of heaven as dowry, and to prefer a mortal man, giving and promising nothing except corruption and contemptible things, to prefer him to God’s son the king of kings.

Certainly that king of kings desired your beauty and wanted to have you as his lawful bride. In what way the man you know of sought your bodily beauty, my sister, how shall I say? Woman of noble birth, how am I to express it? You were chosen when a virgin as God’s bride, and assigned to God by the habit and way of life of a nun. What shall I say you are now? God knows, my daughter, I do not say this to enjoy your confusion but so that God, and with him the angels, may rejoice over your conversion and saving penitence. What then am I to say? If I do not speak, perhaps you will take no notice; if I speak, perhaps you will be angry. After being a chosen and sealed bride of God, what have you become?
Let your nobility blush to be what you blush to hear; and what I, because of your nobility and my affection, blush to say. Behold, my dearest daughter, if you set this before your gaze: what grief ought to be in your heart over your fall, so great, so heavy! For if you grieve bitterly, I am happy to share your grief; but if you do not grieve, I have nothing to be happy about, but grieve much more. For if you grieve, I still hope for your salvation; but if you do not grieve, what can I expect except your damnation?

For it is impossible that you can be saved in any way unless you return to the habit and intention which you have cast aside. For although you were not consecrated by a bishop and did not make a profession in his presence, yet this alone is a manifest and undeniable profession, that you have, publicly and in private, worn the habit of the holy intention, through which, in the sight of everyone, you have declared yourself dedicated to God, just as much as if you had made your profession. Nowadays the profession and consecration of monastic life is common, but previously many thousands of men and women, professing that intention by the habit alone, achieved its loftiness and crown. And people who in those times put on the habit without actual profession and consecration, and then cast it aside, were considered apostate. Therefore you will be without excuse if you abandon the holy intention which you have long professed by your habit and your way of life; even though you did not make the profession which now is customary and you were not consecrated by a bishop. Certainly, dearest daughter, your lord and creator and redeemer is still waiting for you; the king who 'desired your beauty', so that he should be your lawful bridegroom, still waits for you and calls you back to be his lawful bride, if not a virgin, at least chaste. For we know of many holy women who after the loss of virginity pleased God more and were more truly his familiar friends through penitence in chastity, than many other women, however holy, were in virginity.

Come back, therefore, Christian woman, come back to your heart, and consider whom you ought to choose, and to whom you ought to cleave: the one who chose you for such great honour, and choosing called you, and calling sealed you his own with bridal
habit, and who still waits for you and calls you back though despised and rejected by you; or the one through whom—to put it mildly—you have fallen from so great a height into this condition into which you see that you have fallen, especially as he now as I think despises you or will soon undoubtedly despise and desert you. I only wish you both would despise each other, so that God would not despise you both. I wish you would desert each other, so that God did not desert you. I wish you would reject each other, so that God did not cast you from his face. I wish you would turn from each other so that you might turn to God. Certainly it is much better and more honourable, both for him and for you, that you should be despised by him than that you should be kept by him, because as long as you are kept by him you will without doubt be despised by God, not to speak of him. And if, despised by him, you despise him for God’s sake, you will not be despised by God, but accepted and loved because redeemed with his own blood.

Daughter whose salvation I desire, consider the kindness of him who, despised by you, calls back the woman who despises him in order to lead you to his royal marriage-chamber, not an earthly but a heavenly one. Consider, beat your breast, grieve deeply over your fall. Cast aside and trample on the worldly clothes you have put on, and wear once more the habit of Christ’s bride, the habit which you threw away. For Christ will not recognize you or accept you, except in the habit by which he sealed you as his and by which publicly and privately you showed that you were his bride. In this habit return to his kindness. Hasten urgently into his sight. Yourself accuse your conscience, wash with tears your guilt. Beseech him without wearying, cling to him inseparably. He is merciful, he will not reject you, rather he will kindly accept you, rejoicing over your return. If you do this, there will be joy over you in heaven and on earth, and all holy angels and men will know it. But if you refuse to do this, all will be your enemies, and I and the Church of God will do what we know we ought to do in such a matter.
May almighty God visit your heart and pour into it the love of him, my dearest daughter. I beg you, tell me by letter how you take this fatherly advice of mine.

Letter 169. To the same woman.
Another exhortation to resume the habit of religious life.

Anselm, servant of the servants of Christ Jesus, called archbishop: to his dearest sister and daughter according to the spirit, a king's daughter according to the flesh: urging her to prefer incorruption to corruption, an immortal bridegroom to a mortal one, the eternal king to a lord temporal.

I still greet you and call you dearest daughter, since I do not yet despair of obtaining from you what I want, that is, that God may look upon you and visit you so that you come to your senses and return to your lord and redeemer Christ, who, for no earlier merits of yours, loved you so much that from your infancy he chose you as his bride and for this very purpose reared you until now in the habit and life of religion. Therefore, my most loved and longed for daughter, for the honour of God and your own great good, listen to the words and advice of me, your true friend. When I spoke to you before, you said you wished always to be with me, to enjoy my conversation continually (you admitted that it was sweet to you), and later you sent me the sweetest letter, in which I could recognize that you did not mean to reject the religious life, the habit of which you wore; I hoped that you would behave as you promised in accordance with God's will.

Sister and daughter, turn away your heart from beholding vanity so that it does not think truth. Reflect. What is the world's glory, what is it that you love? You were the daughter of a king and queen. Where are they? They are worms and dust. Their high position, their pleasures, their wealth, did not save them, or go with them. You loved Count Alan the Red, and he loved you. Where is he now? Where has your beloved lover come to? Go now, sister, place yourself with him in the bed in which he now lies; collect his worms in your bosom; embrace his corpse; kiss hard his naked teeth, for the lips have rotted away. Certainly
he does not now care about your love in which he delighted when alive, and you shrink from his rotted flesh which you used to long to enjoy. This is what you loved in him; and this and nothing else is what you love in his brother.

What if God took Count Alan from this life so that he should not take you from God as he intended to? Though there are other reasons for his death; but who will dare to deny that this too was a reason along with other reasons? Who will deny that in this God showed him mercy and justice; mercy, because by death God prevented him from doing the wicked thing which he wickedly intended; justice, because by the same death he punished his sacrilegious intention?

Why do you not fear that by a similar death God may on your account kill Count Alan the Black; or—which is worse—may damn him with you in eternal death if you are united to him? I wish he may be black to you, and you black to him, in respect of love, so that neither he is black to you nor you black to him in respect of damnation. For do you think that if you die in his bed or he in yours, you or he will see the lord Christ, except for the judgement of damnation? You both will do so great wrong and insult to Christ, that casting aside the dress and signs by which for many years you have shown, with everyone seeing you indoors and out of doors, that you are consecrated to him, you run into the unmentionable embraces of Count Alan; and he, drawing you to himself, steals you from Christ, or when you come to him of your own accord welcomes you; —and will Christ with a procession of angels, welcome to his embrace your soul or his, snatched from mutual embraces? Truly he will not. You are both much deceived if you expect it. You are both very blind if you do not see this. You are truly wretched if you despise this.

But if you say that you put on the habit of religion because you were promised an abbacy—as I hear some people say—and therefore, since you were not made abbess, you are under no obligation to keep the habit you put on; consider, my daughter, how you are insulting Christ. You were promised an abbacy and therefore you promised that you wanted to be his bride and would
keep faith—and you say that you will not keep this vow because Christ promises to give you himself? Is an abbacy more precious to you than Christ? Is he so cheap to you, and are the things he promises to give you so worthless? He did not think you so worthless, when he gave his life for you. Do you so completely love vanity and despise truth?

Or did you wish to deceive Christ, so that since people did not give you the promised abbacy you did not pay him your vow? Do you want to lie to God because people lie to you? He did not himself promise you an abbacy, it was men or women who did that. When they promised you the abbacy, to whom did you make your promise, to God or to men? The people who promised you an abbacy did bring it about that you promised God you would be a nun. Therefore you gave your promise to God, not to men.

God therefore says to you: 'You are my servant, created and redeemed by me; give me what you promised and have already begun. If you ought, demand from men, not from me, what they promised you. If they lie to you, what wrong have I done, that you should lie to me? I am ready to lead you as my chosen and beloved bride into the bridal-chamber of my glory and to place you over all my possessions. Did you wish to deceive me when you made me this promise? If you did so wish, be sure that you cannot give me satisfaction for this falsehood except by truly doing what you falsely promised. If you did not so wish, then do what, not deceitfully but with sincere wish, you promised.'

My beloved, understand God's providence and his love for you. When for the sake of an abbacy you promised the religious life, you desired what it is vanity to desire and you promised what it is truth to carry out. But God, whose wisdom works good out of evil and virtue out of sin, God himself permitted you to fall into this vanity in order to catch you in a noose and draw you to the truth. Not in order that while you continued in a stupid desire, vanity should with this noose draw you to an abbacy, but in order that you should reflect that you have treated God with intolerable and hateful contempt, if you refuse to keep the good vow which (in whatever way, and for a contemptible reward) you
promised ... to God, as far as with your whole heart you shrink from deserting him.

My sister, you are caught in a noose. By this noose Christ draws your soul on one side, the devil draws it on the other side. By this noose, either Christ will draw you to the heights of paradise, if you keep to the religious life; or else—which God forbid!—the devil will draw you to the depths of hell if you abandon it.

My friend in God and in true friendship on my side: may God never be so angry with you as to allow you to be united to a mortal man. If this does happen, not only will you damn yourself and that man in eternal death, but you will cause a great and detestable scandal in the church of God, and to all that hear of it you will set an example hateful to God and all his saints and good men. If so great an evil is caused by you, be sure that it would be better for you if you had not been born.

Know that I advise, pray, beg, bid, with the authority that I can and ought to use, I bid you to resume the habit of holy life which you have cast aside, and to return to the grace of God which you have despised, so that Christ may say of you to his friends and neighbours, the citizens of heaven: ‘Rejoice with me and congratulate me, for my chosen and beloved who had deserted me has come back to me’, and there may be glory to God in heaven and all the saints may rejoice over you, and on earth men of good will may give thanks. Answer your true friend and spiritual father by letter, and do not despise my advice, because it is not in your interests before God to do so.

All-powerful God cleanse your heart from all fleshly desire and fill it with the sweetness of his love, so that I may see what my heart desires for you, which is that through sanctity in this present life you may deserve the happiness of eternal life.

7 Schmitt says that the text is corrupt here and some words may be missing.
Amen.

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