

ANTHOLOGIE

Of Rancé's textes

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Introduction

Armand de Rancé's family, the Bouthillier de Rancé, was a typical exponent of the emerging legal class, *les gens de robe*, which through skillful maneuvering and patient waiting succeeded during the first twenty-five years of the seventeenth century in replacing various members of the nobility in key government positions. His grandfather Denis had transported the clan to Paris and there found his way into the good graces and patronage of influential persons, some of them his clients. Among these was the Du Plessis family, including Armand Jean du Plessis, bishop of Luçon, and the future dazzling and all-powerful Cardinal de Richelieu.

By January 9, 1626, when Armand-Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé was born, the family had already attained an enviable position at the French royal court. Armand-Jean du Plessis, Cardinal Richelieu and since 1624 first minister as well, accepted the invitation to be his godfather. Young Armand's early years were marked by family ambition and the attachment to the riches and honors good fortune had gained for them. Receiving the clerical tonsure at age nine, at eleven he succeeded to the revenues deriving from five benefices- abbeys and priories- which fell to him at the premature death of his brother François. Prior to this, he had begun to be trained for a military career. Family interests demanded that these plans be dropped, and Armand found himself forced to enter upon a path with no attraction for him. He continued his studies- with great success- at the Collège d'Harcourt, working with three instructors who enabled him to acquire a solid knowledge of Latin and Greek. One of them, Monsieur Favier, lived to an advanced age and maintained a lively correspondence with his student. The letters show that Rancé always preserved a profound veneration and affection for his teacher.

Family fortunes took a turn for the worse in 1642 with the death of Cardinal Richelieu. The ascent to almost unlimited power of his successor Mazarin promised nothing in the way of advancement for the adolescent Rancé.

In 1643, Rancé took his degree of Master of Arts. For all his declared aversion for a career in the Church he began theological studies at the Sorbonne in obedience to his father. At the same time, he maintained his old friendships and developed a lifestyle that can be summarized in one of his well-known phrases: "Preach like an angel in the morning; hunt like a devil in the afternoon." Known and respected by the inhabitants of *le grand monde*, Rancé was passionately devoted to horseback riding and worked hard at developing his horsemanship. Many of the most dramatic incidents of his youth, in fact, stem from his recklessness in riding. Once again to please his father, Rancé consented to take holy orders and was ordained to the priesthood in 1651. He became doctor of theology in 1654, first in a class in which Bossuet ranked third. These events however had no effect on his personal life. There Rancé cultivated elegance, wearing the lace ruff then in fashion, curling his hair and adorning himself with emeralds or other precious stones. He looked upon his willingness to change into dark clothing when performing acts directly related to his priestly ministry as an outstanding witness to his self-restraint.

This young priest, "rich, brilliant and intense", drew the attention of the duchess Marie de Montbazon, an attention which turned into a devoted friendship and then a love whose nature remains enigmatic to us and which came to a painful halt with her unexpected death in 1657. The Bouthillier and Montbazon families were good friends; their residences bordered on each other. These circumstances certainly contributed to the relationship which slowly grew up between the young Rancé and the duchess, fifteen years his elder. The duchess, moreover, was unhappy in her marriage. She had been married at sixteen to the sixty year old duke Hercule de Rohan de Montbazon, a notorious Don Juan, and quickly fallen into a loose and immoral way of life.

Much has been written about this relationship. Some have attempted to fathom its most personal aspects. Others, leaving historical truth aside altogether, have fallen into absurdity, composing novels and plays on the theme that are, to say the least, fantastic. A psychological interpretation has also been advanced, according to which Rancé after losing his mother at age twelve found an affective maternal substitute in this woman so much his senior. Given the centuries between ourselves and the actual events, the truth of such an hypothesis can never be verified. Rancé never mentioned this relationship in later years, except perhaps indirectly in condemning his entire past prior to his conversion.

That same year Rancé incurred the disfavor of Mazarin, an event that would have serious consequences for his future. The Boutilhier family were not favorites of the Cardinal; his uncle Claude and his cousin Léon had already suffered the effects of his displeasure. Armand Jean had been sent as a representative to the Assembly of Clergy at Paris. He went as the delegate of his uncle Victor, archbishop of Tours, who hoped to have him as his successor. Knowing the delicate nature of the relationship with Mazarin, Rancé should have acted with prudence. Yet loyal and generous by nature he defended his friend Cardinal de Retz in front of the Assembly. This time Rancé had to pay a high price for these virtues. Mazarin responded with sarcasm and Rancé was forced to retire to the family property at Véretz to wait out the situation. He had just begun what he imagined would be a solitude lasting many months when the duchess of Montbazou died. These two events, coming one after the other, radically altered Rancé's life, leading him to profound reflection and a gradual return to God.

Overwhelmed by the death of a woman he loved, "sad and melancholy", the anguished Rancé entered on a new road. It was a path that would take him far, ultimately leading him to a life of serene joy in a hitherto unknown environment. Rancé's liaison with the duchess of Montbazou, adroitly covered over though it was, had made him the talk of the Paris salons. In this atmosphere of frivolity and hypocrisy, everything was fair game for gossip, especially the lives of the up-and-coming members of notable families. The nobility liked the "handsome young court abbé" and had frequently felt themselves conquered by his brilliance. They received the news of his conversion with scepticism and a certain acrimony, doubtful of the authenticity and longevity of his conversion. The years to come would witness a tremendous growth in the number of Rancé's admirers. At the same time the hostility of the enemies he was to make would grow more and more implacable.

Rancé's change in lifestyle became increasingly radical. Enclosed in his splendid chateau, dedicated to reading, prayer and austerity in an atmosphere of solitude and recollection, Rancé lived totally removed from the former sphere of his activity. He himself affirmed: "God was not absent from my thoughts, and as I had always preserved my faith and devotion towards Him, I did not doubt that I would find Him in the need I had of Him. I even hoped that He would fill the void in my heart that would come about from the separation from creatures I intended to make. I withdrew to the countryside, troubled and confused in spirit, not knowing what would become of me..."

In this period of slow and painful rebirth, Rancé sought counsel from a famous woman convert: Mother Louise-Françoise, of the Visitation sisters in Tours. "Louison", as she was known, a woman of extraordinary beauty, had become the lover of Gaston d'Orléans through the mediation of Rancé's cousin Chavigny and given birth to a son, the count of Charny. Following her conversion, she had entered the Visitation convent at Tours where she remained until 1707, serving several terms as the community's superior. Mother Louise advised Rancé to seek spiritual assistance from the Oratorian priest, Father Séguenot. Little did the good father imagine the caliber of this new penitent who declared in all simplicity that he wanted "to belong as much to God now as he had belonged to the world."

Fr. Séguenot put Rancé's patience to the test, forbidding him to divest himself of all his possessions at once, as he desired. He likewise delayed giving Rancé the sacramental absolution that would enable him to celebrate Mass. Yet hidden in the solitude of Véretz and absorbed in prayer, the meditation of the Scriptures, the study of the Fathers and Church history and the reading of the *Imitation of Christ*, the new convert found himself gradually experiencing a new dimension of peace and tranquility.

At the suggestion of his sister, the Countess of Albon, and in order to put an end to the rumors circulating about him, Rancé agreed to come to Paris for a brief visit in the summer of 1657. He stayed with the Oratorian Fathers, where he made a general confession to Fr. Bouchard and asked Fr. Monchy to be his spiritual director.

Seeking to choose a new direction for his future, Rancé was attracted to various possibilities. He considered volunteering for the foreign missions and going to the Indies in the hope of martyrdom. He felt drawn to join a group centered around another recent convert, the Duke of Orléans, which lived in retirement from the world near the city of Boulogne. He thought of becoming a Carthusian. Before coming to a definitive decision, he took a trip during which he encountered four bishops known for their sanctity. The first three with whom he met, Monseigneur Pavillon at Alet, Monseigneur Vialart de Hersé at Chalons-sur-Marne and Monseigneur Caulet at Pamiers, all counseled him to return to the pastoral ministry, to adopt a humble life style and to renounce his different ecclesiastical revenues. Bishop Pavillon, renowned for his holy way of life, deeply affected Rancé. But the advice that most struck him - that turned him upside down- came from the fourth bishop, Monseigneur Choiseul of Comminges.

Rancé's intention had been simply to stop on the homeward journey to pay his respects to his friend the bishop and share with him the events of the trip. What he got was a completely unexpected response. After telling Rancé that in his opinion the practice of commendatory abbots was contrary to the mind of the Church, the bishop went on to say, "I myself have one such (abbey *in commendam*) in Champagne, but I will never be at peace until I renounce it, even though I have already given up all its revenues to the claustral prior...There was a time when I thought of becoming a religious and of restoring one of my abbeys to good order...As you have decided to leave the world, that is what I advise you to do." Rancé was thunderstruck: "I should take the habit?" He felt well up within him a "horrible repugnance for the habit and the monastic life" These are Rancé's very words, spoken in genuine fury. The encounter with Choiseul occurred in 1660, three years after his conversion. Opposed though he was to any idea of a monastic vocation, Rancé nonetheless began to implement the rest of the bishops' advice. One after another, he rid himself of his benefices *in commendam*, and then, after some inward struggle, sold the chateau at Véretz.

In 1662, Rancé went to visit La Trappe, not with the thought of remaining there permanently but with the intention of introducing the practice of the Strict Observance. He found the community gravely compromised financially and in a deplorable spiritual condition. The six monks who then comprised the community lived by poaching, pilfering, thieving and occasionally, murdering. Rancé was deeply grieved by the situation. He began to feel remorse for his own part in the frightful state of affairs. Later on he acknowledged that neither his father nor he himself had ever cared anything for this house of God and had simply allowed it to go to ruin. Initiating the restoration of the monastery buildings, Rancé invited the visitor of the Strict Observance, Abbé Barbéry, to assist him in the reform of the conventual life. Barbéry came to La Trappe on August 17, 1662. A concordat was signed with the religious of the community in the name of the Strict Observance at the invitation of its vicar general, the abbot of Prières. Six monks from the abbey of Perseigne were sent to the monastery to launch the renewal.

On August 20, Rancé presided at the first solemn mass in the renovated abbey church. By this point, three of the six original monks had decided to become part of the renewed La Trappe; the other three had been allotted a pension which enabled them to leave the community peacefully. With this, the community's situation became clearer and the monks urged Rancé to remain with them and become their regular abbot.

Grace finally triumphed on April 17, 1663. Rancé was participating in the chanting of the psalms at the hour of sext, when he came to the words: "He who trusts in the Lord is like Mount Sion. He cannot be overcome; he remains for ever." (Ps. 124). Deeply touched, he decided he would become a monk. He communicated the decision to the community assembled in chapter on May 30, 1663. Their response was positive and enthusiastic, and he made preparations to start his canonical novitiate at Perseigne on June 13.

Contrary to all expectations, the months at Perseigne proved extremely busy. Yet despite problems of health and the weight of various community duties entrusted to him, Rancé constantly offered a fine example of faithfulness to the Rule, the desire to undergo humiliations, penance and detachment from worldly affections. In all this his model was the fathers of ancient monasticism. As the time for his profession approached, Rancé revealed to his prior and to the vicar general of the Strict Observance his intention to reform the monastery of La Trappe, making it an absolute condition for pronouncing his vows. Nothing could more clearly demonstrate his loyalty to the cause. His request was granted and he made his vows on June 26, 1664.

Almost immediately, Rancé had to sacrifice his desire for solitude and penance. The very year of his vows, the Strict Observance abbots asked their new and illustrious colleague to undertake a service fundamental to their survival: he was named first representative of the commission called to Rome to negotiate between the two parts of the Order of Cîteaux, the Common Observance and the Strict Observance. Dom Dominique Georges, abbot of Val-Richer, accompanied him on this mission. Unfortunately, the results of the negotiations proved highly disappointing and Rancé saw his desires for the reform of the order as a whole totally frustrated. In 1666, he returned to France, and after the famous chapter of 1667 returned to La Trappe, determined to limit himself to the reform of his own monastery.

During the first years after his return, Rancé still felt a moral obligation to do all he could to have the reform of the Strict Observance adopted by the whole Order. From the year 1675, however, after numerous setbacks and the decision of the Council of State in favor of the Common Observance, he decided to break off "all contact with the world and to live hidden from everyone and for ever." Certainly the numerous friends to whom he confided his disappointment and his resolution to never leave the monastery again doubted that he would keep his word. But he did, and for the next twenty-five years he literally did not leave the enclosure except for four rapid visits to the nuns of the neighboring convent of Les Clairets, where he was father immediate. Rancé continued with the reform of La Trappe, establishing a very austere observance - too austere, in the opinion of many. Faced with the questioning, criticism and at times calumny to which they submitted his efforts, the abbot gave proof of fortitude, patience and an extraordinary spirit of faith. On three different occasions, regular visitations were made by the Order so as to evaluate the situation from the inside. What the visitors encountered was a serene spiritual atmosphere in a happy community loyally united to its abbot. According to the reports written after the visitations, the brothers lived in true fraternal charity and in a filial, joyful and trusting obedience to their abbot, who for his part unstintingly dedicated his attention and energy to his sons. None of these official interventions at all diminished the community's communion with its abbot or led to any statement by a religious that he was forced to practice austerity against his will. When he first initiated his reforms, Rancé had lacked experience as abbot, but over the

course of time he matured in his role. He allowed the Holy Spirit to work in the depths of his heart and acquired an intense grasp of spiritual fatherhood. His sons recognized this and responded with grateful affection.

It was during the first years of the reform that Rancé wrote the *Constitutions* (1671). These, together with the Rule of St. Benedict, the teachings of the ancient monastic fathers (especially John Climacus) and of St. Bernard and the other twelfth century reformers, formed the code that governed daily life at La Trappe. Among his later works, the undoubted masterpiece is *On the Holiness and Duties of the Monastic Life* (1683). Here he develops in depth his teaching on the monastic vocation, justifying all his assertions by numerous references to the monastic and Cistercian fathers. Another work which deserves particular mention is *An Account of the Life and Death of Certain Religious of La Trappe*. Begun by Rancé, the work was continued by others after his death. It constitutes a precious testimony, a genuine tribute, to the working of grace in the lives of many men who entered the monastery with the desire to permanently consecrate themselves to God. It is a book of great spiritual value that wins over the reader by putting him in touch with the splendid qualities of these extraordinary men.

The decade of 1675-85 was one of the most difficult eras. Yet as it confronted problems of every kind, La Trappe put down roots in the heart of monasticism, acquired widespread renown and received a constant flow of requests for admission. By the end of Rancé's life, the community of six had grown to almost a hundred. Drawn by the almost mythical accounts of the life, candidates of every kind asked to join the community: religious and laymen, military men and nobles, rich and poor, converted sinners and young innocents, educated professionals and humble artisans. Those who wished to enter needed to possess neither wealth nor great natural abilities, but simply a true vocation to a hidden and penitential life. Rancé was an extraordinary spiritual master who succeeded in uncovering the inner truth of each of his men and in leading him to respond with utmost fidelity to the call of God. He taught that faith, hope and love were the virtues and formed and sustained the monastic vocation and that the fraternal life, simplicity, humility and self-abandonment, practiced at every moment with renewed fervor, conquered the heart of God.

During this period, contacts between La Trappe and the outside world multiplied. To begin with there was the crowd, as one can call it without exaggeration: the four to five thousand poor and needy who knocked every year at the monastery gate looking for assistance. Besides this, there were the visitors to the monastery, many of whom came on a regular basis. For the most part these friends of the monastery were people who came to Rancé for spiritual direction. We possess an impressive record of his friendship with them in the approximately two thousand letters that survive. In this private correspondence, Rancé reveals the depths of his personality. He shows himself as a true man of God, capable of giving counsel and wise advice in all circumstances. Rancé's last years brought no fewer trials than the previous ones. In 1695, his health completely ruined, he presented his resignation. The successor he chose, Dom Zosime, was installed in December 1695, but died several months later in March 1696. Once again Rancé had to apply for royal confirmation for his candidate. This was Dom Gervaise, who entered in office in September 1696. Despite his many gifts, Gervaise did not possess the necessary qualities for governing a community like La Trappe, and had to resign in December 1698. His successor was Dom Jacques de la Court, installed as abbot on April 5, 1699. With Dom Jacques, peace was restored at La Trappe and Rancé's final months were lived out in tranquility.

He still corresponded with several of his friends, among them Bossuet and James II, but his life was drawing to a close. At the end of October, a long-term pulmonary infection suddenly worsened. From then on his health deteriorated quickly. The death agony set in on October 26, 1700. He died the following day at one thirty in the afternoon, attended by Monseigneur

d'Aquin, bishop of Séz, who left an account of his final hours. One of the last words of the beloved abbot was *Miserere*. It was the word in which he finally came to peace.

I offer this brief biographical sketch as an introduction to the texts of the anthology, convinced that such a portrait is indispensable for attaining some idea of this extraordinary figure, Armand-Jean le Bouthilier de Rancé.

A great spiritual director (as the multitude of his spiritual disciples, both religious and lay, testified), Rancé could not resist the urgings of those who asked him to put his doctrine into written form. Despite his statement that he composed *On the Holiness and Duties of the Monastic Life* solely for his monks, the reader perceives immediately that the work was intended for a much larger public. It was published for the first time in 1683 at the desire of his lifetime friend Bossuet, and enjoyed universal success.

It has seemed worthwhile to make a brief but substantial anthology from the twenty two chapters of this work, choosing those texts which would be of most interest to our own generation. Translating such texts into English inevitably presents some difficulties. Fortunately the task has been capably accomplished by Dom Bernardo Bonowitz. We heartily thank him for the successful outcome of his efforts.

I have limited this anthology to Rancé's own reflections, not reproducing his innumerable patristic citations in their entirety, but offering references to them in the footnotes.

It is my hope is that the reader will find enjoyment and spiritual profit in these texts. Chronologically far removed from us, they are nonetheless part of that timeless tradition with which Rancé ever identified himself. As he proudly declared, "The only party I have ever wished to belong to is the party of Jesus Christ."

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On the Holiness and Duties of the Monastic Life¹

Chapter One

Question One: What is meant by a true religious?

Response: A true religious is a man who, having renounced the world and all sensible and perishable objects by means of a solemn vow, lives for God alone and is concerned only with what is eternal (p. 1).

Question Two: What do you mean by the words: "having renounced the world by means of a solemn vow"?

Response: A true religious has, by means of a public declaration, authorized by the Church, renounced the affairs, occupations, goods, honors and pleasures of the world. Because of the commitment he has assumed towards God, who must henceforth be the unique object of his

¹ Subsequent references to this work will always "De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique" to the 1683 edition except when is differently pointed. Charter 1-15 from the volume one, chapter 16-22 from the volume two.

thoughts, affections and desires, he denies himself forever the enjoyment of all these things. He may no longer make use even of the necessities of life, those things which our human condition do not allow him to live without, except with reference to God and with the aim of pleasing Him (p. 2).

Question Three: How does the obligation of a religious differ from that of any other Christian who by baptism has also renounced the world?

Response: It is true that the Christian who has been buried with Jesus Christ in baptism and been given new life by this sacrament - a life founded and animated by the Spirit of this same Jesus Christ - ought to live as dead to the world, to its goods, honors, business and pleasures. But in this case, the renunciation can be effected by a certain disposition of heart. Outwardly he will be permitted to retain the use and ownership of all these things, while inwardly he will have to be so detached that he will remain poor in his very prosperity, chaste in his marital relations, moderate at his abundant table and dedicated to God in the midst of those dealings with others to which his state of life obliges him.

For the solitary, however, this is far from enough. He cannot stop there. He must detach himself from all that is sensible. Since eternity alone is his portion, it must be the sole object of all the activity of his intellect and all the motions of his heart. That which Jesus Christ presents to men in general under the form of counsels become for the religious totally binding precepts. He will only begin to truly fulfill the duties of his state when his detachment is total, when his self-denial is genuine and effective and when he succeeds in making the sentiments of his heart bear fruit in his actions. Only those who remain in the grossest ignorance of the monastic state can deny this, people who have never bothered to concern themselves with it or read what the holy fathers have to teach about it. Vessels set apart for divine service and worship cannot be used for other purposes without desecrating them. By the same token, a religious who by a special consecration has become the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit and the temple of God² must, if he is not to commit a sacrilege, keep Him constantly before his gaze and not allow himself to be distracted by visible and perishable things³

St. Basil says that, "the purity and holiness so essential to the religious state consists in attaching oneself to God in all things, and in uniting oneself inseparably to Him, the author of all holiness, at all times and in all places through a zealous desire to carry out all that is pleasing to Him"⁴ (p.3).

Question Four: What is the basis for the great detachment you require of religious?

Response: Vowed consecration means nothing else but the immolation of a perfect and total holocaust... [the fathers]⁵ could describe monastic profession as...the continual meditation on God's judgments, a crucifixion, a genuine martyrdom, a life of apostolic perfection, an angelic way of life. In this they simply wanted to say that the solitary must be insensible to all human affections, separated from all that is mortal, leading a life that is completely heavenly....As Saint Basil says, the monastic profession lifts men to the purity of the angels (p. 4) ⁶.

² 1 Corint. 6: 8.

³ Cassian, *Coll.*, 23: 8.

⁴ *Reg. Brev.*, 53.

⁵ Cassian, *Coll.*, 1: c. 13; *Instit.*, l: 1; Gregory, in *1 Reg.*, c. 14: 49; John Climacus, I^o: 4; Bernard, *Serm.* 17.

⁶ *Instit. Monachorum*, Serm. 1.

Chapter Two

The Founding of Monastic Life

Question One: What it human beings who first created and instituted the monastic way of life?

Response: No, it was Jesus Christ himself. Those men whom he raised up to institute it at the time appointed by his eternal foreknowledge were merely the ministers of his plans, the executors of his divine will (p.6).

Question Two: Where do we find in the gospel that Jesus Christ instituted the monastic life?

Response: We find it in Saint Luke, when Jesus says: “Sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come follow me”⁷. Elsewhere he says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters and his very life, he cannot be my disciple”⁸. We also find him saying in chapter nineteen of St. Matthew: “Whoever has left behind houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children or lands for love of me will receive a hundred times as much and inherit eternal life”⁹.

It cannot be doubted that Jesus Christ intended to set up within his Church a holy state of life, where he could be adored and served in complete detachment from all worldly things, in uninterrupted dedication to his divine majesty and exact and literal observance of all his counsels. It is this that is perfectly realized in the monastic state when maintained in its rigor, where its purity remains unblemished and the constancy and perseverance of the solitaries is not defeated by the envy, conspiracy and violence of the demons (p. 6-7).

Chapter Three

The Origins of the Solitary Life

Question one: Don't you think it would be helpful to us if you spoke more in depth about the origins of the monastic life and God's intentions in founding it?

Response: Given that my sole aim is your edification, and that God has imposed on me no other duty more pressing than this one, I will respond to your question, brothers, by simply telling you what I have learned from my study of the holy fathers.

⁷ Luke 18: 21.
⁸ Luke 14: 16.
⁹ Matthew 15: 29.

To begin with, you must understand that God's chief purpose in establishing a new covenant with men was to inaugurate here in this world a form of adoration worthy of His majesty, with true worshipers who would worship Him, as Jesus Christ said, in spirit and in truth. *Venit hora et nunc est, quando veri adoratores adorabunt Patrem in Spiritu et veritate* ¹⁰ - that is to say, with the purity which can only be produced by the fullness of His Spirit and the abundance of His grace.

He established a new law for Christians, whose excellence and perfection would consist above all in the disdain and renunciation of riches, pleasures and those other goods which the Jews had considered as the sole reward of their faithful observance of the Law and the one object of all their hopes. Then He raised up men after His own heart, and called them to His service, giving them the desire and strength necessary to carry out His orders. These men abandoned everything, and turning a deaf ear to all that human nature might propose in opposition to such an instantaneous and complete rupture, they left behind their possessions, their professions, their fathers and their mothers. Without a single moment's delay, they followed the Christ who called them. *Relictis retibus et patre, secuti sunt eum* ¹¹ (p.11-13).

These true worshippers were the apostles. It was they who first embraced this pure and perfect state of life. Having themselves reached the pinnacle of the tower of the Gospel (as the Scriptures put it), they succeeded in passing on the same spirit and the same detachment to almost everyone who made their submission to faith in Jesus Christ. The martyrs possessed it in an altogether preeminent degree, renouncing not only their goods, their parents, their children and their brethren, but their very lives as well : *Adhuc animam suam* ¹². For the glory and joy of confessing the name of Jesus Christ, they preferred the loss of life to all the world's allurements.

Eventually, however, as the number of Christians continued to multiply, the Church like an excessively fruitful mother, began to decline in vigor.... Nevertheless, God, wishing to maintain this perfect purity within His Church... preserved within it a number of persons filled with the spirit of the apostles. These new martyrs detached themselves from all their goods...through a death no less real, less sacred or less miraculous than that of the original ones. They withdrew to the most distant solitudes, submitting themselves to nakedness, cold, hunger, the hardships of the most inclement climates, the fury of savage beasts and the rage and envy of the demons. This they did in order to praise God, to contemplate His infinite beauties in silence of heart, the stilling of the passions and separation from all that could distract them from their meditation of things eternal.

This spirit descended upon anchorites and cenobites alike, and they filled the deserts and the monasteries....Anthony, Hilarion, Pachomius and their like gathered around them, in accord with the divine mandate, men who joined them with the intent of practicing the same perfection and of living stripped and detached (*désoccupation*) from all creatures....And all those who followed after them, and who took them as masters and teachers, were formed to the same holiness and separation from sensible realities.

If the current order of things presents an entirely different picture, this is due to the corruption and decadence of our times. In and of itself, the monastic life continues to be what it has always been. God neither alters his designs nor revokes his orders. He demands no less a degree of perfection and detachment from the religious of today than He did fourteen hundred years ago. Saint Bernard did not worry about exaggerating when he told his brothers that they had promised God to live according to apostolic perfection... It is evident that religious have the privilege

¹⁰ John 4: 23.

¹¹ Matthew. 4: 22.

¹² Luke 14: 16.

within the Church of taking the place of the martyrs and imitating the perfection of the apostles (p. 13-18).

Chapter IV

The Different Forms of Life Instituted by the First Solitaries

Despite the fact that those who have written on this question have treated it in diverse ways, it is evident that they were of one mind about it, and that all of them divided the monastic state into the two categories of anchorites and cenobites.

In his *Conferences*, Cassian distinguished between four kinds of monks. He assigned the first place to the cenobites, holding that they already existed at the time of the apostles, and that the anchorites came forth from them, as fruits take their birth from flowers, or rather, as disciples from their masters.

Thus, in his estimation, the anchorites occupy the second place. From there, he goes on to speak of certain monks who live without a rule, to whom he gives the name of sarabites. Last of all, he describes a fourth group of solitaries who began to make their appearance during this period. Motivated by a spirit of self-indulgence and independence, they deserted their monasteries, attributing to themselves the name and rank of anchorites....Saint Benedict closely follows Cassian's approach when he divides the solitaries into anchorites, cenobites, sarabites and gyrovagues....

From these catalogues we can conclude that there are some solitaries who live in monasteries under a superior and a common rule- the cenobites- and others who live alone in retirement, and who deserve the name of anchorites. As for those who retain only the outward appearance of one of these two ways of life, but possess neither their holiness nor their true identity, these disordered and corrupt monks have no right to be considered alongside authentic monks, nor to be called by that name (p. 19-20).

Question Two: Who were the solitaries known as cenobites?

....The Church has been no less strengthened and adorned by the life of the cenobites than she has by that of the anchorites, and though in and of itself the eremitic state is superior to the cenobitic, cenobites have frequently been raised to the sanctity of anchorites. The Spirit of God who breathes where it wills has called men like Anthony, Paul and Hilarion directly from the world to the desert; nonetheless, the common rule is that the cloister prepares men to be anchorites. It is through the labor, exertion, combat, mortification, obedience and the other exercises practiced in the monastery that they acquire the attitudes necessary for a holy life in the desert.

Monasteries are wonderfully fruitful fields, where these divine shoots grow, develop and reach maturity and perfection before they are transplanted to the desert. Should it be the case, however, that you are not able to hide yourself within the remotest depths of the desert, together with men like Palemon, Paphnutius and Macarius, you may still imitate, and should imitate Pachomius, Theodore, Benedict and Bernard. As we have said many times, your state of life obliges you to nothing less than to tend unremittingly to all the perfection and holiness taught by Jesus Christ.

St. Bernard was not afraid of going too far when he told his brothers that they had promised to live according to the perfection of the apostles. Is it not to you, brothers, as cenobites, that these words of St. Bernard are addressed: *Yours is a very exalted calling; higher than the heavens, equal to that of the angels. You have committed yourselves to attain not simply holiness, but the*

perfection of holiness - the very summit of this perfection. For it is for others to serve God; yours is to unite yourselves perfectly to Him. For others, it suffices to believe in God -to know, love and adore Him. You on the contrary must penetrate the depths of His wisdom and knowledge, that you may see Him in Himself and possess Him ¹³. (p.31-32)

But there is no need, brothers, to look to Palestine or the Thebaid or to seek for instruction and for models from far-off generations. We have plenty of examples here at hand. For if we consider closely what the Rule of St. Benedict prescribes for all those who make profession and the obligations it imposes, we will discover a faithful copy, an authentic reproduction of what was once practiced in the monasteries of the East. The great saint directs his rule to men whose principal activity is to do combat with their vices and passions under the standard of Jesus Christ and with the arms of an exact and unflinching obedience. He wants them to have God's judgments constantly before their eyes, mindful of the torments with which he will punish the evil deeds of the wicked and the crowns with which He will reward the faithfulness of the just....

It is his desire that the brothers live in such perfect union that neither division nor dispute will be found among them; instead, a holy emulation will make them seek to show each other, every time they meet, the marks of charity, respect and mutual deference. They should love their superior with heartfelt charity and carry out his wishes and orders as God's own. They should imitate Jesus Christ in his humiliations, degradation and sufferings, and place themselves beneath all others in an attitude of sincere humility. They should entirely separate themselves from the wisdom and behavior of worldly men and yearn unceasingly for what is eternal. Finally, by the constant exercise of piety, they should ascend to perfect charity, which casting out all fear will make them serve God on earth as the angels do in heaven: without any thought of punishment, but simply for the sake of truth and justice, the pure love they have for Jesus Christ and the happiness they feel in pleasing him.

¹³ Bernard, *Ad fratres de Monte Dei*, c. 2.

Such are the divine maxims, brothers, which have formed the various observances that spring from this one great rule as so many rivers from a single source, or rather, from a chasm of never-ending graces: the Carthusians, the Camaldolese, the Vallambrosans, the Celestines, to name a few. Among these the Cistercians have made it their fundamental duty to accept and follow in every particular the spirit of this great saint. In so doing, they have realized a monastic way of life so perfect and integral as to justify the affirmation that the only advantage the solitaries of old can claim in regard to them is that they lived before them. At a time when monastic life was becoming enfeebled, they arose and shone forth like stars in the dark of night. Without intending it, they burst upon the attention of the whole world, they robed the Church with a new holiness, they sanctified her, and through their merits and the fame of their holiness, God extended His blessings to the most savage peoples and nations ¹⁴ (p. 44-46).

Chapter Five

On the Essence and Perfection of the Cenobitic Life

Question One: What constitutes this perfection? In what does its essence consist?

Response: Given that God's intention in establishing monastic life within the Church was to place in it men who would serve Him in spirit and in truth and offer Him a cult that was totally pure, holy and free from all attachment to sensible things, we must agree, brothers, that the solitary's first and chief obligation is to dedicate himself to God in tranquility and inward silence, to mediate His law unceasingly, to maintain a complete detachment from anything that might distract him and, by faithfully carrying out His will and His counsels, to raise himself by constant attention and attentiveness to the perfection for which God has destined him.

This is God's aim in setting up the monastic state, and it is this therefore that is most essential, the central point to which all the regulations, all the pious practices and all the penitential exercises should be directed. Fasting, vigils, manual labor, silence, separation from society, and the acceptance of celibacy, poverty and the yoke of obedience: all these are undertaken so as to obtain from God that holiness which is the origin, the foundation and the goal of the religious life (p51-52).

¹⁴ Quoted in this chapter: Gregory of Nazianz, Ephrem, Bernard, John Climacus, The life of Marie of Egipt, Augustine, Guillaume of St. Thierry.

When Saint Bernard marks out the distinct activities in which religious in monasteries may engage, he does not admit any except those which aim directly at God, focus on Him and take Him as their one true object. *Consideremus, fratres, quemadmodum in hac domo nostra tria haec distribuerit ordinatio charitatis, Martha administrationem, Mariae contemplationem, Lazari poenitentiam* 15. Whether they spend their days weeping and sighing like Lazarus, or imitate by their service the charitable concern of Martha or choose as their part the contemplation of Mary, all can claim with the prophet, "*Oculi mei semper ad Dominum*", since they think only of Jesus Christ and have eyes for him alone....After all, Lazarus applies himself to Christ's judgments, Martha attends to his needs and Mary, on fire with sacred love, longs with ceasing for his infinite beauties.

So sure are these truths, brothers, that there is no need to recur to an authority in order to prove them. No religious should be ignorant of the fact that the life of religion is entirely spiritual, and that its whole purpose in God's design and in the design of those enlightened by Him is the sanctification of those He calls to it. *Haec est voluntas Dei, sanctificatio vestra* 16. If He calls them apart, it is to purify them...to make them completely pure and holy. He hides them from the world so as to hide the world from them; He conceals them in the secret of His face so as to dedicate them totally to Himself, placing beneath a veil, so to speak, all the persons and objects from which He has withdrawn them. And so, the world is no less crucified to them than they to the world, and they live henceforth for Him alone, with no other sentiment, action or thought than to say to Him, along with the holy Apostle: My God, You are my life, and my death I consider my good fortune: *Mihi vivere Christus est, et mori lucrum* 17. Thus, my brothers, the whole cenobitic way of life, consists in looking towards God and constantly aiming at Him. That is its core and its essence and all its other obligations tend to it as to their goal (p.54-55).

Question II: Must we believe that for religious the evangelical counsels have the status of binding precepts?

This notion is so well-established and based on such solid grounds that there is no reason to call it into question.

The text of the Gospel, which contains nothing but the instructions given to men by Jesus Christ, falls into two subdivisions: precepts and counsels. Although Christ proposed the counsels to all Christians, and not only the precepts, not all Christians are equally bound to carry them out. It is sufficient for the ordinary Christian to carry out the commandments as the wholly necessary and indispensable means of attaining his salvation.

Those men however who desire to attain to a more excellent and perfect life embrace the counsels and put them into practice. In fact, the difference between the two groups is that those in the first group are content to lead an ordinary life, submitting themselves to the commandments and carrying them out, while those in the second raise themselves to a life of perfection, through the fidelity with which they live out the counsels.

15 Sermo 3, *De Assumptione*.

16 I Thess., 4: 3.

17 Philip. 1: 2.

This distinction was introduced by Jesus Christ himself, who taught it to us in his own words. For having said to the rich man of the Scriptures, “If you wish to be saved, keep the commandments”, and learned that the man was already keeping them, he went on to say, “If you would be perfect, sell all you have, give to the poor and come follow me”¹⁸. In other words: “You have carried out the commandments; you have done well. But to be perfect, you must practice the counsels. Renounce the goods of earth, as I have, and the anxieties and entanglements that inevitably accompany them, and live in the way you observe that I live.” This is what the apostle means when he says, *Ambulare sicut ipse ambulavit* ¹⁹. To love what Christ loved, abstain from the things he abstained from, esteem what he esteemed, to be chaste as he was, poor as he was, obedient as he was, submissive to all as he was, to suffer ill treatment as he did, to be humble as he was, to flee from honors and advancement, to pray, watch, fast, labor as he did - in a word, to practice the counsels he gave to men, which we cannot fail to see that he himself practiced, as the Scriptures testify, *Coepit Jesus facere et docere* ²⁰. Once this truth is established as certain, we cannot deny that those whose by their state of life have promised God to strive to become perfect and to aim at evangelical perfection are obliged to follow the counsels and have assumed a binding obligation to put them into practice. For according to the teaching given by Jesus Christ, to aim at perfection and to follow the counsels are one and the same thing. To prove to you brothers that the counsels are obligatory for religious, it therefore suffices to demonstrate that these are bound by their state of life to aim at perfection.... To the rich man of whom we were just speaking, Jesus Christ said that if he wished to be perfect, he should sell all his goods and follow him. Isn't it exactly this that the religious does when he makes profession? By his vow of poverty, he renounces the goods of earth. He follows Jesus Christ by the engagement he takes on to live in chastity, obedience and all the virtues that flow from them. He embraces a way of life filled with acts of piety, religious exercises, prayers, mortifications, renunciations, humiliations and all kinds of other practices which cannot be interpreted otherwise than as an exact imitation of the conduct of Jesus Christ. He follows Christ, and as Christ himself said, to follow him is to aim at perfection. And he carries out the evangelical counsels, and these, in consequence of his vow, take on for him the character of precepts. (“De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique” ed. 1701, p. 70-74)

Question IV: Explain to us what we need to know about the three vows, starting with chastity

It is beyond doubt, brothers, that Jesus Christ requires of those who bind themselves to him by the sacred vows of religion a purity corresponding to such an exalted degree of intimacy. Within the marriages contracted by the children of men, physical chastity can perhaps be considered as sufficient. But He who infinitely surpasses in beauty the children of men wishes to find in the souls of those who have espoused themselves to him a purity worthy of his own. To these, more than to other men, the words of the Holy Spirit are addressed: *Sancti estote, quoniam Ego sanctus sum*²¹... You see, in fact, that the bridegroom of the Canticle desires that the bride's beauty be perfect and completed. His heart is so attuned to everything about her that a single glance that betrays indifference, a single hair out of place, is enough to wound him profoundly: *Vulnerasti cor meum in uno oculorum tuorum, et in uno crine colli tui*, just as he cannot abide to see in her the least stain or fault: *Tota pulchra es amica mea et macula non est in te*. He calls her beautiful two times to show us that she ought to have a twofold beauty, that her purity of soul should be no

¹⁸ Matthew. 19: 21.

¹⁹ I John 2: 6.

²⁰ Acts 1: 1.

²¹ Lev. 11: 44; I Peter. 1: 16.

less entire than her bodily chastity....Do you think that such a soul becomes more pleasing to him by being free of gross impurity, if it is not exempt from pride, vainglory, anger and envy? Don't we see that the foolish virgins, in spite of having kept themselves chaste, were expelled from the bridal chamber and treated as wantons?

Thus, brothers, the chastity to which a religious is bound implies nothing less than an irreproachable conversion... As [the monk] dedicates himself completely to Christ, it is Christ who must fill the whole capacity of his heart (pp. 57-59).

Saint Cyprian had the same idea when he gave the name of "foolish virgins" to souls who fancy themselves to have a solid piety on account of their corporal chastity, when their heart is corrupted by avarice, pride, envy and slander (p. 63).

Saint John Chrysostom gave abundant witness of this truth when he affirmed that a virgin who is preoccupied with the things of this world does not deserve to be counted among the virgins. To have the right to bear such a glorious name, it is not enough to renounce marriage. Chastity of soul is likewise indispensable to profess oneself a virgin....The five virgins whose lamps went out were virgins physically, but were not pure in spirit. Untainted by carnal intercourse with men, they were defiled by the love of riches. Their bodies, no doubt, were pure, but their souls were filled with adulteries - with a thousand evil thoughts, in a ceaseless cycle of avarice, tightfistedness towards the poor, envy, sloth, oblivion, pride - in short, with all the spiritual and interior vices capable of destroying the venerable state of Christian virginity. After all, what good is virginity when united to the harshness of a heart within pity? (pp. 64-65)

Such is the thinking of the saints with regard to religious chastity, what their exalted notion of God's majesty led them to express. They could not believe that a creature...who had been united to Jesus Christ in the quality of spouse could assume any other obligation whatsoever...except that of purity, purity of heart and in the outward senses...could be allowed, as St. Augustine 22 says, to love in a common way Him by whose mercy it had ceased to love what it might have legitimately loved before...(pp. 67-68)

I will not speak to you of continence or chastity of the senses. You are well aware of its requirements....Simply remember, brothers, that it is the foundation of the whole edifice and that if it falls, everything collapses with it...Even though there is no fall whatsoever from which the hand of God cannot raise us up, and even though as long as we have the opportunity to repent for our sins, we have the opportunity to obtain pardon for them, nevertheless, a cure of this type is so rare that it might be said that anyone who failed to keep fidelity with so holy an obligation would not be able to shed sufficient tears to blot out his offence. (p.70-71)

Question V: What you have said concerning chastity seems to do such just God's holiness and the nobility of our vocation that we cannot think that there is anything else to say on the subject. Now, what is the idea we should have of religious poverty?

The saints considered poverty to be the riches of the solitary....Those who take the same step as the apostles and renounce the goods to be found here below are the ones who possess a true abundance....The hope of future blessings fills and absorbs them to such an extent that they lose the sense and awareness of present things....A state of mind so sublime can only be acquired as the

22 Augustine *Liber de Virginitate*, c.55

result of a total dispossession. Anyone who wishes to arrive at this blessed state must strip himself of everything without exception, beginning with the renunciation of himself.

No creature, nothing that is perishable, may occupy the least space of his heart. He must follow Jesus Christ with such perfect detachment that he can say, together with the great martyr: *Jam Christi incipio esse discipulus, nihil eorum quae sunt in mundo desiderans* 23 (p. 72-73).

He should have no other motive for this renouncement except to give himself integrally and unreservedly to God, and to serve Him in profound peace....(p. 73)

Believe me, brothers: A religious will never find rest in his reclusion if he does not abandon himself completely to the only One from whom he may hope to obtain it. Unless he looks on all the privations and sufferings that befall him - hunger, thirst, cold, heat, illness, the decisions of his superiors, the bad temper of his brothers- as the dispositions of God's providence, he will live out his days as an embittered man (p. 75).

From such ideas and affirmations, brothers, you will have to conclude that religious poverty goes beyond a simple cutting back of external goods and wealth. Just as chastity, it withdraws the heart from all things visible and invisible that are not eternal. It deprives us of everything and leaves us only God- God and those things which can lead to the possession of his kingdom.

Perhaps you will say, brothers, that I am proposing a state of perfection. I admit it. But then, to whom else should I propose it if not for those whom God has destined for perfection? To whom else should I propose the ideal of sanctity if not to saints -to monks, I mean, since after all it was for this end that God raised them up in His Church, that they might be saints, carrying on the life of the apostles and taking the place once held by the martyrs. Is it possible that those whose life is meant to literally reproduce the life of Jesus Christ are not bound to live in accord with his teachings and counsels as well as with his precepts? And yet, while this perfection is implicit in the vow of poverty and essential to it, it itself has a beginning stage, a growth and a consummation, so that whereas all religious are bound to tend to this renunciation, all are not obliged to perfectly attain it. All have the indispensable duty to make continual efforts to raise themselves to this level, and yet God, who desires to encounter this disposition in all those who consecrate themselves to Him by the vow of poverty and dispenses none from it, does not require that all possess it in such an excellent way. He is content if they show a sincere and efficacious good will, if they are not negligent and if they faithfully make use of the means and practices prescribed by the Rule for attaining this perfection (pp. 84-85).

Question VII: Now that you have spoken about chastity and poverty, we ask you to say something about obedience.

The great majority of men, brothers, have no truer or more precise notion of obedience than they have of religious chastity or poverty. They speak of it in a way so different than that employed by the saints in their teachings that it would seem that they are as determined to make religious independent as the saints are to render them dependent (p. 87).

It would be impossible for us, brothers, to sufficiently bewail the misfortune of our times and our own misery, seeing that the very virtue which once hallowed the deserts...has been banished from monasteries, and to such an extent that only a few traces of it can be found even in the strictest and most observant communities.

Even there obedience is lived so hesitatingly and so differently than the reality which the saints intended to express by the term that it would seem that those who practice it do so merely to

23 Ignatius, *Ep. Ad Rm.*

prevent its name from being lost and its memory from falling into oblivion. Please God that its memory persist to put us to shame and keep our unfaithfulness ever before our sight. May the remembrance of it produce a salutary sorrow and fear whenever we find ourselves straying from the path of our fathers and deprived of such a powerful and efficacious means, wherein more than any place else the essence, the glory and the security of our profession are to be found.

The essence, I say, because it is obedience, when perfect, that gives form to the religious and establishes him within his state. By it, he consecrates himself and offers himself in immolation to God. It is the coup de grace of that blessed death which makes him cease to live the life of the world and to henceforth live the life of Jesus Christ. "*Vivo ego jam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus*"²⁴. I call it glory, because a religious can have no other glory than that of Jesus Christ. Since he cannot honor Christ or magnify his holy name in any better way than by obedience, there is no other way by which he can more greatly increase his own glory. "*Melior oboedientia quam victima*"²⁵ He accomplishes much less and renders much less homage to God in offering up thousands of sacrificial victims than he does when he sacrifices his self-will by vowing obedience and practicing it in action (pp. 99-100).

It is precisely this that makes for the holy tranquility and blessed peace (*repos*) found in the solitude of the cloister. Since all the passions are destroyed or dominated by obedience, since their roots are cut and their water sources removed, nothing remains that could provoke unrest or stir up a storm. There the peace is profound and Jesus Christ, who is the king of peace and whose delights to encounter it, sets up his kingdom there, governs there, preserves good order there and holds all things in an unchanging harmony and concord. (pp. 101-102).

24 Gal. 1: 10.

25 I Kings 15: 23.

With prayers and unceasing groans, let us ask Jesus Christ to revive in his Church the spirit of his servants and his saints. May he give a fatherly heart to those who are pastors, stirring up the charity and vigilance within them, so that they put aside every other activity and dedicate themselves uniquely to watching over the conduct of those Divine Providence has entrusted to their care. As for us, brothers, may he lead us into this renunciation and self-denial and fill us with that trust, simplicity and heartfelt docility without which obedience is nothing more than enforced submission, surveillance under guards, outward deference on a purely human level... I have no doubt that if you perceived with perfect clarity that there is nothing in religious life, be it so sublime or exalted, that is not contained in chastity, poverty and obedience, you would assume (take on) these three virtues in the full scope of perfection given to them by the saints...Scripture teaches us the same when it says...that chastity was of no use to the foolish virgins, and that the poverty of a man who has given all his goods to the poor will not benefit him when not joined to charity and other inseparable virtues. So too it offers us the obedience of Jesus Christ as the model for our obedience, saying: *Descendi de coelo, non ut faciam voluntatem meam, sed voluntatem eius qui misit me* ²⁶ *Humiliavit seipsum factus oboediens usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis* ²⁷ - an obedience marked by the breadth and perfection attributed to them by the saints, and without which it is unworthy of its name. If the extent of your duties dismays you, brothers, if you have ever found yourself declaring with the Psalmist, “Lord, how great the extent of your commandments”, then arm yourself with holy resolve, stir up your faith, arouse your zeal, set to work, strive mightily. Those who desire perfection and work to attain it have already reached it. Console yourselves with the promise of Saint Augustine: God will have regard for your efforts and make up in his mercy for whatever defects he finds in the path on which you have set out and in the work you have begun. Simply go forward, do not lose courage, and if your last day overtakes you before you have won the victory, at least may it find you with your weapons in your hand ²⁸ (pp. 103-106).

Chapter VI

On the Principal Means by which Religious can Attain the Perfection of their State

God’s wisdom and mercy are infinite. In all the different circumstances he has prepared and to which he has called his chosen ones, he has ordered everything for their sanctification and supplied all the necessary means for fulfilling the duties of their state....

Since for those whom God has destined and called to it, religious life has the character of a commandment, here too he does not fail to provide them with all the appropriate helps....

Thus, religious will demonstrate sufficient zeal and faithfulness in carrying out their duties according to all the particulars of their Rule and its full import when they observe all that has been prescribed for them:

To be fervent in the love of God.

To look on the superior as their father, trusting in him completely, the superior for his part considering them and loving them as his children.

To be punctual in showing their brothers the charity due to them.

To be assiduous in prayer.

To love lowliness of spirit.

²⁶ John 6: 38.

²⁷ Philip. 2: 3.

²⁸ Quoted in this chapter: Cassian, Basil, Jerome, Gregory the great, Denis, John Climacus, Benedict, Thomas, Ephrem, John Chrisostomus, Augustine, Fulgente, Syncretica, Bernard

To keep before them the thought of death.
 To have God's judgments present to their minds,
 And a holy and salutary compunction of heart.
 To live in solitude,
 In silence,
 In austerity of life and mortification of the senses,
 In manual labor,
 In vigils,
 In strict poverty.
 And to bear illness with an attitude worthy of the holiness of their state (107-108).

Chapter VII On the Love of God

Question One: What is the basis and origin of the first of these abovementioned duties, that of loving God?

Just as to love God is the first and more binding of all the divine precepts, so is our obligation to carry it out the clearest and most evident....It could be said that if the heavens and all that the universe contains speak to us incessantly of his majesty and glory, they also tell us of our obligation to love Him...Our love towards God, brothers, arises in the same way as our adoration, if love and adoration can be considered distinct activities.His sovereign majesty is the basis of the adoration we offer Him, and his infinite goodness the stimulus of the love men owe Him....(pp. 113-114).

.....My brothers, I wish you to direct your attention to yourselves. Examine your own conscience, reflect devoutly and attentively on all that God has done for you, both in the order of grace and of nature. Consider that under His shadow, He protects you from an almost infinite number of invisible enemies, that He preserves you from a thousand mishaps which threaten you, that it is He, as the prophet says, who pardons all your sins, heals your frailties and illnesses and delivers your life from the power of death. He fills you with good things and with the marks of His favor. He satisfies all your desires, renews your youth like an eagle's, defends you from those who would harm you and showers down his mercies upon you....So then, you will no longer acknowledge any other duty or precept but that of loving Him, nor find any other consolation except to pour out your heart before Him. There will not be enough time nor enough ways to show Him the signs of your gratitude. Like the prophet, you will cry out in unending transports: *Bless the Lord, my soul; let all within me glorify his holy name. Never forget his graces and his blessings* 29 (pp. 114-115).

This obligation, already so clearly expressed in the Old Testament, also appears in the New, so strongly highlighted that Saint Augustine can say that the New Law commands one thing alone: to love. *Lex nova nihil nisi amorem jubet*. Without doubt, nothing is more conspicuous in all the words of Jesus Christ in every instant of his life and death, and in the instructions we have received from his apostles. We sense throughout that all-important affirmation which Jesus Christ explicitly made to mankind when he said: "I have come in order to bring to earth the fire of

29 SI 102.

perfect divine charity; how could I desire anything except that this fire blaze up?" *Ignem veni mittere in terram, et quid volo, nisi ut accendatur?* ³⁰ (pp.120-121).

³⁰ Luke. 12: 49.

What God revealed through the words of His Son, He succeeded in teaching us through his Son's earthly mission³¹.... We can no longer question how much we ought to love him, as we cannot be unaware that an infinite grace deserves and demands an infinite gratitude. Gratitude is a disposition of justice and charity...a sentiment of the heart that adjusts and proportions itself according to the nature of the kindness shown, the greatness of the favor, and the dignity of the person who confers it. Since in this case, there is nothing but what is infinite - the gift is Jesus Christ himself *Filius datus est nobis*³² and we come to receive it through the charity of the Father *Propter nimiam charitatem suam qua dilexit nos, et cum essemus mortui peccatis, convivificavit nos in Christo*³³ -our gratitude, in order to be commensurate, must be infinite. Should however this be impossible, as man limited in his nature is likewise limited in his sentiments and dispositions, let it at least be accepted that he owes to God his Benefactor all the gratitude of which he is capable, and is obliged to love him with all his heart, all his strength and all his might. We see this very thing in all the circumstances of the birth of Jesus Christ, in the course of all his human life and above all in his passion, that it was a martyrdom of charity as well as a martyrdom of blood, and that charity alone was the cause of his martyrdom: *Cum dilexit suos qui erant in mundo, in finem dilexit eos*³⁴ When the Church wishes to stir up the love and piety of her children by reminding them of all the graces divine mercy has shown them, she can find no more moving climax with which to conclude her account than that grace which is the culmination and fulfillment of all the others. Directing herself to God, she cries out in a transport of emotion, *Ut servum redimeret, Filium tradidit*³⁵. (To ransom a slave, He gave up his Son). And Saint John, in his first epistle, speaks of nothing but charity and love. "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in deed and truth." "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (pp. 122-123).

After this, it should no longer be necessary to ask about the way we should love God. The reflections we have offered speak for themselves. If they are not so long as some others, it is because here we are speaking the language of the heart. To understand this language, it is necessary to have a heart and the majority of human beings do not have one. The saints, however, those who have received the heart and the new spirit God promises us through the prophet: *Dabo vobis cor novum et spiritum novum ponam in medio vestri*³⁶ ... are possessed of these truths (p. 124).

Saint John Climacus says that divine love never flags, never pauses in its course and gives no rest to anyone who pierced by its shafts is carried off by a holy and blessed inebriation.... The same saint says that a mother experiences less pleasure in holding her child on her lap and breastfeeding him than a child of divine love (for so we can call him) experiences in being always united to God and held in his Father's arms. Whoever loves truly keeps the image of his beloved ever before his eyes, contemplating it with such great joy that sleep cannot distract him from the object of his affection which he sees even in his dreams. The same holds true in the spiritual realm. Thus the bride of the Son of Songs speaks these admirable words, when wounded by the dart of divine

³¹ John 10: 16.

³² Is. 9: 6

³³ Eph. 2: 4. 5.

³⁴ John 15: 1

³⁵ See, Exultet

³⁶ Ez. 36: 26

love: “ I sleep by the compulsion of nature, but my heart remains awake because of the greatness of my love”³⁷. (pp. 130-131)

Question II: Tell us in detail how we should understand this precept of loving God and what we must do to carry it out

....My brothers, do not think that we can fulfill this commandment by mere outward obedience, by observing the law, by pious exercises and a literal conformity to the precepts, however strict, when our practice does not spring from the heart of God as from its source, when it is not motivated by his love and when it does not return to him as to its goal. Do not imagine that you can satisfy this obligation by the exactitude with which you observe all the regulations and the faithfulness you demonstrate in fasting, vigils, manual labor, mortification, silence and the other austerities. Love of God is a wholly inward disposition and while it expresses itself in your works and manifests itself through your outward actions, its dwelling place is the heart of one who truly loves. Love is an affection of the heart and where there is no surrender of the heart, there is no genuine love (pp. 132-133).

Thus, brothers, if you desire to fulfill the precept *Diliges Dominum*, love God as children love their father, unite yourself to Him by the striving and desire of your heart and admit nothing there but what is conducive to the glory of his name. Insofar as human weakness and inconstancy allow, make him the sole, or at least the chief, object of all your thoughts and the motive of all your words and actions. Neglect nothing He has prescribed for you, whether in His gospel or your Rule. In the efforts you make to obey His will, have no other purpose but to please Him. Keep Him before your eyes, as the apostle commands, even in the necessary activities of everyday. Make sure to unite your heart to deeds and your spirit of obedience to a obedience literally accomplished. In this way you will preserve yourselves from the blindness of those who imagine they love God and say they do, but who meanwhile excuse themselves from carrying out his precepts and offer no visible sign of their love. You will also avoid the opposite pitfall, that of those who multiply their works and punctiliously fulfill the duties of a wholly external piety, who make the obligation to love God consist in the attainment of a purely legalistic justice and do not recognize that this justice must proceed from a movement of the heart (pp. 137-138).

³⁷ Song of Songs 5: 2.

To sum up: Use your poverty, your solitude, your silence, your austerity and all the other gifts you have received from Jesus Christ as means to turn all your actions so pure and holy that each of them becomes in God's eyes a sacrifice of deathless praise for all the mercies he has shown you
38 (pp. 140).

Chapter Eight

On Love and Confidence Towards Our Superiors

Question I: Is it necessary to have complete confidence in the superiors?

The superior is the chief of the community, the head of a body of which the brothers form the various members and parts. Within a human body, it falls to the head to govern and direct, to guide all motion and action, and to be the origin and principle of all that takes place, since everything depends on it. Similarly, in a well-ordered community, everything should be accomplished by the superior's orders and in obedience to him.... (151-152)

This was the thinking of St. Benedict when he declared that in the monastery the superior should hold the place and exercise the functions of Jesus Christ....

A type of government so encompassing and absolute necessitates a perfect knowledge by the superior of the persons in his charge. Lacking this, the authority entrusted to him to establish and maintain good order will produce nothing but trouble and confusion. If he does not have the light he needs, he cannot act with prudence. He will have only his imagination and his conjectures to guide him and will be like a blind man who does everything by chance or a physician responsible for the treatment and cure of the sick but with no knowledge of his patients' illnesses or constitutions.

Let us take for granted, then, what is completely obvious, that to direct his brothers the superior has to have a complete knowledge of them. From this it follows that they will have to be entirely open with him, since without that there is no way for him to understand them... Unless the brothers strive to show him the depths of their heart, to reveal all its inner movements and to lay bare its inmost recesses - all of this the fruit of a perfect confidence in him - his knowledge will never go beyond the conjectural and doubtful.

38 Quoted in this chapter Basil, John Chrysostomus, Macarius, Augustine, Fulgentius, Paulinus, Bernard.

As the preservation of a monastic community depends on nothing more than this, and nothing contributes more greatly to that unity of spirit which gives a community all its truth, its beauty, and its continuity, the holy monks of old recommended it more zealously than anything else. Superiors instructed their disciples in it with special emphasis, and the disciples practiced it with the greatest exactitude and faithfulness possible... We read in Cassian³⁹ that in order to raise solitaries to the perfection of true humility, they were told never to conceal any of the thoughts that stirred in their hearts, out of a false sense of shame, but rather to reveal them to the superior the moment they arose. Likewise, they should never rest with their own judgment, but consider a matter to be good or bad according to the discernment of the superior(pp. 151-155).

Question II: What qualities does a superior need to enable the brothers to trust in him completely?

When a superior thoroughly comprehends the holiness of his state of life, possesses its authentic principles, observes the rule exactly, has love for the brethren, manifested through the care and effort with which he labors for their salvation, and conducts himself so edifyingly within the monastery that the extraordinary words of St. Benedict - "He is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery"⁴⁰ - can be applied to him, then the religious should believe him in all things, place themselves in his hands and entrust themselves to him unquestioningly and unreservedly. If however through ineptitude, negligence, low esteem for his profession or disordered conduct he gives grounds for suspicions and legitimate doubts concerning his governance, the brothers have to exercise more caution and reserve and watch over their ways with their own eyes....Nevertheless, he must be obeyed as Jesus Christ himself when he speaks in Christ's name, setting forth Christ's truths and his will, and his character and person must always be respected in word and deed, even if it is necessary to diverge from his attitudes (pp. 158-159).

Question III: Would it not be sufficient for the brothers to open themselves confidently to another religious than their superior?

As the care of souls has been given to superiors and it is they who must direct the community, the brothers should address themselves to them in all their necessities and manifest complete confidence towards them. This ordinance cannot be changed without creating grave difficulties....(p.159)

We should also note that the community is a body that maintains itself through the bonds (*liaisons*) between the members and the intimate connection each one has with the head. However it would be almost impossible to preserve this harmony and unity in its integrity if the brothers ceased to be directed by the superior and sought out some other guidance. The diversity of orientations would make it almost impossible to avoid a divergence of hearts and minds(p. 160).

.....Concerning the superior: As submission always demands virtue and it is difficult for our nature to accept authority, subjects are prone to withdraw themselves from being known or directed by the superior. Instead, they seek opportunities to open themselves to their brothers and confide in those they regard as equals. The more they grow accustomed to these interchanges which confirm them in their own inclinations and their autonomy, the more repugnant the idea of conversing with their superior. They avoid their superiors and close themselves off completely from them. Avoiding all contact with the superiors, they irrevocably lose the attitude of friendship and respect they should have towards them. They are like streams which empty

³⁹ Cassian *Instit.*: l. 4, c. 5

⁴⁰ R.B.: c. 3.

themselves into any opening they encounter. Have deserted their natural course, they never return to it (pp. 161-162).

Question IV: Must we believe that people who give direction within religious communities in place of the superior violate the order established by God?

There are two ways in which a state of affairs may be within the plan of God. The first is when it has been established by his decision and the direct action of his Holy Spirit, the second when it has been instituted merely with his permission, as something he tolerates. The superior of a monastery is first in rank. He holds the place of Jesus Christ, set there by Christ himself and in accordance with his will. As for those who under the authority of the superior direct souls and hear confessions, in some cases they fulfill such functions due to a lack of docility on the part of certain brethren who fail in the respect and confidence towards the superior which are due him and cannot adapt themselves to his guidance. The orientations of such directors must be relegated to second place. It is only as a concession to the weak, the imperfect and the disgruntled that they have been appointed, because of the hardness of heart on the part of some... (pp. 163-164)

Others with the title of priors, ancients or presidents carry out the care of souls in monasteries governed by abbots as we find in the early monastic rules. Here it is neither indocility or refractoriness on the part of the brethren that accounts for this arrangement. The superior appoints them to assist him in his functions insofar as certain genuine and holy responsibilities and unavoidable limitations prevent him from dedicating himself at every moment to the needs of each of the brethren. He chooses from their number someone distinguished for piety and purity of life and delegates to him some of his authority and his pastoral charge, to help him to encourage (*consoler*) them, watch over them and take action in pressing cases when he himself is impeded from doing so. As this person shares not only in the mission and authority of the abbot but also in his vision, thinking and orientation and renders a detailed account of the brothers' interior state, down to their most fleeting thoughts, a total trust is maintained without any weakening of unity. This subordinate authority leaves the primary and chief authority wholly intact. The superior, kept informed of everything, continues to determine what he deems necessary for the cure of the brothers' diseases, the quieting of their temptations and the liberation from the evil thoughts which may assail them. In short, he orders everything and the community is governed solely by his decisions. You will of course note, brothers, that we are not referring here to the secret of sacramental confession which must remain inviolable. (pp. 164-165).

.... St. Bernard says nothing that goes against the principles we regularly present to you. He wishes- just as we have already said- that we refuse obedience to superiors when they order anything that would weaken or contradict the rules but that we submit when a superior dispenses from these rules for a just cause, the dictates of charity or genuine necessity. Here we have St. Bernard's very thinking on the subject (pp. 177-178).

Question VII: What are these "dictates of charity and genuine necessities" that accord with the Rule?

Saint Benedict has bequeathed a rule to us, brothers, as discreet as it is holy. His intention was that it should be austere and at the same time that it not be lacking in discretion. So well did he observe due measure that there has never been in the Church of God apart from what was practiced by the first desert solitaires) a holier or more exacting rule and yet as a loving father he

has not failed to take into account the needs, fragility and weaknesses of his children.... (p.178)
With the dedication and vigilance of a true pastor, he [the superior] must order and dispose everything for both the encouragement and the sanctification of the souls Jesus Christ has placed under his guidance ⁴¹. (p. 179)

Chapter X

The love religious should have for one another

Question I: What should religious do to manifest their charity to their brothers?

Next to the commandment of loving God, the most important is that of loving our brothers. It was by this sign that Jesus Christ said that people would distinguish between those who were his disciples and those who were not: *In hoc cognoscent omnes quia discipuli mei estis, si dilectionem habueritis ad invicem* ⁴². As solitaries should be first among his disciples- not first in rank and dignity but in piety and devotion - they must excel in their charity. Moreover, your brothers are more greatly loved by God, more favored with his blessings, more men after his own heart than those he has allowed to remain in worldly society and therefore they have more of Jesus Christ within them. His outlook and attitudes show themselves more clearly in them; the mark and imprint of his holiness is more visible in them. Consequently, they are more worthy of your love and respect.

Wishing to offer us a true notion of the charity that should exist in the cloister, St. Basil says: “The religious state is a wholly spiritual way of life, the profession of a indissoluble and indestructible communion. The solitaries are joined to each other in a spiritual covenant in the Holy Spirit, who is mediator and witness of of their bond. The union among them should be much more intimate than that which exists among the members of the human body”⁴³ (pp. 245-246)

.....The means available for showing charity towards the brethren come down to a few basic practices: first of all, to prayer, and then to the those signs of kindness, affection and deference permitted by the regular life of the monastery (pp. 246-247).

First of all, as their charity is restricted in its scope and cannot radiate outwards through the manifold good works to which devout people in the world customarily devote themselves, it must be all the more ardent and intense, so that they may accomplish within the peace of the cloister what they are not allowed to realize in the midst of society.... All the concern and holy affection they feel for each other must be directed to seeking each other’s solid profit and true good....They must achieve by action what they cannot express verbally and demonstrate by example what they do not have the freedom to say...The very sight of the brethren should be a source of support and consolation for each of them...(pp. 247-248)

⁴¹ Quoted in this charter: Regula Magistri, Basile, bernard,

⁴² John 13:35.

⁴³ Const. Mon. 21

True religious are bound together by such close and pressing ties that it seems that in them the words of Jesus Christ are perfectly fulfilled: *Claritatem quam dedisti mihi, dedi eis, ut sint unum*⁴⁴ As St. Basil says, they have but a single spirit, a single heart, a single will, and, we can add, a single occupation: to serve Jesus Christ and to fight without respite against the enemies of his Name and his glory⁴⁵. They are engaged in the same labors and exposed to the same dangers in the same war. Each one is at the same time the object of his brother's constant observation and the witness of his brother's action. The slackness and frailty of one is enough to cause a general weakening and heavy losses; the constancy and faithfulness of one suffices to give strength and encouragement to many. Therefore they must offer a united and unyielding defence. Let them offer a helping hand to each other, the strong supporting the weak, the steadfast animating the wavering, so that all of them, united in the same undertaking and with equal fervor...can win the same victory and receive the same crown....(pp. 248-249)

Question Two: Is it a Grave Fault to Fail to Give Good Example to the Brothers?

.....My brothers, reflect on the fact that solitaries are vessels of election and that God has set them within his house to give it luster and ornament and be its foremost beauty. He has established them for the edification of his Church, so that despite the corruption of the world his truths and principles remain visible in the purity of their behavior and their innocence of life. Because of this, a religious cannot occupy an intermediate space between good and evil or oscillate between praise and blame. Once he ceases to build up, he begins to tear down, entering into God's plan by halves, which is not at all what God wants...(pp. 250-251)

Question III: Is it also obligatory to pray to God for our brothers?

You would have to be completely unaware of the necessity and usefulness of prayer, what it can do and the role it plays in your own sanctification to be ignorant of your responsibility to pray to God for the sanctification of your brothers....You have to sympathize with all your brothers' needs, let yourself be touched by the different states of soul and moods in which they find themselves, weep over their miseries before God, pray to Him in union with them and think of yourselves as a single body of which you are all the parts and members (p. 254).

We see that it was thus that the apostles and disciples prayed after the Ascension of Jesus Christ, as it is written: "They all persevered in prayer in one spirit, together with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers", showing in this way the unity and fervor of their prayer. God has called to dwell in one house men who have but one spirit and he will only receive them into his heavenly dwelling places if they are also one in the same prayer (pp. 255-256).

Brothers, you are with each other day and night, in your spiritual exercises, your observances, your tasks, and you have nothing that belongs to you, nothing to call your own - nothing that is not the common property of the brothers. All this indicates the kind of unity of will, heart and mind that there should be. But, believe me, this unity will never be either true or since unless it enters into your prayers and you are just as eager to offer your brothers to Jesus Christ as you are to offer yourselves. So don't imagine that prayer for your brothers does not amount to more than something advisable, some type of minor commandment. Realize that it is the apostle addresses when he says: "How can you love God, whom you do not see, if you do not come to

⁴⁴ John 17: 22.

⁴⁵ *Constit. Monast.*: c. 18.

love your brothers whom you have constantly before you?"⁴⁶ Yet it is certain that you have no love for them at all if you deny them one of the most fundamental expressions of love you are able to offer them (pp. 256-257).

Question IV: How should we carry out the remaining obligations of charity towards our brothers?

We should not fail to join to prayer and good example certain outward services which act as the bonds that keep our hearts and wills united. By means of these, we preserve the charity that should exist between the brothers and convincing them of our love for them we bring them to love us as well. By example, the brothers instruct and edify each other; by prayer, they strengthen and sustain each other; by outward signs of charity, they are joined together and confirmed in the unity of a single body. Without this, a monastic community is a mere heap of diverse limbs and members, with no mutual connection, ties or genuine empathy (257).

⁴⁶ I John 4: 19.

You should therefore show your brothers all the possible signs of a completely pure and heartfelt affection, letting no opportunity slip to let them know that you love them. *Charitatem fraternitatis casto impendant amore* 47. Those assigned to the service of the community should carry out their functions so carefully, exactly and diligently that their goodness of heart will be manifest in their actions. When they are charged with the care of the sick, they must see Christ in them, Christ who wishes to undergo in the person of the ill what he did not suffer in his own and who makes up for what is still lacking to the perfection of his sufferings by the weakness, pain and other inconveniences of the illnesses he sends them. *Infirmorum cura ante omnia, et super omnia adhibenda est, ut sicut re vera Christus, ita eis serviatur*. This must be the conviction and attitude they have as they attend the sick with all possible zeal, bearing with them in all their infirmities corporal or spiritual (should they happen to have them) as they wish Jesus Christ to bear with them.

Yet, if Jesus Christ is found in the sick and enfeebled among the brethren, he is no less present in those who aid them and devote themselves to taking care of them...so that all of them should have for each other an equal measure of respect, charity and esteem. If one group counts itself privileged in being able to serve their brothers, the others should think themselves unworthy of such service.

As for those religious who are not engaged in such employments and lack the opportunity to offer their brothers these signs of their love, they ought to live in perfect and stable harmony, one that is never disturbed. Each one should regard his brother as his superior, never opposing his brother's ideas, ready at every moment to leave his own will to do that of his brother, anticipating him with all respect and deference...To lighten his brother's load, he will take on himself the heaviest burdens and even desire to be regarded as blameworthy in order that his brother appear innocent. To sum up, as St. Basil puts it, he should be sensitive to all the fortunate and unfortunate things that befall him, and find his sorrow or his joy in the different states of soul he perceives his brother to be experiencing. (pp.257-259)

Question V: Is there no exception to what you have just said: should older religious really show this obedience to younger ones?

Answer: Brothers, have no doubt as to whether they should do so or whether this obligation is universal. Charity is the bond and the foundation of monastic communities. It brings them into being, it holds them together, it makes the brothers live according to God's plan in mutual understanding and holy concord and enables them to bear the yoke of the Lord together- *humero uno*- with one mind, one heart and one will. The conviction they should cultivate that mutual deference and submission is what best preserves this charity and keeps it safe from disturbance or deterioration should serve as a powerful motivation to express these attitudes outwardly and to lose no occasion to obey one another promptly and to the full.

All those whom God's call has established in the monastery through the same vows and under the same rule should be convinced of this, and these persons...should establish among themselves an obedience so complete, all-embracing and heartfelt that at the least manifestation of a desire on the part of one of them, they hasten to obey as unhesitatingly as if it were a question of carrying out the order of a superior. This practice should be observed to such a degree that the seniors will submit with pleasure to the younger and finding themselves unhampered by the consideration of their age or the number of years of their profession (pp. 260-261).

47 R.B. c.: 72

Question VI: Doesn't this opinion contradict somewhat the Rule of St. Benedict?

To those who reflect superficially on this directive and do not take the time to understand its basis or intention, it can seem contradictory to several passages of the Rule where it is affirmed, "The seniors should love the juniors and the juniors honor and obey the seniors in all charity and solicitude"⁴⁸ However, you should be aware that this difficulty is easily resolved (p. 261)... Saint Benedict did not express the full extent of religious perfection in the letter of the Rule...(p. 263)

It is certainly a fine and praiseworthy state of affairs when things are so well disposed in a religious community that everything is subject to the superior's orders, where the seniors love the juniors and the juniors obey them. But the degree of perfection is much more noteworthy when the seniors themselves, *effecti parvuli* ⁴⁹, defer to their juniors, teaching them through their humility that nothing is more great in persons consecrated to God by the vows of religion than docility and obedience (p.263).

....Saint Benedict orients and directs those who would live a more perfect life than that established by him in the Rule to adopt the way of life of the holy fathers who preceded him, and in particular as found in the Institutes of St. Basil.... (265)

We read in the account left to us by St. Basil, to which we have already made reference in speaking of the way the solitaries of his time conducted themselves within their monasteries, that the brothers demonstrated towards one another an equal and reciprocal charity, deference and submission, without making exceptions of account of age or seniority. Cenobites are both the servants and the masters of each other, says the holy doctor, and thus preserve an unconquerable liberty. They manifest to each other the signs of an absolute submission, not forced to do so by some necessity, misfortune or compulsion (such servitude always produces suffering for those who have to endure it) but as the consequence of an utterly free choice, filled with joy. Charity makes free persons submit themselves to one another while retaining their liberty, since they act thus by their own free choice (p. 265).

Hardly any worse abuse has made its way into monasteries than exemptions and privileges claimed and demanded by senior monks. The longevity of their profession has become a justification for removing themselves from a position of dependence, and for dispensing themselves from the submission and regular observance to which others are obliged. They talk themselves into believing that they have the right to question everything, judge everything and criticize everything.

As a result it could be said that there are as many superiors in the monastery as there are senior monks. Such a situation eliminates piety, spoils discipline and throws everything into disorder and a scandalous confusion. To block all entry into the cloisters of something so harmful nothing is more effective than that the ancients lose sight, sentiment and if possible memory of their seniority. They should live with their brothers on a footing of complete equality, fully conscious that all such privileges are dangerous (p. 267).

....If anyone says that this kind of submission goes against the law of nature, does he not know that on many occasions the law of grace abolishes the law of nature? It snatches children away from their parents' bosom, it divides husbands and wives, it sets young superiors over old men

48 R.B.: c. 63: 71.

49 Matthew 18: 3.

and sometimes places parents under the governance of their children. In short: Is such an exemption desirable? Will it be possible to find reasons to support it, if it was said of Jesus Christ, *Et erat subditus illis*” ? (p. 268-269)

....The fear that this deference will cause young religious to exalt themselves and imagine that they owe less submission to their elders has no basis. The very opposite is true: The elders' example will make them more fervent and conscientious (exacts) in obedience. The more humility they see in them, the more worthy of respect they will think them and the greater the efforts they will make to express it. They will perform all sorts of favors without being asked and will respond promptly and exactly to the least hints the seniors give. If anything is capable of instilling in them a love and esteem for obedience, it is to see older religious give up the exemptions they might claim on the grounds of their age and the seniority of their profession in order to merit the privileges and blessings that accrue from obeying. (p. 269).

Question VII: What are the means by which we can fulfill all these duties?

Answer: Fundamentally, there are two. The first consists in observing the precept of the Rule of St. Benedict: *Omnibus se inferiorem ac viliorem, non solum sua lingua pronuntiet, sed etiam intimo cordis credat affectu, humilians se* ⁵⁰ ... The religious who has come to see his nothingness, who regards himself as an unproductive member of the community, who applies to himself with sincerity of heart the words of the prophet, *Ego sum vermis et non homo, opprobrium hominum et abiectio plebis*⁵¹, will consider himself his brothers' inferior in all things, think himself unworthy of their company and find no difficulty in paying them the charity, respect, submission and deference owed to them and to which he is committed by his profession.

The second consists in guarding that strict silence with the brothers which the Rule of St. Benedict lays down for you. It is the irritation and hard feeling arising out of conversations that accounts for the lack of courtesy, charity and respect among monks. They create divisions among themselves because of the disparity of their thinking, they form familiarity or friendships that have nothing beyond the human and are the destruction of a true and holy charity or they talk over together the shortcomings of their brothers and so come to look down on them and are no longer capable of esteeming them....

In this whole matter, what is most important, brothers, is that Jesus Christ be your goal and your intention. May you have no other desire than to obey him and please him, and as St. Gregory ⁵² says, may the love you have for your brothers be drawn from the heart of God as from its source (pp. 270-272).

Question IX: Tell us if it is never permitted to love one brother more than the rest

Answer: To give you the clarification you desire, let me say first that friendship between the brothers can be considered in terms of outward signs or in terms of the attitude and feeling of the heart. As regards outward signs, they should be the same towards all. They should all live together in equal kindness, courtesy, patience and thoughtfulness. The same zeal, readiness and placidity should appear whenever the occasion arises to render each other some service or assistance....

As regards the sentiment of the heart, there is no question that it need be and ought to be unequal, in accord with the different degrees of virtue and holiness that are found in different

⁵⁰ R.B. c. 7.

⁵¹ Psalm 21: 7.

⁵² In Job 1: 7, c. 10.

persons Who ever has more of these is more lovable and deserves to be loved more. It is the nature of the good to attract, and there is in virtue a beauty and goodness that make it deserving of love, an attractiveness worthy of producing a response in those who perceive it....

.....When they saints said that we must love everyone with the same charity, their intention was that we must desire the same good for all, wishing that God make all of them equally happy and grant them eternal life and the possession of his kingdom. It is incumbent on us to desire this for the perfect and the imperfect, for those still enslaved by the passions and for those who have been freed from them. However this does not impede us from experiencing distinct reactions towards the brothers, and being more affected by the greater piety of some than by the lesser piety of others. While it is true that God makes his sun to rise on all men equally, he nonetheless loves and favors certain men more than others. Jesus Christ himself, perfect model and sure rule whom we ought to follow in everything, carried all his disciples in his heart, and yet placed Peter and John ahead of the others....

All this having been said, you must recognize that only the superior has the right to manifest by outward signs the differences that exist in his affection towards the brothers. He needs to adapt his behavior towards each of them in accord to what he judges is useful and will make them advance along the way of salvation. He should encourage the devotion of those who are progressing with greater zeal and fidelity, showing them at those times and occasions he considers opportune the testimony of the friendship he feels for them. The lazy and the negligent he should punish, by showing himself more severe with them. In regard to all of them, he should modify his conduct in the way he finds most suitable to educate them and to win them for Jesus Christ.... Even when he bestows on those under his authority the marks of affections which their zeal, their docility and their obedience have won for them, let him do it with so much wisdom and prudence that nothing can be noted in his conduct that is unworthy of a minister of Jesus Christ (“De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique” ed. 1701, pp. 343-349)

Chapter XI

On Prayer

Question I: How should we conduct ourselves in prayer?

Answer: In the opinion of the holy Fathers, prayer is the entire strength and power of solitaries. By means of it, they hold out against the attacks of their enemies and overcome them. By means of it, they remain in God’s presence, implore his mercy, and obtain those helps and those graces without which they could never tirelessly raise themselves to the perfection to which he has destined them. Thus, the solitary who neglects his prayer is neglecting to show care for his salvation. He abandons the strongest and most powerful instrument God has given him for his maintenance and his defence. He is an athlete who throws away his weapons in the midst of the combat. Of such a one, there is nothing else to be said, except that his defeat seems assured (p.273).

Brothers, remind yourselves to put into practice this teaching of the Holy Spirit: *Oportet semper orare et non deficere* ⁵³. Make a particular effort to purify yourselves by means of prayer. Count its observance as the first of your duties and let nothing impede you from fulfilling such an important obligation, enjoined in such a way. Yet take care that your prayer is not a matter of dry

⁵³ Luke: 18: 1

speculation, devoid of that élan which is all its merit and its strength....Do not think that prayer is a mere effort of the intellect, a series of spiritual reflections or a discourse on some pious theme. Do not resemble people who imagine that they have prayed well because they have meditated in front of the altar on certain Christian truths and been careful to follow the preferred rules and methods of those who write on these subjects. Let your prayer be the speech and the cry of your heart, let it spring from your heart's inner feelings and express its affections and intense desires. Or rather, let the Holy Spirit form it in your heart through his divine action, opening the mouth of your inward self, loosening your tongue and placing words upon your lips. For nothing but that which he expresses is worthy of God's majesty or deserves to be heard by him.

Do therefore everything you can to let your prayer be enkindled by that sacred fire of which the prophet speaks when he says, *Concaluit cor meum intra me, et in meditatione mea exardescit ignis* 54. Cast out all coldness, distraction, halfheartedness, and laziness, and never come before God in prayer except with the entire intention and attention of your soul, so that your prayer may be in accord not only with the greatness of the One to whom you pray but with the excellence and purity of your state of life (état) as well. Be certain that all lukewarmness is unsuitable for those who have promised God to lead a completely pure and perfect life (pp. 275-276).

My brothers, if you have the obligation to direct yourselves frequently to God in prayer, you also have the obligation to make due preparation for such a holy act. The same Holy Spirit who commands that you be faithful and constant in prayer- *Non impediatis orare semper* - commands you to take the necessary steps to prepare yourselves: *Ante orationem prepara animam tuam et noli esse quasi homo qui tentat Deum* 55

Saint Basil instructs us that "as we begin our prayer" we must "abandon ourselves, our wives and our children. We must leave earth behind and raise ourselves to heaven, separating ourselves from all created things, both visible and invisible...We must attain to a state in which our conscience has nothing to reprove us for 56 ."

"When we are about to place ourselves in the presence of God in order to converse with him," says St. John Climacus, "we should not begin without having previously prepared ourselves well.... Make use of the continual prayer of the heart to prepare yourself for that other kind of prayer, whether outward or inward, in which you come before God's presence to offer him your petitions and your prayers. In so acting, you will make great progress in a very short time" 57 (pp. 276-278).

It is easily perceptible in these affirmations, brethren, that there are two chief preparations for prayer, the first more remote and general, the second proximate and specific. The first consists in correcting our behavior, regulating our actions, living a holy life, taking care to act in all matters for the love of God and eliminating from our conduct everything which is not according to his plan and might displease him. The second requires that during the time marked out for prayer we distance ourselves from all visible things and deny to our senses, our imagination, our memory, our reason and our heart the consideration of all that is not God. The actions we are commanded to perform at other moments are not permitted at this time. We are to keep God alone before our eyes, and he himself, without any mediation, is to wholly absorb us.

Through this twofold preparation a solitary can attain the two conditions referred to by Cassian. These are essential to prayer, they are the source of all its power and it is due to them that our prayer is received by God as a sacrifice of pleasing aroma (pp. 279-280).

54 Psalm 38: 4.

55 Sirach 18: 22. 23.

56 *Constit. Monast.*: c. 1.

57 *The holy ladder* 28^o: 7.

Question II: What is meant by these “two conditions”?

Answer: I consider them to be purity of heart and fervor. The saints regarded these two conditions as so necessary to prayer that they preferred them to all others. As they understood it, it is these conditions that lift men to the throne of God and that encounter such a favorable reception with God that he can refuse nothing to whoever approaches him with these dispositions. For this reason St. Augustine said that prayer which is holy and prayer pierces the heavens and never returns without having obtained the object of its request: *Oratio si pura est, si casta fuerit, coelos penetrat, vacua non redibit*. In another place it is said that “when prayer is pure its efficacy is great. It is like a faithful emissary who carries out what is commanded.... We read that the primitive Egyptian monks offered prayers that were very frequent and yet brief, so that being less subject to distractions, they could more easily retain their purity and fervor”(pp. 280-281).

St. Benedict mandates that prayer be pure and fervent and desires that it be brief when offered in community. His fear is that on account of the human spirit’s weakness and instability something might occur to diminish the purity of such a holy action.(p. 281)

Brothers, you are aware that prayer is a holy intimacy, a sacred union of man with God. You know that it is then that God bestows himself on the souls he loves, conversing with them in secret and speaking with them heart to heart. These are the times that he overwhelms them with his favors, holds nothing back from them and, pouring out on them the indescribable manifestations of his love and good pleasure, delights in making them experience in themselves the fulfillment of the prophet’s words, *Delicia mea esse cum filiis hominum* 58. Of an encounter as intimate as this, he wishes no third party present as witness. He desires that all creatures withdraw and yield their place to him; he desires to be completely alone in those he favors with such tender and delicate proofs of his infinite goodness. And anything that he sees or comes upon beside himself displeases and annoys him. “Remain alone”, says St. Bernard 59 to souls that are dear to God. “Don’t you know the extent of your spouse’s modesty and how he will never make himself present to you in the presence of others?”

This purity, brethren, is proposed to all Christians but most especially to solitaries. If God has withdrawn them from the midst of the world and led them into solitude, it is so that finding them perfectly desengaged and detached from creatures, he may consummate their purification, fill the void of their mind and heart and establish there, in this present world, as in a true heaven a kingdom of blessing and of glory.

The second precondition of prayer, fervor, is no less necessary or important than the first. It is in fact inseparable from the first, since no prayer is pure unless it is fervent.

The reason we don’t pray fervently is that our souls are weighed down by thoughts, worries and attachments to creatures. They stifle the holy activity without which it is impossible for our souls to ascend. Involved in earthly concerns they cannot direct themselves to the things of heaven and even if they try to concentrate on them, they only succeed in a weak, distracted and anemic manner.

Brothers, if you want your prayer to be fervent, purify your heart. Let it have within it no occupation, care or intention that is unworthy of God. Let it neither accept or retain anything that does not allow it to come before the holy and terrible majesty of God. Weed it out of like noxious growths anything not planted there by his hand.

And thus prayer will be formed in your inward self (sein) and come forth as something alive and ardent. In a person so emancipated and so perfectly free, prayer will encounter no obstacle

58 *Prov.* 8: 31.

59 *Song the Songs* Serm. 40.

along its way to deflect it or weaken it. Heaven will look favorably upon it; the cloud spoken of by the prophet will not impede it or keep it from reaching the throne of Him whom it seeks; once there, the holy angels, your guardians and defenders, will be sure to present it as a sacrifice of praise, an oblation of blessing.

Above all else, brothers, be convinced that halfheartedness mars our prayer. It robs it of all its power, its graciousness and its merit. Whoever prays in a spirit of indifference, that is, without fervor, testifies that he has no hope of obtaining from God that which he requests.

To these two conditions, the holy fathers added a third: compunction of heart. Certainly it can be considered as an effect of prayer and a necessary consequence. For it cannot be that those united to God by an intensely pure and fervent prayer - that is, by an abundant gratitude and love - should fail to be pierced by grievous suffering when they reflect that this divine Goodness so worthy of love daily suffers (outrage) from men and perceive that they themselves are among the ones who have the misfortune to displease and offend him.

When they consider this numberless multitude of persons, they cannot hold back their tears. They behold some of them wage war against God openly, publicly engaging in excess and evildoing, and others proceeding more circumspectly yet with the same ingratitude and effrontery. It is certain, my brothers, that souls who enjoy the love and favor of Jesus Christ cannot see without being plunged into the greatest bitterness and affection that the precious blood which he poured out for the redemption of the whole world benefits so small a number of persons and that the world which continues in being solely by the merits of his death lives as if it did not know him and totally unmindful of his sufferings (pp. 282-285).

This is a sentiment which should exist in all his disciples, in all those consumed with a holy zeal for the glory of his name, yet it is so characteristic of monks that it may be considered their distinguishing mark. Grieving is their profession and ceaseless lamentation their state of life. Their whole existence is nothing but a sacrifice of tears constantly offered to God for the sins of the world as well as for their own offences. It is they who are prefigured by the men who mourned over the chosen people's abominations and whom the prophet signed with the letter of mercy in accord with the divine commandment: "Inscribe the letter Tau, says the Holy Spirit, on the forehead of those who mourn and grieve over the abominations committed in the midst of Jerusalem" ⁶⁰.

This is why the monks of old desired solitudes to offer all their prayers with heartfelt compunction. They were to insert it in all the aspects of their lives and in all their spiritual exercises, taking special care to purify their prayer with the water of their tears. (pp. 285-286).

Such are the three conditions that ought to accompany the solitary's prayer, the three dispositions God asks of him. Through this sacred triad of purity, fervor and compunction his prayer will attain its (agrément), its dignity and its efficacy. As a matter of fact, these advantages are linked to solitude. They are fruits that spring up only in the desert; the world is utterly unable to produce them. Monks gather these riches in separation from the world; they retain them and increase them by tranquility and silence.

Do not believe, my brothers, that when God declared through the prophet that he would transform the arid wastes into pools and make fountains gush forth in desert places and the jonquil and reed flourish in what had been the lair of dragons that by this he wanted to display his ordinary way of dealing with souls....

On the contrary, it is when he says that thorns and thistles cannot produce figs or grapes that he reveals to us the normal course of events and the general laws that he observes: that purity

⁶⁰ Ezech. 9: 4. 6.

cannot be found in corruption nor the love of Jesus Christ where what dominates is the love of the world, and that the spirit of penitence and compunction is not to be looked for in the midst of the world's tumult and dissipation (pp. 287-289).

Question III: Are we to believe that people in the world cannot offer prayers that are pure and pleasing to God?

Answer: Many people in the world make long prayers but few of them actually pray. Doubtless people in the world can offer pure and holy prayers to God if he has called them to that vocation, or if, starting out there by their own volition, they have afterwards mended their ways and returned to living under his authority and at his disposal. Walking faithfully in his presence, in the fear and love of God, they live in the world but are no longer of it, and possess neither its spirit, its principles or its works. As for the rest who, rather than practicing detachment and obeying the apostolic teaching intended for all Christians to not conform themselves to the men of the present age, give themselves up to pleasure, or obligations, or business, they must be counted among the people described by St. Gregory: They make long prayers but their conduct is as different as possible from the conduct of people of prayer. By their actions they drive far from themselves the heavenly goods they apparently desire in their prayers.... In short, brothers, when someone who prays does not become the better for it, when the degree of his observance gives no grounds to trust in the truthfulness of his prayer, we must believe that his prayer is nothing but illusion and the consequence of his deluded imagination (pp. 289-291).

Question IV: Sum up in a few words what you have just said about prayer, in order to help us practice it.

Answer: Before anything else, brothers, as we have already said, govern your conduct according to God's designs and that perfect piety to which you know yourselves bound by your profession. When you come before God in prayer, expel from his temple whatever does not belong there or is unworthy of such a sublime activity, in imitation of Jesus Christ who would not tolerate anything unholy in his house set apart as it was for prayer. That is to say, refuse every other focus and attachment to creatures that he may be your sole object, the one thing you keep before your gaze.

Always begin your prayer in profound awareness of your nothingness, trusting in the promise of the Holy Spirit: *Oratio humilitatis se nubes penetrabit*⁶¹. Never fail to place within the mouth of your heart some words of the Scriptures, as St. Basil advises, words that describe your needs or refer to the mysteries [of Christ's life] or truths you are about to adore. To explain things in a more orderly fashion: First of all, whether you are taking the truths of the faith or the mysteries of Christ's life as the subject of your prayer, reflect on them with attention, meditate on them with care, and consider them in all their fullness, in so far as you are able. Second: Make them enter into you to enkindle your zeal, stir up your piety and give rise to holy sentiments. Third: If what you are praying about is your poverty and your misery, go over them diligently. Make a detailed and rigorous self-examination, judge yourself with severity and uncover all your neediness and woundedness to God so that he may judge you with mercy. Fourth: To ensure that your prayer does not stop at mere feelings (movements) or pious reflections, take some resolutions about

⁶¹ Sirach. 35: 21.

your spiritual wellbeing for the improvement of your behavior and rule of life, in accord with those faults you wish to free yourself of or the virtues in which you wish to become more perfect. Fifthly: Thank God that in spite of your unworthiness he has allowed you to remain in his presence. Last of all, to make these practices easier, take advantage of texts you have read that have most touched and edified you and of thoughts most likely to stimulate devotion.

Here then, brothers, you have a method which though brief is nonetheless holy and practical. I offer it as a method you can follow and apply. Should it happen however that it does not suit you, that you have difficulties in getting used to it or that it does not produce the advantages and benefits you expected, do not insist on it as if your prayer depended on it. The Spirit of God is free and not bound to manmade rules and methods. He communicates himself to souls and inspires them according to his good pleasure.

Brothers, whenever you come before God's gaze and prostrate yourself in prayer before the altar, surrender yourselves to the movement he arouses in you. You can firmly trust that he who preserves the life of your body by his constant protection will not deny you the grace of praying to him, without which you could not preserve the life of your soul. Allow him to dispose of your entire being and follow the impulse of his Spirit in absolute simplicity, whether it lead you to meditate on his truths, to speak to him of your personal needs and those of your brothers or to offer to him the intentions of the Church. Follow him when he makes you shed floods of tears at the recollection of your faults, when he raises you to the contemplation of his ineffable beauty or when he asks you to adore him in profound silence. Follow him when he draws and unites you to himself by the sacred bonds of love or when he favors you with heavenly insights or stirs up holy sentiments or inspires resolutions about your personal behavior. Surrender yourself to him as well when he keeps you in his presence, without anything else to do but to patiently await, in blessed idleness, the various actions he effects in souls that belong to him, according to his good pleasure.

Do not make grandiloquent speeches, lest the search for highflown words fill you with empty images and end up distracting you. Guard against all distractions, even though they are not imputable when they are involuntary, and regard as a genuine evil whatever disturbs the eye of your intention at such a precious moment, hiding from you, though it be for an instant, the infinite object of which you should never lose sight.

I do not intend to give you any further rules than these, my brothers. Beside the fact that there is no other subject on which more has already been written or spoken than that of prayer, it is, finally, a completely divine activity, learned much more through God's anointing than by men's instruction. The Holy Spirit is its source and principle, and he should also be its master and teacher

(pp. 291-295)

Question V : When the saints taught that the prayer of a solitary should be continual and that he is obligated to pray without ceasing, they did not intend to tell us that he should contemplate God so constantly and with such an unbroken attention that his prayer is never interrupted. They knew that a changeless state of mind and constant stillness are more the part of angels than of human beings; they knew that within monasteries there are duties imposed by God which require so much concentration that they inevitably diminish that which the brothers dedicate to God's infinite majesty. As a result, the sight of his majesty is obstructed for a certain time. They are not able to look at it directly, as in other moments, but indirectly and by the meditation of creatures. (pp. 295-296)

For this reason, brothers, the saints held that a religious fulfilled his duty to pray unceasingly whenever the will of God governed his entire life, when his heart was filled with God's love,

when his only desire was to please God, when he considered God as the sole end of his actions and when he never began any activity without insistently asking God's blessing upon it, in accord with St. Benedict's precept. When a solitary keeps to this unswervingly and perseveres in this piety, we can say that all his ways are holy, that his life is one single sacrifice of praise, that he prays always, and that even if the thought of God occasionally escapes his mind as he fulfills his duties, God is present in his faithfulness and the intention of his heart.

St. Augustine says that while no tongue is capable of praising God all day long, to do all one's deeds well is to give him constant praise. *Fac bene quidquid egeris, et laudasti Deum* 62. It is in the purity of our actions that we arrive at continual prayer.... Elsewhere he says that our desire is our prayer, and if our desire remains unbroken, so too does our prayer. *Si continuum desiderium continua oratio* 63

For St. John Climacus, the continual prayer of the solitary consists in making God the object and rule of all his actions, words, thoughts, plans, and feelings, and never doing anything except in God's presence, with an ever renewed and inward fervor 64 .

62 *In Psalm.* 34.

63 *Ibid.* 37.

64 *The holy Ladder* 27^o: 67.

Cassian says that we will fulfill the apostle's precept, "Pray without ceasing, lifting up pure hands in every place", when our soul comes to be established in peace, totally liberated from all attachments and all carnal passions, and when our heart is fixed on God with an unswerving attention.... Once our soul passes from being something earthly to entirely spiritual and close to angelic, everything it hears, speaks and does becomes a most pure and genuine prayer ⁶⁵. Elsewhere he says: "We will practice continual prayer when all that we desire, seek, hope, think, see, say and wait for is God alone" ⁶⁶ (pp. 298-299).

Question VII: What did St. Anthony mean when he said that whoever prays conscious that he is praying is not praying at all?

Answer: It was not St. Anthony's intention here to propose a generally valid form and way of prayer, but to suggest something of prayer's excellence and perfection. He possessed too much experience and understanding not to recognize that there are various degrees in prayer and that it is not necessary to be raised to the sublimest height in order to be praying.

To free you of the perplexity you experience, brothers, when you ask how can anyone so forget himself in prayer as to be oblivious to the fact that he is praying, let me tell you that when the soul... succeeds in going forth from herself through the motions of the heart and the operations of the mind and draws near to God in prayer, she is like a person who finds herself looking open-eyed at the sun at noon. Her eyes are so struck and dazzled by the sun's rays that she sees nothing but the brightness that surrounds her. Her vision is restricted to this; all of the other objects around her are invisible. In the same way, when the soul by a special grace is penetrated by God and plunged as it were into inaccessible light, she sees nothing but him, beholds nothing but him, knows nothing but him. Everything else escapes her and vanishes, except for the Beauty which she possesses and which possesses her. It is this beauty, endlessly attracting and ravishing the soul by the power of its infinite loveliness, that makes her incapable of interrupting or suspending her activity for even a moment and excludes the least act of self-consciousness. She is unaware of herself and what is happening to her, to the point of not perceiving that the state she is in is the effect of the sublimity of her prayer. ("De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique", ed. 1701, pp. 392-393)

...It was of this kind of prayer that the prophet spoke in the following image: *Inebriabuntur ab ubertate domus tuae et torrente voluptatis tuae potabis eos* ⁶⁷. God, he teaches us, gives and pours himself out so abundantly, so profusely and so completely on souls that they become drunk on his graces and favors. They enter into a type of lethargy and slumber brought on by his holy inebriation, where they forget everything, themselves included, insensible to all but the taste of these ineffable divine communications.

The holy apostle experienced this state when he was caught up to the third heaven and heard from God's mouth secrets and mysteries that transcend all comprehension and explanation. What precisely happened in these moments, he could not tell us, and he himself admits that he did not even know the manner in which the rapture took place, whether his soul alone was transported or if his body participated in this suspension as well.

The soul that is transported by the power and intensity of its prayer and plunged into God's bosom discovers in that inexhaustible abyss every kind of blessing and consolations without

⁶⁵ *Collat.* 9: 5.

⁶⁶ *Collat.* 10: 6.

⁶⁷ *Psalm* 35: 9.

number. She lets the weight of her love carry her where it will; she submits to its violent and impetuous attraction. All her desires are satisfied; she wishes for nothing but the happiness she has. Everything else for her is as if it were not.

If this way of praying is so extraordinary, it is because purity of heart is such a rarity. Few indeed are the persons who come into God's presence with that emptiness and inner freedom that call forth such abundant blessings. The world continues to hold us, the self continues to hold us by many tangible and intangible bonds, in whatever condition we find ourselves. Because the holocaust offered to God is almost always incomplete, he cannot look upon it with the same pleasure he would have if it were whole and entire. Wholeness attracts wholeness. When we give little we can only receive little, but when we deal with God with greatness of heart, we arouse and provoke his generosity. If souls could only abandon themselves and leave themselves behind when they seek God in prayer and hope to find him, he would open his treasures to them, weigh them down with his riches and reward them a hundred times over. They would be ravished by what they saw and perceived of his infinite majesty and would devote themselves during the time of prayer to a contemplation so exalted, stable and unchanging that nothing would be able to distract them or draw them away from it.

Now you know that St. Anthony had in mind. It was in the context of this sublime notion of prayer that he said that, "He does not truly pray who is conscious that he is praying."

It ought to be added that when a soul is compelled to descend from this sublime state and return to earthly things on account of the inconstancy and frailty of her nature which she cannot hold out against, she feels herself to be in a land of darkness, a place of horrors where everything she sees is an affliction her. The people she lives with, her duties, her activities all burden her, and everything is gall and wormwood. It crushes her to have to speak, drink, eat and sleep; she grieves and pines unceasingly over what she has lost. Only in the divine will to which she wishes to submit does she find consolation, and in the hope that she will soon depart from this prison. She counts up the moments that still remain. Not one of them seems less than thousand years ⁶⁸. ("De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique", ed, 1701, pp. 393-396).

Chapter XII

On Penance

The categories of penance

What preaching is to the life of the apostle and the profession of faith in Jesus Christ is to martyrdom, penance is to the solitary life. The apostle has been destined by God to preach his truths; the martyr to defend them by the shedding of his blood. The solitary must honor and uphold them by his sufferings. Now the practice, the power and the merit of a religious' penance is drawn from the penance of Jesus Christ, and it is necessary that the one should be a perfect reproduction and faithful imitation of the other. All Christians need to follow Christ in his sufferings if they want to follow him in his glory, as the apostle says - *Si tamen compatimur ut et conglorificemur* ⁶⁹ - but monks have the advantage and pride of place This is the part of the life of Christ that most directly concerns them; he offers to them, in preference to all others, the chalice of his passion. It is written to be sure that all the sinners on earth, all men that is to say, must drink from the chalice he has drunk from and yet it is the particular lot of religious, it is their good fortune, to suffer for Jesus Christ as Jesus Christ suffered for them (pp. 310-311).

⁶⁸ Quoted in this charter: Benedict, Ephrem, John Climacus, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Cassian, Bernard, Jerome,

⁶⁹ Rom 8: 17.

If then we are to know what the penance of solitaries should be, we must first consider the penance of Christ. Of all the great number of reflections we might make, one will suffice for our purposes: that Jesus Christ wished to dedicate the whole of his being to satisfying his intense zeal to honor the majesty of his Father by means of his sufferings. Because of this, he gave up his body to severe punishment, to works of penance and an arduous way of life, and his soul to every kind of humiliation and shame. We know his manner of fasting, solitude and silence, since we read in Scriptures that after being baptized, he went into the desert, where he passed forty days in an uninterrupted fast, with no other company but the wild beasts and the holy angels. We know about his vigils and his great weariness: Scripture tells us that he passed whole nights in prayer. We cannot be unaware of the extreme necessity he endured on account of his poverty, so great as he himself tells us that he lacked the things that nature does not deny to the birds of heaven or the beasts of the field (pp. 311-312). As for the mental pain and affliction he endured, we cannot remain ignorant of them when we read in the Scriptures that he wept over the misfortunes of Jerusalem and the death of Lazarus, groaned when he cured the man deaf and dumb from birth, and sighed over the obtuseness and illwill of the Pharisees who unmoved by all the miracles they had seen him perform asked him to accomplish new wonders. We know that the thought of his passion was ever present to him by the pains he took to speak of it at so many moments of his life.

Nor can we doubt that he kept before him the severity of his Father's judgments, since he cried out in the words of the prophet, "My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?"⁷⁰ and shortly before the passion, expressed in his own words the bitterness and sorrow which filled his heart: "My Father, if it is possible, make this chalice pass from me"⁷¹.

As for insults and humiliations, he experienced them continually. For his life was passed in the midst of an ungrateful people who disregarded the holiness of his person, the rightness of his conduct and the truth of his teaching and treated him as a madman, a demoniac and a trickster.

All this should make us conclude, my brothers, that the solitary should practice both exterior and interior penance. He must chastise his soul as he does his body and mortify his spirit as he mortifies his senses. In other words, his whole being must live in holy sorrow, profound humility and rigorous austerity.

With respect to interior penance, you will not err if you regard it as consisting of humiliations, meditation on death and divine judgment and in compunction. The same holds true for exterior penance if you take solitude, silence, austerity of diet, manual labor, vigils, poverty and the patient endurance of illness and infirmity as the virtues and practices that make up its essence and foundation (pp. 312-314).

On Interior Penance

Humiliations

Question I: How can a religious live the practice of humiliations within the monastery?

Answer: This will occur through the diligence of a superior who is both vigilant and charitable. Such a one will exert himself to train him by reproaches, stern corrections, harsh words, public embarrassments, heavy labors, menial duties and everything else he believes can help to abase him (p. 314).

⁷⁰ Psalm 21.

⁷¹ Matthew 26: 39.

Question II: If religious have already attained a high level of perfection, how can they be humbled and corrected without resorting to lies and artifices?

Answer: I would be able to offer many different answers to your question, brothers. The first and most important of these is that there are very few religious whose actions - I am talking of their best actions - are totally blameless and free of defects.

In the second place, it is very difficult to observe with so much exactitude the Rules of the Holy Fathers - as, for example, the Rule of Saint Benedict which is the lengthiest currently in use and which goes into great detail, regulating the smallest matters even to the control of our eyes - without sometimes neglecting some point about which they make prescription.

Thirdly, if we had a genuine idea of monastic life and profession, as the saints have handed it down to us, and considered it as a continual crucifixion, and a commitment to imitate the perfection of the apostles... really, brothers, there would be no lack of occasion for humiliating and discomfiting monks, as long as they still lacked the mortification of a crucified man, the holiness of the apostles or the purity of the angels. There would be absolutely no need to resort to lies and artifices.

In the fourth place, if the life of a religious were so perfect in every aspect that no genuine faults could be perceived, it would be simple enough to profit from some outward action, interpreting it negatively without regarding the motivation and making it the occasion for a humiliation. For example: A religious reads in the refectory a little more solemnly, emphatically, carefully or loudly than the rest of the brothers. This could be something very simple and innocent without any harmful origin. Nonetheless, a superior would have grounds to say to this religious that his way of reading smacks of pride and presumption and that it is closer to self-satisfaction and vanity of a public speaker than the simplicity and humility of a monk. He could express this in terms of greater or lesser force, depending on the judgement he makes about the good effect it would have not only on this monk but on those brothers who witness the correction (pp. 315-316).

Question III: As the practice of humiliating religious in such a strong and pointed fashion is so infrequently practiced presently, might its use not be more dangerous than advantageous?

This practice has always been in force in the regulars observances which maintain a strict discipline. The profession of a monk, according to the truth and in the opinion of the saints, is nothing but constant abjection and humiliation, and thus there is no reason for condemning this type of mortification or claiming that it is not necessary or beneficial in directing cloistered communities.

As you well know, brothers, the virtues are acquired and retained through our actions, and God who is their principle and who realizes them in us by his grace does not wish to tamper with the natural order of things. Humility is gained by humiliations, just as peace is by patience and knowledge by study. As St. Bernard teaches: *Humiliatio via est ad humilitatem, sicut patientia ad pacem, sicut lectio ad scientiam; si virtutem appetis humilitatis, viam non refugias humiliationis, nam si non pateris humiliari, non pateris ad humilitatem proveh i72*. Now humility is the essence and the foundation of monastic life. How can we believe, then, that a monk wishes to be what he ought to be by his profession and what God desires him to be, if he rejects and disdains

72 Epist. 87.

humiliations, the only route by which he can arrive at his goal? As it is written, those whom God receives as his children, he purifies in the crucible of humiliations as gold and silver.

It will be said that people in the world have other ways of becoming humble besides mortifications and that therefore these are not necessary. I grant that such people acquire humility through other means than the mortifications of religious life and that their humility is in no way the effect of such practices. But it must be admitted that when God wishes to sanctify them and communicate to them this fundamental virtue of evangelical life without which, according to the apostle, no man can come to see God in eternity, He shows a special care to try them by other mortifications corresponding to their state of life: distressing situations, loss of goods, domestic difficulties, sudden upsets of fortune, etc....

Monasteries are places of refuges; they are harbors. Separated from all interaction with the world and all communication with men of the world, the monk is not exposed to the various circumstances people in the world meet with.... Their lot would be pitiable indeed if they did not have a superior who applied himself out of charity to gain for them by humiliations and mortifications what God effects in people who live in the world.... Every man's heart is an incredibly fertile field when it comes to evil. Pride has put down deep roots there, to be found almost everywhere, when they remain unseen.... All it takes is that a person obliged to cultivate his field should deny it his effort and the labor of his hands and in a short time it will be covered with thorns and thistles. It can happen that a solitary whose life has not been formed by the holy practice of mortification will pass the whole of it with a false sense of security. He will live in his cell, in the words of a great saint, as a man puffed up with pride and presumption, like a dragon in his lair swollen with his own venom....

But the reason why humiliation is almost always necessary is that this evil [of pride] renews itself in all times and all ages, sparing neither age nor virtue, and never more to be feared than when virtue is most perfect. That is why the demon of pride rejoices when he sees the virtues flourish....

All other reasons aside, it suffices to say, my brothers, that nothing is more in harmony with the methods of the gospel than to discover holy and innocent means for humiliating men. Nothing else can conform them so much to Jesus Christ, whose life was an unbroken succession of humiliations.

I take for granted that in making use of mortifications, the superior will conduct himself with prudence and charity, with due regard for the moment, the circumstances and the persons involved, and will avoid the displays of temper, violence, inappropriate language, mockery and other exaggerations that can occur when humiliations are applied without discretion (pp. 317-322).

The saints of every nation concur in this idea: Whoever is not prepared to suffer opprobrium and injury in peace - or rather, in a spirit of thanksgiving - is unworthy of the name of solitary.

It is true that these practices have been gradually suppressed over the centuries, but this ought only to be attributed to the decadence of monastic life and the diminishment of its initial fervor.

All this came about, brothers, by a weakening of the monastic state and by children who began to degenerate from their fathers' virtue and simplicity. By the corrupting influence of time, abstinence from meat, the perfect observance of silence and solitude, manual labor and many other practices have fallen into decay, with the result that the present times cannot tolerate such a holy and demanding discipline. This alteration however is not due to any defect in legislation, but to the negligence and backsliding of monks. It is worth noting that every time a new form of monastic life has been instituted or an old one reformed, and holy men have been sent to this work by the disposition of God, they have never failed to revive these kind of practices. This

happened not only because they judged these practices necessary for the establishment of the regular life in its perfection, but because it is natural for them to arise from the zeal and fervor of souls totally consecrated to the service of Jesus Christ, just as we see flames and sparks come to birth and emerge from fire, as the results of its activity. It is not possible for a solitary to possess the spirit of his vocation and love Jesus Christ as he should, unless, as St. John Climacus says, he has an ardent thirst for all that can humiliate him and put him to shame.

Waters are never purer and clearer than at their source. Whoever wishes to possess the pure, unalloyed truth must always go back to the origins and first beginnings (pp. 331-333).

Question XV: Could it not be claimed that former dispositions are not appropriate for the present day and that the world is no longer capable of following them?

Answer: If you wished to say that the world is no longer worthy of them, then you would be right. We have hardened our hearts, and the hand of God, so long open to us, is closed. We have left the ways of our fathers - God's ways - and in return God has denied us the help and protection he gave to our fathers. But nothing would justify condemning those who, having perceived the gravity of their wrongs and recognized their true cause, attempt by every means possible to return to the ways of their fathers which they had abandoned and to reinstate the practices and observances by which their fathers were sanctified.

It is groundless to assert that men are no longer capable of these things. God is the master of mankind, as we know, and his power has not been diminished, nor his arm shortened. Human hearts remain within his hand as before and are no less receptive to the imprint of his grace. He still knows how to make himself loved and, in accord with his own word, he can create at will posterity for Abraham from the hardest rocks and stones (pp. 371-372).

Question XXI: Wouldn't it be more advisable to direct advanced souls along the royal road of love?

Answer: You, my brothers, would place in opposition the royal road of love and the road of humiliations. It seems, however, that our faith teaches us the contrary, instructing us that the royal road of love is the road of the Cross and that the Cross includes spiritual sufferings - humiliations and afflictions - as well as corporal ones. This is the road on which our King Jesus Christ himself walked, His whole life was one whole succession of hardships, disgraces and abasements. The treatment the eternal Father meted out to his Son was one of infinite rigor and humiliation.... Never did it occur to anyone think that Jesus Christ was guided along the lowly and servile road of fear instead of the royal road of love. This royal road which he showed us by his deeds as well as his works was - I repeat - the road of the Cross. It is the only one he sanctified by his example and acknowledged as that of his genuine disciples: *Ibant gaudentes a conspectu concilii quoniam digni habiti sunt pro nomine Jesus contumelian pati*⁷³ (pp. 384-385).

To sum up, brothers: When applied with charity and due discretion, humiliations produce an effect very different from what we would imagine... They win hearts rather than alienating them; they produce love rather than destroying it. This is what St. Bernard teaches us when he says that, "the brothers he has treated more rigorously and severely are bound to him by closer and more intimate bonds of charity than the brothers he never treated in this way ⁷⁴." The reason there is little or no love among men is their cupidity, which holds a powerful sway over them. Just as there

⁷³ Acts 5: 41.

⁷⁴ *Song of Songs* Sermon. 29.

is nothing that brings down cupidity more than humiliations, in the estimation of the saints, so is there nothing that builds up charity more (pp. 387).

(Rancé goes on to say that the whole purpose of the monastic life is to live in humility, of which Christ has given us the example. He then continues)

Monastic communities are bands of men who are taken for malefactors; by their very state, they are public penitents... they are prodigal sons.... (pp. 392)

It could be said that there are ecclesiastics who are sinners and monks who are just men.... But just as at the moment he is raised to the rank of levites a sinner ceases to be regarded as a sinner, so a just man ceases to be regarded as just at the moment he becomes a monk. Henceforth he can only be regarded as a sinner. But shutting himself within the monastery he loses his innocence, in the same way that Jesus Christ ceased to be considered holy from the moment he manifested himself in the world under the aspect and form of a sinner - and this, not only in the estimation of human beings but as concerns the harsh treatment received at the hands of his Father.... (p.393)

Such was the thought of St. Bernard when he spoke to one of his brethren in the following terms: "My son, if you understood the greatness of the monk's responsibility, you would never take a bit of bread that was not soaked with your tears. For no other reason do we shut ourselves up in our cloisters except to bewail our sins and the sins of all people. Every time we eat bread, the work of their hands and the fruit of their labors, we can truly say that we eat their sins, in order to find a cure for their offences as well as for our own" ⁷⁵ (pp. 393-394).

Their consolation will be to reproduce in all the actions of their life the disgraces and hardships Jesus Christ endured in his own. Purifying their hearts through the constant practice of humility from the stains that pride has placed there, they will be raised, according to the saints, to the purity of the angels insofar as this is possible while still in the mortal body, and by brief humiliations and abasements will prepare themselves for the glory to come and for eternal happiness (pp. 394-395).

Chapter XIII **On the Meditation on Death**

Question I: Is the thought of death something really necessary and profitable for religious?

Answer: People in the world cannot bring themselves to think of death because they want to live forever. They bind themselves to the earth by so many ties and commitments that of all their thoughts the rarest and least welcome is the thought of death.

True solitaries, however, for whom the world no longer exists and who have no share in passing things but live solely by faith and in the hope of future blessings, find nothing in the thought of their end that in any way disturbs them. On the contrary, they find their joy and consolation in meditating on death. Nothing better describes these men so utterly detached from all sensible things than the words used by one of the fathers of the first centuries in speaking of Christians: They are that race of men ever prompt and ready to die - *expeditum morti genus* - with the thought of death impressed upon their spirit and the desire for it engraved into the depth of their hearts. They hold death to be the end of their servitude, the beginning of their freedom. They are a people

⁷⁵ *Epist. Fastredi.*

set apart by the disdain in which they hold their life, never more satisfied than when they are about to lose it. What torments others, consoles them. Well aware that baptism has already separated them from the world, these divine men rejoice that death will make this separation definitive (pp. 410-412).

The saints considered the thought of death so profitable that they recommended it very especially to solitaries as their most habitual occupation.

Saint Ephrem urges monks to ever persevere in the remembrance of death ⁷⁶. St. Benedict wishes his brothers to have death ever present ⁷⁷, and never to lose sight of it... (p. 414-415)

What will diminish the number of your offences is by no means the number of years you accumulate. It is the greatness of your charity and your love that will cover your sins...

A third advantage to be found in meditating on death is that by making earthly things recede it brings heavenly things closer. It gives us a heart of bronze towards the former and a heart of flesh towards the latter. To the extent it puts to death the love of the world within us, it makes the love of Jesus Christ reign in us.... (p. 420)

⁷⁶ *Sermo de compunc. Animi.*

⁷⁷ R.B. c.4.

...The true solitary who keeps the thought of death sharply engraved within his mind has God's eternity ceaselessly before his eyes. He never sees himself more than an instant away from it, and so lives in constant expectation of being called by Jesus Christ. ...The Savior is the sole object of his thoughts and desires; he regards him as the cause of that happiness he is on the verge of possessing. He thinks of the gratitude he owes for all the graces already shown him and all those God is yet disposed to bestow on him. He thinks, says St. John Climacus, of God's infinite majesty and the kingdom "whose duration and whose glory have no end. He thinks of the zeal which so inflamed the martyrs, of that most exalted and invisible witness who never withdraws his merciful gaze from him... he thinks of the angels, those holy spirits who surround his throne ⁷⁸. And brothers, let us add that he thinks of his departure from this world which in accord with the hope God has given him should be the moment of his exaltation and triumph (pp. 420-421).

We can include inward compunction as a fourth consequence of meditating on death. As this meditation shows us both aspects of eternity and renders its blessings and its evils equally present to our mind, it cannot but produce two different sets of impressions on us, the sense of God's mercy being tempered by the consideration and fear of his judgments (p. 421).

...Everything that the monk ever thought or did contrary to the holiness of his profession and the ensemble of his duties is placed before his eyes (p. 422)...

On the other hand, if he is faithful and does what he can to keep his promises, the marks of kindness he has received from Jesus Christ, far from troubling him or shaking his confidence, will come to his aid, to sustain and strengthen his hope and his faith. He knows he has recourse to a protection whose power he has already experienced time and time again. Not only the fear of God's wrath, but his love for God and his grief at having displeased him weigh upon his heart. He lives in continual compunction and cannot keep from groaning or from shedding tears. Yet if his tears are his food by day and by night, he can also affirm that in his mercy the Lord has turned this bitterness and affliction into his consolation and joy. *Convertisti planctum meum in gaudium mihi* ⁷⁹. For the abundance of tears purifies and renews his soul, so that all his feelings and thoughts are nothing but peace, thankfulness and blessing (p. 423).

Chapter XV On Compunction

Question I: Compunction is the last of the dispositions of inward penance you have indicated by means of which the solitary can raise himself to the excellence of his state. You have touched on it in so many contexts, however, that you have already answered whatever questions we might put.

Answer: I will not omit to add, brothers, that the thought of death and judgement produces compunction of heart as fire produces heat and light. Reflection on these two events is never dry or sterile. In fact, it is difficult to regard a subject that so merits our tears without coming to actually shed them...

⁷⁸ *The holy Ladder* 6: 15

⁷⁹ *Psalm* 29: 12.

I have said to you a number of times that monks should pass their lives in groaning, that they are under obligation to bewail not only their personal offences but the iniquity of the world and that their whole life is nothing but a fixed state of grief and compunction. Let me repeat myself: If monks knew the full extent of their obligation, if they thought about the account they must render to God and the profit that comes from such a holy attitude, they would constantly ask him for this grace. Their greatest grief would be that their compunction was not enough to make them shed floods of tears.

According to St. John Climacus, “the solitary will never fully know until the moment he leaves the world how much he has gained by his tears ⁸⁰.”

Such is the opinion of all the holy monks. Those who thoroughly understand their vocation have always regarded them as people destined to spend their life in affliction and holy sorrow, either because of the thought of death which must be everpresent to them or because nothing is more appropriate to those who are penitents by profession than compunction and grieving (pp. 451-452).

My brothers, take advantage of these insights. Weep now for a brief instant to live in joy for all eternity. Immerse your faces continually in the bitter waters of repentance. Worry about nothing but to shed your tears; leave it to God to wipe them away. The time is coming when he will soothe your groaning, dry your eyes and transform your sorrow into consolation beyond measure...Keep away from anything that might dry up the source of your tears. Engage in nothing- activities, tasks, occupations, diversions- that could dilute your grief and your compunction. Instead make use of everything that happens to nourish and strengthen it....(pp. 458-459)

If after all of this, you are so unfeeling as to be utterly unmoved and resistant to such powerful reasons and reflections, then weep because you are unable to weep. Let tears gush forth from the hardness of your heart, as from a rock, if they cannot come forth from its tenderness (p. 460) .

On Outward Penance

Chapter XVI Separation from the World

Question I: Now that you have spoken in depth about spiritual penance, tell us something about corporal penance.

Answer: The solitaires of old held that outward penance consists in certain virtues and central practices by means of which they gained mastery over their senses and were able to make their body subject to their spirit.

This is why they waged continual war on themselves, mounted perpetual attacks against themselves and never lost a single opportunity to inflict on themselves that holy and charitable hatred which Jesus Christ commended so explicitly to his disciples.

⁸⁰ *The holy Ladder* 7: 37.

You know what sacred history relates and teaches us about the mortifications they were led to by the greatness of their zeal. But rather than speaking of their astonishing deeds and the extravagant penances some of these men undertook under God's inspiration, more to offer the world signs of God's omnipotence and cause for wonder than to give rules and models for our conduct, I would say, brothers, that we can reduce the number of these virtues and practices to six or seven fundamental ones: separation from the world, silence, fasting, austerity in diet, vigils, poverty and the patient endurance of illness and suffering. We find these in the account of their lives as we find their source in the life of Jesus Christ. Our teachers the saints have established them in the rules they have left us, and our obligation to follow and observe them is all the greater in that their moderation keeps them within the bounds of our strength...

Those who have chosen a life of seclusion out of genuine renunciation, fleeing from the goods, delights, comforts, pleasures and consolations to be found in life within the world, rather than finding anything in these holy practices that exceeds the perfection and rigor they have proposed for themselves, will aspire to still greater things. For such as these, rules can impose limits to their conduct, but their desires will always go beyond these limits.

To continue with our proposed plan, let us begin by speaking of separation from the world, the first of these practices ("De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique", II, ed. 1701, p1).

Recall, my brothers, that life apart from the world has always been the heaven of genuine solitaries. All the graces which are given them by God are encountered there, and it is there that Jesus Christ is pleased to give himself to them. Those who have preserved their baptismal innocence receive in solitude the fruit and the recompense of their faithfulness. The world has never held any place within their hearts and since they have never loved it, they retain no recollection of it...If they have eyes and ears it is to close them to transient things, if they have hands, it is to raise them to heaven. Their mouths are for chanting the praises of God, their minds and their intelligence for meditating on his infinite perfections, their hearts to be consumed as a victim by the fire of divine love. These faithful souls live as if they were alone with God in the universe. They possess him without interruption; they rest in his bosom in utter tranquility. Unceasingly they are purified by the ever renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and it is this intimate contact and continual possession which renders them worthy of never losing the object of their love (II, pp. 4-5).

Those unfortunate enough to have provoked God's anger before by their offences now find themselves in a situation no less blessed. God's merciful hand led them into solitude for no other reason but that separated from the places and persons that caused them to fall, they might recover their lost justice. Recovered, they work to preserve it, and entirely cured of the wounds inflicted by sin, they take on a vitality equal to those whose health has never been attacked. Impelled by desire to draw near to God and by remorse for having withdrawn from him, they use all means capable of satisfying their holy passion. They retain no recollection of worldly things, except their sins, accusing themselves of these day and night in God's presence. They punish them with rigorous penances, reflecting constantly on their misfortune in having offended God and lost him. Like the wild dove that fills the forests with her amorous complaints at the loss of her mate, they moan incessantly. And God, who produces these emotions and sentiments in them and is pleased to find them overwhelmed by love and by grief, never fails to mingle secret joys and ineffable consolations with their sorrows. He brings it about that these souls, raised again to life, experience as much peace and delight in their solitude as the innocent souls whom he has preserved from death. The two groups are united by participating in the same happiness, and together enjoy an absolute felicity, as far as this is possible while still in the body (pp. 5-6)

Now brothers, isn't it surprising that a monk can be unaware of such undoubted truths and live in ignorance of the fact that through his profession he has once and for all shut behind him all the doors of the world? Does he not know that he has renounced its concerns and its occupations along with its riches and pleasures? That the commitment he has made to serve Jesus Christ does not allow him to take on any in the service of men? That he is dead to everything, that the monastery is his burial place and that his task is to lie there and wait for the savior of the world to call him as he called Lazarus when he wanted him to come forth from the tomb? That he is a vessel set apart for divine worship and the sacred service of the altar and cannot be set to other use without incurring profanation? That the Rule is filled with orders and instructions that he will be unable to carry out, except in strict seclusion? That above all things what the saints require of him is that he live and die in seclusion in constant fidelity....(pp. 6-7)

The saints did everything they could to forestall these excessesThey have, however not had much success. Once a solitary has deafened himself to the voice of Jesus Christ who speaks to him in the secret of his heart, he will not have ears for the counsels and instructions of men (p. 9-10)

Question II: Is a religious not permitted to exit from the monastery where he has made profession?

Answer: There is hardly any other precept in the Rule of St. Benedict that is more clearcut or important than that of stability. Nevertheless, it must be agreed that exceptions exist. St. Benedict sent St. Maur to France and St. Placid to Sicily in order to lay the foundations of his Order there. St. Bernard left his monastery of Citeaux to make the foundation at Clairvaux and become the abbot. In the Rule of St. Benedict and other monastic rules, we see that the monks were employed in work outside the cloister: cultivating the land, bringing in the harvest, cutting down trees in the forest and other similar tasks. We also note that they were sent outside the monastery when there was some need on the part of the brethren or some communal necessity. One of the councils at Mainz forbids religious to go outside the cloister except when obliged by necessity and an order of the superior. It can be affirmed that a religious can exit from his monastery without detriment to the promise made to Jesus Christ to live and die there, when God's will, ruling over all situations and all rules, calls him outside it. This will, however, needs to be made known to him by explicit order and by the just and legitimate command of his superiors, who cannot oblige him to go outside the cloister except for genuine necessities and reasons in accord with his profession and his rule. The vow of stability does not depend on the superiors; it is not subject to their whim or their imagination. This is what St. Bernard intended to communicate when he said that the vow of stability should not prejudice that of obedience nor the vow of obedience that of stability. In other words, in case of a just commandment, which falls within the order of things and does not contradict the rules or duties of one's profession, the vow of stability does not dispense a religious from obeying. On the other hand, where any of these conditions is lacking, the obligation of stability holds firm (pp. 18-19).

The same saint gave a clearer exposition of his thought when he said that the vow of stability is to prevent a religious from leaving his monastery to take up a more pleasant and comfortable existence, or for motives of self-satisfaction, vexation, pique, curiosity or any other reason springing from superficiality, indecisiveness or restlessness. It is not there to prevent a legitimate authority from commanding him and assigning him to tasks in accord with his duties and his profession... (pp. 18-19).

It should be added that a religious has the right to change monasteries when the poor observance and bad conduct of the brothers are an impediment to his salvation or when the Spirit of God calls him to a stricter and more perfect life than the one practiced in the place where he first

committed himself. This is the holy freedom of the children of God, which the Church has always safeguarded, as we have said before (p. 21).

Question III: May a religious go out of the monastery for the sake of mental relaxation, seeking some harmless change of pace or innocent enjoyment within the world?

A religious should be aware that he can no longer look for fulfillment in the world. Dead as he is to all the things of earth by his profession, he has renounced its joys and pleasures along with its goods and wealth. By the same token, these kinds of pastimes are also forbidden to him. There are for him no other consolations than those encountered in his state of life: peace and the testimony of a good conscience. These proceed from his purity of heart, his submission to the will of Jesus Christ and his faithfulness in keeping his law (p. 21).

Question IV: Is it necessary for a religious to live in dejection and sorrow, without any consolation?

Answer: Brothers, you should know that there are two types of sorrow. The first is entirely human; it is wicked, unproductive and leads to death. This is the type Sirach referred to when he said, "Drive sorrow far from you. It has brought death to many and has never produced anything beneficial⁸¹ ." It is wicked because it is a disordered state of heart, a passion stirred up by the privation of a desired good or the presence of an unwished-for evil. It is unproductive because, for all its agitated activity, it can never free us from the evil that afflicts us or procure us the good we would like. It leads to death, since all passions inflict mortal wounds when they are not tempered by grace and submissive to it.

But there is another sorrow, a sorrow according to God. It is holy, productive and lifts up the soul instead of casting it down... (p.23).

It is holy because Jesus Christ brings it about by casting his gaze on us and by the working of his Holy Spirit. It is productive, because it makes us shed tears that wash our souls and remove whatever stains of sin they have acquired. They are, beyond doubt, a source of consolation and joy: no penitent can consider his groanings as anything but the sensible proof of the mercy God has already shown him and the pledge of the mercy still to come. Thus, although we would imagine that a solitary who passes his entire life without taking part in earthly pleasures would necessarily be crushed by the weight of his grief and bereft of all consolation, on the contrary, his experience is, in the words of St. John Climacus, that "mourning and penance contain within themselves a spiritual happiness and joy, as wax contains honey. Such grieving is always united within the soul to a kind of pleasure, sweet and delightful, for God never fails to console, in a secret and invisible manner, those whose hearts have been broken by holy affliction⁸² ." It was this which led the same saint, a man perfectly familiar with the action of grace, to say that the sharp and piercing grief of penance brings down divine consolation, as purity of heart brings down celestial illumination... This consolation refreshes the afflicted soul, weeping and crying like an infant from its feelings of tenderness and love, and this refreshment in turn gives new force to the soul that was prostrate in grief and marvellously transforms bitter and scalding tears into gentle and welcome ones (pp. 23-24).

Question V: Should freedom to go out of the monastery be denied to a religious who needs a

⁸¹ Sirach 30: 24-25

⁸² *The holy Ladder* 7^o: 50

break, at times when he is suffering from anxiety or sadness?

Answer: On this point, we would respond to you brothers that there are different causes and reasons why religious find themselves desolate in their state of life, why everything seems difficult and why they find themselves restless and embittered. In some cases, God conceals himself, withdrawing for a time the inward joy he customarily grants to those who serve him. This he does in order to put their faithfulness to the test. He offers them the opportunity to support themselves by their vigorous faith and their resolute confidence. These, however, perceiving themselves to be in aridity and without any sensible grace, instead of collaborating with God's plan and contenting themselves with the situation in which Providence places them, proceed to torture and upset themselves. The only consequence of these disordered reactions is to make their yoke heavier and their sufferings greater.

Others, inclined to melancholy by temperament, feel nothing but disgust for reclusion. The weight of solitude is crushing for them and their days are spent in unbroken sorrow and gloominess.

Still others (and would to God their number were not so great) are so disturbed in their thinking and feelings and so opposed to everything sacred that they consider the monastery a prison and subjection to discipline a cruel form of slavery. More exactly, by failing to observe the strict fidelity that God requires of those who are consecrated to him, they deprive themselves of the happiness of their state and the fruits of their labors. In a field of peace and tranquility, they reap nothing but dissatisfaction and perplexity.

The members of the first group should be told to conform themselves to God's designs. They should adore all the ways by which he guides us and profit from these apparent moments of coolness and disfavor which quickly pass. This "cloud" is of brief duration and afterwards the sun will shine more clearly and brightly than before. As for the aridity that afflicts them, it will prove beneficial for them, if they only endure it with patience, with the same holy frame of mind the prophet manifested when he said to the Lord, "I have refused all human fulfillments and thought of you alone, and behold I was filled with consolation" ⁸³.

The fragility of those in the second group should arouse our compassion. We should come to the aid of their weakness and do all we can to alleviate their misery. The way to console them is to direct them upwards to God, offering them the advice St. James gives to all Christian overtaken by sorrow: *Tristatur aliquis vestrum? Oret* ⁸⁴. Remember, it is never permissible to use illegitimate means to arrive at desired ends, however good and necessary they appear.

As for the last group, they must come to recognize that they are unhappy only because they are unfaithful. Their restlessness and their irritation is the consequence and punishment of their sin, and their conscience is troubled because it is impure. Had they faithfully observed God's law, they would, in the prophet's words, enjoy "a peace as profound as the deepest abysses of the sea" ⁸⁵ ...

Such are the remedies that must be applied to comfort a solitary when sadness invades his heart, the means that must be employed to cure him- instead of offering him pleasures and amusements that deceive all those who get involved with them, never provide true and lasting joy, and worst of all are contrary to the holiness of his profession. For those who have the honor to belong to him, Jesus Christ is the only fitting source of peace. The peace which is his comes from him, and it is his to bestow. He gained it for us when he shed his blood for the reconciliation of mankind. Anyone who looks to the world to obtain it simply fools himself, as Jesus himself told us that the

⁸³ Psalm 6: 3

⁸⁴ James 5: 13

⁸⁵ Is 43: 18

world neither knew it nor was able to give it. *Pacem meam do vobis: non quomodo mundus dat, ego do vobis* 86. (pp. 24-28)

Chapter XVII **On Silence**

Question I: Must religious practice silence very strictly?

Answer: The same reasons that led Saint Benedict to legislate for an inviolable stability brought him to lay down for us rigorous rules of silence. What could be more sensible than to want to restore to monks through a strict practice of separation the spirit of piety they had lost in the world through thoughtless conversations? There is no question that it is just as easy to feed our passions and live by our desires in solitude as it is in the world, unless talking and conversations be completely eliminated.... (pp. 161-162).

The passions have changed their locale; their scope has narrowed. This change of scene, however, rather than destroying them, only makes them more dynamic and intense. One sole recourse remains which can succeed in curing all these disorders: a strict observation of silence that cuts off verbal exchanges and puts a stop to talking. Once nature sees itself deprived of all its means of action and all hope of fulfillment, it will keep itself in check; its habits as well as its inclinations will slowly die off, now that there is nothing to strengthen and sustain them (p. 162).

Question III: Wouldn't it be helpful for a religious to hear a consoling word from another brother once in a while?

Answer: It is not impossible that occasionally a religious would find something edifying in the conversation of one or other of his brothers. The practice however would generate such great problems and produce such negative consequences that taking the advantages and disadvantages together, you see that benefit of conversation is null and you are obliged to adapt an unwavering position on the necessity of silence.

It is incomparably easier to remain silent than to speak with such due moderation that you never commit any fault by means of speech....

As long as someone keeps silence, imposing on himself the law and the obligation to refrain from speech, he has control over his words. Once he has begun to speak, it becomes very difficult to regulate what he says and to retain complete mastery. Sometimes the strictest and most reflective persons catch themselves saying things they neither should have said or wanted to say.

86 John 14: 17

Devout persons themselves often speak of the things of God in a purely human way. They may begin talking well enough, under the impulsion of the Holy Spirit, but as they go on they end up talking under the impulsion of nature. Self-seeking takes over: they want to be listened to and applauded; they want their ideas to prevail. Nothing is more common than to witness pious exchanges turn into disputes or degenerate into useless, vain and gossipy chatter. For this reason the prophet kept such close guard over himself and refrained from speaking even of good things: *Obmutui et silui a bonis* 87 ... (pp. 165-167).

The holy abbot Nestor felt himself bound to communicate to Cassian as a indispensable counsel for attaining the perfection of his state of life that he “impose on himself a perpetual silence, take special care to listen and retain all the words and instructions of the elders, always keep his heart open and his mouth closed, and be more zealous and ready to practice what he has learned than to teach it” 88. For, as the holy solitary said, “In teaching the holy truths to others one runs the risk of vainglory, whereas practicing them in silence one grows in spiritual understanding....” And he adds: “Because of this, never allow yourself the liberty to speak, unless to ask for the clarification of a point where it would be dangerous to remain in ignorance or to gain some necessary knowledge” (p. 171).

Saint Benedict, who partook of this whole tradition and its orientation, was so unyielding with regard to silence that he forbade his religious to open their mouths except when questioned or impelled by a genuine necessity. Freedom to speak, he ordained, even on matters conducive to edification, should be rarely granted and then only to religious of consummate virtue- those who gave no grounds for uneasiness or hesitation.... Moreover he gave to all his monks as a perpetual rule the obligation to observe strict silence at all times. *Omni tempore silentio debent studere monachi* 89. (pp. 174-175).

The religious personally formed by this great saint [St. Bernard] and filled with his spirit, showed so much zeal for this holy practice of the rule (*régularité*) considered so important by them that they instituted the use of signs so as to express what was necessary while being able to entirely eliminate speech. This way of keeping silence sanctified the great religious order. The Carthusians took their example and adopted the practice, compel even their laybrothers observe it in its full rigor. From that time onward they took on the obligation of silence as they did of solitude.

It certainly is frustrating for a superior when all these truths fail to move and convince the brothers. After having done his best to present them, he sees he has not persuaded them of the necessity of putting them in practice. Nonetheless, he will have hardly done his duty unless he makes a special effort to make the road smooth for them, straighten out their paths and remove whatever could constitute a temptation or make compliance difficult.

With this in mind, the first step he must take is to deny them the least communication with their friends and relatives and deprive them of all knowledge of what goes on in the world. He must act in such a way that no news, either of the government, the Church, or their own congregation reaches their ears. They must be satisfied with praying for the needs of society in general without knowing the particulars. For it is impossible, among the variety of public events, that one or other occurrence fail to catch their attention, excite their feelings and stir up desires, inclinations and other passions that were merely dormant and not totally extinct.

Secondly, he must organize things in such a way that the brothers are constantly kept busy. Their days should be full, without any gap in their activities. Alternating them will make the

87 Psalm 18: 3

88 *Coll.* 14: 9

89 R.B. 41

weight of them lighter. The brothers should move from psalmody to reading, from work to prayer, everything so arranged that nothing becomes distasteful by its length or repetitiveness. Furthermore, all these observances should be carried out in common, according to true cenobitic tradition. Let the brothers read and work together, so that even though verbal exchanges are forbidden, they will have the support and consolation of seeing and being with each other

In the third place, the brothers ought to have colloquies from time to time, but public ones that are part of the regular community activities, and not occasions of rest and recreation. They should be holy and infrequent. Holy in their organization and in the subject matter - because if not, they will end up causing more harm than good. As their whole purpose is to animate, inspire zeal and fervor and dissipate the clouds and doldrums that can sometimes gather in the context of intense reclusion, the topics must be stimulating, and drawn from the most vital, moving and interesting texts encountered in the reading of the Fathers. The brothers should express themselves in a simple and straightforward way, free of affectation or vainglory, so that the less fluent feel they can speak to the more fluent without fear or embarrassment. All should observe an equal simplicity to cover over both erudition and ignorance. Above all, there should be no discussion of points of doctrine, esoteric questions or theological controversies. Nothing is more likely to get people excited, disturb their hearts or create arguments than this kind of discussion.

These colloquies must also be rare. Apart from the fact that frequent colloquies would contradict the silence we profess, such an abundance of truths and great notions would certainly tire the brothers' minds, create repugnance and ultimately turn them insensible to subjects which should always be attended to with so much pleasure and eagerness as if they were being heard for the first time. Even more important is that the superior give impetus to the colloquies by his own words and maintain their dynamism, seeking to make all the brothers' thoughts duly appreciated. While allowing them an unconstrained freedom of expression, he should take care that there is no word uttered unworthy of persons who come together only for the sake of mutual sanctification and who know that, in accordance with his promise, Jesus Christ is always present in the midst of those who gather in his name (pp. 176-180).

This should suffice, brothers, to confirm the love and esteem that I know you have for silence. Take my word that without silence solitude will mean nothing and monasteries will not be able to have either solid piety or genuine monastic observance. Nothing will come of closing the gates of the cloister as long as your mouths stay open; in the absence of this holy practice, you will encounter as much danger among your brothers as you would with people in the world. What I wish you for, brothers, is what was said by St. Peter Damian: "May the temple of the Holy Spirit be built up more and more within you. May the spiritual virtues, like heavenly stones, be shaped and bound together by means of silence, a silence in which the heavenly spouse, so tenderly loved by you, can be as much at rest as in his marriage bed" ⁹⁰.(p. 180).

Question IV: Should we believe that St. Benedict and St. Bernard proposed such a rigorous observance of silence?

Answer: Both St. Benedict's and St. Bernard's thinking on the subject is so clear, and it is so simple to ascertain how strongly they both believed in the rigorous observance of silence, that a person might feel surprised that there could be doubts about something so straightforward and so firmly established.

⁹⁰ *Lib. 7 Epist. ad Agnete. Imperat., Epist. 7*

To put an end to this question once and for all and remove the tiniest wisp of uncertainty, let me remind you that in chapter forty-two of the Rule St. Benedict ordains that religious maintain silence at all times. In chapter six, as we have already said, he says that even religious who are perfect in virtue and of consummate piety should not be allowed to speak except on rare occasions, and only on holy and edifying subjects. Would it be possible to express oneself more explicitly than this? Can there really be doubts about the thinking of someone who speaks so forcefully?

Against this people raise as a weighty objection the words of Chapter 48: *Neque frater ad fratrem jungatur, horis incompetentibus*. Their intention is to argue that if it is forbidden for brothers to get together at inappropriate times it is therefore permitted for them to get together and talk at other times. To answer as briefly as possible: St. Benedict's position is completely different from this. What he wished was to forbid any of the brothers to get together at inappropriate times (during the Divine Office, the meridiem, between matins and prime, after compline) in order to render each other the help, assistance or kindness they could offer on other occasions, in particular during the common exercises or common work- all of which, by the way, was always carried out in absolute silence. This should be easily believed by those who know that the monks of former times used signs for necessary communications - to this very day we retain the ones used by the first religious of Cîteaux- and that the lay brothers who constantly worked together and always had reason and matter for conversation the thousands of times they met never broke silence. If the word *jungere* meant "to speak", or if brothers never came together without speaking, there might be grounds for arguing as some do. However, it is impossible that anyone familiar with the way of life led by monks who strictly observe the Rule of St. Benedict should think in this manner.

Besides, even if it were possible to give the term *jungere* the assumed interpretation, "to come together in order to speak", we must believe that what St. Benedict intended here was to deny the religious who by reason of their community charge enjoyed the right to speak - prior, subprior, deans where the community was numerous, novice master and cellarer- the exercise of that power at those times, obliging them to keep silence like the rest.

An argument is also made from another place in the Rule, in chapter forty-eight. There it says that after the community has finished compline, no one should dare speak concerning any subject whatsoever and that if anyone is found violating this rule he should be severely punished. The only exception is if someone is obliged to speak with guests who may be present in the monastery or if the abbot has to give some order. From this prohibition some draw the conclusion that at other times it was permitted to speak. Yet this was not St. Benedict's intention. He legislates silence at all times, as we have shown. For the time after compline, however, he commands it so explicitly that apart from the exceptions we have just noted, it cannot be violated without in some sense committing a crime. This distinction arises from the fact that conversations and exchanges between monks during the night always involve scandal, not only at the time they occur but also in their consequences and after-effects.

As for St. Bernard, there is no basis for imagining that he did not go as far as Benedict regarding the obligation to keep silence. To be able to see this, brothers, consult Sermon Twenty-Nine on the Canticle where he exhorts his religious to preserve perfect charity among themselves, unblemished by any deed, word or sign.... There he says that, "Men are much more easily led to suspect evil than to believe good, especially in places where the rule of silence is so strict that it does not allow the person who may have offended his brother to excuse himself nor the one who has formed a suspicion to give voice to it." Still and all, he goes on, "the brother who believes himself offended, is consumed by the intensity of his grief. He bears a mortal wound in his heart, he groans within himself, he is full of wrath and agitation, unable in his silence to think of anything except the injury he has received. He can neither pray, nor read, nor meditate. The

lifegiving Spirit is no longer able to move or act in him, and thus this soul for whom Jesus Christ died must inevitably perish, deprived of its necessary spiritual sustenance. Nor is the unhappy person who committed the offence in any better shape, on account of his inner affliction and the pangs of conscience

If ever there were justification for permitting a religious to break silence, it would certainly be to allow him to extricate himself from the vexity in which he finds himself, according to St. Bernard. A single word would be sufficient to free himself from a deadly state of soul. Moreover, by a word of explanation or apology, he could make up for the offense inflicted on his brother and thus enable him to escape from a situation almost as dangerous as his own. Even so, St. Bernard does not permit the severity of silence to be modified in this case, urgent though it may be. We read in another text of his on the same subject, for the third sermon for Advent, that “by the law of our community and of our brotherhood, our brothers are obliged to aid us by means of advice and of concrete help. *Consiliis et auxiliis* -so that their advice can make up for our ignorance and their help can assist us in our frailty...As long as you persevere in the charity you owe your brothers, you will never lack the means to carry out these obligations”... “In my opinion you can offer no better counsel to your brother than to let him know by your example what he should do and what he should avoid. You should always stimulate him to what his best, giving your counsel by your works and the faithfulness of your conduct rather than with words and with your tongue....To really help him, nothing is more useful and efficacious than praying for him.’

Experience teaches us that nothing is more common for charitable and fervent religious than to show their brother how to do some task, when they perceive that he is less capable or enthusiastic than the rest in the assigned work. They do this by throwing themselves twice as hard into the activity, carrying out their task with greater energy and greater attention. This is the way monks instruct and exhort, without resorting to words. It is texts like these that should be the basis for our understanding of St. Bernard’s thought.

Another objection is raised in regard to the reproof St. Bernard made to some brothers about their exaggerated speaking. To answer this, it is enough to know that already in this period there were public exchanges and conferences on the rule, attended by all the brothers, and it was at such meetings as these that the brothers fell into the faults which St. Bernard is apparently reproaching in Sermon 17 of *De Diversis*. With such a great number of religious in community, it shouldn’t be a surprise that one or other failed to keep within the limits of a due moderation. It is even possible that certain ones broke silence against of the prescribed order and rule.

You can be sure, brothers, that you will find in these reflections and principles all you need to resolve any uncertainties about solitude and silence. If I were able to relate to you what Guigo, the great prior general of the Carthusians, said to his brothers at the end of his statutes, I would succeed in saying everything that I intended (“De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique”, ed. 1701, II, pp. 219-228).

Chapter XVIII

On Abstinence and Mortification in Food

Question I: Did the saints attribute great importance to abstinence and mortification?

Answer: We can judge the notion the ancient solitaries held concerning mortification of the senses and, in particular, concerning austerity in food and drink by the kind of lives they led on earth and by the instructions and rules they left for us. Although by itself and without the inner dispositions that make it meritorious and pleasing to God, austerity is of little profit, the monks of old continued to believe it helpful and necessary for the sanctification of communities, when it is

animated by inner disposal, first principle and holiness of life. They themselves left many illustrious testimonies of it. Their sacred history abounds in the actions and examples they practiced, held up as marvels of penance. Indeed, hardly any form of monastic observance exists which was not formed and maintained through a rigorous austerity.

Seek to recall, brothers, the great number of solitaries living either in monasteries or in isolation who passed whole weeks or the whole of Lent without eating, in order to reproduce the extraordinary penance Jesus Christ practiced in the desert. I do not say this to make you imitate feats which today are inimitable, but to convince you that God has placed powerful helps and joined special blessings to this type of penance. Had he not, he would not have inspired the desire for it in the greatest of his servants(pp.187-188).

Question II: Such edifying examples seem to be extraordinary feats. Can they really be adopted as a rule for communities and entire monastic observances?

Answer: It is certain that what is to be practiced by many persons must not include anything extreme. Rules intended for common use and universal application have to show a greater moderation. Yet when the saints established the various monastic observances, whatever moderating elements they may have introduced, the penitence they ordained was always so strict, that even though their orientation showed all the requisite restraint and discretion, it could hardly fail to be accounted as exaggerated. When we compare what is done today in the strictest congregations to what the saints laid down and what was practiced by the monastic observances in their initial form, we find that the greatest and most inflexible austerity of our times is no more than the shadow and outward show of all they observed. We could say to you with a good deal of justice what you have already read in the *Imitation of Christ* 91: “Look at the vibrant examples of the holy fathers in whom piety shone forth in all its purity, and you will see that what takes place among us is hardly worth noting and our life compared to theirs is of very small account.”

This truth of this will become completely obvious, brothers, if you study the monastic tradition and become aware of the extent of the solitaries’ penances, especially as concerns diet, manual labor and poverty. Here I am not speaking only of those human angels, who raised above the necessities of nature, blazed forth in the desert like shining stars. I refer also to cenobites who lived in communities and congregations governed by a rule.

As the legislation within Egypt and the Upper Thebaid varied, there was not a uniform practice of penance. Nevertheless reading the monastic histories we see that the level of austerity was great everywhere. Dry bread in small quantities, wild herbs, vegetables, fruit made up the ordinary diet of the solitaries and the cenobites. All the disciples of St. Anthony -that is to say, almost all Egyptian monks- lived this kind of abstinence, as he was the father of all the observances that arose there (pp. 190-192).

The Rule of St. Benedict, always regarded by the occidental church as the chief rule by reason of its scope and its diffusion, legislates a severe fast from the feast of the exaltation of the Holy Cross until Easter. It forbids the eating of meat, allowing it only in cases of serious illness or debility. For the habitual diet of the brothers, it permits no more than two cooked dishes. The terms it employs to describe the kind of edibles allowed have received various interpretations. Nonetheless, there is good reason to think that these terms should be taken literally, *pulmentum*

91 Liber I, c. 18

being understood as referring to dishes prepared with vegetables, herbs, broth and other similar ingredients.

In the first place, when dealing with regulations, we should always interpret terms according to their specific and obvious meaning .

Secondly, nothing is more fitting for an observance born in poverty and abjection and committed to extreme poverty than a lowly and simple diet, the ingredients of which can be cheaply obtained and easily prepared. It is highly improbable that St. Benedict would make provision for expensive and fancy food in order to nourish poor men, obliged to live by the work of their own hands.

Third of all, the holy men who inaugurated the Order of Cîteaux and set themselves to live the Rule of St. Benedict to the letter, gave the same meaning to *pulmentum*, as can be seen by their manner of life at the order's beginnings and by their first legislation (pp. 246-247).

What ought to influence you even more, brothers, is the austerity practiced by the holy founders of the Order of Cîteaux. The sort of life they established at the commencement of this great order should make you more aware of your present state of affairs. I have no doubt that as you perceive the almost infinite distance between the lifestyle of the fathers and that of their children you will be moved to exclaim as did St. Bernard, *O monachi et monachi!*⁹² As we have said already, these monks made it their aim to observe the Rule of St. Benedict literally. That was their proposal; God had inspired it within their hearts. They rejected every attempt to lessen its rigor or adulterate its purity by adducing various commentaries and interpretations of terms. They likewise imposed this same austerity on their successors, commanding them to persevere up to their last breath in the hard and narrow road set forth in the Rule. Such are the very terms of the charter of foundation.

In order to fulfill this obligation, they limited themselves to a diet of vegetables, roots, wild herbs and broth, seasoning them only with salt and water. They ate coarse, whole grained bread and drank wine very rarely, never serving it at table until it had been diluted with water. For supper on days when there was no fast, they were given uncooked herbs, along with milk (hot or cold) at harvest time. Eggs were eaten infrequently and only by the sick. In accordance with the Rule of St. Benedict, they fasted daily from the Exaltation of the Holy Cross until Easter, and on Wednesdays and Fridays from Pentecost until the feast of the Holy Cross. There was abstinence from milk, butter and cheese in Lent, Advent, all the fastdays observed by the Church and all Fridays except for those in Paschal time. On three Fridays in Lent they took a single portion; on the other three they had only bread and water. Their manual labor was extremely heavy and their vigils very long, but because of their love for Jesus Christ, they delighted in their penance and found relish and enjoyment in their sufferings (pp. 202-204).

Could anyone better enable us to grasp St. Benedict's spirit on this point than the holy founders of the Order of Cîteaux? God chose them as new Ezras to reinaugurate the rule of this great saint, no longer truly known or practiced, and to let its spirit live again. They took it up in literal fidelity to the text and its true (institution), as we have already said elsewhere: *Integre, pure et ad litteram*. They refused every interpretation and commentary that was at variance with its purity....(p. 219)

Question VI: What were the saints' motives in living in such intense penance?

92 In Serm. S. Benedicti

Answer: Brothers, there would be more reason to ask : What motivated the successors of these holy men to dispense from it? In purely human and natural questions, disciples have the right to differ from their masters' positions, since they may well surpass them in inspiration, talent and learning. But when it comes to the works of God , works that should be effected and directed by his Spirit, it certainly shows great audacity for ordinary men to deviate from the thinking of the holy men God employed as his instruments and ministers, to ignore their instructions and to abolish what they set up and observed with so much attention and piety. Given that the monastic observances are works of grace and manifestations of mercy and that those whom God chose to establish them did nothing but reveal his will to us, isn't it strange that their policies should be overturned and that their holy practices which were and still are the sanctification of the Church should be considered as useless contrivances?

However, in response to your question, I would say this: The saints, filled with lively faith and burning charity, lived with their attention and their desire fixed on future realities. Keeping the eternal rewards and punishments ever before their eyes, they occupied each day of their lives as we would like to occupy the final day of our own. The words of Jesus Christ, "Do penance for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand", resounded ceaselessly in the ears of their heart. They knew that Jesus Christ also teaches that it is violent war unremittingly waged against ourselves that opens the gates of this kingdom to us- *violenti rapiunt illud* - and thus one of their principal concerns was to crucify their flesh and mortify their senses... (pp. 228-229)

Chapter XIX **On Manual Labor**

Question I: Should manual labor be included among the principal observances of monastic life?

Answer: No other penitential exercise has been more practiced by monks or more strongly recommended by them than manual labor. So universally has it been judged necessary that almost all religious congregations have ordered its practice, while solitaries have always counted it among their principal obligations (p. 257).

St. Bernard directs his greatest condemnation against the idleness of the monks of his time. He considered work so necessary to religious life that when he wished to give us a definition of it, he included manual labor among its chief duties. "Work", said the great saint, "reclusion and voluntary poverty are the monks' claims to distinction, the marks of honor of the solitary life...." Elsewhere he says: "Our profession and the example of our fathers command us to make our living by our own labor and not by revenues of the altar". Once, unexpectedly overtaken by the beginning of the work period in the midst of a sermon, he said to his brothers, "The hour demands that we proceed to our manual labor, to which both our rule and our poverty oblige us"⁹³ (pp. 266).

I have said nothing up to now about the religious of the Order of Cîteaux. I chose to take them out of [chronological] order, so that seeing them apart from the multitude, you could focus on them more attentively and note their dedication and fidelity regarding work. These admirable

⁹³ Epist. 42; Epist. 384; Son of Songs: serm. 10.

men who imposed on themselves the law of executing their father's testament to the letter and of rejecting all interpretation and commentary opposed to his spirit and his intentions, considered manual labor as one of their principal obligations. No form of it was too arduous for them. They reaped the crops at harvest time, they cleared the uncultivated terrain, they felled trees in the forest to raise their monasteries, they built houses, they spread manure in the fields, they bailed hay, they sheared sheep....(p. 275)

And you, my brothers, burdened with duties from which the ancient solitaries were exempt, obliged by the Church to those prayers, offices and attendance at liturgical functions she did not require of them : If you cannot equal them in their constant application and long hours of work, try at least to imitate their spirit and commitment in going about it, .so as not to lose all the benefits and advantages of work. Even though you may never catch up to them, follow them as closely as you can. You will have reason to be content with yourself, as it were, if you dedicate to manual labor the time the Rule does not prescribe for choir, prayer and reading ,and perform for yourselves in the monastery the tasks carried out by day laborers and servants for religious who have given up the practice of work. To speak more specifically: if you prepare the food necessary for the community, if you yourselves do the wash-up after meals, if you clean the stables, etc....in a word, if you do not neglect any service you may render to the monastery and joyfully embrace the lowliest and humblest tasks (pp. 326-327).

Chapter XXI On Poverty

Question I: You have already spoken of the excellence and scope of religious poverty. Now we would like you to inform us in detail about the manner of practicing it.

Answer: What I would add to what I have already said on this subject, brothers, is that a monk is not truly poor at all if, when he finds himself deprived of the very necessities of life, he does not consider himself fortunate to imitate the poverty exemplified by Jesus Christ. To be poor he needs to enter into the disposition of the pauper in the Gospel. Dying of hunger and weakness at the gate of the heartless rich man, he persevered in complete patience in the worst of situations, and merited to be transferred from this kingdom of inward peace to the kingdom of glory. In the state of affairs presently established by the Church, it is impossible for religious to find themselves in this condition.

So let me propose something more appropriate for you: Religious are poor in the way they are obliged to be when they not only live without the blessings of fortune and the riches of earth but when they love these privations and gladly endure them.

St. Bernard says: "Not poverty alone, but the love of poverty, makes the genuine poor man"⁹⁴. We could add that just as the miser's joy consists in discovering ways and means to become rich, the poor man's satisfaction consists in never losing an opportunity to become poorer than he already is. His love for poverty touches everything he does. It is a virtue that arises from the depths of his heart like a living spring that spreads its waters in all directions. He is poor in all things, in all aspects of his life- poor in his vesture, his diet, his furnishings. He demonstrates his poverty in his charity towards the poor, in his lack of interest for acquiring goods or undertaking projects to

⁹⁴ Epist. 100

increase the revenues of the community. At every occasion he manifests perfect renunciation and sincere detachment for all the goods, luxuries, rarities and privileges of this world (pp. 337-338).

Question IV: Should religious give substantial alms?

Answer: In nothing did the ancient solitaries show so much holiness and zeal than in the efforts they made to aid the needy. Nothing was left undone in order to comfort them in their distress. Some solitaries went as far as to give away their tunic, just as the Gospel prescribes, and were brought to the state of total nakedness. Others were sold as slaves, paying for their love of the poor with their liberty. But what the majority of the holy monks did was to provide for the sustenance of the poor with their work, and to feed them with the sweat of their brow. We have already told you that the solitaries of the Upper Thebaid sent such abundant alms to Egypt that there were not enough poor to consume them; it was necessary to distribute part of them to the most abandoned and remote peoples of Africa. Their faith was a living faith, and therefore, so was their charity. Every teaching and every desire of Jesus Christ inflamed up their piety, and their feelings found relief when they encountered opportunities and means to express in deeds what the love of the divine master had inscribed in the depths of their hearts.

These perfect disciples knew what the Scriptures said: Almsgiving blots out sin as water extinguishes a fire; To bury one's alms in the bosom of a poor man is to plant seed in rich and blessed soil; a Christian's whole ambition is to lay up imperishable treasures and riches.

What affected them even more, however, is that they perceived Jesus Christ under the outward figure of the poor. They recognized him beneath the old rags and tattered clothes; they saw him pinched by hunger, burning with thirst and crushed by hardship and exhaustion. Such glimpses, visible to them through the greatness of their faith, made them count all the effort, time, labor and difficulties (peines) they offered as nothing, as long as they could thereby assist those who held for them the place of Jesus Christ. If only they could have given they lives for him who shed the last drop of his blood for them, their happiness would have been complete.

The practice of almsgiving does not require a precept; all that is needed is faith. From the moment someone believes that it is Jesus Christ who is suffering in the poor, Jesus Christ who puts out his hand, Christianity means not closing one's own hand and thus not risking the scathing reproach: "I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not receive me. I was naked and you did not clothe me. I was sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Amen, I tell you, as often as you neglected to do it to one of the least of those who believe in me, you neglected to do it to me" ⁹⁵.

The monks of the early centuries gave alms out of their poverty; those of our time should at least do so out of their abundance. The first monks were as poor as those they helped by their charity; only their own heavy and constant labor enabled to aid them. Monks of today have both the means and the obligation to assist the poor, through the revenues they receive from the generosity of the faithful. The first monks gave alms because they had great faith. Monks of today, apart from being obliged on the same ground of faith, are bound on another score- the express desire of their founders. These bequeathed their goods and possessions to them only to impose a double duty: to labor incessantly before God for the expiation of their sins by prayer and almsgiving.

Monks must therefore consider themselves as bound and committed by the founders' intentions. They are the executors of a testament, chosen to disburse goods whose use and

⁹⁵ Matthew 25: 42. 43. 45.

employment have already been determined. To prevent them from thinking of themselves as owners and proprietors when they are no more than administrators, and to prevent them from imagining that they have fulfilled all their obligations when they feed and clothe a given number of religious, sing the office and carry out their ordinary duties and tasks, they should take account of the fact, and make it a habit to reflect on it, that in the intention of those who have founded monasteries, they are not simply places of penance and prayer, but public centers of almsgiving and charity in perpetuity (pp. 351-354).

Chapter XX On Vigils

Question I: What reasons led the monks of old to such a strict and rigorous observance of vigils?

Answer: The first solitaries had no more ardent desire than to correspond to God's will and to reach the perfection for which God had destined them. They dedicated themselves to avoiding all the obstacles that could prevent them from achieving this goal and to seeking out all the means that could enable them to attain it. It seemed to them that vigils could be a great help in their plan, and therefore they limited their sleep to the minimum, allowing it only as much time as could not be denied to the needs and necessities of nature.

They chose to act thus, in the first place, because they considered it a special blessing to be conformed in this way to Jesus Christ. After spending all his day in exercising his ministry and instructing the people, he used to pass the whole night in solitude and prayer.

Secondly, they could imitate the apostles, who following the master's example, sang God's praises while the rest of the world took its rest, as we read in the book of Acts.

Third, their devotion led them to adopt the holy practice so widespread among Christians of the primitive Church. These used to assemble at night to give themselves to prayer in common and encourage one another through reading texts of Scripture and singing hymns and canticles. The days were too short to allow expression for the ardor of their zeal and of their love. Or perhaps they wanted to hold themselves in constant readiness for the second coming of Jesus Christ, in accord with the belief that he would come to judge the world in the middle of the night: *Media nocte clamor factus est. Ecce sponsus venit, exite obviam ei* 96.

Fourth, these men could not help having a love for vigils. They regarded sleep as a form of degradation, aware that in this state the actions of the spirit are suspended and that as long as the suspension lasts man is deprived of his nobility and his special dignity. He becomes just like the other creatures, despite the great privileges God has bestowed on him.

Fifth, it was a source of great suffering to the saints to think that while they slept, no one kept watch over the "temple of God". His enemies were able to enter it more easily, extending their power and malign influence over the senses, and throwing the whole inward and outward man into disorder and confusion.

Sixth, they knew, as a great solitary once declared, that vigils cool the heat of lusts, banish evil dreams, give rise to tears of repentance, touch the heart, turn us faithful and vigilant in the custody of thoughts, mortify the passions, refrain indiscrete liberty of speech, and drive away the clouds and scatter the phantasms that soil the purity of our spirit and disturb our sleep. They knew that it is during evening prayer and night prayer that true solitaries gather up all the riches of virtue and the whole wealth of knowledge. (pp. 328-331).

96 Matthew 25: 6.

Brothers, you perceive the authority there is for monastic vigils and their great necessity, and how solid and holy are the motives and reasonings that led the saints to introduce them. Yet even though they contain almost infinite blessings, you will never receive any fruit from them at all, unless you practice them with the requisite dispositions.

Briefly put: As vocal prayer is nothing unless joined to prayer of the spirit, vigils of the eyes will do you hardly any good unless you keep vigil over your heart, and your senses will stay awake to no purpose if your souls are sunk in lethargy or slumber. The prayers we address to God at night do not contribute to our salvation unless they are accompanied by ardent zeal, true religiousness and a piety that makes them worthy of a hearing(pp. 335-336).

Chapter XXII **On Patiently Enduring Infirmity and Illness**

Question I: What are the right dispositions of a religious who is ill?

Answer: He should enter wholeheartedly into God's intentions for him. God makes him ill so that the pain which his illness causes him may reproduce what Jesus Christ endured on the cross, that he may become more assimilated to Christ and as a result become purer, more perfect and more holy. For this reason he should accept the illnesses that befall him not only with resignation, but with thanksgiving. Let him consider his afflictions as remedies God employs for the healing of his soul, and say with the prophet in profound gratitude: "Lord, I accept the chalice destined to effect my salvation; for ever will I bless your saving help." In this way he will put an end to the desires, inconformity, restlessness and irritation which instead of letting him benefit from his sicknesses, make him more subject to his passions than he was before (pp. 431-432).

Question II: Is it appropriate for a religious who is ill to consult doctors and take remedies?

Answer: To answer your question, brothers, I would say that the first solitaries lived in such detachment from creatures and such abandonment to God that in time of illness the majority of them looked to him alone for their healing. Their living faith, disdain for earthly things and desire to be united to Jesus Christ made them reject all human aid. They left it entirely to God to decide if they would live or die(p. 432).

....People without faith or light can think of illness as calamity and a stroke of ill fortune, get angry and impatient over it and do whatever they can to avoid it. But you, brothers, who live by faith, whom God nourishes with his word, whom he teaches the sacred truths he has learned from his Father and who by a special privilege linked to your profession are consecrated to his cross and able to say with the apostle: *Stigmata Domini Jesu in corpore meo porto* 97 - "I bear the marks of the passion of Jesus Christ in my body" - can't you regard these events as precious occasions, the result of the watchful diligence God our Father has for his elect? Wouldn't it be possible for you to endure them not simply resignedly and uncomplainingly but with a feeling of intense joy and authentic gratitude?

Glory for Christians means the glory of Jesus Christ. As he himself knew no other glory in this world than to ceaselessly offer himself as a victim to God the Father for the exaltation of his holy

97 Galat. 6: 17

name, there can be no other glory for us as well but to offer ourselves like him for the same end and in the same spirit.

He has chosen to make the happiness of those who live and die in his love and service dependent on their faithfulness in penance. He wants them to share his sufferings and labors before they share his rest and blessedness, that here within time they may inaugurate the blessed likeness they will have with him for all eternity. Our frailties, illnesses and sufferings are simultaneously the remedy for our sins, the working out of God's judgments, the sign of our reconciliation with him and the pledge of our future crowns (pp. 451-452).

..... What should confirm a solitary even more in the love of his sufferings is the knowledge that he has assumed a twofold obligation to imitate those of Jesus Christ, by his baptismal vows and by the vows of his profession. God has chosen his elect from before all time, yet this choice cannot be carried out in heaven until the elect have become conformed to his Son on earth. The solitary sees that he is utterly powerless to manifest in his life the cruel persecutions, the bloody scourging, the crowning with thorns, the crucifixion filled with pain and shame and all the other atrocities of the Passion. He can only submit unreservedly to corporal and spiritual mortification, to vigils, fasting, and manual labor, insofar as far as the law of God and the rule he has professed permit, in the just fear that should he ever diminish the weight of the cross laid upon him, whether through disordered self-love or natural compassion, he would lose all its merit and its reward.

If those who take it on themselves to hold back penitents in their course and impose narrow limits on their austerities ever thought about the harm they cause by their bad advice, they would certainly be a little more reticent. If they only understood that they deny God the honor he receives from the genuine and sincere repentance of a sinner, prevent Jesus Christ from triumphing over the powers of hell, grieve the Holy Spirit, deprive the Church of the edification it draws and the sinner of the profit and consolation he attains from his penance. It is written that a sinner's repentance fills heaven with rejoicing. Can we doubt that the one responsible for the fact that this penance does not reach its full extent and integrity brings heaven grief and sorrow instead of comfort and joy?

Someone who knew the magnitude and number of sins, the hidden attitudes of those who commit them, the depth of God's judgments, the rigor of his justice- such a person could speak with some intelligence about those who lead lives of penance... It could be said that so much care has been taken to make the paths smooth and take away the thorns and thistles that anyone wishing to return to Christ, from whatever country he begins, makes the whole journey on broad and even roads. People have not dared to openly deny the necessity of carrying Christ's cross- his own words are too clear for that- but they have had no scruple in weakening the obligation, or in making it possible to slip out of it by the manner in which they describe it or the way they propose for fulfilling it. The secret has been discovered, in almost all states and professions of religion (tous les états et les professions) for uniting the cross and making it compatible with the weakness and softness of an easy, comfortable and lax style of life. Can we be surprised when people consider exaggeration and culpable singularity anything that goes beyond the common practices and the ordinary ways?

It is true that Jesus Christ has offered himself to the Father as a sacrificial victim for the reconciliation of the world. The grace he implored for it has been granted, through his insistent prayers, the infinite value of his death and the merit of his blood. But men must make this grace their own through their personal sufferings. The verdict God pronounced against them on account of sin has never been revoked; it is still in force. What Jesus Christ has changed is the *nature* of the penalty and has sanctified it. Instead of being the sign of a curse and the memorial to God's

wrath, our punishments have become the steps by which human beings can mount up to the happiness Jesus Christ has merited for them through his own.

Jesus Christ has totally taken upon himself the punishment for sin, but has not exempted men from suffering. He has drunk the chalice to make us worthy to drink it after him, desiring that it pass from his lips to the lips of all sinners in keeping with the prophet's words: *Bibent omnes peccatores terrae* 98. The bitterest part he has set aside for people after his own heart, those especially consecrated to him. Were we to aspire to glory without advancing towards it by participation in his sufferings we would simply deceive ourselves. We would overturn the necessary, holy and adorable order that Christ set up in the world through his own example and destroy the divine correspondence that must exist between the head and the members. All this rather than bearing in our body the dying of Jesus, as the holy apostle says...rather than nailing our concupiscence, our passions and all the inclinations of nature to the cross with the nails of mortification and penance.

This is your lot, my brothers, whatever anyone may say. It is your heritage; it is your dignity. It is the mark of distinction with which God has chosen to honor you, summoning you by it to his glory and calling you to the inheritance of his saints (pp. 487-491).



98 Psalm 74: 9.