

Abbot St. Columban: The Monastic Rule, c. 590)

ABOVE all things we must love God Oh our whole heart and with our whole mind and our neighbor as ourselves; all our works must be informed with this love.

1. At the first word of a superior all; rise to obey, because by obeying they obey God, according to the word of the Lord Jesus: "He that heareth you, heareth me." If, therefore any hearing a word of command don't rise straightway he shall be judged disobedient. Whoever contradicts incurs the crime of contumacy; he is not only guilty of disobedience but by opening the gateway of refracturiness to others he becomes the seducer of many. If anyone obeys with grumbling, his obedience, not coming from the heart, is disobedience; therefore, until he shows his good will, his work is of no avail.

To what limits should obedience be carried? Obedience unto death is certainly enjoined on us, because Christ was obedient to His Father for us, unto death. "Let this mind be in you," says the Apostle, "which was also in Christ Jesus: who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and inhabit found as a man. He humbled Himself, becoming obedient (to His Father) unto death, even to the death of the cross." The true disciple of Christ must obey in all things; no matter how hard or distasteful the task laid upon him may be, he must set about its fulfillment with zeal and joy, because only such obedience is acceptable to the Lord, who says: "He that taketh not up his cross, and followeth Me, is not worthy of Me." Wherefore also He says of the disciple worthy of Him: "Where I am, there also shall My minister be with Me."

2. The Rule of silence must be diligently observed, for it is written: "The service of justice shall be quietness and peace." All superfluity of words must be avoided; except in cases of necessity or utility, the monk must be silent, because, according to the Scripture, "in the multitude of words there shall not want sin." Hence our Savior says: "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." Justly indeed shall they be condemned who would not, though able, speak just words, but preferred in their garrulousness to speak wicked, unjust, ungodly, vain, injurious, double-meaning, false, quarrelsome, abusive, shameful, absurd, blasphemous, harsh, and crooked words. These and such like words must never pass the lips of the monk, whose tongue must ever be governed by prudence and right reason, lest by his talkativeness he be betrayed into detractions and contradictions born of pride.

3. The food of the monks shall be coarse, consisting of cabbage, vegetables, flour mixed with water, and a biscuit, and taken toward evening. Surfeiting must be guarded against

in eating, and drunkenness in drinking, so that what is partaken may sustain, not injure, the body, for by overloading the stomach the mind becomes stupid. Those who look out for the eternal reward should satisfy only their real needs in this life. True discretion requires that food and work shall be duly proportioned. It is reasonable to promote spiritual progress by bringing the flesh into subjection by abstinence, but if abstinence is practiced to excess, it ceases to be a virtue and becomes a vice. Hence the monk must fast daily, but also daily refresh his body with food; since he must indulge his body, he must do so sparingly and by means of the coarsest food; for only to this end does he eat daily that he may be able to make daily progress in virtue, pray daily, work daily, and read daily.

4. Monks to whom for Christ's sake the world is crucified and who are crucified to the world, must sedulously guard against covetousness, seeing that it is wrong for them not only to be possessed of superfluities, but even to desire them. It is not what they possess that matters, but rather how their wills are affected by their possessions. Those who have left all things to follow Christ the Lord with the cross of daily fear have treasure in heaven. Therefore, as they are to possess much in heaven, they ought to be content with little, nay, with the barest necessities on earth, remembering that in monks covetousness is a leprosy, as it was in Giezi, of the sons of the prophets; and the cause of treason and perdition, as it was in the disciple of Christ, and of death, as it was in Ananias and Sapphira, the half-hearted followers of the Apostles. Utter nakedness, therefore, and contempt of earthly goods is the first perfection of the monk; the second is the cleansing of the heart from every vice; the third, perfect and unbroken love of God and of divine things, which is the fruit of renouncement of all things of earth. Few indeed are the things that are really necessary to us to sustain life, or rather, according to the words of the Lord, but one thing, food. We need, however, to have our senses purified by the grace of God to understand spiritually the words of our Lord to Martha.

5. The danger of vanity is shown by the few words addressed by our Savior to His disciples, whose joy that spirits were subject to them was mingled with thoughts of vanity: "I saw Satan like lightning falling from heaven"; and to the Jews who justified themselves before men He says: "That which is high to men, is an abomination to God." From these words and the well-known instance of the Pharisee whose works, though good in themselves, were not acceptable in the sight of God because he vaingloriously boasted of them (whereas the sins of the Publican, humbly confessed, were forgiven), we may gather that vanity and self-exaltation are the ruin of every good work. Therefore let no boastful word ever proceed out of the mouth of the monk, lest even his greatest work be rendered useless thereby.

6. The chastity of the monk is judged by his thoughts. To him as well as to the disciples

who heard them spoken these words of the Lord are addressed: "Whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart.- Let him anxiously watch, lest He to whom he is consecrated, looking on him, find in his heart that which is abominable; lest, according to the words of St. Peter, he have eyes full of lust and adultery. What does it profit him to be chaste in body if he is not chaste in mind? For God is a spirit and makes our spirit His dwelling place if He find it undefiled, free from adulterous thoughts and all stain of sin.

7. How necessary discretion is to the monk is shown by the errors of many and the ruin of not a few who, running their course without discretion, and persisting in it without this guiding knowledge, failed to bring it to a praiseworthy end. For, just as those who journey away from the path must necessarily go astray, so also will those who live without discretion of necessity fall into excess, which is opposed to virtue, for virtue is the mean between two extremes. On the right and the left of the path of discretion the enemy places diverse stumbling-blocks and snares. We must therefore pray to God to grant us the light of true discretion to lighten the pathway of our life, surrounded as it is on all sides by the dense darkness of the world. Discretion comes from the word *diseernere*, which means to separate, to distinguish; it is the faculty by which we distinguish what is good from what is bad, what is mediocre from what is perfect. Just as light and darkness, so also were good and evil divided from the beginning, after evil had entered into the world through the devil. God having enlightened men to distinguish between them. Thus Abel, the God-fearing, chose good: Cain, the godless, evil. All the things that God made were good, but the devil, with deceitful cunning, over sowed evil among the good. What things, then, are good? Those which remained whole and uncorrupted as they were created, which God, according to the Apostle, "hath prepared that we should walk in them, the good works in which we are created in Christ Jesus"; which are, goodness, integrity, piety, justice, truth, mercy, charity, salutary peace, spiritual joy, with the fruit of the Spirit: all these with their fruits are good. The things that are contrary to these are evil, which are, malice, impiety, injustice, lying, avarice, hatred, discord, bitterness, with the manifold fruits horn of them. For the fruits of both good and evil are innumerable.

We who have the assistance of God must at all times hold fast to what is good. In prosperity as well as in adversity we must implore the divine help that we may not be puffed up with pride when it goes well with us, nor be cast down with despair when it goes ill with us. True discretion is the inseparable companion of Christian humility and opens the way to perfection to the true soldier of Christ.

If we weigh all our actions in the just balance of true discretion, we shall never be betrayed into error; if we walk by the divine light of true discretion, we "shall not go

aside neither to the right hand, nor to the left," but keep ever on the straight way, chanting with the conquering Psalmist the words: "Oh my God, enlighten my darkness, for by Thee I shall be delivered from temptation." For "the life of man upon earth is a temptation."

8. Mortification is the most important part of the monastic rule. "Do nothing without counsel," says the Holy Scripture. Wherefore, if nothing is to be done without counsel, everything must be done with counsel.

Hence Moses commanded: "Ask thy father, and he will declare to thee, the elders and they will tell thee." Though this may appear hard to the hard of heart, viz., that a man be always dependent on the will of another, it is nevertheless sweet to those that fear God, if it be practiced to the letter and not in part only; for nothing is sweeter, nothing gives greater peace and security to the mind than a peaceful conscience, and nothing is better calculated to procure this peace of conscience than the renunciation of one's own judgment. "There is greater danger in judging," someone has said, "than in being judged." The monk who always seeks counsel and acts on it, will never go wrong; for even though the counsel he receives be wrong, his faith and obedience will be right and will be rewarded. But if a person, whose duty it is to ask counsel, acts on his own impulse, he errs by the very fact that he presumes to judge for himself when he should have allowed others to judge for him; and even if what he does be good, it will profit him little, seeing that he swerved from the right course while doing it: he whose sole duty it is to obey, never dares to judge for himself.

If this be so, the monk must fly all pride of liberty, and learn to obey with true humility, without hesitation, without murmuring, for only then will the yoke of Christ be sweet and His burden light. Until he has learned the humility of Christ, he cannot taste the sweetness of the yoke of Christ nor the lightness of His burden. For the soul, harassed with sin and toil, finds repose only in humility. Humility is its sole refreshment amidst so many evils. The more it withdraws itself from the vanity and uncertainty without, the more rest and refreshment will it find within. What before seemed bitter, and hard, and painful, will now be light, and smooth, and pleasant. Mortification is indeed intolerable to the proud and hard of heart, but a consolation to him who loves only what is meek and lowly. No one, however, it must be remembered, can attain to the full possession of the felicity of this martyrdom unless all his desires, all his aspirations be directed toward it. to the exclusion of every other aim whatsoever.

The mortification of the monk is threefold: he must never think what he pleases, never speak what he pleases, never go where he pleases. No matter how distasteful the command imposed on him may be, he shall always say to his superior: "Not as I will, but

as thou wilt," after the example of our Savior, who says elsewhere: "I came down from heaven, not to do My will, but the will of Him that sent Me."

9. The monk shall live in a monastery under the rule of one father and in the company of many brethren, in order that he may learn humility from one, patience from another. One will teach him silence, another meekness. He shall not do what pleases him; he shall eat what is set before him, clothe himself with what is given him, do the work assigned to him, be subject to a superior whom he does not like. He shall go to bed so tired that he may fall asleep while going, and rise before he has had sufficient rest. If he suffers ill-usage, he shall be silent; he shall fear the head of the monastery as a master, and love him as a father, being ever convinced that what he commands is profitable to him; nor shall he criticize the words of the elders because it is his duty to obey and to do what he is bidden, as Moses says: "Attend, and hear, oh Israel."