The Via Vitae
of St. Benedict
by
Bernard Hayes

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THE VIA VITÆ OF ST. BENEDICT
Rihil Obstat.

D. EDMUNDUS KENDAL, S.T.D.

Imprimatur.

D. AIDANUS GASQUET,

ABBAS PRÆSES CONGR. ANGL., O.S.B.
"Christus Dominus sic allocutus est: Ille est monachus Benedicti, qui plus obedit Regulæ quam carni."—S. Birgitta: Revel. l. 4, c. 127.

"The man of God (Benedict), besides so many miracles which made him famous amongst men, was also held in high repute as a teacher; for he wrote a Rule for Monks, both excellent in its discretion and eloquent in style. If anyone desires to know more of his manner of life, he can find all that the Master did in this Rule; for the holy man could not in any way teach otherwise than he lived."—Second Book of Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great, c. xxxvi.

"In omnibus igitur omnes magistram sequantur regulam, neque ab ea temere declinetur a quocum."—S. Reg., cap. ill.

"Ecce pietate sua demonstrat nobis Dominus viam vitæ."—Prologus in Regulam.
INTRODUCTION

The idea of this book is to gather and make it available to many members of the Benedictine family and others. A series of devout Meditations on the Rule of St. Benedict is virtually a novelty at the present day; for although in past times monastic affections and elevations in the Early Rule have been given to the world by one or other of its numerous commentators they are not easily accessible in a form adapted for use. Moreover, the present publication aims at providing the reader with materials for pursuing that "brief and pure" method of prayer which is recommended by St. Benedict himself.

The holy Patriarch gives no explicit instruction how to pray. To him as to those Fathers of the Eastern Church and of the desert whose traditions he carried on, "prayer" is simply the agreement of the heart with God. Vocal prayer or psalmody was to fill up a large portion of each day, and mental prayer was to continue, as far as possible, during all the waking hours not occupied by the Divine Office.

*Lett. 5 Benedict. 1: 10*
INTRODUCTION

In St. Benedict's time there was no fixed time for "meditation"—no hour or half-hour in which the whole community knelt in their places in Church and devoted themselves to the exercise of mental prayer. A monk, as far as possible, should pray always. St. Benedict was intimately acquainted with the writings of Cassian, whose disciple he calls himself. We may be sure that he strongly held, with the ancients whom Cassian quotes in his first Conference, that the monk's grand aim was θεωπλα, or "contemplation"—the inherence of the soul on Divine things and on God. With Cassian, he was far from thinking that the attainment of contemplation—that is to say, of anything like continuous and intense application of the spirit to God—was an easy matter. All the means and instruments for the gradual acquisition of such a spiritual condition, which are entered into at great length by Cassian in the Conference I have quoted, and in the ninth Conference, were, without doubt, insisted on and explained at Monte Cassino. But we find no trace of "methods," if by methods we mean a business-like marshalling of the mental powers and faculties to produce a special effect in a given time. It would be absurd to suppose that St. Benedict and his school of spirituality did not give a novice useful directions as to how to use the imagination, the reason, and the will. This kind of instruction is of the essence of all "methods"; and the "methods" which have been devised and delivered to the world by great Saints and masters in all ages have invariably dealt with these essential factors in "contemplation."
INTRODUCTION

Of the practical utility of "methods" there can be no doubt whatever; but it is always useful to go back to the teachings of the desert—that a man has no other purpose in this life except to fix his spirit upon his God. It is not in itself a sin if he fails to make any considerable success in this great undertaking, but the better he succeeds the more perfect he is. Meanwhile he may, and must, make use of means, instruments, and "methods," but must never mistake the means or the method for the end itself.

Almost the only direction which St. Benedict gives in regard to mental prayer—oratio, as he calls it, in distinction to psalmodia—is that it should be "short and pure"—brevis et pura. Here, again, he follows Cassian. What is meant by "pure" prayer is explained in the third chapter of the ninth Conference. "Pure" prayer in that chapter is the prayer of a soul that is neither under the dominion of passions and lusts, nor habitually distracted with earthly solicitudes. No one can hope to attain to genuine and constant prayer unless he has subdued his nature, his self-love, and his pride. For "pure" prayer is prayer made with all the force of the purified heart. When St. Benedict goes on to say that prayer should be short, he is again referring to the teachings of the Conferences. The ancient Fathers recommended short forms and short spells. They found a pattern for all Christian prayer in the Our Father. It was in the ardent and fervent utterance of its petitions, and in the use of the innumerable pregnant elevations of Holy Scripture, that they found the shortest and most effective way
to intimate communion with God. Prayer, moreover, was not to be kept too long at its highest point of intensity. For beginners, and proportionately for all, it was advisable not to strain Nature too severely. We read, indeed, that not a few of the monks of the desert, in their ardour, and, we may say, with that indiscretion which was sometimes found among them, would prolong the effort of prayer till exhausted nature broke down, and fervour gave way to discouragement and disgust. St. Benedict recognized that no general rule could be given for the length of each individual monk's strenuous prayer; the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was to be the guide. But we cannot be wrong in supposing that he would not have considered two half-hours daily, or, indeed, two hours, to be more than discretion would allow.

There is a phrase in the twentieth chapter of the Rule which has sometimes been misunderstood. The holy legislator goes on to say that "in the assembly"—that is, when the community are making prayer in common—"prayer should never be prolonged"—omnisno brevitur. This direction does not refer, as has already been implied, to what we now know as the "meditation" made by the whole of the monks together. We are told that the monks of the earliest times were accustomed at the end of each psalm of the Office to fall prostrate for a period of silent prayer. This custom survives in the collect, or oratio, which is said by the priest at the end of each canonical hour. Perhaps also, at the termination of each Office, this secret prayer was usually
more distinctly prolonged. It is easy to see how an indiscreet fervour might lead the presiding Superior to lengthen out this feature of the common Office, and it is against this that St. Benedict here lays down a rule.

No book that is offered as an aid to mental prayer can be expected to be useful to all persons and at all times. But there will be many, especially among those who wear the habit of St. Benedict, who will be assisted at some period of their spiritual experience by the reflections and pious acts of which this book is made up. It seems to suggest most efficiently the true relation of meditation or consideration to what the Ven. Father Baker calls "affectuous actuation"—a relation which is insisted upon in all the text-books, but which is much more readily taken in when, as in these pages, it is shown by example.

+ J. C. H.
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VIA VITÆ OF ST. BENEDICT
THE HOLY RULE ARRANGED FOR
MENTAL PRAYER

There can be no doubt that to many people the morning meditation is the most difficult spiritual exercise of the day. The exercise of mental prayer does not require special gifts of mind or learning. All that is needed is an honest wish and a real endeavour to pray to God. Why, then, is this morning exercise so difficult to many souls? There may be many reasons. Chief amongst these is a want of proper instruction. The word "meditation," which we generally use, is misleading. It suggests, to some extent, a mental exercise which is beyond the ordinary mind at any time, and beyond most minds at an early hour of the morning. It leads one to think that the subject-matter has to be dwelt upon, drawn out in fullest detail and in logical order, and that when one is able to do this one can "meditate." The exercise is not "meditation," but "mental prayer." We make use of meditation to rouse ourselves to
pray, and for this only. It is a means to an end, and we must use the means only in so far as is necessary. The end or object is to pray. Long and formal meditations were not known amongst the early monks. Their prayer was affective or contemplative. St. Alphonsus says: "For you religious all your mental prayer should consist of acts and petitions."

When, therefore, a person thinks "I cannot make a meditation," let him analyze what his thought means. It means that he cannot work through a subject mentally. This needs a trained mind. It may be a useful exercise in the preparation of a sermon. But we come before God to pray, and anyone who is serious and mortified can pray. To pray well, of course, is difficult, because one's general life has to be of a high standard before this can be done. But to pray in a way pleasing to God should not be hard.

It is a common complaint that it is hard to find a book which appeals to the heart and raises it to prayer. There is, however, one book which must appeal to and influence every Benedictine—viz., the Holy Rule. In this Rule we have all that we need. Its words come from the lips of our Holy Father. It is our duty to assimilate his teaching, and we must form our spiritual character upon the Rule. It should be our handbook through life. In it we shall find subject-matter for prayer sufficient for our lifetime; and the more frequently and deepy we think and pray upon the text of the Holy Rule, the more Benedictine in spirit we shall become.

If we take the text of the Holy Rule as the subject-matter of our mental prayer, we shall find in it not
only thoughts of the utmost importance to us, but also a store of holy aspirations and ejaculations which may be "darted forth" to God. Haeften (Tract VIII., Disq. vii.) says:

"I cannot pass by without mention that pious and fruitful reading of the Rule which consists in turning the Rule into prayer, so that by this means it may be impressed more firmly on the mind, and at the same time being prayer, obtain the grace of strength to fulfil it. St. Francis Borgia, we read, used to turn St. Thomas' Theology into litanies, so that his study was prayer, and his disputations about God were held with God. This example of pious industry may be applied to the Rule. Alcuin, in his book 'De Psalmorum usu,' under the heading 'Oratio Monachorum,' weaves the very words of St. Benedict into a prayer, and bequeaths it for the recitation of the monks."

Three short and simple acts should be said as a preparation for our mental prayer—viz., an act of Faith—i.e., of the Presence of God; an act of Contrition—i.e., of humility and sorrow for sin; and an act of Petition, that we may pray well. Two or three minutes should suffice for these preparatory acts. After this we should get the thought of the passage of the Rule quite clearly before us, and then pray upon it. As Haeften suggests, we may turn the very words of the Rule into aspirations and ejaculations. We must take great care, however, not to allow the exercise to become mere vocal prayer. The ejaculations must be dwelt upon, said slowly, repeated, made our own. We should never be anxious to get
through the matter set for one meditation, nor leave one thought or aspiration for another, until we have extracted all that is helpful to us in it. "Let us remember that not for much speaking, but for our purity of heart and tears of compunction shall we be heard. Our prayer, therefore, ought to be short and pure, except it be prolonged by the inspiration of Divine Grace" (Rule, c. xx.). Though it is wise to minimize mere "meditation" as much as possible, we must take care that our prayer is "meditative," i.e., full of thought, meaning, realization. We must not do away with thought because we are praying. Prayer is the raising not only of the heart but of the mind also to God. The Psalmist says: "In meditatively mea exardescet ignis"; so we must turn our thoughts into prayer, and put thought into our prayers.

When the time is drawing to a close, we can make some resolution which will suggest itself from what has gone before. The custom of making a different resolution every day is apt to teach one rather how to forget resolutions than how to keep them. We should not change the resolution often, but let one be kept to for some time until some fault has been checked or some virtue obtained.

As a conclusion, make an act of thanksgiving and of petition for help to keep your resolution.

The text of the Holy Rule, used in this way, should not only become fixed in the memory, but should be a great motive-power in the will.

In conclusion, we should be zealous to improve the quality of our prayer rather than to increase the
quantity. This can only be done by a greater spirit of mortification and of abstraction of life.

PROLOGUE

I.

Text.

Ausculta, o fili, precepta Magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui, et admonitionem piæ Patris libenter excipe, et efficaciter comple; ut ad eum, per obedientiam laborarem redessas, a quo per inobediéntiam desiderias recesseras.

Hearken, O my son, to the precepts of thy Master, and incline the ear of thine heart; receive with joy and faithfully fulfill the admonition of the loving Father, that thou mayest return by the labour of obedience to Him from Whom thou hast departed through the snare of disobedience.

Thoughts.

I. God speaks to you through St. Benedict: "Ausculta"—"Hearken."

Consider the attitude of soul necessary when God speaks:

(a) Attention, and the humility of a child—Ausculta, o fili.

(b) Docility; et admonitionem libenter excipe—i.e., with joy.

(c) Resolution; efficaciter comple—i.e., faithfully fulfill.

Prayer (to be dwelt on and made one's own).

Hearken, O my Soul; be attentive to the voice of thy God.

Thy loving Father admonishes thee.

How gladly, O my loving Father, shall I listen to Thy voice!

May I faithfully obey Thy commands in my daily life.
II. What does this loving Father say to you?
"Return to Me by the labour of obedience."
"Your sloth of disobedience has led you from Me."
Make answer to your Father:
I will return to Thee.
The labour is trying, but day by day will I obey Thee in every duty.
I will wear out my self-will by fidelity to daily obedience.
I will no longer slothfully take my ease and follow my own will.

II.

Text.

Ad te ergo nunc meus sermo dirigatur, quiaquis abrenuntiatus propris voluntatibus, Domino Christo vero Regi militaturus, obedientiae fortissima atque praeclera arma sumis. To thee, therefore, my words are now addressed, whoever thou art that, renouncing thine own will, dost take up the strong and bright weapon of obedience, in order to fight for the Lord Christ, our true King.

Thoughts.

It is well to realize from the very beginning what is the object of the religious life. It is to renounce your own will in order to return to God. Self-will is the source of all sin. St. Bernard says: "What does God hate or punish except self-will? Let self-will cease, and there will be no hell. On what does that fire feed except on self-will?"

How is self-will to be defeated? St. Benedict puts into your hand a weapon bright and strong—viz., obedience. Obedience is a weapon—i.e., it is to be used to attack the enemy and to defend yourself.

It is bright and strong, because it is a most effective weapon against self.
PROLOGUE

The daily labour of obedience attacks self at every moment of the day.

Consider that you must not fight as one "beating the air." Therefore examine your daily life in detail. Notice how this enemy—self—intrudes into every action of the day. Examine your prayers, your work, your spirit of charity, your humility. Can you truthfully say that you have come not to do your own will, but the will of Him Who sent you? Make use of your obedience to attack some form of self-seeking.

Prayer.

My Father, I will accept Thy terms.

I see that I cannot, in any true sense, be Thy disciple unless I fight continuously against my self-will.

May I check my self-will in every duty.

May I use every obedience actively against myself.

May I value what is hard to bear, because it will break my self-will.

May I rejoice at every blow this my enemy receives.

I fight under the banner of Jesus Christ.

He was obedient even unto death.

Gird me, O Lord, with this bright weapon of obedience.

Give me wisdom to see its power.

Give me skill in its use.

I am Thy soldier; I fight in Thy cause; self is the enemy.

Help me to subdue my slothful self.

Not my will, but Thine be done.
III.

Text.

In the first place, whatever good work thou beginnest to do, beg of Him with most earnest prayer to perfect; that He Who hath now vouchsafed to count us in the number of His children, may not at any time be grieved by our evil deeds. For we must always so serve Him with the good things He hath given us, that He may never as an angry Father disinherit His children; nor as a dreadful Lord, incensed by our sins, deliver us to punishment as most wicked servants, who would not follow Him to glory. Let us then at length arise, since the Scripture stirreth us up, saying: "It is time now for us to rise from sleep." And our eyes being opened to the deifying light, let us hear with wondering ears what the Divine Voice admonisheth us, daily crying out: "To-day if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts." . . . And what sayeth He? "Come, my children, hearken to Me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Run while ye have the light of life, lest the darkness of death seize hold of you."

Thoughts.

We have considered the call of God to rouse ourselves from our sloth and pleasure to return to Him. We have to overcome self by the labour of obedience. We have accepted a great responsibility, and must look to God for help to be faithful. It is God Who has begun the work, and it is God Who brings it to perfection. St. Benedict puts before us the motives of love and fear.
PRLOGUE

Prayer.

May I realize my weakness and dependence on Thee, O my God.

Instantia mea orationes deprecationes. I shall fail in my purpose unless Thou dost help me.

earnestly. I will beg Thy help frequently and

Thou hast deigned to make me one of Thy children.

My Father, I will try never to grieve Thee by my wickedness.

Thou hast given me many gifts of nature and of grace.

I will serve Thee with them all my days.

Iratus pater. If I am faithless, Thou wilt be angry.

If I refuse to follow Thee to Heaven,

Thou wilt chastise me in Thy wrath, and send me to eternal punishment.

Therefore, rouse yourself, open your eyes to the Light, and your ears to God’s voice.

It is time now to rise from my sloth and tepidity.

Hodie si voce. To-day I will obey God’s voice.

Nolite obdurare. No longer will I harden my heart.

Death is near, and Thy Judgment, O God! Teach me Thy fear. May I work while it is yet day, “for the night cometh, when no man can work.”

Ne tenhabis mortis. May I run in Thy ways while I have the light of life, lest the darkness of death seize me.
THE VIA VITÆ OF ST. BENEDICT

IV.

Text.

Et quaerens Dominus in multitudo populi, cui haec clamat, operarinti suum, iterum dicit: "Quis est homo, qui vult vitam, et cupit videre dies bonos?" Quod si tu audiens, respondes: "Ego"; dicit tibi Deus: "Si vis habere veram et perpetuam vitam, prohibe lingua tuam a malo, et labia tua ne loquatur dolum. Divert a malo; et fac bonum; inquire pacem et sequere eam."

And the Lord, seeking His own workman in the multitude of the people to whom He thus cried out, saith again: "Who is the man that will have life, and desireth to see good days?" And if thou, hearing Him, answer, "I am he," God saith to thee: "If thou wilt have true and everlasting life, keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips that they speak no guile. Turn from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it."

Thoughts.

Consider that God has called you by a special religious vocation. You have been chosen out of the multitude. You have answered God's call, because you have realized that in His work alone is true life to be found and real happiness. God has called you to be His workman.

Consider what God requires of His workman.

Works; deeds, more than professions.

God says to His workman: Guard the tongue; avoid sin; strive after virtue. Seek and pursue that true peace which comes from self-conquest.

Prayer.

I have offered myself to be Thy workman, O my God.

I thank Thee for choosing me out of the multitude of the people.

I will work for Thee all the days of my life.

Let me never love the earthly life and happiness.
PROLOGUE

May I turn from evil, O my Master.
May I strive even against lesser sins and
imperfections.
May I strive to become virtuous in thought, desire,
and deed.
May Thy will be done, and not mine.
In this way shall I gain Thy peace.
The "peace of Christ" is for those who
overcome themselves.
Reward my efforts with Thy peace.
May Thy peace accompany all my efforts after
virtue.

V.
Text.

Et cum haec feceritis, oculi
mei super vos, et aures meae ad
preces vestras. Et antequam
me invocetis, dicam; "Ecce
adsum." Quid dulcius nobis
hac voce Domini invitantis nos,
fratres carissimi? Ecce pietate
sua demonstrat nobis Dominus
viam vitae. Succinctis ergo fide,
vel observantia bonorum actuum,
lumbis nostris, per ducatum
Evangelii pergamus itinera ejus.
. . . In cujus regni tabernaculo
si volumus habitare, nisi illuc
bonis actibus currendo, minime
perveniratur.

And when you have done these
things, My eyes will be upon
you, and My ears will be open
to your prayers; and before you
call upon Me, I will say unto
you, "Behold, I am here!"
What can be sweeter to us,
dearest brethren, than this voice
of the Lord inviting us? Behold,
in His loving-kindness, the Lord
sheweth unto us the way of Life.
Having our loins, therefore,
girded with faith, and the per-
formance of good works, let us
walk in His paths by the guid-
ance of the Gospel. . . . And if we
wish to dwell in the tabernacle
of His kingdom, we shall by no
means reach it unless we run
thither by our good deeds.

Thoughts.

"When you have done these things, My eyes will be
upon you," etc.
Consider how we are too fond of reading and
dreaming of beautiful ideals, and yet our practice remains what it was. This passage tells us that the increase of God's help and His rewards are given in return for deeds. Though we cannot begin the spiritual life without God's action on mind and will, yet the grace given for our subsequent progress depends generally on our faithful correspondence with the help already received. We can, therefore, in a certain sense, look upon spiritual progress as depending upon human effort and perseverance.

Prayer.

Cum haec feceritis.

Let me begin to do something for Thee, my Lord.

Thou dost not wish to reward us first.

Suscipitis ergo side humils.

We must labour in faith, believing that God will not fail us.

We must be brave enough to take a leap into the dark, trusting in God's promises and help.

"Ecco adsum." "Behold," He says, "I am by your side. My eyes are upon you. Your prayers are heard."

Demonstrat viam vitae.

He invites us, shows us the way of life, and lovingly encourages us.

Quid dulcitus. Pergamus itinera Evangelii.

How sweet, O Lord, is Thy invitation: how consoling Thy promise. Let me; then, gird myself to Thy work. However rough and dark the ways of perfection are, I will trust in Thee.

I will lead a life of faith, content to believe in Thy word, and content to wait till Thou dost disclose Thyself to me.
PROLOGUE

I know Thou art with me and wilt help me.

Let me understand that I must be practical in my endeavours, for I cannot travel the viae vitiæ except by good deeds—by avoiding sin of every kind, and by performing acts of virtue.

VI.

Text.

Sed interrogemus cum Propheta Dominum, dicentes ei: "Domine, quis habebas in tabernaculo tuo, aut quis requiescat in monte sancto tuo?" Post hanc interrogationem, fratres, audiamus Dominum respondentem, et ostendente nobis viam ipsius tabernaculi, ac dicentem: "Qui ingrediatur sine macula, et operatur instintum; qui loquitur veritatem in corde suo; qui non esit dolum in lingua sua; qui non facit proximo suo malum, et opprobrium non accept adversus proximum suum."

Quis malignum diabolum aliqua suadentem sibi, cum ipsa suasione sua a consortibus cordis sui responsus, deduxit ad nihilum, et parvulos cogitatus ejus tenuit, et allist ad Christum. Qui timentes Dominum, de bona observantia sua non se reddunt elatos, sed ipsa in se bona, non a se posse, sed a Domino fieri existimantes, operantem in se Dominum magnificat, illud cum Propheta dicentes: "Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomine tuo da gloriam." Sicut nec Paulus Apostolus de praedicatione sua sibi aliquid imputavit, dicens: "Gratias Dei summ id, quod sum." But let us ask the Lord with the prophet, saying to Him: "Lord, who shall dwell in Thy tabernacle, or who shall rest upon Thy holy hill?" After this question, brethren, let us hear the Lord answering, and showing to us the way to His tabernacle, and saying: "He that walketh without stain and worketh justice; he that speaketh truth in his heart, that hath not done guile with his tongue; he that hath done no evil to his neighbour, and hath not taken up a reproach against his neighbour:" he that hath brought the malignant evil one to naught, casting him out of his heart with all his suggestions, and hath taken his bad thoughts, while they were yet young, and dashed them down at the feet of Christ. These are they who, fearing the Lord, are not puffed up with their own good works, but, knowing that the good which is in them cometh not from themselves, but from the Lord, magnify the Lord Who worketh in them, saying with the prophet: "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give the
Et iterum ipse dicit: "Qui gloriatur, in Domino gloriatur."


"Thoughts."

1. "Lord, who shall dwell in Thy tabernacle, or who shall rest upon Thy holy hill?" (Ps. xiv. 1).

We wish to travel along the "way of life" to the kingdom of God.

Our Lord answers our questions and shows us the way to His kingdom. Let us examine ourselves upon these words of the Psalm; let us pray to our Lord upon the thoughts suggested by them. Do not pass over them hurriedly.

(a) He that walketh without stain, and worketh justice;
(b) He that speaketh truth in his heart—i.e., is true-hearted, upright, and honest in the eyes of God;
(c) He that hath not done guile with his tongue;
(d) He that hath done no evil to his neighbour;
(e) He that hath not taken up a reproach against his neighbour. St. Benedict then adds:
(f) "He that hath taken his bad thoughts, while they were yet young, and dashed them down at the feet of Christ."

2. Such workers as these "are they who, fearing the Lord, are not puffed up with their own good works."

Let us purify our intention by praying upon the texts used by St. Benedict:

"Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name, give the glory" (Ps. cxiii. 1).

"By the grace of God, I am what I am" (1 Cor. xv. 10).

"He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (2 Cor. x. 17).

3. "Hence, also, the Lord saith in the Gospel: 'He who heareth these words of Mine, and doeth them, is like a wise man who built his house upon a rock. . .' And the Lord, in fulfilment of these His words, is waiting daily for us to respond by our deeds to His holy admonitions."

Prayer.

I will be wise and build upon a rock.
I will not be content with sentiment, but will do real work for Thee, O my Master.
Thou art speaking daily to me.
Thou waitest, but I either do not hear Thy words or neglect to obey.

May I now respond by my deeds to Thy holy admonitions.

Let me prove my love for Thee by doing and suffering bravely for Thy sake whenever an opportunity occurs.

VII.

Text.

“Cum ergo interrogassamus Dominum, fratres, de habitatore tabernaculi ejus, audivimus habitandi præceptum; sed si compleamur habitatoris officium, erimus heredes regni celorum. Ergo preparanda sunt corda et corpora nostra sanctæ præceptorum obedientiae militandi; et quod minus habet in nobis natura possibile, rogemus Dominum, ut gratiae sue jubeat nobis adjutorium ministrare. Et si fugientes gehennae poenas ad vitam volumus pervenire perpetuum, dum adhuc vacat, et in hoc corpore sumus, et hæc omnia per hanc lucis viam vacat implere, currundum et agendum est modo, quod in perpetuum nobis expedit.”

“Since then, brethren, we have asked of the Lord who is to inhabit His temple, we have heard His commands to those who are to dwell there; and if we fulfil those duties, we shall be heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Our hearts, therefore, and our bodies, must be made ready to fight under the holy obedience of His commands; and let us ask God to supply by the help of His grace what by nature is not possible to us. And if we would arrive at eternal life, escaping the pains of hell, then, while there is yet time, while we are still in the flesh, and are able to fulfil all these things by the light which is given us, we must hasten to do now what will profit us for all eternity.

Thoughts.

1. We have heard the commands of God, and must obey if we wish to get to heaven. He has called us to return to Him by the labour of obedience—i.e., we have to be labourers, using obedience to subject our self-will to the Will of God. Our hearts and our bodies must be subject to God.
PROLOGUE

Prayer.

May Thy kingdom come; rule Thou my heart.

Bring into subjection every thought and desire.

May I think of Thee alone; may I desire naught save Thee.

Put Thy yoke, too, upon my body.

Tame its rebellious nature; check its love of ease and pleasure.

Help my weakness. Give me Thy grace.

Thoughts.

2. Venerable de la Puente used to say: “Do not defer the execution of thy resolutions to a later time, because, if thou dost not perform what thou canst now, thou wilt each day become capable of less.”

Prayer.

Dum adhuc vacat per hanc lucis viam. How short the time is! If we wish to accomplish anything we must begin at once, whilst the light of grace is with us.

“Confinge timore tuo carnes meas (Ps. cxviii.).

Fugientes gehennes pomas. Let me ever remember the uncertainty of life, and fear hell.

Quod in sternum nobis expediat. May I desire to dwell for ever with Thee in Thy eternal kingdom.

May I use every moment of my life so that it may profit me in eternity.

“Nunc cœpi, hæc mutatio dexteræ excelsi” (Ps. lxxvi.).

2
Constituenda est ergo nobis Dominici schola servitii; in qua institutione nihil asperum, nihil grave nos constituturos speramus. Sed et si quid paululum restrictius, diciante æquitatis ratione, propter emendationem vitiorum, vel conservationem charitatis processerit, non illico pavore perterritus refugias viam salutis, quæ non est nisi angusto initio incipienda.

We are, therefore, about to establish a school of the Lord’s service, in the setting forth of which we hope to order nothing that is harsh or rigorous. But if anything be somewhat strictly laid down, according to the dictates of sound reason, for the amendment of vices or the preservation of charity, do not, therefore, fly in dismay from the way of salvation, whose beginning cannot but be strait and difficult.

Thoughts.

The religious life is a school. There are lessons to be learned, labours to be undergone, and probably punishments to be suffered. We must always remain in the position of learners, and spend laborious days. We must be prepared for all this.

The difficulties and dryness met with lead many to lose interest in, and zeal for, the life of mortification and prayer. If they would only persevere until these become habits, they would realize how excellent is the lesson taught by St. Benedict in his school of the service of God.

Prayer.

"Thou dost chastise every one that Thou receivest," O my God.

How can I overcome my vices and turn them into virtues except by brave and persevering effort?
PROLOGUE

The lessons of virtue and of perfect service are hard and difficult.

O Jesus, Model of patience, teach me how to bear patiently all trials and tests.

Patience will soothe my anger, restrain my tongue, rule my mind, control my concupiscence, and will enable me to carry out the high lessons taught in Thy school.

I must prepare my soul for trials when I come to Thy service, O my God.

There is no crown for me unless I have fought; no reward unless I have laboured.

I must, then, fly from no labour and no difficulty.

I must be faithful to the Holy Rule, however rigorous it may appear to me.

May I never fly in dismay from this way of salvation.

All things will become easy and sweet to me if I trust in Thee, O my Lord, and remember Thee in the time of trial.

Make me generous in my aims, and persevering in my efforts.

IX.

Text.

Processu vero conversationis et fidei, dilatatio corde, inenarrabili dilectionis dulcedinem curritur via mandatorum Dei; ut ab ipsius nunquam magisterio discendentes, in eius doctrina usque ad mortem in monasterio perseverantes, passionibus Christi per patientiam participemus, ut et regni ejus mereamur esse consortes. Amen.

But as we go forward in our life and in faith, we shall, with hearts enlarged and unspeakable sweetness of love, run the way of God's commandments: so that, never departing from His guidance, but persevering in His teaching in the monastery until death, we may by patience share in the sufferings of Christ, that we may deserve to be partakers of His kingdom. Amen.
Thoughts.

St. Benedict finally encourages us. Fidelity to the observances of our Rule in dark days as in bright days will enlarge our hearts; God's gifts of consolation will be given to us; our strength will increase, and we shall soon run the "way of life."

Prayer.

I will never depart from Thy school.
Thou art my Lord and my Teacher.
May I persevere in Thy teaching day by day, year by year, in good health and in ill health, in joy and in sorrow, till my death.
This daily fidelity is my passion. By this do I share in the sufferings of Christ.
By this shall I win the crown and the kingdom of heaven.
By this shall I gain a hundredfold in this life, and afterwards an eternity of bliss. Amen.
CHAPTER I

OF THE SEVERAL KINDS OF MONKS

THE CENOBITE.

We read the following about Cenobites in this chapter:

(a) Primum (genus) Cenobitarum, hoc est, monasteriale, militans sub regula vel abbate. The first are the Cenobites—that is, those in monasteries who live under a Rule or an Abbot.

At the end of the chapter St. Benedict says:

(b) Ad Cenobitarum fortissimum genus disponendum, adjuvante Domino, veniamus. Let us set to work, by the help of God, to lay down a Rule for the Cenobites—that is, the most stable kind of monks.

Thoughts.

(a) and (b). The advantages of a life in the cloister. Cenobites—i.e. monks in their monasteries—are the strongest type of religious, or the safest type, as the word fortissimum is taken to mean by some commentators.

This peculiar fortitude and safety comes to them from perpetual and absolute obedience to the will of another and to the Rule—"militans sub regula vel abbate." It is the daily and ever-present pressure of
THE VIA VITÆ OF ST. BENEDICT

obedience, the "probatio diuturna," which makes the Cenobite a skilled fighter against the devil and himself.

In Chapter V. St. Benedict says that good monks desire to have a Superior over them. A holy and wise religious, recognizing the immense advantages of subjection to the will of another, desires always to bear this sweet yoke.

Prayer.

Militans. I am Thy soldier, O my King.
Thou teachest me that obedience is my strength.

Fortissimum. Obedience is my greatest safeguard.
Obedience is my chief weapon.

With it I attack not only the indolence of my body, but I overcome the pride of my judgment and the selfishness of my will.

Help me, O my Master, to appreciate holy obedience. Help me to use it actively against myself.

Sub regula vel abbate. May I be faithful to my Rule in the smallest particulars.

May I love my Abbot as Thy representative.

May my obedience be not merely an outward compliance, but be always the interior submission of humility.

In speaking of the Hermits, St. Benedict alludes to other advantages of community life.

Qui ... Monasterii probatione diuturnae, didicerunt contra diabolum, multorum solatium jam docti, pugnare; et bene instructi fraterna ex acie, etc. Who ... after long probation in the Monastery, have learned by the help and experience of others to fight against the devil; and going forth well armed from the ranks of their brethren, etc.
Thoughts.

It is an art to use the weapon of obedience, and this has to be learned by daily exercise for a long time. Not till we have acquired skill in its use will it be safe for us to leave the ranks of the brethren to work for the souls of others. Consider, also, the consolations of community life. How much easier it is to fight in the ranks shoulder to shoulder, ever being stimulated to further effort by the example of those about us, ever learning new ways of using the weapons given to us by seeing the skill and prowess of our brethren.

Prayer.

How good a thing it is, O my God, for brethren to dwell together!
What consolation and help Thou hast given to me!
What a great opportunity of becoming strong!

Probationes diuturnae.

Long probation in the monastery will strengthen me for active life.

Let me profit, O my Master, by all the blessings of my community life.

Let me have clear views about the place of obedience in the spiritual life.

Multorum solatio jam doi.

Let my manly use of it encourage those about me.

Let me ever be an example to those with whom I live.

Let me copy their virtues and be blind to their failings.
Help me to make myself into a perfect community man.
May I throw myself with great zeal into the community life, so as to be an example to others and to derive benefit for myself.

**THE ANCHORITES.**

**Text.**

Secundum genus est Anachoretarum, id est, Eremitarum, horum qui non conversationis fervore novitio, sed monasterii probatione diurna, didicerunt contra diabolum, multorum solatio jam docti, pugnare; et bene instructi fraterna ex acie ad singularem pugnam eremi securi jam sine consolatione alterius, sola manu vel brachio, contra vitia carnis vel cogitationum, Deo auxiliante, pugnare sufficiunt.

The second kind are the Anchorites or Hermits—that is, those who, not in the first fervour of religious life, but after long probation in the monastery, have learned by the help and experience of others to fight against the devil; and going forth well armed from the ranks of their brethren to the single-handed combat of the desert, are able, without the support of others, to fight, by the strength of their own arm and the help of God, against the vices of the flesh and their evil thoughts.

**Thoughts.**

St. Benedict does not expect a religious to lose his first fervour, but to grow to the manhood of the spiritual life, when he will be strong enough to stand alone without exterior helps. In early days it was considered safe for one who had lived in the monastery for twenty years to take up a life of great solitude and recollection (Martène). Alas! how rare it is for one in these days to keep some little of his first fervour and of his generous impulses to a life of self-denial and prayer.
OF THE SEVERAL KINDS OF MONKS

Prayer.

Why, O God, has the fervour of early days produced so little fruit?

The "probatio diuturna" has not been intelligently used.

I have endured rather than applied the daily discipline.

The community exercises and life will not bring me nearer to Thee, unless I try by them to overcome self.

Teach me to use them against the devil and the flesh.

"Domine ut videam"—"Lord, that I may see."

The years pass by, and I am as full of self as ever.

Help me to see clearly and to act bravely.

If Thou callest me, may I go forth to work for others well armed, and skilled in the use of these spiritual weapons.

May I learn now how to fight for Thee, my King.

May I grow to love solitude and recollection more and more.

May the time come, O my Beloved, when I shall live for Thee alone, and with Thee alone.

For the present, follow the advice of the Venerable de la Puente: "Be more diligent in mortification than in contemplation, because the unmortified person seeks prayer and finds it not, whilst the mortified person seeks and finds."
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THE SARABITES.

Text.

Tertium vero monachorum determinum genus est Sarabittarum, qui nulla regula approbat, experientia magistra, sicut aurum fornacis, sed in plumbi natura molliti, adhuc operibus servantes seculo fidem, mentiri Deo per tonsuram noscuntur. Qui bini aut terni, aut certe singuli sine pastore, non Dominicas, sed suis inclusi ovilibus, pro lege eis est desideriorum voluptas: cum quicquid putavereint vel elegerint, hoc dicunt sanctum, et quod noluerint, hoc putant non licere. A third and most baneful kind of monks are the Sarabites, who have been tried by no rule, nor by the experience of a master, as gold in the furnace; but, being as soft as lead, and still serving the world in their works, are known by their tonsure to lie to God. These in twos or threes, or even singly, without a shepherd, shut up, not in the Lord's sheepfolds, but in their own, make a law to themselves in their own pleasures and desires. Whatever they think fit or choose to do, that they call holy; and what they like not, that they consider unlawful.

Thoughts.

Such religious are not hardened and tested by living under a Rule and Superior; or if they have, they have not intelligently benefited by the monastic training. They are as soft as lead, and cannot stand against the fire of temptation and difficult surroundings.

They serve the world by loving its ways and its pleasures.

They grow to think as the world thinks, and become unspiritual in their views. Their standards are not those of their Rule.

They do not value interior obedience, and have no spiritual view of self-conquest. They are probably not alone in their opinions and habits of life, for they find congenial companions and form cliques which have a baneful influence upon the rest of the
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community. The fundamental and unchanging principles of the religious life, which must always remain true and in force in whatever surroundings a monk may be, are explained away or laughed at as sentimental, unreal, and wanting in common sense.

Though one may say that the description given by St. Benedict is not a true likeness of himself, yet everyone will probably have to accuse himself of some at least of the faults mentioned in this passage of the Rule.

Let us, then, examine ourselves honestly by the help of God's light, humble ourselves in prayer, and realize to what a low standard of view and practice we may sink. Let us fear to lie to God by our tonsure and our habit.

Prayer.

In plumbi natura molliti. My God, teach me to harden myself by regular discipline.

Nulla regula approbati. Purify me of all self-seeking by the practice of interior obedience.

Servantes seculo fidem. Give me the bravery to abstain from pleasures that are worldly.

Make me an "alien" from the ways of the world.

May I never become worldly in spirit and lie to Thee.

Mentiri Deo pertonsuram. I wear Thy uniform, and I must never be false to Thee.

Let me ever seek the company of those who love Thee, who are spiritual in their views, and monastic in their tastes.

Be Thou the Shepherd of my soul!
THE VIA VITÆ OF ST. BENEDICT

Lead Thou me on! I desire not my own will, but the will of Him Who sent me.

May my lower desires never become a law to me.

May I never justify my lax practice by adopting lax views.

May I constantly revise and meditate upon the great principles of the Holy Rule.

Ignorance of them can never be an excuse.

Help me, O my God, to be clear-sighted, strong and steady in my practice of obedience, and loyal to my monastic vocation wherever Thou dost place me to work. Amen.

THE GIROVAGI.

Text.

Quartum vero genus est monachorum, quod nominatur Girovagum, qui tota sua per diversas provincias ternis ant quaternis diebus per diversorum cellas hospitantur, semper vagi et nunquam stabiles, et propriis voluptatibus et gula illecebrii servientes, et per omnia deteriores Sarabaitis; de quorum omnium horum miserrima conversatione melius est silere, quam loqui.

The fourth kind of monks are those called Girovagii, who spend all their lives long wandering about divers provinces, staying in different cells for three or four days at a time, ever roaming, with no stability, given up to their own pleasures and to the snares of gluttony, and worse in all things than the Sarabites. Of the most wretched life of these it is better to say nothing than to speak.

Thoughts.

The Girovagi as described here are perhaps extinct. But are you a "restless roamer without stability"?

Restlessness may attack one in the monastery. It may appear in your dislike for regular steady work, especially of work which keeps you to your desk in
the solitude of your cell. Are you beginning to give in to this restlessness by seeking external active work in order to avoid recollection and study? Are you anxious for change and excitement? This restlessness has to be checked if the interior life is to grow.

The question of mortification in food and drink is important for one who wishes to be spiritual. Spiritual writers say that one of the last immortifications of a spiritual man is a too great pleasure in food and drink.

A clear view should be obtained on this matter, and advice should be asked (see Chapters XXXIX. and XL.).

Examine yourself carefully on these points. From this chapter conceive a true idea of the life of a monk. Form an ideal in your mind, and wherever obedience may place you, resolve to live up to it as far as you can, and never let the idea grow indistinct.

Prayer.

Keep to thy cell diligently, O my soul, and it will guard thee.

O my God, what safer place can there be for Thy servant?

Here I may pray to Thee with undistracted mind.

Outside my cell are dangers of every kind; within I find the quiet happiness of a devout life.

If I love my cell and stay willingly in it, I shall escape many sins and temptations.

When I find Thee, O my God, in the quiet and retirement of my cell, then I shall grow to love it.