

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX: EXCERPTS FROM *THE APOLOGIA TO ABBOTT WILLIAM OF ST.-THIERRY*

Against Excesses

VIII.16. It is said correctly that it was by holy Fathers that this way of life was organized; they did not abrogate the Rule, they merely moderated its severity on account of the weak, so that more men might be saved. At the same time, I would hate to think that these holy Fathers would have commanded or allowed the many foolish excesses I have noticed in several monasteries. I am astonished that monks could be so lacking in moderation in matters of food and drink, and with respect to clothing and bedding, carriages and buildings. Things have come to such a pass that right order and religion are thought to be promoted, the more concern and pleasure and enthusiasm there is regarding such things. Abstemiousness is accounted miserliness, sobriety strictness, silence gloom. On the other hand, laxity is labeled discretion, extravagance generosity, talkativeness sociability, and laughter joy. Fine clothes and costly caparisons are regarded as mere respectability, and being fussy about bedding is hygiene. When we lavish these things on one another, we call it love. Such love undermines true love. Such discretion disgraces real discretion. This sort of kindness is full of cruelty, for it so looks after the body that the soul is strangled. How can love pamper the flesh and neglect the spirit? What sort of discretion is it to give everything to the body and nothing to the soul? Is it kindness to entertain the maid and murder the mistress? For this kind of mercy let no one hope to receive the mercy the Gospel promises through the mouth of Truth, to those who show mercy: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Rather, he can expect that penalty called down by holy Job on those who are cruelly kind. Speaking in prophecy, rather than merely giving vent to his feelings, he said: "May he go unremembered; let him come to grief like a sterile tree." He then shows how such a punishment was deserved by adding: "He feeds the barren childless woman, and does no good to the widow."

17. It is obvious, then, that the kindness of the flesh is inordinate and unreasonable. The flesh is barren and childless, and in the Lord's words "profits nothing." Also, as the Apostle says, "it will not inherit God's kingdom." Such kindness is ever on the alert to fulfill every whim, caring nothing for the sage's sound advice about looking after the soul. "Have mercy on your own soul," he says, "and you will please God." It is a good thing to be merciful to your own soul; it cannot fail to win that mercy which makes you pleasing to God. Any other sort of mercy is cruelty; it is not love but malevolence; it is not discretion but disorder. It feeds the barren childless women, (i.e. it follows the futile fancies of the flesh), while it does no good to the widow (i.e. it does nothing to cultivate the soul's virtues). The soul is indeed bereaved of its heavenly Bridegroom in this life, yet it has from the Holy Spirit the power to conceive and bring forth immortal children. These will, one day, enjoy their heavenly and incorruptible inheritance, provided they are reared by a guardian who is painstaking and devoted.

18. Nowadays, slackness has become so general that it is accepted as the normal thing. It is condoned by almost everyone unquestioningly and in all innocence, though not for the same reasons. Some monks are detached in their use of such things, and so they incur little or no guilt. In other cases simplicity or charity or necessity is the motivation. There are monks who simply do what they are told, and who are quite prepared to act otherwise if they are so bidden. Some

monks strive to avoid trouble with those among whom they live. They do not aim at fulfilling their own whims, but at safeguarding the peace of others. Finally there are monks who cannot withstand the majority voice which vigorously insists that such things are all right, and with all its might resists any attempt on the part of right reason to restrict or change anything.

On gold and silver images in monasteries

XII. 28. These are only small things; I am coming to things of greater moment. I merely mention these minor details because they happen to be rather common. I shall say nothing about the soaring, heights and extravagant lengths and unnecessary widths of the churches, nothing about their expensive decorations and their novel images, which catch the attention of those who go in to pray, and dry up their devotion. To me they seem like something out of the Old Testament; but let them be, since it is all to the glory of God. However, as one monk to another, may I ask the question which a heathen poet put to his fellows. "Tell me, O priests," he said, "why is there gold in the holy place?" I shall put the question slightly differently, I am more interested in the sense of the text than in its precise words. "Tell me, O poor men," this is my question, "tell me, O poor men--if you are really poor men--why is there gold in the holy place?" It is not the same for monks and bishops. Bishops have a duty toward both wise and foolish. They have to make use of material ornamentation to rouse devotion in a carnal people, incapable of spiritual things. But we no longer belong to such people. For the sake of Christ we have abandoned all the world holds valuable and attractive. All that is beautiful in sight and sound and scent we have left behind, all that is pleasant to taste and touch. To win Christ we have reckoned bodily enjoyments as dung. Therefore, I ask you, can it be our own devotion we are trying to excite with such display, or is the purpose of it to win the admiration of fools and the offerings of simple folk? Living among gentiles, as we do, it seems that we now follow their example, and do service to their idols.

Let me speak plainly. Cupidity, which is a form of idolatry, is the cause of all this. It is for no useful purpose that we do it, but to, attract gifts. You want to know how? Listen to the marvels of it all. It is possible to spend money in such a way that it increases; it is an investment which grows, and pouring it out only brings in more. The very sight of such sumptuous and exquisite baubles is sufficient to inspire men to make offerings, though not to say their prayers. In this way, riches attract riches, and money produces more money. For some unknown reason, the richer a place appears, the more freely do offerings pour in. Gold-cased relics catch the gaze and open the purses. If you show someone a beautiful picture of a saint, he comes to the conclusion that the saint is as holy as the picture is brightly colored. When people rush up to kiss them, they are asked to donate. Beauty they admire, but they do no reverence to holiness. This is the reason that churches are decked out, not merely with a jewelled crown, but with a huge jewelled wheel, where circles of lamps compete in radiance with precious stones. Instead of candle-sticks we see tree-like structures, made of much metal and with exquisite workmanship, where candles and gems sparkle equally. Do you think such appurtenances are meant to stir penitents to compunction, or rather to make sight-seers agog? Oh, vanity of vanities, whose vanity is rivalled only by its insanity! The walls of the church are aglow, but the poor of the Church go hungry. The stones of the church are covered with gold, while its children are left naked. The food of the poor is taken to feed the eyes of the rich, and amusement is provided for the curious, while the needy have not even the necessities of life.

What sort of respect is shown for the saints by placing their images on the floor to be trampled underfoot? People spit on the angels, and the saints' faces are pummelled by the feet of passers-by. Even though its sacred character counts for little, at least the painting itself should be spared. Why adorn what is so soon to be sullied? Why paint what is to be trodden on? What good are beautiful pictures when they are all discolored with dirt? Finally, what meaning do such things have for monks, who are supposed to be poor men and spiritual? It is, of course, possible to reply to the Poet's question in the words of the Prophet: "Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house, and the place where your glory dwells." Very well, we may tolerate such things in the church itself, since they do harm only to greedy and shallow people, not to those who are simple and god-fearing.

29. What excuse can there be for these ridiculous monstrosities in the cloisters where the monks do their reading, extraordinary things at once beautiful and ugly? Here we find filthy monkeys and fierce lions, fearful centaurs, harpies, and striped tigers, soldiers at war, and hunters blowing their horns. Here is one head with many bodies, there is one body with many heads. Over there is a beast with a serpent for its tail, a fish with an animal's head, and a creature that is horse in front and goat behind, and a second beast with horns and the rear of a horse. All round there is such an amazing variety of shapes that one could easily prefer to take one's reading from the walls instead of from a book. One could spend the whole day gazing fascinated at these things, one by one, instead of meditating on the law of God. Good Lord, even if the foolishness of it all occasion no shame, at least one might balk at the expense.

30. There are plenty of other things that could be added, but I am prevented from going on by the burdens of my office, and by your imminent departure, dear brother Oger. You will not agree to stay any longer, and you refuse to go without this latest little book. I shall do as you wish, and let you go, cutting short my words. In any case, a few words spoken in peace will do more good than many which give rise to scandal. I do hope that these few things I have written will not cause scandal, even though I realize that my condemnation of vices must offend those concerned. Yet, if God so will, it could happen that those whom I fear to vex will be grateful for what I say, and will give up their vices. I mean that the more austere monks will stop belittling others, and that those who have been remiss in the past will put an end to their excesses. In this way both sides can maintain their own values, but without passing judgment on those who think differently. A good man should not be envious of those who are better, and the man who thinks his own course of action good, should not despise a lesser good that another has. The monk who can live austere should not be harsh, toward those who cannot, but at the same time he should avoid modeling his conduct on theirs. Those who cannot live austere should admire those who can, but they shouldn't imitate them injudiciously. For, just as there is danger of apostasy if a man render less than he vowed, so too, there is danger that those who try to do too much will come to grief.