

Exordium

UNIT EIGHT

AUSTERITY

The Value of Austerity

An important component of the first Cistercians' self-description was an insistence on the austerity of their lifestyle, compared to that of "unreformed" monasticism: poverty, work, rough food and clothing, vigils, separation from the world.

Objectives

- a) To gain an idea of the Cistercian lifestyle relative to contemporary standards of living in the late-eleventh and twelfth centuries.
- b) To appreciate the values inherent in the practice of austerity and to see their purpose in the context of Gospel living..
- c)To understand how austerity is appropriately expressed in the context of contemporary values and aspirations.

THE VALUE OF AUSTERITY

A certain abbot in the 1950s took very seriously St Benedict's injunction that novices be instructed about the *dura et aspera* before profession. In his homily during the profession ceremony itself, he was accustomed to dazzle the congregation with spine-chilling descriptions of how the Cistercian life was "hard on flesh and blood". Here, as happened in the early days of Cîteaux, the rhetoric sometimes outpaced the reality. The question we ask in this Unit is this. What do we know about how the early Cistercians lived and the manner in which they experienced the elements of their lifestyle that were hard and exigent?

We begin by trying to appreciate the mind-set in which the predilection for an austere life style had its meaning.

1. Spiritual Warfare

Job 7:1 compares human life to military service: ___ is translated by the Vulgate as *militia* (more correct than the Old Latin version, *tentatio*). Gregory the Great regarded the two terms as equivalent, since every pursuit of an ideal involves constant warfare against temptation, — especially the temptation to become discouraged at the gravity and duration of the struggle.

The New Testament also contains military images to denote the element of struggle and difficulty in the Christian life. For example, Eph 6:10-17 discusses the weaponry of the soldier of Christ. 2 Tim 2:3-4 was much quoted: "Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian affairs." Use of this imagery grew and deepened as the various movements of asceticism gained ground in the Church. Intensity in Christian life brought with it an appreciation of the extent that living by faith involved toil and trouble.

As monasticism became more organised, so the vision of the struggle was seen more and more in terms of a spiritual war in which monks were soldiers in the army of Christ doing battle against dark and malign adversaries. Thus Cassian insists that fighting the battle willed by God is more profitable for us than an unmerited peace (*Conl* 4.7). The spiritual combat was not an additional element in spiritual life: the very nature of pursuing spiritual priorities involved doing battle with one's own natural inertia and lower appetites. No easy progress was conceivable.

Confronted with their own, irreducibly particular *flesh and blood*, all believers struggled to maintain, in themselves, the huge momentum of their spirit's longing for God
Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 166..

Although demons and the wicked world were often portrayed as the enemies, ultimately it was against oneself that the battle was joined. The only way to achieve the freedom necessary for the spiritual advancement was by systematic self-denial through the practice of asceticism. The struggle to

remain faithful to the costly exigencies of such a life was presented in terms of spiritual warfare.

Spiritual Warfare

Origen held that life is a spiritual combat in which one must struggle with demons. Spiritual perfection consists in achieving detachment from the inherently evil world through asceticism.

Michael S. Driscoll, p. 1018.

A structured monastery was viewed somewhat as a sort of spiritual army, with its clear chain of command, its need for training and constant vigilance, its inherent hardship and its regular involvement in life and death battles.

Recent studies are somewhat ambivalent about the significance of the military imagery in the Rule of St Benedict, pointing out that the verb *militare* has a secondary meaning of “service”, as is illustrated by the parallel between *militia* and *servitus* in RB 2.52 and 61.25. “From this period the accent is placed not on combat, but on the disciplined and well-organised service of God” (C. Mohrmann, p.339).

However this question is solved, it is clear that Gregory the Great takes such military vocabulary back into battle. The book of the *Moralia*, in particular, is full of the imagery of spiritual combat in which the “spiritual knight” or “knight of God” must be vigilant in times of quiet and energetic in confronting the attacks of enemies. This prevailing militarism is especially significant because this was the first book chosen for copying in the scriptorium of primitive Cîteaux. We know, furthermore, that the theme of spiritual warfare was important for the founding generation because the illustrator of the *Moralia* chose to reiterate the message in the illuminated initials. (This has been studied in detail by Conrad Rudolph in *Violence & Daily Life: Reading, Art and Polemics in the Cîteaux Moralia* in Job.) This was not mere decoration, but serious business: “the imagery of the Cîteaux *Moralia* was not for pleasant daydreaming, but for strong spiritual stimulation” (p. 56). The illustrations gave the same message as Gregory’s text: the spiritual life is a state of struggle that increases in intensity as progress is made. Constant vigilance and effort are required, and even so there is no guarantee of easy victory or immunity from wounds, temporary setbacks and occasional major losses.

From the ninth century the term *miles*, referred to a professional soldier — increasingly as a title of honour. By the mid-twelfth century an *ordo militaris*, was recognised, more and more subject to defined standards of behaviour and civility. The first generation Cistercians, conscious that they were turning their backs on “the less austere constraints of a more relaxed monastery” (EP 14.8), appropriated this designation for themselves. In the context of their “unusual and, as it were, unheard of harshness (*asperitatem*) of life” they are referred to as a *militia spiritualis* (EP 16.4-5). “The new soldiers of Christ” (EP 15:9) committed themselves to the hard life of poverty, in imitation of Christ, “doing battle successfully against their own vices and the enticements of malign spirits” (EP 17:11). Austerity was not something marginal to the attraction of the Cistercian life, to be tolerated as unavoidable. It was an integral component that drew them to this vocation: “They ardently **loved** the hard and rough precepts of the Rule” (EP 17.13). It was a way of life that vigorously pursued its goal.

Monastic *conversatio* was seen as the arena of struggle (thus also the athletic imagery borrowed from St Paul in EP 17: *exercitatus* (2), *cursum suum* (11), and *currere* (13); see also EC 2.6: *bravium*, and *cucurrit*).

Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. **I treat my body hard and bring it into subjection**, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Cor 9:24-27)

The Desert Fathers' psychological wrestling with demons has been replaced by a more routine war: the lifestyle itself became the area of challenge. Cistercian *disciplina* offered an effective defence against attack because it gave no opening to the enemy. It operated at the level of prevention. The contest was between the exigencies of the monastic way of life and the reluctance of flesh and blood. The struggle was between an all too "delicate" disposition and the *dura et aspera* which are typical of the road towards God.

The **adult recruits** who were attracted to Cîteaux and its foundation were predominantly from the knightly class. Even if they were not familiar with actual war, they were well-accustomed to the physical disciplines that equipped them for battle. They understood and accepted the adventure, challenge and necessary hardship of this profession. Bernard often used this military experience to illustrate the dynamics of monastic life, especially in the Parables. Furthermore, most of them came to monastic life through the medium of **conversion**, in which penitence for past sins played a role. It would have been unthinkable for this movement of grace to have found satisfaction in a life that was merely a continuation of previous experience — comfortable and undemanding. A radical disjunction was required — what John of Forde would later call the *poenitentiae austeritas* (SC 77.8). "Having, therefore, put off the old man, they were rejoicing to have put on the new" (EP 15.4).

The practice of **asceticism was a way of signalling that life had changed direction**. The very bite of monastic living acted as a reminder that a new life had been assumed — one in which the old habits of thought and behaviour were now counter-productive. The self-knowledge that is engine of conversion demands a double purification:

- We need to identify the selfishness of the past and to offer some recompense, especially through penitential acts — though not necessarily as dramatic as those adopted by the thirteenth-century Flemish laybrother Arnulf of Villers.
- We need to recognise the ongoing influence of past practice on present performance and to take concrete steps to interrupt the cycle of inevitability that otherwise would ensure that our behaviour remains substantially unchanged. Some acts of self-denial are symbolic, reminders to ourselves that we operate under a new dispensation; others are strictly causal.

The reason for the prolonged struggle is simple: the monk wishes to live a contemplative life, but his aspiration does not go unchallenged. "He wishes to be stable in contemplation but he cannot." (*Vult*

in contemplatione stare sed non valeat: Mor 8.6.8). He has to do battle with the contrary tendencies within himself and with the attractive alternatives constantly presented by the external situation. They are too many other opportunities, even in a monastery. It is, however, impossible to drift into union with God. We have to make a stand.

Asceticism and Carnal Desire

It is good that the panderings of carnal desires should be more fully extinguished by fastings, vigils, manual work, the frequent use of hair-cloth and other means approved and recognised by regular discipline; all this on a daily basis.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sent* 3,94

A further and more devotional motivation for penitence was a desire for identification with the Passion of Christ: “For the cure of their souls, insupportable **crosses** are devised for their bodies” (William of Malmsbury, 1289b). The theme reappears in John of Forde:

It is by the nails of poverty and abstinence, yes, and by nails of fear and love, that [Christ] must be fixed to his cross in our lives. But we have drawn out those nails, by a pretence of gentleness and tenderness, and by taking care to serve him by observances motivated more by dry custom than faith. In such a situation, these womanly minds, set on a feminine softness, do not have Christ crucified with them, because they themselves are not nailed with Christ to the cross. (SC 76.11) *(With apologies to the nuns.)*

It is in the context of seriousness about the contemplative orientation of Cistercian life that its austerity must be viewed.

2. Rigor Ordinis

The first wave of new recruits who gave such youthful vigour to the early decades of Cîteaux was made up of enthusiasts. Only the fit and fervent volunteer for such a venture and so there was less responsibility for providing mitigations for the old and frail. They were, moreover, possessed of a great desire to differentiate themselves from what they perceived as the stodgy mediocrity of conventional monastic institutions. Ordericus Vitalis (641c) records the attractiveness of the Cistercian challenge:

“Many noble athletes and profound sophists ran to them on account of their singular novelty and, moreover, embracing the unusual strictness, gladly sang hymns of gladness to Christ as they travelled along the straight path.”

Like Humbert of Igny who rebelled at any suggestion of mitigation (See Bernard, *Hum* 4), the early Cistercians resisted any alleviation of their accustomed severity. This is how William of Malmsbury

describes the second generation who, like the first, were “steadfast in holy obstinacy” (1288b).

Again, because when the clemency of this praiseworthy abbot (Stephen) wishes or pretends to wish, to bend back something of the yoke of the Rule, they lean over to resist, saying that not much is left of their lifetime, and that they do not so much have life ahead of them as behind, and are hoping to hold fast to their purpose and to be an example to their successors. (1290b)

The “rigour of the Order” far from being an obstacle to recruitment projected an image of a group with clear objectives, appropriate means to achieve them, and a high level of internal morale. A preferential option against self-indulgence was no more comfortable for medieval monks than it is for us, but it made sense as part of a package that included forgiveness of past sins and an assured way to God. Confidence in the Order’s effectiveness in leading to the ultimate goal led to an acceptance even of means that were hard and difficult. There was comfort to be found even in the challenge.

Guerric admits that the rigours of Cistercian life are a shock to the system and newcomers take some time to get used to them. He is confident, however, that these observances are not simply occasions for mindless endurance but, on the contrary, purposeful remedies for the maladies of the soul.

If we are to believe those who have just come in from the world the regular fasts and vigils, the daily manual labour, the rough clothes and practically everything are bitter to them because they are unaccustomed to them. . . Just as the stomach, spoiled by immoderate indulgence in sweet things, is purged by a dose of something bitter, so the soured conscience of those who have lived in pleasure is never better cured than by the opposite, that is austerity of life and rule — and this especially if they are often given to drink the myrrh-spiced wine of compunction, which is all the more wholesome for the sinner on account of sin remembered. (Epi 1,3)

Let us reflect on the elements that constituted this severe lifestyle, on the way they are presented in the early documents and on the subsequent appreciation of them by later representatives of the Cistercian tradition.

Ordo Noster

Our *ordo* is debasement (*abiectio*), humility and voluntary poverty; it is obedience, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. Our *ordo* is to be under a master, under an abbot, under a rule, under discipline. Our *ordo* is to be zealous for silence, to practise fasting, vigils, prayer, manual work and above all to keep to the more excellent way of charity. Moreover it is a matter of making progress in all these from one day to the next, and to persevere in them until the final day.

Bernard of Clairvaux, Ep 142.1

1) Poverty

For Bernard, poverty is the monk’s insignia, as a soldier of Christ, not deluxe clothing (Miss 4.10). It is the foundation of the other virtues (Sent 3.126.1) and the inseparable companion of humility (SC 27.3, etc.). There was nothing romantic about the reality of poverty, it was to be held in low esteem, *despicabilis* (Epi 1.5), it was the condition of a slave, *vilitas* (OS 1.8), it involved oppression (OS 1.15) and misery (Par 7). It was said to be like dung: it promotes growth but is, in itself, disgusting

(PP 2.2). Its roughness inspired terror (Ep 319.2). The experience of it seemed like martyrdom (OS 1.9); a sort of hell (In cel adv 3).

There are several components of early Cistercian poverty. The documents leave us in no doubt that the project of the new foundation was a reaction against the congestion of spirit brought about by an abundance of goods and the necessity of administering a large domain.

Because association of possessions with virtues is not usually long-lasting, certain men from that holy congregation — men undoubtedly wise and of deeper understanding — chose to be occupied with heavenly pursuits than to be entangled in earthly affairs. (EC 1.4)

As we have seen in Unit 1, the monastic world of the late 11th century appreciated the challenge of poverty. No new monastic venture could hope to succeed unless it took this value seriously. The phrase “poor with the poor Christ” famous from its inclusion in EP 15.9 also appears in the writings of Peter Damian (PL 93, col. 878-9). To this reformist approach to poverty later Cistercian liturgical sermons added a new dimension by explicitly relating monastic poverty to the mysteries of Christ: the poverty of Bethlehem, Nazareth and Calvary was taken as a model.

Of course the economic situation in new foundations is often precarious — Cistercians do not have a monopoly on this. When income is based on farming it is constantly subject to the vagaries of climate and markets. This was not, however, what was meant by “monastic poverty” and in fact the Cistercians of the twelfth century went to great lengths to assure the economic stability of their monasteries. The poverty for which they strove was more a matter of micro-economics than macro-economics: a poverty expressed especially in the daily details of monastic life. This happened because, as the Cistercian population increased, it took an increasingly complex financial operation to provide them even with their meagre necessities. As a result the monasteries grew richer and more powerful, increasing “in lands and vineyards and meadows and farmsteads” (EP 17.9) — “under the bounteous and powerful blessing of the Lord” (EP 18.2). Meanwhile every effort was made to maintain high levels of personal poverty. A monk on his deathbed was tormented by the thought of a scrap of cloth unlawfully taken to repair his scapular (Herbert of Clairvaux, *De Miraculis* 2.34). Abbot Abraham of La Prée committed the same fault when he was a novice and learnt something from the experience. “He became aware that those who have professed the pure and perfect life of poverty must avoid and fear such private ownership, be it ever so slight” (*Ibid.* 2.36).

Material and spiritual poverty is the soul of all the regular observances. It was seen as a protection against the pomp and arrogance that are the consequences of riches, success and all the other qualities of a “worldly” lifestyle that had previously led the monks to the brink of destruction. As Aelred notes, “What a wall is poverty. How stoutly it defends us against the pride of the world, excluding vanity and superfluity: things so harmful and so detestable” (Nat 2; PL 195,221b)

2) Servile Work

The necessity for work is threefold, according to Bernard : it derives from our earthly state of exile, from our poverty and from the evil we have done (Lab Mess 2.1). It is the common lot of the human race, especially those who are poor, and it is also embraced as a recompense and antidote for

sin. Furthermore, it is clear that one of the early motivations for work was a matter of justice. Monks have no right to live off the labour of others: A monk ‘possesses his own lands and lives off them by his own work and that of the farm animals’ any attempt to do otherwise is “an unjust usurpation of the rights of others” (EP 15.8).

This did not mean that the monks’ labour was sufficient to provide for their sustenance and assistance given to the poor, together with capital expenditure. As we have seen in Unit 4, benefactors were an important element in the foundation and building of monasteries. In addition the monks availed themselves of additional workers. In the first place were the bearded **laybrothers**, who were professed members of the community, but not “monks”. They combined community life and a simple prayer regimen with a solid amount of work that constituted the mainstay of the monastery’s economy. They also managed the granges and operated the mills, often travelling extensively to buy and sell and in other ways improve the monastery’s material resources. (Two brothers from Clairvaux drove cattle overland from Sicily to Clairvaux for the purposes of herd improvement.). In addition to these are the **hired hands** mentioned in EP 15.10. We need to bear in mind also that much of the skilled and specialised work in the construction of monasteries was done by journeymen, who travelled from one building site to another in pursuit of their craft. Even though the monks were permitted to hire as much labour as they needed, share-farming and other joint ventures are forbidden in the *Capitula* attached to EC-SCC (#19).

It may be that involvement in manual labour was more a symbolic reality than a real contribution to the monastic finances. It was mainly due to the laybrothers that Isaac of Stella was able to say, “It is by the sweat of our own brows rather than that of hired hands or animals that we ought to eat our bread” (*Serm* 14.13). John of Forde notes that work was a valuable means of acquiring humility. “For me the most effective discipline for learning humility is a humble *conversatio*” (SC 91.4). Even though more experienced workers bore most of the burden, there is no doubt that manual labour was experienced as physically challenging especially by older recruits and those of gentler upbringing. This is especially true of harvest time, when the monks were sent out to work long hours, they even had a picnic meal and took their siesta in the fields (EO 84). The well-known scenes in the *Cîteaux Moralia* are certainly part of a campaign of self-congratulatory polemic, as if to say: “Here are *real* monks, living by their own labour (RB 48..8)”, even though they do not appear particularly skilled at their various tasks. Later legislation makes it appear that the sturdy young monks sent out to the granges to bring in the harvest were enjoying themselves excessively, making of the occasion a sort of vacation. So steps were taken to curtail their fun. “Nobody should go beyond the determined limits without permission, nor begin to wander about in search of amusement” (EO 84.28).

It is hard to know how much farm labour was done by the monks on an ordinary day. There were many arts and crafts practised in a medieval monastery (including those associated with the scriptorium), and there was also need for housekeepers, pastors and administrators. On a winter’s day when the hours of daylight were short and the tasks less urgent, it seems that, dependent on the weather, there was a single period of work in the late morning, including a pause.

As with many of the components of the Cistercian reform, work was assessed primarily according to its spiritual value rather than by its contribution to the material substance of the community.

Externally the monk did the same tasks as the peasant — but with a different motivation: the peasant cultivated potatoes and parsnips; the monk cultivated the virtues. “When you go to work, do what has to be done in such a way that your concern for the task will not divert your mind from the things of God” (*Mirror of Novices* 12). Bernard says something similar: “During work think on the reason why you have to work so that the penalty you suffer may lead you to reflect on the fault for which you suffer it” (Lab Mess 2.1). Notwithstanding all this meditation, “It must be known that reading is not permitted during work, nor may anyone take a book out to work with him” (EO 75.26).

John of Forde

Not despising servile tasks, indeed not regarding anything as servile that leads to low status (*abiectio*) and educates in humility (SC 89.11).

3) Rough Clothing

The humility of the Cistercian life was concretely demonstrated by the poor clothing worn by the monks, and the cutting back of many items conceded to the Black Monks since the time of the Synod of Aachen in 817. Apart from signalling the dawn of a new era, as Ordericus suggests, the motivation for this change was the elimination of superfluity and display: a desire to experience concretely the effects of poverty and in that way to identify with the lower ranks of society. The mean garments worn by the monks in the Cîteaux *Moralia* are undoubtedly caricatures, but they make a serious point — real monks are known by the roughness of their clothing. Poverty of attire is a point on which there is substantial agreement among the early sources.

| EXORDIUM PARVUM | CAPITULA [EC-SCC] | WILLIAM OF. MALMSBURY | ORDERICUS VITALIS |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Frocci = coats or mantles | | | |
| Pellicia = lambskins _ | Lambskins | Lambskins | Lambskins |
| Stamina = fine wool shirts _ | Shirts = <i>Camisia</i> | Stamina | |
| Caputia = hoods | | | |
| Femoralia = unmentionables _ | | Femoralia | Femoralia |
| | Fleecy Cowls | | |
| | | | Dyed clothes |
| | Expensive Shoes | | |
| Pectina = combs | | | |
| Coopertoria = coverlets | | | |
| Stramina lectorum = mattresses | | | |

Table 1: Proscribed Wardrobe Items
Items marked _ were explicitly permitted by the Synod of Aachen

Ordericus was critical about the prohibition of *femoralia* since “all peoples in the western climates use trousers (*bracca*) and could not be without them because of the cold and for the sake of decency” (639a). There is quite an extensive monastic literature on this elevating topic.

One of Gueric’s winter sermons seems to indicate that his monks were cold: “O brethren, you who find the clothes of your poverty insufficient in the bitter cold of this winter, you who say ‘Who can bear this cold?’ . . .” (Epi 1.6). Yet there was provision documented later for the monks to add extra clothing to keep warm for vigils. In extreme cases even the scapular — normally reserved for work — could be added:

A monk who, in winter, is wearing **three tunics** may put the scapular over them, providing he is [already] wearing **two cowls**. (EO 74.19)

There were other commonsense rules to ease the burden, such as the possibility of reading in the chapter room instead of the cloister on cold mornings. If monks were cold they had the possibility of warming themselves by the fire in the **calefactory**. The brothers used the calefactory for three purposes: to grease their shoes and make them waterproof, for blood letting and — simply — “to warm themselves” (EO 72.6). Two monks are shown thus engaged in the initial to Book 34 of the *Cîteaux*

Moralia. Note that they have removed their shoes — contrary to the later regulation of EO 72.7.

4) “Parsimonious Food” (William of Malmsbury 1289b)

At times it seems that the food in some early Cistercian monasteries was really awful. According to the *Vita Prima*, Clairvaux was so poor that the monks were reduced to eating leaves from the beech tree and bread made of barley, millet and vetches (VP 1.5.25). When Archdeacon Andrew entered the same monastery much later it needed a miracle to convince him that monastic food was edible (Herbert, *De Miraculis* 2.4). Even such mediocre fare was restricted. The lenten fast was extended to include the pre-lenten period from Septuagesima, Advent, Fridays, Ember days and the vigils of major feasts. (EC-SCC, 14). Additional to this was the winter fast imposed by RB 41.6 from 13 September until Lent — when food was in short supply.

Lavish food was a standard target for monastic reformers and it is not always easy to extract factual information from their diatribes. Recent analysis of medieval monastic middens, and the medical examination of monks’ skeletons has suggested, however, that there were many Black Monks in fourteenth-century England who ate at a level with the ruling classes and not at all like the poor. It is more difficult to find evidence for the twelfth century.

The early Cistercians defined themselves by their meagre diet and their zest for fasting. We can be reasonably sure that since the monastic day was fairly energetic, especially in the early years of a foundation, solid, if not splendid, food must have been made available. Supplementary food was provided during periods of extraordinary work (EO 84.12f). There must have been more than was necessary for mere subsistence since William of St Thierry counsels that extra frugality be exercised in addition to the common practice (*Golden Epistle* 131). He adds:

Attention should be paid to the manner of eating and to the time, to the quality and quantity of the food, fleeing from what is superfluous and from adulterating condiments. (*Ibid.*, 133)

The sources agree on what foods were to be excluded, though they do not mention the luxuries against which Bernard railed in the *Apologia* and which Peter the Venerable moved to restrict in his 1146/7 *Statutes*..

| EXORDIUM PARVUM | CAPITULA [EC-SCC] | WILLIAM OF MALMSBURY | ORDERICUS VITALIS |
|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Variety of dishes | | More than 2 dishes | |
| Lard | Lard | Lard | Fat |
| | Fine Bread | | |
| | Meat | Meat | Meat |

Table 2: Proscribed Kitchen Items

Since RB forbids only the eating of the flesh of quadrupeds, fish was served as a “pittance” or concession for up to three days at a time when there was cause: illness (or blood-letting), travelling, and possibly in the case of winter shortage of vegetables or even on the greater feast days. Many monasteries had fish farms to supply not only the community but also the infirm and guests.

Refectories were often significant buildings in the twelfth century; only the church was grander. The meals were amply orchestrated, with ceremonial grace, full service and reading (EO 76). The meal seems to have consisted of two cooked portions and bread. A measured amount (*iusticia*) of wine or strong drink was offered as beverage.

Arnulph of Bohéries

At table not only should the mouth take food, ears should draw their fill of the word of God. No one should concentrate entirely on eating, but such attention should be given to the word of God that only the mouth takes food, while the ears take the word. If one is given less nutritious food than others, one’s joy should be all the greater. They are really blest who bear privation with greater zest.

A Mirror for Monks, 7

William suggests mental rumination to accompany the meal (*Golden Epistle* 131). The *Mirror of Novices* recommends that the food should be eaten in mindfulness and seasoned with gratitude:

Think of how many worked to prepare your food and how especially the Lord provides you with spiritual food by way of learned teachers. Think of the countless dangers endured by seamen in order to provide fish to satisfy the wants of your flesh and thank God for each bite. (Ch. 12)

There is much evidence to indicate that there was a certain amount of grumbling about the quality of food. The great teachers of the Order regularly advert to this and try to point the murmurers in a more positive direction.

If coarse food disheartens me, concupiscence of the flesh inflicts this toil upon me. I toil not because I have taken the yoke of Christ upon myself, but because I have not fully cast off the yoke of self-centeredness.

- Why is it that when I am burning with eagerness for more sumptuous food, I get upset if more commonplace fare is set before me?
- Or if there is less than usual,
- or something is not on time,
- or rather carelessly prepared,

why am I consumed with the plague of grumbling? What produces this anxiety in me? The passion of self-centeredness or the gentleness of charity? What if a monk demands from his superior the number of portions corresponding to the number of lessons at the

Night Office [12], and wants to have tasty meals and exotic seasonings on each and every solemn feast...Has worldly concupiscence not put the yoke of this slavery on him and the affliction of the vilest toil? (Aelred, *Mirror of Charity* 2,4,7)

How successful they were in persuading monks to be indifferent to their food is a matter for conjecture.

5) Vigils

Medieval monks did not use the 24 hour clock, but followed the Roman practice of division into day hours and night hours — with variation according to season. This makes it extremely difficult to calculate exactly the daily horarium, since it varied. In thirteenth-century Villers (for which detailed information is available) the rising time between September and February varied between 2.40 am and 5.00 am, with 56 of the 81 days between 3.40 and 4.40. Retiring time was between 9.00 pm and 10.20 pm and the time of sleep was usually between 6.40 hours and 7.40 hours. The chart in the Introduction to the *Ecclesiastica Officia* (pp. 36-37) shows rising times between 2.00 am (21 March) and 4.40 am (31 October).

Curiously enough, it seems that not all medieval monks enjoyed leaving their beds; although the open dormitory made it difficult to avoid. Not only was early rising considered one of the major challenges, but monks were inclined to doze during Vigils (it was the duty of the cantors to wake up those who were asleep, EO 115.2) and even at chapter (Bernard, SC 36.7) or during *lectio divina* (EO 71.8: “If somebody has his hood on his head while he reads, he should have it in such a way that he can be noticed if he should sleep.”) One of the distinguishing marks of the White Monks was that “in no season do they return to bed after Lauds” (William of Malmesbury, 1288c). Bernard criticises the Black Monks for going back to bed at this time and for long siestas (necessitated by their large meals): “Your comrades are out wallowing in blood and gore and here you are enjoying fine food and taking your morning sleep!” (Apo 22)

Arise, soldier of Christ, I say arise! Shake off the dust and return to the battle. . . Do you think that because you have forsaken the front line the enemy has forsaken you. Far from it. He will follow you in flight more readily than he would fight you when striking back. He strikes you more readily from behind than he would fight you face to face. Can you sleep unarmed in the morning hours when it was at that time that Christ rose from the dead? Do you not know that unarmed you are both more fearful and less to be feared? A multitude of armed men surrounds the house, and can you still sleep? (Ep 1.13)

It may be that the Cistercian’s vigil was less onerous than the Cluniac’s, since the Offices had been simplified. But for the White Monk it was the beginning of a long, hard day.

6) Silence

It is hard to know how much silence was practised in twelfth-century monasteries: there were certainly extensive rules restricting both speech and sign-making, but there were also occasions in which speech was permitted, permissions were obtained and rules were ignored. Counsel was sought and

obtained. Herbert gives a beautiful example of spiritual conversation when he writes of Boson, a disciple of Bernard: *mutua collatione invicem pascere* — “by speaking together we each nourished the other” (*De Mir* 1.30) and Adam of Perseigne lists among the means of formation “a frequent and friendly discussion about spiritual things and regular observances” (Ep 5.47). The fact that there are exhortations to silence and laws against its violation are, perhaps, indications that limits were routinely stretched. Silence was not absolute. Isaac of Stella complains that on his storm-tossed island, “Lord, solitude has been superadded to solitude, silence to silence. We are **forced and forced** [by the elements] to practise silence among ourselves — so that we are more articulate and familiar with you alone” (*Serm.* 14.12).

The fact that Bernard admonishes his monks to reduce both their speaking and their sign-making during Lent seems to indicate some possibility for both at other times.

Let the ear fast from its evil itch to listen to stories and rumours and whatever is unprofitable and has little bearing on salvation. Let the tongue fast from detraction and murmuring, from useless, vain and scurrilous words and, indeed, sometimes — on account of the seriousness of silence — from words that could seem necessary. Let the hand fast from unprofitable sign-making. (Quad 3.4)

Bernard is remarkably even-handed in adding to the customary warnings against evil speech, an equally serious admonition not to inhibit life-giving and edifying words: “Sometimes it is necessary to participate in a conversation. . . There is great utility in speaking and frequently most valuable fruit is found in the tongue.” Therefore, he continues with a mischievous wordplay on RB 6.8, we must “not prevent life-giving and constructive speech by setting up an eternal enclosure (*aeterna clausura*) against it” (Div 17:6-7). Without questioning the importance of silence both for the individual and for the monastic ambience, Bernard is also fully aware that silence can strain community relations:

Human perception and understanding are often more ready to detect evil than to have faith in the presence of goodness. This is especially so where the discipline of silence prevents you, who are the cause of the trouble, from offering some explanation; nor does it permit him to lance the wound that he inwardly sustains: to make known his suspicion so that it may be healed. So he develops a fever due to this death-dealing wound given so thoughtlessly. He groans inwardly and is wholly taken up with anger and negative feelings. It is impossible for him to do anything except silently to go over and over again in his mind the injury he has received. He cannot pray or read. He is unable to reflect on anything holy or spiritual. (SC 29.4)

The problem is not with silence as such but with defective love. Just as it is possible wordlessly to hurt another by grimaces, muttered words, scowls, snort and scoffing (SC 29.5), so also “love is maintained and increased by a friendly mien, a cheerful deed. In this way kind and cheerful behaviour confirms what is conveyed by facial expression and words” (Div 121).

John of Forde admits that monks do sometimes engage in unprofitable conversations. “I confess that I am upset and I groan when while some are reading or praying I see others yawning in corners or

idly running about out of a restless curiosity, or giving themselves to talking and story-telling” (SC 91.6). Elsewhere he laments that their discourse seems limited to “the progeny of bulls and goats, the acquisition of land, the yield of fields, the details of litigation, various complaints of carnal needs, the deeds of kings and princes, and . . . even stupid and coarse stories” (SC 116.7).

Build a wall around your ears
against poisonous conversation.

John of Forde, SC 40.3

There is no doubt that — despite the different modalities of silence in medieval times — the first Cistercians experienced it as much as a challenge as we do. The fact that they continued to affirm the importance of this observance may, perhaps, be instructive in that it indicates that **they were not afraid to propose ideals that were a little beyond what they could easily deliver**. Perhaps we are too ready to lower our ideals and make them conform to our practice, with the result that there is nothing left to goad us into a more focussed life.

7) Separation from the World

The different aspects of enclosure are strongly emphasised in the primitive documents and seem to have been observed in substance although there were many cases of monks going out and outsiders coming in — more than we might expect: even Stephen was elected abbot of Cîteaux *in his absence*.

i) Staying at Home

“Monks should reside in their own cloister” (EP 15.12). This was the reason for the creation of the laybrothers. Meanwhile monks were sent to Metz and Milan to upgrade liturgical texts, foundations were prepared, markets frequented, visitations and chapters duly conducted. And all this before Bernard attained frequent-flyer status! The principle stands, however. The monastery was to be an island where the monks could live their distinctive lifestyle without interference from exterior demands: “serving God and living in accordance with the Rule” (EC-SCC 9.4). Notwithstanding this, Bernard warns about those “who are enclosed within the walls of the monastery only in their bodies. In heart and tongue they go round the whole world” (Sent 3.31). Nor, it seems, were the monks of those times entirely without news of the outside world — even with minimal means of social communication. Elsewhere Bernard gives as an example of foolish thoughts “thinking about the King of England” (Sent 1.25).

ii) Remote Location

“Because these holy men knew that the blessed Benedict had built his monasteries not in cities, nor in walled settlements or villages, but in places removed from populated areas, they promised to follow his example in this” (EP 15.13). It is true that some abbeys became centres of settlement, but it

is noteworthy that even today it is relatively difficult to reach most twelfth-century monasteries. At a time when 35 km represented a day's journey, it was not so hard to find a desert location. This separation was deliberate and consistent.

iii) Visitors

Remoteness meant that the monks practised hospitality to those who passed by. A guesthouse and a porter's cell were to be constructed before the monks arrived (EC-SCC 9.4) — an indication that hospitality was seen as an integral part of strict monastic living. From anecdotal accounts we know that Clairvaux had a regular stream of visitors: bishops, “retreatants” (like Gueric), and family visitors (like Humbelina). Stephen, however, put an end to ducal parties inside the monastery — even at the risk of offending his principal benefactor (EP 17.4).

iv) Hidden Life

In addition to ensuring a contemplative ambience, separation from the world offered the monks the means of escaping the rat race of worldly involvement. It is “secular conduct” that the early Cistercians wanted to avoid (EP 15.6) — particularly the traps of avarice and ambition. When Bernard lists the characteristic insignia of monks he includes the “hidden life” (*latebrae*) alongside the more conventional marks of manual work and voluntary poverty (Ep 42.37). By choosing to live in the shade (*umbratilis vita*) the monk dedicates himself to pursue the practical humility necessary for the development of deep prayer. Stability and perseverance give this choice some hope of success.

- **Austerity in liturgy will be discussed in Unit 9.**

John of Forde

Austerity of diet, austerity of clothing, the gravity of silence, the discipline of labour and vigils, the correctness of continence — these are the insignia of the sacred militia. (SC 45.6)

3. The Meaning of Austerity

Behind the Cistercian quest for an austere lifestyle lay an anthropology that placed great insistence on observing due priorities in practical choices: *ordinatio caritatis*. The grace of God was believed to be at work, but it required the assent of the human will to be effective. So long as the will's energies were totally occupied with transient, external and unimportant matters, they would never be placed at the service of spiritual growth. Bernard's prescription was simple: “Get rid of the non-essential and life-giving options will present themselves”. *Tolle superflua et salubria surgunt* (SC 58.10). On the other hand, sustained concern with things that do not matter, is more than time-wasting diversion of energies or harmless self-indulgence; it gradually disables the spiritual faculties. *Appetitus vanitatis est contemptus veritatis, contemptus veritatis causa nostrae caecitatis*: “to have an appetite for the

unimportant is to despise the truth; despising the truth is the cause of our blindness” (Ep 18.1). The austerity of Cistercian *conversatio* was a systematic attempt to exclude anything that could frustrate the grandeur of the soul’s call to seek and find God. The image of spiritual warfare gave such renunciation a positive accent: it was a matter of doing battle with one’s own reluctance to respond to God.

Because they had an appreciation of the interconnection of the virtues, the early Cistercian authors considered that any victory over selfishness reinforced spiritual defences as a whole. Thus John of Forde cites as aids to chastity, “abstemiousness in food and drink, cheap clothing, fervour in keeping vigil, working and praying as well as other exercises of sacred discipline by which they strive to increase the measure of their grace and beauty” (SC 61.4). On the other hand, to succumb to the temptation of a more comfortable life progressively undermines all spiritual priorities and will cause problems in a variety of areas..

Where is this zeal of unity [of heart and soul] nowadays? We give ourselves to outward things and abandon the true and lasting values of God’s kingdom which is within us. Instead we go abroad, seeking some cold comfort from false and empty baubles. Not only has our religious life lost its inner vitality, we haven’t even kept up an outward semblance. . .

Any vice that shows up on the surface must have its source in the heart. A frivolous heart is known by frivolous conduct, external extravagance points to inward impoverishment, and soft clothes are a sign of a soul without firmness. The fact is that there would not be so much concern for the body, if the fostering of spiritual values had not long since been neglected. (Apo 25-26)

The intuitive appreciation of an austere lifestyle by the Founders was reinforced by the experience of subsequent decades. The various negative elements of Cistercian *conversatio* have as their purpose the minimisation of three tendencies that have the capacity to bring shipwreck to the contemplative pursuit.

- Self-promotion, display, attention-seeking, “singularity”.
- Self-indulgence: “Following the futile fancies of the flesh” (Apo 17).

- Rationalisation by which watering down the exigencies in monastic life is spuriously legitimated, and a basic uncertainty about priorities results.

The OCSO Constitutions (M. 16.2; F.16.5) provide that monks and nuns be given “a careful formation in this discipline of separation from the world”, because it is not a value they would likely have cultivated before entry. The same is probably true of all aspects of monastic austerity. Because these practices are “hard on flesh and blood” our instinctive preference is to downgrade their importance. In the practice of austerity good formation — comprising clear and solid instruction, personal guidance and encouragement — is particularly important.

Bernard Appears to a Wavering Novice

“Be a man and do not shirk, because in difficulties the Lord will be at your side to deliver you.”
Herbert, *De Miraculis* 1.31.

Exordium

Unit 8: Austerity

Questions for Reflection and Dialogue

1. Compare the Cistercian practices of austerity with what is found in RB. Are the same values at work?
2. Recognising that different monasteries express the value of austerity in different ways, would you describe as “appropriately austere”:
 - 1) your own community?
 - 2) other communities you know?
 - 3) your personal lifestyle?

Explain how you arrive at your conclusions. What criteria do you use?

3. Given the great social and cultural changes evident in the Order after 900 years, what elements of traditional austerity do you consider important today?
4. Are there new challenges which make monastic life “hard and rough” in ways unknown to the Founders? Make a list of them? Do such difficult observances further the purposes of monastic life or are they merely accidental byproducts of modern living? How can we make a creative response?
5. What answers do you give when people ask:
 - 1) **Why** do you get up so early?
 - 2) **Why** do you have a lower standard of living than other religious?

- 3) **Why** don't you eat meat?
- 4) **Why** do you wear the habit?
- 5) **Why** don't you wear make-up or jewellery?
- 6) **Why** are there restrictions on speaking and on access to the media?
- 7) **Why** can't you come out and play?

What **3 points** from this Unit would you wish to retain for further reflection?

Exordium

Unit 8: Austerity

Transparency 1: Outline

AUSTERITY

1. Spiritual Warfare
2. "Rigor Ordinis"
 - 1) Poverty
 - 2) Servile Work
 - 3) Rough Clothing
 - 4) "Parsimonious Food"
 - 5) Vigils
 - 6) Silence
 - 7) Separation from the World
 - 8) Unadorned Liturgy
3. The Meaning of Austerity

Exordium

Unit 8: Austerity

E. Malone: Monastic Life as a Militia Spiritualis

Origen is the father of the concept of the ascetic as the true soldier of Christ who wages a constant battle against sin. . . It is quite evident from the earliest writings dealing with monastic life that the monks felt that they had fallen heir to the title of *Milites Christi*. They looked upon their lives principally as a warfare in which the chief enemy was the devil and his angels, and in which the victories won were the vicarious victories of Christ over Satan. When giving instruction to his monks on the nature of their vocation, St Anthony tells them:

When we live this life, let us keep an incessant watch and “keep our heart with all watchfulness,” (Prov 4:23) as it is written, for we have as enemies the terrible, unscrupulous, and wicked demons; against them is our warfare, as the Apostle said: “Not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirit of wickedness dwelling in high places” (Eph 6:12)

. . . More metaphorical, but hardly less vivid is the instruction given by Abbot Serapion (d. after 362) to his monks, in which they are described as soldiers serving in the army of Christ. . .

Therefore, my dearest ones, blessed are you. It is meet to tell you this over and over again. You have not served in the army of a human king, to witness in war the slaughter of your fellow men; but you have campaigned for Christ, to witness the defeat of the demons. Nor were you equipped with weapons of brass and iron to slay your fellow servants, but you are equipped with a strong faith for the vanquishment of the devil. Nor again have you become soldiers for the spilling of human blood, but you are in the service of God to pour forth your prayers continuously before Him.

This manner of presenting the life of the monk is not a passing phenomenon, but recurs constantly in the writings of the monastic Fathers. St. Orsiesius speaks of the monks as *boni milites Christi*. As a group the monks are sometimes referred to as the *exercitus monachorum*, and their struggles with temptation are spoken of as *certamina cordis*, *certamina visus*, *pugna sensuum corporis*, and *certamina sensuum animae* [a struggle of the heart, a struggle of the sense of sight, a battle of the senses of the body, a struggle of the senses of the soul].

John Cassian frequently speaks of the monk as the soldier of Christ. For example, when describing the clothing proper to the monastic life, he says, *Itaque monachum ut militem Christi in procinctu semper belli accinctis lumbis iugiter oportet incedere* (*Inst* 1.1), and continuing he assures his readers, *His itaque vestimentis Christi miles indutus noverit prius ob id se cinguli constrictione munitum* (*Inst* 1.11). [= “As a soldier of Christ, it is appropriate that the monk always and continually go about in battle attire, with his loins girt. . . The soldier of Christ, attired with these garments, will see

to it that he is equipped with a belt which constrains him.”]

The spiritual struggles which await the monk after he has subdued the flesh are presented by Cassian as struggles with the cohorts of the enemy. These struggles, he says, are necessary for the soldier of Christ, lest he becomes lax in the ease and inactivity of times of peace, and forget the glory of his former victories over the enemy. If he were to lose his fervor and become lax, the soldier of Christ would lose the rewards of his triumphs.

For having subjected and overcome the flesh, how many cohorts of adversaries, how many columns of enemies, aroused by his victories, take up arms against the victorious soldier of Christ, indeed lest the soldier of Christ, relaxing because of the ease of times of peace, begin to forget the glorious struggles of his former contests, and having become lax in an idleness born of security, be defrauded of the payments of recompense and the merits of victories. (*Inst* 5.19)

St Benedict (ca 547), when writing his monastic rule, accepted the tradition that had been handed down to him by earlier writers. At the very outset of the rule he addresses his disciples in the following words:

To you, therefore, my words are now addressed, whoever you are, who renouncing your own will, take up the most powerful and excellent arms of obedience, in order to fight for the Lord Christ, our true King.

For St Benedict, the whole life of the monk was a spiritual warfare, one in which Christ was the king, and the monk was the soldier. The monastic rule was the strict military code by which tis soldier was bound and under which he served.

Exordium

Unit 8: Austerity

Background Reading: 2

Texts from Gilbert of Swineshead

1. SC 39/40,6; CFS 26, 484

“Myrrh with spices”, means either abstention from evil with aspirations for goodness, or austerity of the flesh and devotion of the heart. Whether we mean moderation in what is lawful or endurance of injuries, in myrrh the spices of both virtues are well blended. This myrrh is indeed a grace, if we are scourged when we do good or if, afflicting ourselves outwardly, we are thereby affected with inner consolation.

2. SC 43/44,6; CFS 26,533

In your opinion . . . why does the Lord’s discourse not cleave like an icepick, the hardness of some people? Their bowels are frozen with chilling feelings of exaggerated austerity; their bowels distill no drops of mercy; they are not thrilled and moved with the slightest affection towards penitents.

3. SC 15/16,8; CFS 20,213

Even now, good Jesus, if a son of our mother be dead - I mean a son of this holy community, this widow with whom (so to speak) you lodge - do you restore him to life. That son is dead who is crushed by the weight either of tedium or of despair, who possesses no lively devotion, no fervour of spirit, who although he does not abandon the precepts of the Rule, none the less languishes in a cold and moribund affection and feels no sweetness in our holy work. The sorrowful countenance of the whole Order disheartens him.

4. SC 42/43,8; CFS 26,523

About to speak of opening the door, why does she first advert to her hands? Did she wish perhaps to suggest with what hands you should open to your Beloved, with what meritorious deeds you should prepare your approach to the contemplation of truth? Good indeed are hands scented with myrrh, which practise mortification of the flesh, which check its laxity, constrain its wantonness, that the entrance may be wider for the enjoyment of the Word. Do you not regard as drops of myrrh these works of regular observance, which following one upon the other anoint the mind and constrain the flesh. Consider our vigils, fasts, a modest and sparse diet, rough cloth and black bread, strokes of the rod freely undertaken, the chanting of psalms at daybreak and silent prayer; though each prayer rises with heartfelt passion, still silent prayer is the more passionate the more a quiet breathing of the body releases the breath of the spirit. Do not all these observances distill myrrh upon us as they succeed one

another? Rightly are they compared to myrrh, because they inflict on the flesh the bitterness of discomfort and soothe the spirit with the ointment of devotion.

5. SC 25/26,5; CFS 20,321

Good is a fortress of granite, if it be such that from its hard substance honey and oil may be extracted. And indeed the very hardness of observances and the rock of discipline often pour full streams of oil, and the somewhat stony rigour of our Order supplies sweetness of devotion to the jowls of the mind. In the words of the Psalm: “Let peace be in your power and plenty in your towers” Jerusalem, but “a plenty for those who love you”. Otherwise one who does not love, though he be within, goes hungry none the less.

6. SC 34/35,2; CFS 26,428

A good wall is love but this wall has a rampart in front of it. Love is like a wall and its rampart is the strictness of the Rule. The wall encloses holy thoughts and sweet affections; the rampart repulses and shuts out occasions of sin. The rampart of the Rule affords the opportunity of leisure for the attentions of love; the wall of love enjoys them. The inner wall is pleasing; the outer rampart is necessary. The wall encloses you amid heavenly delights; the rampart excludes worldly pleasures. If you desire to offer your heart to Christ as a garden of delights, do not take it ill if you are enclosed by this rampart. Anyone who complains of a bulwark wishes to lose the delights he possesses, if indeed he does possess them. One who knows not how to be enclosed, knows not how to be a garden.

Exordium

Unit 8: Austerity

Background Reading: 3

Walter Daniel, *Vita Ailredi* 5

For their name [i.e. White Monks] arose from the fact that, as the angels might be, they were clothed in undyed wool spun and woven from the pure fleece of the sheep. So named and garbed and gathered together like flocks of sea-gulls, they shine as they walk with the whiteness of snow. They venerate poverty, not the penury of the idle and negligent, but a poverty directed by a necessity of the will and sustained by the thoroughness of faith, and approved by divine love. They are welded together by such firm bands of charity that their society is “as terrible as an army with banners”. Trampling the flowers of the world with the foot of forgetfulness, counting riches and honours as dung, beating with the fist of conscience on the faces of mutable things, spurning fleshly desires and vain glory in food, drink, act, affection, alike in the abundance and scarcity of goods, running an even course in the fit use of them between right and left they observe at all times a discreet uniformity, using only so much and such means of sustaining life as will maintain the needs of the body and their fervour in the worship of God.

For them everything is fixed by weight, measure and number. A pound of bread, a pint [*hemina*] of drink, two dishes of cabbage and beans. If they sup the remnants of their former meal are dished up again except that, instead of the two cooked dishes, fresh vegetables, if they are to be had, are served. When they rest on their beds, each of them lies alone and girdled, in cowl and tunic in winter and summer. They have no personal property; they do not even talk together; no one takes a step towards anything of its own will. Everything they do is at the motion of the prelate’s nod and they are turned aside by a like direction. At table, in procession, at communion and in other liturgical observances, all of them, small and great, young and old, wise and ignorant, are subject to one law. Personal standing is merged in the equality of each and all, there is no inequitable mark of exception except the greater sanctity which is able to put one man above others. The only test of worth is the recognition of the best. The humbler a man is the greater he is among them, the more lowly in his own esteem, the more pleasing in the opinion and judgement of the rest.

Women, hawks and dogs, except those ready barkers used to drive away thieves from houses, do not enter the gates of the monastery.

By their exceeding love they stifle among them the bane of impatience, and every growth of anger and the smoky emanations of pride and so, in the words of the Acts of the Apostles, by the grace and love of the Holy Spirit they are made “of one heart and of one soul.”

Exordium

Unit 8: Austerity

Background Reading: 4

Aelred on Austerity

About an opinion of certain persons who say that outward toil is opposed to charity and to inward gentleness.

But, you say, it is clear that to waste the body away by unremitting vigils, to afflict the flesh by daily toil, and to weaken the strength of one's members by eating very poor food are not only [causes of] considerable toil, but are opposed to the charity you are trying hard to recommend so that, emptying the mind of all pleasantness, they leave it drained of all spiritual gentleness.

This is the ludicrous opinion of those who put spiritual sweetness in a certain pleasantness of the flesh, asserting that affliction of the body is contrary to the spirit and that the sufferings of the outer man lessen the holiness of the inner. They say that since flesh and spirit cleave to each other by a natural attachment, each necessarily communicates its passions to the other. If the joy of one cannot be undisturbed when the other is oppressed, so also a spirit downcast over some anxiety or sorrow cannot catch the breath of spiritual joy. These things are seen to be closely investigated and proved.

Oh, how shameful it is to seek spiritual grace by the rules of Hippocrates! Those who rely on physical arguments rather than on the apostles' teachings are so wrong, so very wrong.

This is clearly not the wisdom coming down from above, but one which is first of all modest and then pacifying, but one which is frankly earthly, carnal and diabolic. This is the wisdom of words; while teaching of the pleasantness of the flesh, it strives to abolish the cross of Christ. In the cross, of course, there is nothing pleasant, nothing soft, nothing tender, nothing at all delicate as far as the flesh is concerned. But it is not abolished. Rather it upsets this self-indulgent doctrine which the nails driven into those sacred members have conquered, which the very lance thrust into that gentle breast has vanquished by its saving point.

I feel utterly opposed [to this doctrine], and declare boldly that affliction of the flesh is not contrary to the spirit, if it is inspired by a healthy intention and if discretion is observed. This should be taken, not from our own personal conjecture, but from the example of our forebears, so that laxness and slackness may not be camouflaged beneath the colours of discretion. So I say, affliction of the flesh is not contrary but necessary to the spirit. It does not lessen divine consolation but rather, I think, elicits it. So much so that I would estimate that as long as we are in this life these two things, that is, outward tribulation and inward consolation, always balance each other. (*Spec Car 2,5,8-9*)

Exordium

Unit 8: Austerity

Background Reading: 5

Bernard on Food

1.

What have you got to say about this, you who are so careful about your food and so careless with your morals? Hippocrates and his followers teach us to save our lives in this world, whereas Christ and his disciples teach us to lose our lives. Which of these two do you elect to have as master? There is no doubt about whose disciple is the one who says, “This is bad for my eyes, and this mor my head, that for my chest and that for my stomach.” For everyone speaks according to what he has learned from his master. Such fussiness is not in the Gospels, nor in the prophets, nor in the letters of the Apostles. Certainly it is flesh and blood that have revealed such wisdom, not the Spirit of the Father — for this is the wisdom of the flesh. Hear what our physicians have to say about this: “The wisdom of the flesh is death,” they say, and “The wisdom of the flesh is hostile to God”.

Should I be setting before you the teaching of Hippocrates or Galen, or that of the school of Epicurus? No, for I am a disciple of Christ and it is to disciples of Christ that I address myself. Should I introduce some strange tenets, then it is I who would sin. Epicurus and Hippocrates are concerned about the body, its pleasure or its good health; but for both such conditions my Master proclaimed contempt. The Saviour exhorted us to lose the life of the soul in the body, whereas these teachers pursued and inculcated the pursuit of how this life was to be maintained and enjoyed.

What else did you hear Christ saying when you just heard him proclaim, “The one who loves life will lose it.” One loses one’s life either by giving it up in martyrdom or by **afflicting it in a life of penitence**. Indeed, to put to death the deeds of the flesh by the spirit is a sort of martyrdom, less horrifying than being struck by the sword, but more agonising in being more drawn out. Don’t you see that this saying of my Master is a condemnation of the wisdom of the flesh which is equally expressed in sexual indulgence and in an excessive concern for the well-being of the body?

That true wisdom is not directed to pleasurable living you can hear from that saying of the Sage which states that no wisdom is found in those who live softly. Whereas one who did find wisdom said, “I have loved wisdom more than health or beauty”. if wisdom is to be loved more than health and beauty, how much more is it to be preferred to pleasure and filth? Furthermore, what profit is there in controlling one’s desire for pleasure if one gives oneself over to a daily concern for studying the different types and combinations of foods? Such a one says, “Beans give me wind. Cheese upsets my stomach. Milk is bad for my head. Drinking water weakens the heart. Cabbage induces melancholy. Leeks get me stirred up. Fish from ponds or muddy water disagree with me entirely.” How is it that in all the rivers

and fields and gardens and storehouses, there is scarcely anything to be found which may be eaten?

Please remember this. You are a monk, not a physician. You will not be judged for your health but for how you lived your profession. I beg you desist: for your own peace of mind, for the sake of those who have to look after you, to avoid being a burden to the house, and for the sake of conscience — not so much your own as the conscience of the one who sits and eats what is set before him and who murmurs because of your refusal to eat. He is scandalised, since he thinks you are superstitious, making an issue about inessentials. Alternatively, he thinks ill of me for not providing you with the food you need. (SC 30.10-12)

2.

We turn up our noses at food that is unadulterated, as nature made it, and prefer to mix things together. We set aside natural God-given qualities so as to entice excess with hybrid delicacies. Hunger has long subsided, of course, but there is always room for pleasure.

To take a single example. Who could describe all the ways in which eggs are tampered with and tortured, or the care that goes into turning them one way and then turning them back? They might be cooked soft, hard or scrambled. They might be fried or roasted. Sometimes they are stuffed. Sometimes they are served with other foods and sometimes on their own. What reason can there be for all this variation except the gratification of a jaded appetite? A good deal of care is given to the appearance of a dish, so that the sense of sight is as much delighted as the palate. In this way, even when the stomach rumbles its repletion, the eyes can still feast on novelties. The eyes delight in colours, the palate in tastes, but the poor stomach cannot see colours and does not appreciate tastes. It has to contain everything and ends up being more oppressed than refreshed. (Apo 20)

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Austerity

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