De vita et actibus rationi consentaneis (On Life and Rational Action)

Methodius of Olympus (d. c. AD 311)

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The Second Homily, by the same. On Life and Rational Action.

[I. 1.] Many persons are surprised at the changes in life, or how they pass from abundance of sustenance to worse things. For such people, because of love for the things they have lost, and because of the diminishing of those things which are needful, not having learnt to humble themselves to worse things, often rail unreasonably even at Providence. [2.] But I say, since we are men, and have dominion over those things which were created for us, let us not show ourselves to be worse than those things that were created for us: neither being exalted with a multitude of riches, nor, on the contrary, being impatient with the little that we have now. For it is foolish to become enslaved to those things over which we have received dominion. [3.] For the sake of abstinence even those who are rich often regard their abundance as very little, while the poor regard these things as nothing. And many, who have the things of this world as if they had not the things of this world, are greater. [4.] For if there were any benefit in material things, people would indeed have an excuse; but if there is none at all, how is it possible to hinder the mind of God? They labour in vain who do not accept the things that befall them, and they do not understand that they cast themselves into worse evils, and receive punishment from God for their insubordination. Before that further punishment they beat themselves, ending by poisoning themselves with care.

[5.] Life, which is unstable and swift to change human works, knows no good things. Either we have learnt by experience or we have seen those who suffer: [6.] its transformations are many, and its changes from one condition to another – sometimes the lesser are raised up, sometimes the greater are ruined. By the greater an untroubled condition is only to be touched, even if the head is bowed down. [7.] But our rising up wilfully... Knowing

that those who by reason of weakness did not want to receive it shall receive worse loss, [II.1.] how shall he who resisted it, and the things that are pleasing to God, think himself unfit for eternal death? [2.] Thus a mariner obeys the helmsman, and a soldier obeys the general, and an ox bears the yoke, and a horse is restrained by the bridle, and other beasts, according to the law that is for them, obey and submit to the one who drives them. [3.] So how shall man, who is above them all, not obey God? He is glad to receive heavenly things, and does what is commanded promptly, and rejoices in the command, because he had been fit for God's commandment.

[4.] But what sort of men are we, bearing a burden of filth which besets us? When we see those things that are necessary, we are glad only of those which give us pleasure, thinking that this is good; thereby we take delight also in fair deceits, and imagine that only these are of use to us. [5.] But God, who created us and made us, as he desires man not to be saved just by being given things, does not bestow on men as much pleasure as they can enjoy (the end of which would be death). [6.] Over-abundant feeding and rich food weaken a man, and those who have made themselves weaker through much feeding are unfit for obedience to the commands of God.

[III.1] But how much firmer will a man be made by many labours of the body! He will obtain a healthier soul through his labours and hard living. He has brought these things upon men, whereby he thinks willingly to prepare the human mind for that which is high and lovely. [2.] For it is better for them who have lived through hard times to enjoy eternal good things afterwards, than, having enjoyed pleasure for a short time, to fall into unending alien torment. For sorrow is beneficial, and those things that give pleasure do harm. For I think that there is no one who does not know what learning is like for children, and that it is hard to make them remain at their studies. [3.] How is it not manifest that virtue shows itself at the very beginning of the labours that have been before, and not by the experience of useful things, nor by the knowledge of good things to come? Those who have suffered will receive the fruit of these sweet things. [4.] Nor do those who are undergoing treatment in the body, even if they suffer more, demand immediate health, but in the hope of future deliverance accept useful pains. [5.] An athlete is trained by time, and schooled in painful labours from his youth up, and he spreads his table with hardship, and takes food which is distasteful to him, avoiding sweet things, and is fed by what he takes no delight in, that by the rules he obeys he may crown his fatherland.

[6.] These things are done in small things, and are seen by all. They understand the organisation of ordinary life. But each of the things we have spoken of invisibly creates future benefits by means of painful efforts. For they are not soon known to man, and so the good things which are not yet come are invisible to us who believe in the one who knows them. We should speak such things and pray that they should be, [7.] for so we have learnt. Whereby it is pleasing to him, so it should be useful to us, knowing and being firmly assured that the changes in life are useful to us, [8.] or changed by him into useful things, even if they do not immediately appear so. Again, there are often those who themselves change their require-

ments, being in poverty or riches. He who is the constant in all things is revealed by life. [9.] For as many as adhere to a single way of life, maintaining their habit unchanged to the end, such people as have soon left everything, after their departure have been altogether the same, only they have a different life elsewhere, hiding earthly things in the heavens.

[IV.1] If there be anything else, let those who are deprived not be dismayed at the change. For it is fitting to hear this law. For whatever there is shows itself after it has been. Do you not see the changing seasons of the many days of the year? [2. Behold the winter, which is unbearable for many, but is necessary for life, for it gives food and drink to the earth, and having distressed man by the sadness of nature, it shortly reveals its benefits by the coming of the wind, and brings forth for man the many different fruits with which the earth is crowned. [4. Many flee the heat of the sun, but it ripens our food. Often the rains distress us, but they serve the earth for drink. Let the harvest too pass, and let winter be near. Let autumn display a dissolution from the mixing of the two, to the decay of the fruits. [4. Let the sun also change the wind, which blows elsewhere. Behold, O man, the moon itself, in what manner it wanes and is impoverished, and waxes again and is enriched. [5. We see also the nature of the stars, with which the sky is crowned, how they also have received their own lot, and we observe their movements, how by different habits and in changeable manners they approach each other, so that even those that rejoice in the heavens are to be constant within a single circle, [6.

as they say, nor are they to be immobile, like the axis, but go round within the circle that contains them; but they are inseparable, as they say, for the sake of constancy. [7. Let us, again, consider the manner of being of the springs, how they too do not remain in their places, but pour out many waters, as they do not care to remain in the place where they were, but pass through many, and are seen by themselves, and fed by mixing with each other, pour forth many mighty rivers.

[V.1]These are the operations and changes of the nature of created things. Therefore you also, O man, be either rich or poor, or a king. Do not love a changeless existence, but change it, and look to the next world. [And consider] a multitude of people, so as to see clearly and understand wisdom: [2.] there you shall see many changes in many persons, who turn about and change their way of life. There you shall see many rising from a humble condition and falling from greatness. [3.] Such are the mysteries of our life. Such are the laws that the Deity has laid down for man, moving him from place to place and from way of life to way of life as he desires for each individual, so it becomes us to obey, to follow and not to resist.

[4.] Therefore, O man, the image of God, creature of God, do not repine under him, nor make his commandment a hardship, and do not disobey when you are chastised, for it is in love that he chastises you. Some are chastised as having already sinned, and some so that they may not sin. [5.] But if you approach the sea, do not be afraid of its threatening aspect, for here also will you find the footsteps of God, wherein one may follow without fear, believing in the true way by water, and by spirit, and by the tree. [6] The fall of a kingdom is sorrowful indeed for those who experience it or those who hear of it; for whatever pleasure

they have received to enjoy, when they are in want they will experience very great sorrow, being deprived of it. [7.] But forasmuch as these things have not happened without God, instead of worrying about them one should rather seek their cause, so as to understand the good that will come of it. For he who desires to learn from what he endures will understand how to receive the will of God from him and be forgiven.

[VI.1] Understand therefore, O man, if you think yourself deprived of anything, that it was not eternal but transient, a thing wanted but not a thing possessed. [2.] Those who would grasp the things of this world as if they were things eternal shall receive neither, but be deprived of all. For these, even if they receive them, disappear and perish like a shadow; while those remain for ever, as really existing. And let the nature of what happens be understood from the thing itself: [3.] for it it (if it?) does not fall, it is eternal; but if it does fall, it has come to nought. How is it not transient! It is like a dream that appears in the night time only, the imaginary nature of which is revealed when the day comes. [4.] It remains for those who have despaired of imaginary things to ask for those which are to come, and when they have loved to acquire them, and asked for them, they shall receive them. [5.] For the imaginary good things here are the image of the true ones. Therefore having flourished for a little while, they shall immediately fade, and only the word of God shall abide for ever. For the kingdom is not divided, that the voice of God shall come true here also. [6.] Let us take off the purple robe, and cast aside crimson raiment, for it does not satisfy the thirsty soul, and let us avoid many great storehouses full of all kinds of fruit, for by this the soul was never made free. But though we gain the whole world, we have no profit if we lose our soul. It is enough: enough is humble food, lest, if I grow rich, I forget the Lord.

[VII.1] These are the teachings of God, in these ways Our Lord walked. Do you not see that he himself, who fills the heavens and the earth, did not love fleeting things, but left them in his salutary departure, and he first showed us the well conducted life, and what is necessary. [2.] (When he said “he put off”, instead of this it means that he did not require divine power during the time of his pilgrimage; and “he put on” means that he required human poverty and humility.)

For he put off God and put on man. Among us he was among the poor, and did not care for the rich, but imitated the poor and called them blessed, and promised immortal and genuine riches and a kingdom that shall not fail, and said that those who are rich now shall have their reward taken away from them, because they have loved this temporary sustenance instead of that which is eternal. [3.] Let us strive therefore to have it, despising the things of this present world, for they pass like a shadow, and loving those which are to come, for they shall remain, and no one shall take them away, for they are God’s gift, and immortal. [4.] It is necessary for those who would hold onto those good things to despise those imaginary good things that are here. The Lord too renounced his possession of them, and what he himself had made he ceded to another (that is, to the devil), and he allowed his temporal power to the evil spirit and to men. [5.] Therefore these things are not to be held

onto, because they are the possessions of such a lord, and he gives to whom he will: he gives to his own, who understand all his ways and, imagining him to be the lord, worship him. [6.] But it behoves us, if we have chosen to follow God, to renounce the broad and extensive [road], for it is the way of death, and cross over to the narrow and hard one, for it leads to life. [7.] If you are deprived of possessions by acquisition, by poverty, you shall receive, instead of one thing [another]. If you have lost any of your loved ones, they are not lost to you, for those of whom you have been deprived for a short while you will have for ever.

[VIII.1] Behold that man, the preacher of the coming of the Holy One, who was sent into the world for a short time, and abode here scarce for a while, and set little store by any of the things that are here. For he fed upon locusts and wild honey, and was clad in camel's hair, and proved greater than all that have been born, because of his simple raiment, and unsophisticated food, and meagre victuals. [2.] Behold also that poor widow, whose entire possessions were two copper mites, which she did not spare, and who was greater in her giving than many rich people. [3.] If any would fulfil the heavenly commandments, and follow the law of salvation to the end, he will find many occasions for the care that is here – be it to refrain from marriage when nature commands and allows it, or having two coats, promising one to the poor and naked, or not neglecting those who are in need of food, or serving the thirsty, though it be but with cold water, or receiving one who has no roof or shelter into his house, or attaching his soul to the prison, or serving the sick.

[4.] Thus he shall be numbered among those on the judge's right hand, he shall be honoured as a king, he shall be called like a son of God, and he shall live in the unknown world, and be nourished with the riches of God, which cannot be reckoned in time.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.

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