Discourse 11.-Arete

Methodius of Olympus (d. c. AD 311)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

Chapter I.-The True and Chaste Virgins Few; Chastity a Contest; Thekla Chief of Virgins,

I do accept it, Theopatra related that Arete said, and approve of it all. For it is an excellent thing, even although you had not spoken so clearly, to take up and go through with earnestness those things which have been said, not to prepare a sweet entertainment for those who listen, but for correction, recollection, and abstinence. For whoever teaches that chastity is to be preferred and embraced first of all among my pursuits, rightly advises; which many think that they honour and cultivate, but which few, so to speak, really honour. For it is not one who has studied to restrain his flesh from the pleasure of carnal delight that cultivates chastity, if he do not keep in check the rest of the desires; but rather he dishonours it, and that in no small degree, by base lusts, exchanging pleasures for pleasures. Nor if he have strongly resisted the desires of the senses, but is lifted up with vainglory, and from this cause is able to repress the heats of burning lust, and reckon them all as nothing, can he be thought to honour chastity; for he dishonours it in that he is lifted up with pride, cleansing the outside of the cup and platter, that is, the flesh and the body, but injuring the heart by conceit and ambition. Nor when any one is conceited of riches is he desirous of honouring chastity;

he dishonours it more than all, preferring a little gain to that to which nothing is comparable of those things that are in this life esteemed. For all riches and gold ”in respect of it are as a little sand. And neither does he who loves himself above measure, and eagerly considers that which is expedient for himself alone, regardless of the necessities of his neighbour, honour chastity, but he also dishonours it. For he who has repelled from himself charity, mercy, and humanity, is much inferior to those who honourably exercise chastity. Nor is it right, on the one hand, by the use of chastity to keep virginity, and, on the other hand, to pollute the soul by evil deeds and lust; nor here to profess purity and continence, and there to pollute it by indulgence in vices. Nor, again, here to declare that the things of this world bring no care to himself; there to be eager in procuring them, and in concern about them. But all the members are to be preserved intact and free from corruption; not only

those which are sexual, but those members also which minister to the service of lusts. For it would be ridiculous to preserve the organs of generation pure, but not the tongue; or to preserve the tongue, but neither the eyesight, the ears, nor the hands; or lastly, to preserve these pure, but not the mind, defiling it with pride and anger.

It is altogether necessary for him who has resolved that he will not err from the practice of chastity, to keep all his members and senses clean and under restraint, as is customary with the planks of ships, whose fastenings the ship-masters diligently join together, lest by any means the way and access may lie open for sin to pour itself into the mind. For great pursuits are liable to great falls, and evil is more opposed to that which is really good than to that which is not good. For many who thought that to repress vehement lascivious desires constituted chastity, neglecting other duties connected with it, failed also in this, and have brought blame upon those endeavouring after it by the fight way, as you have proved who are a model in everything, leading a virgin life in deed and word. And now what that is which becomes a virgin state has been described.

And you all in my hearing having sufficiently contended in speaking, I pronounce victors and crown; but Thekla with a larger and thicker chaplet, as the chief of you, and as having shone with greater lustre than the rest.

Chapter II.-Thekla Singing Decorously a Hymn, the Rest of the Virgins Sing with Her; John the Baptist a Martyr to Chastity; The Church the Spouse of God, Pure and Virgin.

Theopatra said that Arete having said these things, commanded them all to rise, and, standing under the Agnos, to send up to the Lord in a becoming manner a hymn of thanksgiving; and that Thekla should begin and should lead the rest. And when they had stood up, she said that Thekla, standing in the midst of the virgins on the right of Arete, decorously sang; but the rest, standing together in a circle after the manner of a chorus, responded to her: "I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet Thee." Thekla. I. From above, O virgins, the sound of a noise that wakes the dead has come, bidding us all to meet the Bridegroom in white robes, and with torches towards the cast.Arise, before the King enters within the gates. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet Thee.

Thekla. 2. Fleeing from the sorrowful happiness of mortals, and having despised the luxuriant delights of life and its love, I desire to be protected under Thy life-giving arms, and to behold Thy beauty for ever, O blessed One. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 3. Leaving marriage and the beds of mortals and my golden home for Thee, O King, I have come in undefiled robes, in order that I might enter with Thee within Thy happy bridal chamber. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 4. Having escaped, O blessed One, from the innumerable enchanting wiles of the serpent, and, moreover, from the flame of fire, and from the mortal-destroying assaults of wild beasts, I

await Thee from heaven. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee.

Thekla. 5. I forget my own country, O Lord, through desire of Thy grace. I forget, also, the company of virgins, my fellows, the desire even of mother and of kindred, for Thou, O Christ, art all things to me. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 6. Giver of life art Thou, O Christ. Hail, light that never sets, receive this praise. The company of virgins call upon Thee, Perfect Flower, Love, Joy, Prudence, Wisdom, Word. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 7. With open gates, O beauteously adorned Queen, admit us within thy chambers. O spotless, gloriously triumphant Bride, breathing beauty, we stand by Christ, robed as He is, celebrating thy happy nuptials, O youthful maiden. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee.

Thekla. 8. The virgins standing without the chamber, with bitter tears and deep moans, wail and mournfully lament that their lamps are gone out, having failed to enter in due time the chamber of joy. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 9. For turning from the sacred way of life, unhappy ones, they have neglected to prepare sufficiency of oil for the path of life; bearing lamps whose bright light is dead, they groan from the inward recesses of their mind. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 10. Here are cups full of sweet nectar; let us drink, O virgins, for it is celestial drink, which the Bridegroom hath placed for those duly called to the wedding. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee.

Thekla. 11. Abel, clearly prefiguring Thy death, O blessed One, with flowing blood, and eyes lifted up to heaven, said, Cruelly slain by a brother's hand, O Word, I pray Thee to receive me. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 12. Thy valiant son Joseph, O Word, won the greatest prize of virginity, when I a woman heated with desire forcibly drew him to an unlawful bed; but he giving no heed to her fled stripped, and crying aloud:- Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 13. Jephthah offered his fresh slaughtered virgin daughter a sacrifice to God, like a lamb; and she, nobly fulfilling the type of Thy body, O blessed One, bravely cried:- Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee.

Thekla. 14. Daring Judith, by clever wiles having cut off the head of the leader of the foreign hosts, whom previously she had allured by her beautiful form, without polluting the limbs of her body, with a victor's shout said:- Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 15. Seeing the great beauty of Susanna, the two Judges, maddened with desire, said, O dear lady, we have come desiring secret intercourse with thee; but she with tremulous cries said:- Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla.

16. It is far better for me to die than to betray my nuptials to you, O mad for women, and so to suffer the eternal justice of God in fiery vengeance. Save me now, O Christ, from these evils.

Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 17. Thy Precursor, washing multitudes of men in flowing lustral water, unjustly by a wicked man, on account of his chastity, was led to slaughter; but as he stained the dust with his life-blood, he cried to Thee, O blessed One:- Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 18. The parent of Thy life, that unspotted Grace and undefiled Virgin, bearing in her womb without the ministry of man, by an immaculate conception, and who thus became suspected of having betrayed the marriage-bed, she, O blessed One, when pregnant, thus spoke:- Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 19. Wishing to see Thy nuptial day, O blessed One, as many angels as Thou, O King, calledst from above, bearing the best gifts to Thee, came in unsullied robes:-

Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 20. In hymns, O blessed spouse of God, we attendants of the Bride honour Thee, O undefiled virgin Church of snow-white form, dark haired, chaste, spotless, beloved. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 21. Corruption has fled, and the tearful pains of diseases; death has been taken away, all folly has perished, consuming mental grief is no more; for again the grace of the God-Christ has suddenly shone upon mortals. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 22. Paradise is no longer bereft of mortals, for by divine decree he no longer dwells there as formerly, thrust out from thence when he was free from corruption, and from fear by the various wiles of the serpents, O blessed One.

Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 23. Singing the new song, now the company of virgins attends thee towards the heavens, O Queen, all manifestly crowned with white lilies, and bearing in their hands bright lights. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee. Thekla. 24. O blessed One, who inhabited the undefiled seats of heaven without beginning, who governed all things by everlasting power, O Father, with Thy Son, we are here, receive us also within the gates of life. Chorus. I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding alighted torch I go to meet Thee.

Chapter III.-Which are the Better, the Continent, or Those Who Delight in Tranquillity of Life? Contests the Peril of Chastity: the Felicity of Tranquillity; Purified and Tranquil Minds Gods: They Who Shall See God; Virtue Disciplined by Temptations.

Euboulios. Deservedly, O Gregorion, has Thekla borne off the chief prize. Gregorion. Deservedly indeed. Euboulios. But what about the stranger Telmisiake? Tell me, was she not listening from without? I wonder if she could keep silence on hearing of this banquet, and would not forthwith, as a bird flies to its food, listen to the things which were spoken. Gregorion. The report is that she was present with Methodios when he inquired respecting these things of Arete. But it is a good as well as a happy thing to have such a mistress and guide as Arete, that is virtue. Euboulios. But, Gregorion, which shall we say are the better, those who without lust govern concupiscence, or those who under the assaults of concupiscence continue pure? Gregorion. For my part, I think those who are free from lust, for they have their mined undefiled, and are altogether uncorrupted, sinning in no respect.

Euboulios. Well, I swear by chastity, and wisely, O Gregorion. But lest in any wise I hinder you, if I gainsay your words, it is that I may the better learn, and that no one hereafter may refute me. Gregorion. Gainsay me as you will, you have my permission. For, Euboulios, I think that I know sufficient to teach you that he who is not concupiscent is better than he who is. If I cannot, then there is no one who can convince you. Euboulios. Bless me! I

am glad that you answer me so magnanimously, and show how wealthy you are as regards wisdom. Gregorion. A mere chatterer, so you seem to be, O Euboulios. Euboulios. Why so? Gregorion. Because you ask rather for the sake of amusement than of truth. Euboulios. Speak fair, I pray you, my good friend; for I greatly admire your wisdom and renown. I say this because, with reference to the things that many wise men often dispute among themselves, you say that you not only understand them, but also vaunt that you can teach another.

Gregorion. Now tell me truly whether it is a difficulty with you to receive the opinion, that they who are not concupiscent excel those who are concupiscent, and yet restrain themselves? or are you joking? Euboulios. How so, when I tell you that I do not know? But, come, tell me, O wisest lady, in what do the non-concupiscent and chaste excel the concupiscent who live chastely? Gregorion. Because, in the first place, they have the soul itself pure, and the Holy Spirit always dwells in it, seeing that it is not distracted and disturbed by fancies and unrestrained thoughts, so as to pollute the mind. But they are in every way inaccessible to lust, both as to their flesh and to their heart, enjoying tranquillity from passions. But they who are allured from without, through the sense of sight, with fancies, and receiving lust flowing like a stream into the heart, are often not less polluted, even when they think that they contend and fight against pleasures, being vanquished in their mind.

Euboulios. Shall we then say that they who serenely live and are not disturbed by lusts are pure? Gregorion. Certainly, For these are they whom God makes gods in the beatitudes; they I who believe in Him without doubt. And He says that they shall look upon God with confidence, because they bring in nothing that darkens or confuses the eye of the soul for the beholding of God; but all desire of things secular being eliminated, they not only, as I said, preserve the flesh pure from carnal connection, but even the heart, in which, especially, as in a temple, the Holy Spirit rests and dwells, is open to no unclean thoughts. Euboulios. Stay now; for I think that from hence we shall the better go on to the discovery of what things are truly the best; and, tell me, do you call anyone a good pilot? Gregorion. I certainly do.

Euboulios. Whether is it he that saves his vessel in great and perplexing storms, or is it he who does so in a breathless calm? Gregorion. He that does so in a great and perplexing storm. Euboulios. Shall we not then say that the soul, which is deluged with the surging waves of the passions, and yet does not, on that account, weary or grow faint, but direct her vessel-that is, the flesh-nobly into the port of chastity, is better and more estimable than he that navigates in calm weather? Gregorion. We will say so. Euboulios. For to be prepared against the entrance of the gales of the Evil Spirit, and not to be cast away or overcome, but to refer all to Christ, and strongly to contend against pleasures, brings greater praise than he wins who lives a virgin life calmly and with ease. Gregorion. It appears so. Euboulios. And what saith the Lord? Does He not seem to show that he who retains continence, though concupiscent, excels him who, having no concupiscence, leads a virgin life?

Gregorion. Where does He say so? Euboulios. Where, comparing a wise man to a house well founded, He declares him immoveable because he cannot be overthrown by rains, and

floods, and winds; likening, as it would seem, these storms to lusts, but the immoveable and unshaken firmness of the soul in chastity to the rock. Gregorion. You appear to speak what is true. Euboulios. And what say you of the physician? Do you not call him the best who has been proved in great diseases, and has healed many patients? Gregorion. I do. Euboulios. But the one who has never at any time practised, nor ever had the sick in his hands, is he not still in all respects the inferior? Gregorion. Yes. Euboulios. Then we may certainly say that a soul which is contained by a concupiscent body, and which appeases with the medicaments of temperance the disorders arising from the heat of lusts, carries off the palm for healing, over one to whose lot it has fallen to govern aright a body which is free from lust.

Gregorion. It must be allowed. Euboulios. And how is it in wrestling? Whether is the better wrestler he who has many and strong antagonists, and continually is contending without being worsted, or he who has no opponents? Gregorion. Manifestly he who wrestles. Euboulios. And, in wrestling, is not the athlete who contends the more experienced? Gregorion. It must be granted. Euboulios. Therefore it is clear that he whose soul contends against the impulses of lust, and is not borne down by it, but draws back and sets himself in array against it, appears stronger than he who does not lust. Gregorion. True. Euboulios. What then? Does it not appear to you, Gregorion, that there is more courage in being valiant against the assaults of base desires? Gregorion. Yes, indeed. Euboulios. Is not this courage the strength of virtue? Gregorion. Plainly so. Euboulios. Therefore, if endurance be the strength of virtue, is not the soul, which is troubled by lusts, and yet perseveres against them, stronger than that which is not so troubled?

Gregorion.Yes. Euboulios.And if stronger, then better? Gregorion.Truly. Euboulios.Therefore the soul which is concupiscent, and exercises self-control, as appears from what has been said, is better than that which is not concupiscent, and exercises serf-control. Gregorion. You speak truly, and I shall desire still more fully to discourse with you concerning these things. If, therefore, it pleases you, tomorrow I will come again to hear respecting them. Now, however, as you see, it is time to betake ourselves to the care of the outward man.

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.