Book 6

Sidonius Apollinaris (c. AD 430–490)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

Contents

I. **1**

II. **3**

III. **4**

IV. **5**

V. **6**

VI. **7**

VII. **8**

VIII. **9**

IX. **10**

X. **11**

XI. **12**

XII. **13**

I.

To the Lord Bishop Lupus* A. D. 472

[1] BLESSED be the Holy Spirit and Father of Almighty God that we have you, father of fathers, bishop of bishops and the second James of your age,1 to look down upon every member of the Church from the eminence of your charity, as it were from another Jerusalem exalted high as the first; you, the consoler of all the feeble, the counsellor of all men, whose trust you so well deserve. And what answer can I make to one thus venerated, I who am as vile dust foul with sin? [2] Suffering deep need of your salutary converse, yet standing in great awe, I am driven by the memory of my guilty life to cry to you, as once that great colleague of yours cried to the Lord: 'Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.' 2 But if my dread is not tempered by love, I fear that I may be abandoned like the Gerasenes, and that you may go forth from my borders. Rather, for my greater profit, will I seek to bind you with the conditional prayer of that other leper: 'If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean;' 3 in which words he both declared his need and published abroad his faith. [3] For though you are beyond all doubt first of all bishops in the wide world; though even the throng of your colleagues submits to the prerogative which you enjoy, and trembles at your adverse judgement;

though the hearts of the oldest among them are as the hearts of little children compared with yours; though your hard vigils in the spiritual warfare at Lerins,1 and the nine lustres passed in your apostolic see have made you a veteran honoured in the camps of the Church, and the captain of our vanguard whom every soldier acclaims----yet you never hesitate to leave the first line awhile and those who fight before it; you do not despise camp-follower and servant, but to the meanest of the baggage-train, who for their ignorant simplicity still sit beside the loads of the flesh, you carry the standard of the cross which you have borne so long, and to their stricken souls extend the Word, as it were a hand of rescue. [4] They say, dear veteran leader, that you gather to you even the enemy's wounded, sounding the retreat from Sin to Christ after the manner of a consummate trumpeter, and like the Shepherd of the Gospel feel more joy over those who abandon the way of despair than over those who have never left the path of safety. O norm of all right conduct, column of all virtues, and (if a sinful man may dare to praise) fount of sweetness, truest because most holy, you did not shrink from touching with the finger of exhortation the sores of a most despicable worm;

you did not grudge the food of admonition to a soul frail and fasting, or from the store-house of your deep love refuse me the measure of the humility I am now to pursue. [5] Pray for me, that I may know at length how vast the burden is that weighs upon my shoulders. Wretched man that I am, by the continuance of my transgressions brought to such a pass, that I must now intercede for the sins of the people ---- I for whom their own supplications, more innocent than mine, should hardly obtain the divine mercy. How shall a sick man give others medicine? How shall one in a fever presume to feel a pulse that beats more strongly than his own? What deserter has the right to sing the praise of military science? What lover of high living is fit to read a lecture to the abstemious? Yet I, the unworthiest of men, must preach what I cannot practise. Condemned out of my own mouth when I do not fulfil my own injunctions, I must daily pronounce sentence upon myself. But if like a new Moses, not less, but of a later age, you intercede before Our Lord, with whom you are daily crucified, for all the multitude of my sins, I shall not living descend further into hell, nor longer, inflamed by the incentives of carnal sin, light alien flame on the altar of the Lord. For one guilty as I, there can be no glory to weigh down the scale;

how abundantly shall I then rejoice if your prayers avail to restore my inward man, not indeed to perfect health and its reward, but to the healing of the heart's wounds, and pardon. Deign to keep me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

* Translated by Chaix, i. 449; and Germain, p. 103 f.

II.

To the Lord Bishop Pragmatius A. D. 472

[1] THE venerable matron Eutropia, known to me as a woman of the most exemplary merit, is in the greatest trouble. Frugality and charity dispute her days; her fastings feed the poor; so watchful is she in Christ's service, that sin is all in her which she allows to slumber. But as if the sorrow of her widowhood were not enough, she now finds herself threatened with a lawsuit. Her first instinct in her two-fold affliction is to obtain the perfect remedy of your consolation; if you only see her, she will be equally grateful, whether you regard her coming as a short journey or as a lasting proof of her respect. [2] Now Eutropia is being harassed by the subtleties, to use no harsher word, of our venerable brother the presbyter Agrippinus. He is taking advantage of her woman's inexperience, and continually troubling the serene surface of her spiritual nature by windy gusts of worldliness. And all the while this poor woman is bleeding from two fresh wounds which time has added to the old deep wound of widowhood; for her son was first taken from her, and very soon afterwards her grandson also. [3] I did my best to compose this matter; a friendship of long standing gave me an old claim to be heard, and my sacred calling a new one; I let them know what I thought; I used persuasion where I could, and entreaty at every turn.

You may be surprised to learn that throughout the woman and not the man was the first to accept suggestions for agreement. And though the father boasts that in his paternal quality he is in the best position to serve his daughter's interests, the daughter herself prefers her mother-in-law's most generous proposals.1 [4] The dispute, only half appeased, is now to be carried before you. Pacify the adversaries by your episcopal authority, show their suspicious souls the truth, and bring about a reconciliation. You may take my word for it that the holy Eutropia will count it almost victory if even at the cost of heavy sacrifices she can escape from litigation. Though two families are parties to the quarrel, I fancy you will soon decide which of them deserves the name of quarrelsome. Deign to hold me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

III.

To the Lord Bishop Leontius A. D. 472 [1] You have not yet seen fit to encourage my first steps in our sacred profession, or to pour the rain of heavenly doctrine on the drought of my worldly ignorance; but I do not so far forget myself as to expect an equipoise in the courtesies which we render to each other. I am of small account; you are easily above me in years, in seniority, in the precedence enjoyed by your see,1 in your wide learning, in the treasure of your righteousness; if I expected you to notice every letter, I should deserve no notice at all. [2] I therefore make no imputation against your silence; these lines merely introduce the bearer, and give me the excuse for sending them. If on this journey he can only have the assurance of your prompt favour, a broad harbour of safety will be open to his affairs. His business relates to a will. He does not know the importance of his own documents; the object of his expedition is to get the advice of skilled counsel. He will think it the next best thing to winning his case if it is proved to be lost on its merits; his one desire is to avoid the charge of negligence, and of not sufficiently protecting family interests. My request on his behalf is simply this, that if the lawyers will not deign to give him proper advice, you should exert the authority of your sacred office1 to extract it from them without delay. Deign to keep me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

IV.

To the Lord Bishop Lupus c. A. D. 472

[1] I RENDER you the observance always due to the incomparable eminence of your apostolic life, still always due, however regularly paid. But I have a further object, to commend to your notice a long-standing trouble of the bearers, in whose case I have recently become interested. They have journeyed a great distance into Auvergne at this unfavourable season, and the journey has been undertaken in vain. A female relative of theirs was carried off during a raid of the Vargi,2 as the local bandits are styled. They received trustworthy information, and following an old but reliable clue, discovered that some years ago she had been brought here before being removed elsewhere. [2] As a matter of fact, the unfortunate woman had been sold in open market before their arrival, and is now actually under the roof and the control of my man of affairs. A certain Prudens, rumoured to be now resident in Troyes, had attested the contract for the vendors, whose names are unknown to us; his signature is to be seen on the deed of purchase as that of a suitable witness of the transaction. By the fortunate fact of your presence, you will be able, if you think fit, to see the parties confronted, and use your personal influence to investigate the whole course of the outrage. I gather from what the bearers say, that the offence is aggravated by the death of a man upon the road as a sequel to the abduction.

[3] But as the aggrieved parties who wish to bring this scandalous affair to light are anxious for the remedy of your judgement and for your neighbourly aid, it seems to me that it would no less become your character than your position to bring about an equitable arrangement, thus affording the one side some comfort in affliction, and saving the other from an impending danger. Such a qualified decision would be most beneficial to all concerned; it would diminish the misery of one party and the guilt of the other, while it would give both of them a greater feeling of security. Otherwise, in regions and times like these of ours, the last state of the dispute may well prove no better than the beginning. Deign to keep me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

V.

To the Lord Bishop Theoplastus (No indication of date) WHOEVER bears a letter of introduction from me to you unconsciously does my business; by conveying my dutiful regards at the proper moment, he renders me a service at least as great as that which he considers himself to receive. This is the case with the venerable Donidius, who is deservedly to be numbered among the most admirable of mankind. I now recommend to you his client and servants, who have undertaken this journey for the benefit of their patron and master. Pray take the weary travellers under your protection; do all you can to help them by your support, your hospitality, and your intercession. And if our good friend, through inexperience and unfamiliarity with public affairs, should in any matter betray his inefficiency, consider the cause of an absent man, rather than the personality of his representative. Deign to hold me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

VI.

To the Lord Bishop Eutropius A. D. 472 [1] As soon as I learned that the treaty-breaking nation 1 had withdrawn within its borders, and that travellers were in no further danger of insidious attack, I held it a disgrace to delay the presentation of my respects, for fear your friendship might grow rusty from my neglect, like a sword which is not properly kept bright. My sole object in sending this letter is to satisfy my anxiety as to your health and the success of your affairs; it is my hope that neither the distance which divides us nor the long intervals between our meetings may ever diminish the friendship once accorded me; it is the homes of men which the Creator confines within narrow limits, not their mutual affections. [2] And now I hope your Beatitude will feed my starving ignorance with sharp and salutary discourse; your exhortations have a way of causing mystic increase and spiritual growth in the emaciated inward man. Deign to hold me in your remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

VII.

To the Lord Bishop Fonteius A. D. 472 [1] IF a previous friendship between the older members of two families helps the younger in their turn to know each other better, then indeed by virtue of such preexisting ties I enjoy a great advantage in now seeking your Lordship's more intimate acquaintance. I well remember how powerful a patron in Christ you always were to my family, so that I regard myself less as making a new acquaintance, than as renewing an old one. I will add that the title of bishop imposed on my extreme unworthiness1 compels me to seek the covert of your intercession, that the gaping wounds of a seared conscience may at least be closed by your healing prayers. [2] While, therefore, I commend to you myself and those who are dear to me, at the same time apologizing for not writing sooner, I implore you to sustain my first steps as a novice in this office by those availing supplications for which you are so widely renowned. So shall I owe all to your mediation, if the immutable mercy of God deign but to change the wickedness of this heart of mine. Deign to hold me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

VIII.

To the Lord Bishop Graecus c. A. D. 472 [1] THE bearer of this is one who ekes out a bare living by commerce; he gains no profit or other advantage from any handicraft or employment, nor does he make anything from the cultivation of land. He has come to be favourably known as an agent and trader; but a good name is all he gets; the pecuniary advantage goes to others. Though his means are small, the general confidence in him is so great that if he wants to raise money for the purchase of a cargo, people are confiding enough to trust him on no greater security than their experience of his good faith. It is true that I only learned these facts while actually writing these lines, but that does not make me hesitate to assert them with some assurance, for the sources of the information are common acquaintances of his and mine. I recommend him to you, then, on the ground of his youth and the arduous life he has led. As his name is now entered in the roll as Reader, you will see that I have had to give him in addition to an ordinary introduction as citizen, a canonical letter1 as a clerk. I think I am right in looking forward to his brilliant success as a merchant if he is quick to take advantage of your patronage; but he must definitely prefer the fount of commerce to the icy springs of a municipal career.* Deign to hold me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

* The passage is corrupt.

IX.

To the Lord Bishop Lupus c. A. D. 472 [1] THE bearer Gallus, made an honest man by returning at once to his wife as he was bidden, conveys my greeting in this letter, and by doing so proves the efficacy of your own. For when I opened your missive in his presence, he was seized with instant compunction, and saw in it not so much a communication for me as a condemnation of himself. The result was that he immediately promised to go back, made his preparations at once, and was off without delay. At sight of so rapid a repentance, I could not confine myself altogether to rebuke; I gave him a few words of consolation, for so spontaneous an amendment is the next best thing to unbroken innocence. [2] A man with a perfect conscience could hardly have done more, always supposing him to keep within the range of your admonishment; for even such words of gentle censure as I read out to him are in themselves a most powerful incentive to reform. What, indeed, could be more valuable than a reprimand aiding the sick mind to discover within itself a remedy which the sharp reproach of others could never find? [3] It remains for me to ask a place in those frequent prayers by which you so mightily triumph over every kind of vice; that as the Wise Men of the Gospel returned to their own country by a different way, so by a new way of life you may lead me home to the land of the blessed. I had almost forgotten to mention the point which I could least have afforded to omit. Convey my thanks to the respected Innocentius for so promptly obeying your injunctions. Deign to hold me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

X.

To the Lord Bishop Censorius* A.D. 473 THE bearer is one privileged to hold the rank of deacon. Flying with his family from the whirlwind of the Gothic devastations, he was carried, as it were by the sheer momentum of his flight, into your territory. Immigrant and destitute as he was, he hurriedly sowed a half-tilled plot on Church lands in your holiness's diocese, and now begs permission to take the whole harvest for himself. The poor fellow is a stranger whose means are as narrow as his outlook; but if you treat him with the indulgence often granted to the humbler among the faithful, that is, if you remit him the glebe dues,1 he will think he has done as well as if he were yet at work upon his native soil. If only you show him the liberality usually accorded to the faithful, and abandon your strictly lawful claim on his most exiguous crop, he will be full of gratitude, and set off home royally furnished for the road. Should you take the opportunity of his return to send me one of your usual gracious letters, all the brethren, and I myself, will regard it almost as a letter fallen from heaven. Deign to hold me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

* Translated by Hodgkin, ii. 371.

XI.

To the Lord Bishop Eleutherius c. A.D. 472 [1] I HEREWITH commend a Jew 1 to you, not because I approve a sect pernicious to those involved in its toils, but because we ought to regard none of that creed as wholly lost so long as life remains to them. For while there is any possibility of converting them, there is always a hope of their redemption. [2] The nature of his business will be best explained by himself when admitted to your presence; for it would be imprudent to allow discursive talk to exceed the brevity proper to a letter. In the transactions and the disputes of this present world, a Jew has often as good a cause as any one; however much you may attack his heresy, you can fairly defend him as a man. Deign to hold us in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

XII.

To the Lord Bishop Patiens* A.D. 474

[1] ONE man deems happiness to consist in one thing, a second in another;2 my own belief is that he lives most to his own advantage who lives for others, and does heaven's work on earth by pitying the poverty and misfortune of the faithful. You may wonder at what I aim in these remarks. At yourself, most blessed father, for my sentiments refer especially to you, who are not content to succour only the distress which lies within your cognizance, but push your inquiries to the very frontiers of Gaul, and without respect of persons, consider each case of want upon its merits. [2] Does poverty or infirmity prevent a man from making his way to you in person? He loses nothing; your free hand anticipates the needs of those whose feet are unable to bring them to you. Your watchful eye ranges over other provinces than your own; the spreading tide of your benevolence bears consolation to the straitened, however far away. And so it happens that you often wipe tears from eyes which you have never seen, because the reserve of the absent touches you no less than the plaints of those near at hand. [3] I say nothing of your daily labour to relieve the need of your impoverished fellow countrymen, of your unceasing vigils, your prayers, your charity. I pass over the tact with which you combine the hospitable and the ascetic virtues, so that the king1 is never tired of praising your breakfasts and the queen your fasts.

I omit your embellishment of the church committed to your care until the spectator hardly knows which to admire most, the new fabric which you erect, or the old which you restore. [4] I do not mention the churches that rise in so many districts under your auspices, or the rich additions to their ornaments. I dismiss the fact that under your administration the faithful are increased and multiplied, while heretics alone diminish. I shall not tell how your apostolic chase for souls involves the wild Photinians2 in the spiritual mesh of homily; or how barbarians once converted by your eloquence pursue your track until, like a thrice-fortunate fisher of men, you draw them up at last out of the profound gulfs of error. [5] It may be true that some of these good deeds are not peculiar to you, and are shared by colleagues; but there is one which is yours, as lawyers say, as a first charge, and which even your modesty cannot deny; it is this, that when the Gothic ravages were over, and the crops were all destroyed by fire, you distributed corn to the destitute throughout all the ruined land of Gaul at your own expense, though it would have been relief enough to our starving

peoples if the grain had come to them, not as a free gift, but by the usual paths of commerce. We saw the roads encumbered with your grain-carts. Along the Saône and Rhone we saw more than one granary which you had entirely filled.

[6] The legends of the heathen are eclipsed; Triptolemus must yield his pride of place, whom his fatherland of Greece deified for his discovery of corn; Greece, famed for her architects, her sculptors and her artists, who consecrated temples, and fashioned statues, and painted effigies in his honour. A doubtful story fables that this son of Ceres came wandering among peoples savage and acorn-fed, and that from two ships, to which poetry later assigned the form of dragons, he distributed the unknown seed. But you brought supplies from either Mediterranean shore, and, if need were, you would have sought them among the cities of the Tyrrhenian sea; your granaries filled not two paltry ships, but the basins of two great rivers. [7] If you disapprove, as unsuited to your profession, a comparison drawn from the Achaean superstition of Eleusis, I will recall instead the historic prescience of the patriarch Joseph, who by his foresight provided a remedy for the famine which had to follow the seven lean years; I omit for the moment his mystic and typical significance.1 But I hold that man morally as great, who copes with a similar disaster without any warning in advance. [8] I cannot exactly tell the sum of gratitude which all the people owe you, inhabitants of Arles and Riez, Avignon, Orange, Viviers,2 Valence, and Trois Châteaux 3; it is beyond my power to count the total thanks of men who were fed without having to count out a penny.

But for the city of Clermont I can speak, and in its name I give you endless thanks; all the more, that your help had no obvious inducement; we did not belong to your province; no convenient waterway led to us, we had no money to offer. [9] Measureless gratitude I give you on their behalf; they owe it to the abundant largess of your grain that they have now their own sufficiency once more. If now I have properly fulfilled the duty entrusted to me, I will cease to be the mouthpiece of others, and speak out of my own knowledge. I would have you know that your glory travels over all Aquitaine; all pray for your welfare, their hearts go out to you in love and praise, in longing and loyal devotion. In these evil times you have proved yourself a good priest, a good father, and as good as a good year to men who would have deemed it worth while to risk starvation if there had been no other means of discovering the measure of your generosity. Deign to hold me in remembrance, my Lord Bishop.

* Partly translated by Fertig, Part ii, p. 24.

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.