

Appendix 3 to Vitae Patrum Sayings of the Egyptian Fathers

by Heribert Rosweyde

This sermon emphasizes the importance of humility, prayer, fasting, self-awareness, and loving one's neighbor in spiritual growth.

Scripture: Psalm 25:17, Psalm 51:3, Psalm 73:21, Psalm 118:7, Matthew 7:14

Topics: "Spiritual Discipline", "Monastic Virtues"

Description

Heribert Rosweyde preaches on the virtues of humility, self-discipline, and prayer as essential elements in the monk's journey towards God. He emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, resisting temptations, and seeking peace through forgiveness and charity. The sermon highlights the significance of controlling one's thoughts, emotions, and actions to maintain a pure heart before God. Through various anecdotes and teachings from the old men, the message conveys the path of self-denial, vigilance, and unwavering faith in God's grace and mercy.

Transcript

By an unknown Greek author

Translated into Latin by Bishop Martin Dumiensis, 6th century

1. Abba John said to his disciples: "The Fathers ate only bread and salt, and thus became strong in the work of God while inhibiting themselves. Let us also therefore restrict ourselves to bread and salt, for it behoves the servants of God to be constricted in this way for the Lord himself said that narrow was the gate and strait the way that leads to life." (Matt.7.14) 2. A brother asked the same old man: "What is the effect of the fast and vigils that we do?" And he replied: "They bring humility to the soul, as it is written in Scripture; 'Look upon my adversity and misery and forgive me all my sin.' (Psalm 25.17) If your soul strives like this God will bring you mercy and strength." 3.

Abba Poemenius said: "Have no truck with thoughts of sexual sin or slandering of your neighbour; do not allow their venom into your mind. For if you once allow them entry you will immediately begin to feel how poisonous they are and that is the beginning of losing your way. But rather by prayer and good works bring your enemy to naught. Drive him back and you will have peace." 4. A brother asked an old man: "How should I deal with passionate thoughts, father?" And the old man replied: "Pray to God that your

eyes may see your salvation which comes from God who surrounds you and preserves you." 5.

A brother going to market asked Abba Poemenius: "How should I go about selling my goods?" And the old man said: "Don't sell anything for more than it is worth, and if you are pressurised don't be upset by anyone who forcefully tries to beat you down, but sell to him without losing your peace of mind. When I have been going to market I have never wished to gain in my prices at my brother's expense, holding fast to the hope that my brother's gain is a source of fruitfulness." 6. = V.iv.8 7. = V.x.56 8. = V.i.14 9. = V.xvii.20 10. (cf V.xv.11) An old man said: "In living with your neighbour be like a pillar of stone, which does not get angry when insulted, or conceited when praised." 11. & 12. = V.iv.20 13.

Similar to 11 & 12 14. = V.xvii.10 15. = V.x.34 16. Abba Macarius said: "If a monk is harmed or slandered by his brother he is himself at fault if he does not drive anger from his heart and hasten to make his peace with him. The Shunamite would not have been found worthy to receive Elisha into her house unless she was innocent of any quarrel with anyone. Now the Shunamite personifies the soul and Elijah the Holy Spirit, showing that the soul does not deserve to receive the Holy Spirit unless it is pure.

Unforgiving anger blinds the eye of the heart and deprives the soul of prayer. 17. The brothers talked to Abba Poemenius about a brother who fasted in exemplary fashion for six days a week but who had a dreadful temper, and asked whether this could be acceptable. The old man replied: "Anyone who has learned to fast for six days without conquering his bad temper needs to spend more time in a little hard work at it." 18. Abba Poemenius had a brother monk living with him in his cell who had a quarrel with another brother living outside their monastery.

Abba Poemenius said to him: "Brother, I wish you wouldn't pursue a quarrel with someone outside our monastery." But the brother wouldn't listen to him. So Abba Poemenius went to another old man and said to him: "My brother monk has a quarrel with someone outside our monastery and we are getting no peace because of it." The old man said to him: "Poemenius, do you mean to tell me that here you are, still alive? Go back to your cell and think on the fact that by this time next year you may be in the grave." 19.

While Abba Poemenius sat quietly in the cell the brothers quarrelled fiercely among themselves, but Poemenius said nothing to them at all. When Abba Paphnutius came in and found them wrangling he said: "Why do you let them go on without telling them to stop their arguments?" Poemenius said to him: "They are brothers. They will make it up in due course." "How can you say that?" said Paphnutius. "You can watch them quarrelling almost to the point of shedding blood, and you can say they will make it up?"

Abba Peomen said to him: "Brother, you should think in your heart that I am not here at all." This was the quality of the stillness and silence of Abba Poemenius. 20. Some heretics once visited Abba Poemenius and began to criticise the Archbishop of Alexandria, but Poemenius said nothing. He simply called his disciple and said: "Set the table and give them something to eat, and let them go in peace." 21. A brother asked Abba Poemenius: "How should you go about sitting in your cell?"

And he replied: "To sit in your cell is clearly to work with your hands, to meditate on the word of God, to be still and eat bread in solitude. Sitting in hiddenness and stillness he begins to discipline his thoughts. Wherever he goes he observes the canonical hours of prayer, and does not fail to meditate in private. Thus he cultivates a good way of life (bona conversatio) and departs from evil." 22. = V.iii.22 23. Abba Macarius said: "If a monk can learn to treat scorn as praise, poverty as riches, and hunger as a feast, he will never die.

If you believe in God and seek him in everything you do you cannot fall into unclean thoughts and the wiles of the devil." 24. An old man said: "Going, coming, or sitting or whatever it is you are doing, keep God always before your eyes and the enemy has no terrors for you. Anyone who keeps this thought in his mind is possessed of the power of God." 25. (cf. V.xi.26) A brother said to Abba Peter: "In my cell my soul is at peace, but when I go out and hear what the other brothers are talking about I get into a turmoil."

The old man replied: "You have the key to the door of your brother's mouth." "How do you mean?" the brother asked. "It's you who ask him things," the old man said, "so he replies, and you hear things you had rather not." The brother asked; "What should we do then when we meet with a brother? How should we converse with him?" "All teaching is summed up in the one word, Mourning ('luctus' = mourning, grief, lamentation, compunction). 26. A brother asked Abba Sisois: "At what point should one cut off one's emotions?" (abscidere passiones, cut off passions) And the old man replied: "The moment any emotion arises in your heart cut it off at once.

The soul is very fragile, but be prepared for battle lest you suffer defeat. 27. A brother asked Abba Agathon about his emotions, which he could not overcome. The old man replied: "There is a large container of them inside you. Give them arrhas retributionis ipsorum (?) and they will depart. 28. A brother visited a hermit who welcomed him gladly. When it came time to depart he said: "I'm sorry, father, if I have interrupted your way of life." The hermit replied: "My way of life, brother, is to receive in peace all who come, and take leave of them in charity." 29.

A brother asked an old man why it was that although God through the Holy Scriptures promises the soul good things, nevertheless the soul does not desire to rest in them but inclines after transitory and unclean things. The old man replied: "It is because the soul has not yet tasted the joys of heaven which would make it seek God whole-heartedly that it turns more readily to things unclean." 30. A brother asked an old man why it was that the soul savoured its emotions, and he replied: "The soul delights in its emotions but it is the Spirit of God who keeps it in check.

We therefore should weep and take note of what in us is unclean, begging God who can accomplish all things to cut off from us the seeds of evil. Mary kneeling before the sepulchre wept, and straightway was in His presence. So it is with the soul if it loves tears." 31. A brother said to an old man: "Give me, abba, a word whereby I may live," and he replied: "Go, ask God to give you mourning and humility, and keep your own sins always in mind." 32. It was said of Abba Poemonius that before leaving his cell to join the brothers in church he would sit still for an hour passing judgment on his own thoughts, and only then would he go in. 33.

A brother asked an old man what he should do about his sins, and he replied: "Anyone who wants to be freed from sin can only be freed by tears, and anyone who wants to build up virtue can only build with tears. The Scripture itself is tears. Our fathers said this to their disciples: 'Weep. There is no other way to life except this.'" 34. = V.iii.13 35. Abba Moyses said: "If prayer and action do not go together your labour is in vain. So then, when you pray that your sins may be forgiven, make sure that you do not offend again.

When you have lost the desire to sin and walk permanently in the fear of God, then God welcomes you with joy." 36. A brother asked an old man what one should do about all the temptations which come upon one and all the thoughts which come from the devil, and he replied: "Weep always in the sight of the goodness of God, that he may make haste to come to your aid. For it is written: 'The Lord is my helper and I shall triumph over my enemies.'" (Psalm 118.7) 37. A brother asked an old man: "Suppose someone

strikes a servant in punishment for a fault, what should the servant say to his master?"

And he replied: "Even if the servant is not at fault, he should say: 'I have sinned. Have mercy on me.' and nothing else. But if he recognises his sins and confesses what it is that he has done his master will forgive him." 38. A brother asked an old man where one should fly to if there were to be persecution for the faith, and he replied: "Wherever you hear that people are orthodox and faithful, fly there." 39. = V.ix.8 40. A brother asked an old man what he should do about the thoughts which troubled him and the old man said: "Question them: 'What do I want with you?"

What need do I have of you?' - and you will find peace. Be willing to be held in low esteem, cast self-will behind you, be careful for nothing, and your thoughts will cease to bother you." 41. A brother asked an old man: "How is that sometimes when singing psalms time flies and I finish them quite quickly?" And he replied: "This is the sign of someone who really loves God. It is only when depressed by the action of demons that we need to drive ourselves vigorously, motivated by the fear of God and God's love." 42.

The same old man said: "A fly will not come near a boiling pot, though it will alight on a tepid one. Similarly, the devils fly from the monk who is burning with the divine Spirit, though they will deceive a tepid one." He also said: "If persecuted by the enemy, first of all fly, secondly fly, thirdly be like a great sword against them, get out from under them, kill them." 43. = V.xiii.5 44. Some brothers from Scete once came to Abba John as he sat and worked in silence and after they had greeted him he turned back ('conversus in alteram patrem', sic, misprint for partem?) and began to work again.

The brothers said to him: "John, who was it gave you the monk's habit, and why did he not teach you when receiving brothers to ask them to say a prayer or ask them to sit down?" John said to them: "Sinners are never at leisure," to which Abba Theodore replied: "How right you are. God does not require such requests from anyone who is in constant prayer and penitence." 45. A brother asked Abba Poemen what he should do, and he replied: "The Scripture says: 'I acknowledge my faults and my sin is ever before me.'" (Psalm 51.3) 46.

A brother asked an old man what he should do and he replied: "Learn to love how to do violence to yourself, unsheathe your sword and go to war." The brother said to him: "My thoughts prevent me." The old man replied: "Scripture says: 'Call upon me in the time of trouble, so will I hear thee and thou shalt praise me.' (Psalm 50.15) Call upon God then and he will save you. 47. = V.iii.19 48. = V.iii.15 49. = V.xv.17 50. = V.xi.13 51. A brother asked an old man the meaning of : "When I was in prison you came to me."

And the old man replied: "The Lord accepts what is done to one's neighbour as being done to himself. At the same time, since 'being in prison' is the same as 'being in one's cell', anyone who in the cell constantly remembers God can quite properly hear God addressing him with the words: 'I was in prison and you came to me.'" 52. A brother asked Abba Besarion: "What shall I do, for my thoughts trouble me?" And he replied: "Just be still. Don't measure yourself up against those of great reputation, but just be quiet in your won heart." 53. (cf.

V.xv.30) A brother asked Abba Antony what it meant that anyone should consider himself as of no account. And he replied: "It means to consider yourself to be like an irrational beast which has no discernment, as it is written in Scripture: 'I am become as it were a beast before thee, nevertheless I am always by thee.' (Psalm 73.21-22) 54. = V.i.2 55. A brother asked an old man: "Is it a good thing to be highly regarded by people?" He replied: "There is no virtue in that. Don't desire to be highly regarded by

your brethren.

Run away from that." 56. A brother asked an old man the meaning of humility, and he replied: "Perfect humility is shown in blessing those who do you evil." And the brother said: "What if you can't rise to the measure of being able to do that?" And he replied: "Walk away from it, and be still." 57. A brother asked an old man: "What makes a perfect monk?" And he replied: "Humility. You are raised up to the heights in proportion as you are brought down low through humility." 58.

A brother asked an old man: "How can you keep on being humble?" And he replied: "By keeping your sins constantly in mind." 59. Abba Poemenius groaned and said: "All the virtues except one are evident in my cell, and it is by this one virtue that a man stands or falls." The brothers asked him what this virtue was and he replied: "Always to accuse oneself." 60. A brother asked an old man: "Please pay me a visit if you think I am worthy to wash your feet." But he would not. A second and a third time he asked with the same result.

At last he went to the old man's cell and did penance before him, beseeching him to visit him in his cell. And the old man agreed. The brother asked him: "How was it that you didn't come all the times I asked you before?" And the old man replied: "When it was with words only that you asked I wasn't persuaded in my heart that I should come. But when I saw in you the monastic virtue of humility, then I came with joy." 61. An old man said: "How can anyone teach someone else something which he has not learnt himself and also put into practice?

Therefore always be humble enough to learn." 62. An old man said: "The virtue of a monk lies in being always suspicious of himself." 63. An old man said: "You can't inspect your thoughts from outside, but only when they rise up from within. If you are a warrior, expel them." 64. An old man said: "The work of a monk is to see thoughts coming from afar." 65. An old man said: "Unforeseen crises prevent us from rising to better things." 66. An old man said: "Don't set your own standards, but measure yourself against those whose life is irreproachable." 67.

An old man said: "If you don't cut off every occasion of sin you will continue to be led astray." 68. An old man said: "Every task which falls to a person can be an occasion of victory." 69. An old man said: "Every carnal delight is an abomination in the sight of the Lord" 70. An old man said: "If the flesh causes certain thoughts to come to you, once, twice, or even three times, pay no attention." 71. = V.xi.5 72. (cf. V.xv.43) An old man said: "Pilgrimage is keeping silent." 73.

An old man said: "People who curb their appetites and are immune from worldly considerations will find peace." 74. An old man said: "A monk must be single-hearted, and he will be on the way to salvation," 75. An old man said: "Whatever you see or hear, don't gossip about it to your brother; it only breeds battles." 76. An old man said: "Self will and laziness, especially if habitual, drag a monk down." 77. An old man said: "Charity, silence and private meditation make for purity of heart." 78.

An old man said: "Anything out of proportion comes from the demons." 79. An old man said: "What is the point of building up somebody else's house and pulling down your own?" 80. An old man said: "Each person begins with a wall of self will, as of bronze and stone, between the self and God. Therefore if you can overcome your own self will you can truly say: 'With the help of my God I shall leap over the wall.'" (Psalm 18.29) 81. An old man said: "If we depart from the straight and well marked path we wander off into dark and thorny places; that is, if we cease to weep for ourselves and our sins, we begin to neglect our neighbour." 82.

An old man said: "Anyone who slanders his neighbour is not a monk, anyone who returns evil for evil is not a monk, nor he who is bad tempered, greedy, proud, avaricious, puffed up or verbose. The true monk is humble and quiet, loving, with the fear of God always in his heart." 83. An old man said: "See that you don't condemn a brother who stands up to you. How do you know whether the Holy Spirit is in you or him?" 84. An old man said: "Humility, chastity and the fear of God are greater than all the other virtues." 85.

An old man said: "If anyone wills to cause a monk actual harm, his cause is just if he resists as he would against the devil." 86. An old man said: "Whatever things a person may be upset by, whether great or small, let them all be held in contempt, whether in thought or deed." 87. An old man said: "Humility is no burden, but provides the seasoning in everything burdensome." 88. An old man said: "To be humble and self deprecatory is like a protective wall for a monk." 89. An old man said: "Anyone wishing to build a house needs to amass many materials in order to bring his work to completion; so a monk must take great care in bringing the work of God to completion." 90.

An old man said: "Blessed is the one who undertakes to work hand in hand with grace." 91. An old man said: "There is no greater virtue than to despise no one." 92. An old man said: "To do violence to self in all things, this is the way of God, this is the work of the monk." 93. An old man said: "Doing violence to yourself makes you like the Confessors." 94. An old man said: "If you keep your mortality always in mind you will lose your faint- heartedness." 95. An old man said: "Speak as a free person, not as a slave." 96.

An old man said: "It is impossible to advance in virtue without custody of the tongue. Custody of the tongue is the primary virtue." 97. = V.iii.4 98. An old man said: "Wherever you live, don't look out for those who are comfortable, but for the needy who lack food and shelter." 99. An old man said: "If you are in the grip of some passion and without having done anything about it pray to God about something else he will not hear you. First pray about your own battle, and when you have then knocked and entered ask anything you like for other people." 100.

An old man said: "There are three important things: the fear of God, diligent prayer, and doing good to your neighbour." 101. (cf. V.xv.32) An old man said: "Humility and the fear of God which you ought always to have in you are like the breath in our nostrils without which we can't live." 102. An old man said: "What is the use of starting anything if you don't study to finish it? Starting without finishing is worth nothing." 103. An old man said: "If you cannot give your whole hearted agreement to somebody don't regard him as if he were your conscience." 104.

An old man said: "Decide never to do harm to anyone, and be open hearted towards all." 105. A brother asked an old man whether he should do anything about it if he saw some neglect in his brothers. And he replied: "Whether they are older than you or of the same age admonish them humbly without being censorious, lest in this you lose your own humility."

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