

De Vitis Patrum, Book Iii

by Heribert Rosweyde

The sermon emphasizes the importance of living a life of abstinence, self-denial, and spiritual growth, and provides guidance on how to overcome worldly temptations and develop patience and perseverance in spiritual battles.

Scripture: 2 Kings 6:16, Psalm 27:14, Psalm 128:2, Isaiah 59:1, Luke 1:37, Acts 14:22, 2 Timothy 4:7, 1 John 2:14, 1 John 3:16

Topics: "Spiritual Discipline", "Asceticism"

Description

Rufinus of Aquileia, Presbyter, in De Vitis Patrum, Book III, emphasizes the importance of asceticism and spiritual discipline as demonstrated by the lives of the desert fathers. Through examples of self-denial, perseverance, and reliance on God's grace, the desert fathers teach us to resist worldly temptations, cultivate virtues, and seek eternal rest in God's kingdom. The stories of these holy fathers serve as a guide for true faith, humility, and dedication to the spiritual journey amidst trials and spiritual battles.

Transcript

De Vitis Patrum, Book III

by Rufinus of Aquileia, Presbyter

Prologue

Who can doubt but that the world is sustained by the merits of the Saints, that is, those whose lives shine out from this book, who spurned every mark of luxury with their whole mind, who left the world and penetrated the secret wastes of the desert, traversing dangerous cliffs, sleeping in fearsome caves but suffering neither hunger nor thirst for the right hand of the Lord sustained and fed them. You also are sustained by their merits, my Lord Fidusus, through their prayers you earn remission of your sins. Do not despise then my simple and uncultured words, for my purpose is not to weave eloquent and sophisticated expositions of divine scriptural doctrine, but to lead human minds into true faith and work. For were not even the faith and lives of the Fathers, that is, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Elias and John, written down not so much to glorify those whom God has already glorified and taken into his kingdom, but to provide the reader with true teaching and examples of salvation.

1. When one of the older holy fathers was asked by some monks to explain abstinence, he said, "My children you must despise all the comforts which this world has to offer, whether bodily pleasures or

culinary delights. We have no need for honour to be paid us by other human beings, for the Lord Jesus will give us heavenly honour, eternal rest and glorious happiness with his angels. 2. The same old man said, "It is natural for human beings to feel hunger, but you must take food simply as something which is necessary to sustain the body, not in a disordered desire to fill the stomach to saturation point.

Sleep is natural for human beings, but by not overdoing it we may be able to maintain bodily discipline and overcome the passions and vices of the flesh. Too much sleep makes the human mind and senses stupid and lazy. Vigils however make the mind and senses more subtle and pure. So said the holy fathers - holy vigils purify and illuminate the mind. It is also natural for human beings to feel anger, but don't be angry with passionate wrath. Be angry with yourself and your sins in order that you may cut them out and amend your life.

And if we see other people doing wrong things contrary to the commandments of God we ought to be quite fierce against their vices and diligently plead with them, correct and warn them, that they may amend their lives and find salvation and come to eternal life". 3. There was an old man living in the inner desert who had spent many years in abstinence and every spiritual labour. Some brothers who admired his perseverance came to him and said, "How do you manage to put up with this arid and inhospitable place, father?"

"He replied, "All the labour of the whole time that I have spent here cannot measure up to a single hour of the torments of eternal fire. So therefore in the short time that we have at our disposal in this life we ought to work hard and put to death our bodily passions, so that in that eternal age which is to come we may find that perpetual rest from our labours which never will fail. 4. (A longer version of V.iv.58) The holy seniors told us about a certain brother who was once so harassed by demons making him feel hungry and weak before the first hour of the day had passed that it seemed he would hardly be able to put up with it.

But he said to himself, "However hungry I am I had better wait until at least the third hour and then I will eat something". When the third hour came he said to himself, "I must be strict and wait till the sixth hour." At the sixth hour he put some bread into soak in water, and said, "While this bread is soaking I need to wait till the ninth hour". When the ninth hour came he said all his customary prayers, and sang the psalms according to the rule, and only then took up the bread to eat it.

He kept this up for many days. One day when he had carried on in this way from the first hour to the ninth and was sitting down to eat his bread he looked at the basket in which the bread was kept and saw a thick smoke coming from it and going out the window of the cell. From that day onwards he suffered neither from hunger or bodily weakness, but his heart was made so much stronger in faith and abstinence that he was quite happy to eat only every other day. So by the grace of God he was strengthened in his struggle and overcame through his patience the passion of gluttony, that is, greed and concupiscence. 5. (A slightly longer version of V.x.97) Some brothers once left the monastery to go and visit the fathers in the desert.

They arrived at the hermitage of a senior who welcomed them with great joy, and according to the custom offered them a little food. Then he saw how tired they were from their journey, so although it was well before the ninth hour he brought out whatever else he had in his cell, and put it before them so that they might eat and regain their strength. At Vespers they said the usual prayers and psalms, and did the same at the night office. The hermit retired to rest in a separate place by himself, but heard the brothers talking among themselves, "These hermits certainly eat more food, and better," one said, "than we who have

joined a monastery."

The hermit heard, but said nothing. Next morning as the brothers prepared to continue their journey to another hermit who lived not far away, the old man said, "Give him my greetings, and tell him to take care not to water the vegetables." When they arrived at this other hermitage they gave the message as they had been asked. The hermit grasped what the message meant, and he took the brothers and gave them some work weaving baskets. He sat down with them and kept on working without ceasing.

At the Lighting of the Lamps at Vespers he added on more psalms than usual, and when the prayers had been said, "Today it is not our custom to eat," he said, "but seeing that you have arrived we will eat something," and he put before them some dry bread and salt. "Because you are here, we should eat a little more", he said, and he brought out a little vinegar and a little oil, and when the meal was over he began to sing psalms again and continued till it was nearly dawn. "Because you are here we won't sing the whole canon," he said, "so that you can rest for a while as you must be tired from your journey."

At the first hour of the day they made as if to go, but the old man would not let them. "Please stay a few days with us," he said. "I can't let you go today. Let me in charity keep you for three more days." When they heard him say this, they got up before dawn and quietly fled. 6. (A longer version of V.iv.57) One of the holy seniors went out to visit another senior hermit, who greeted him joyfully and in honour of his visit prepared a cooked meal of lentils. They decided between them that they would complete the prayers and psalmody first and eat afterwards.

So they went in and began the psalms and completed the whole psalter, after which, although they had no books, they recited two of the prophets as if they were reading them. A day passed, and a night, and a new day dawned as they were praying and psalmodising before they realised that the night had gone. But they carried on discussing the word of God and interpreting its meaning, until it got to be the ninth hour, at which point they embraced each other and the visitor went back to his own cell.

They had forgotten to partake of the food which had been prepared for they had been refreshed by spiritual food, and at Vespers time the old man noticed the generous dish of food which had been prepared, and in great distress said, "Oh dear, However did we forget that lentil dish?" 7. (A slightly longer version of V.iv.17) Abba Zenon told us how once when he was going to Palestine, getting very tired because of his journeying, he sat down to rest under a tree next to a field full of cucumbers.

He began to think about getting up and going to steal some of the cucumbers to eat. "After all", he thought, "I won't have to pick very much". But his thoughts went on, "When thieves are taken by the judges they are subjected to torture. So let me find out whether I can bear the sort of torture that thieves are given." He got up immediately and stood in the sun for five days till his body was dehydrated and he said to himself, "I can't stand this torture, so therefore I had better not commit theft but rather busy myself in manual labour as usual and, as the Psalms say, be content with that.

"You shall eat the labour of your hands and you will be blessed and happy" (Psalms 128.2), as we sing daily in the sight of the Lord. 8. A certain disciple of one of the holy seniors was having a battle with thoughts of sex but by the grace of God he was able to resist evil and unclean thoughts by means of fasts and prayers, and vigorous manual work. When his holy senior saw his labours he said to him, "If you like, my son, I will pray to the Lord to take this battle away from you."

"I find, father," he replied, " that as I undergo these labours I feel them bringing forth good fruit in me, for as a result of this battle I fast more and undertake more vigils and prayers. So please pray to the Lord to have mercy on me and give me strength that I may endure and strive with integrity." "Now I know that you really do understand how through your patience this spiritual battle will help you towards the eternal salvation of your soul," the holy old man then said to him.

"As the holy Apostle says, 'I have fought the fight, I have run the course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is a crown of righteousness prepared for me, and not only for me but for all those who look for his coming.'" (2 Timothy 4.7). 9. There was another brother fiercely attacked by a spirit of fornication who got up in the middle of the night in order to go and confess his temptations to a certain holy old man who had a reputation of great wisdom. When the old man had heard him he gave him some spiritual advice on the virtue of patience, quoting the words of Scripture 'Be strong and let your heart be comforted, all you who hope in the Lord' (Psalms 27.14).

The brother went back to his cell where he was immediately attacked again, so he hurried off once more to the holy man. The old man again encouraged him to persevere faithfully and unweariedly, and said to him, "Believe me, my son, the Lord Jesus Christ is able to send you all the help from heaven above in order for you to overcome this passion." Encouraged by the old man's words he returned to his cell, where again the battle began to rage in his heart. He went back again to the old man and begged him to pray more fervently for him.

The old man said to him, "Don't be frightened or relax your efforts, and don't keep your thoughts to yourself. This is the way to confuse the unclean spirit and make him depart. For nothing weakens the power of the demons so much as revealing the hidden unclean thoughts to the blessed and holy fathers. Be strong, brother, let your heart be comforted, trust in the Lord. The harder the fight, the more glorious the crown. Moreover the holy prophet Isaiah said, 'Is the hand of the Lord unable to save you, or are his ears plugged that he cannot hear you?' (Isaiah 59.1).

Remember, brother, that the Lord is watching over your struggle and is preparing for you an eternal crown even as you are resisting the devil. The Scripture warns us that it is only through many tribulations that we can enter eternal life" (Acts.14.22). As the brother listened his heart was strengthened in the Lord, and he remained with the old man, deciding against returning to his cell 10. (Also in V.xviii.12) The demon of fornication once waged such a fierce attack against the blessed abba Moyses, who lived in Petra, that he could not remain in his cell but went to see abba Isidore and told him how violent his battle was.

Abba Isidore comforted him with words from the holy Scriptures and told him to go back to his cell. But Moyses was very unwilling to do so. Abba Isidore then took Moyses with him to the upper room of his cell. "Look west," he said to Isidore. "What do you see?" "I see a multitude of demons," he replied, "milling about ferociously, ready for battle, spoiling for a fight." "Now look east," said Isidore. "What do you see?" "I see a numberless multitude of holy Angels, more glorious and splendid than the light of the sun, an army of celestial power."

"What you saw in the west," said Isidore, "were those who fight against the saints of God. But what you saw in the east were those whom God sends to the aid of his saints. Know therefore that those who are for us are much greater in number, as Elias the prophet said. (2 Kings 6.16). St John also says, 'He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world'" (1 John 2.14). Hearing these things the holy abba Moyses was strengthened in the Lord and returned to his cell giving thanks, and glorifying the suffering kindness of our

Lord Jesus Christ. 11. (Also in V.v.22) There was a certain brother in the desert of Scete who was keen and eager in the work of God and in the spiritual life.

But the devil, the enemy of the human race, filled his thoughts with the memory of the beauty of a certain woman he used to know, leaving his mind in a turmoil. However in the providence of the Lord Jesus another brother came from Egypt to visit him in the charity of Christ. And as they were talking among themselves the brother from Egypt chanced to mention that that woman for whom the brother had been so much in love had died. A few days after hearing this he went to the place where the body of the dead woman had been laid, opened up the tomb, wrapped up some of her decaying matter in a linen cloth and returned to his cell.

He put the rotten matter in a place where he could see it and said to his thoughts, "There you are, you have now got what it was you were wanting. Take your fill of it." And in this way he crucified himself by means of that fetid material until the sordid attacks died away. 12. (Also in V.v.27) Two brothers went into the neighbouring city in order to sell what they had produced during the past year. One of them went on to do some necessary shopping, the other stayed in the guest house and at the urging of the devil fell into the sin of fornication.

The other brother returned later. "See," he said, "We've now got everything we need. Let us go back to our cell." "I can't," the other brother said. "What do you mean, you can't go back to your cell?" "Because after you left me, I fell into the sin of fornication. So I can't go back." "Well, I likewise fell into the sin of fornication," he said, in an attempt to win his brother over and heal him, "so let us both go back to our cell and do penance together. For with God all things are possible (Luke 1.37).

He may grant us pardon through our penances, so that we will avoid being punished by the torments and agony of the everlasting fires in the lowest hell, where punishment does not end, and the fires and terrible tortures do not cease." And so they went back to their cell. They prostrated themselves at the feet of the holy fathers, lamenting loudly with tears, and confessed to them the temptation which had led to their fall. The seniors told them what they must do in penance, and they carried out all their instructions.

And the brother who had not sinned did all the same penances as his brother who had sinned, as if he had sinned himself. And he poured out an immense love towards his brother. The Lord saw his labour of love and after a short time revealed the reason behind it to the holy fathers, that the one who had not sinned was punishing himself on behalf of the brother who had sinned, so that the Lord would grant him pardon. Thus was the scripture fulfilled: 'For he laid down his life for the salvation of his brother' (1 John 3.16). 13. (Also in V.v.19) Another brother in the grip of sexual temptation went to a certain well-respected senior and spoke to him about it.

"Be kind, most blessed father," he said, "and pray for me, for the passion of fornication is grievously afflicting me." Hearing this the senior prayed earnestly, night and day begging the Lord's mercy for him. The brother came back a second time, and begged the senior to pray even harder for him. With renewed compassion the blessed senior prayed even harder. The senior began to be depressed as he witnessed the brother coming to him again and again asking for his prayers, while the Lord did not seem to be listening.

At last the Lord revealed to him in a dream that this same monk was imprisoned in negligence and laziness and pandered to his body as his heart desired. The holy senior had a vision of the monk sitting down with the spirit of fornication playing around him in the shape of various women, and he was really

enjoying it. He also saw the angel of the Lord standing near seriously angry with the brother because he did not prostrate himself in prayer to God, but rather continued enjoying his own thoughts.

This was the revelation given to the holy senior, and he knew then that the brother was to blame, and it was cause of his negligence that prayers were not being answered. "It's your fault, brother," the senior said to him, "because you keep on enjoying your own thoughts. It is impossible for the unclean spirit of fornication to depart from you, however much others may pray and beg God for you, unless you yourself join in the labour, in fasting and prayer and many vigils, praying with deep groans that the Lord will have mercy on you and grant you the help of his grace in enabling you to resist your thoughts.

However much doctors may devise and prepare medicines for the human body, and however much care and diligence they offer, there will be no cure unless the sick person is willing to forgo harmful foods or any other thing that is liable to make one sick. It is the same thing with diseases of the soul. However much the holy fathers, doctors of the spirit, beg with wholehearted will for the mercy of the Lord and Saviour on those who have asked for their prayers, the prayers of the saints will be of no use to those who are negligent and imprisoned and who take no thought for the salvation of their own soul, unless they themselves with a pure intention do what is pleasing to God in prayer and every kind of spiritual work."

Hearing this the brother was cut to the quick, and with great earnestness applying himself to fasting and prayer and vigils, as the senior had taught, he earned the mercy of the Lord, and the spirit of unclean passion departed from him. 14. (Also in V.v.24) There was a certain monk who had been living in the desert for many years when a certain girl whom he had known where he used to live made inquiries about where the monk lived, and at the instigation of the devil came into the desert in search of him.

When she found him she went into his cell, reminded him of her family and parentage, and stayed with him. And so he fell into sin with her. Now there was another monk also living in the desert who when the time for food had come found that a vessel of drinking water which he had prepared had fallen over and the water had been spilt. This happened for several days when it came time for eating; the water was spilt on the ground and he had nothing to drink. He turned it over in his mind and decided to go and tell that other monk about how the jar had fallen over and the water had got spilt.

Evening came on while he was journeying, so he bedded down in an old disused temple of idols, and he heard the demons boasting among themselves how they had enticed that monk into fornication, to which he listened in amazement. When daylight came he journeyed on to that monk and found him very deeply depressed. "What should I do, brother," he asked, "for when the time comes to eat, my jar of drinking water falls over and I have nothing to drink?" "You've come to me asking me what to do because your jar of drinking water falls over?

But what should I do, for I have fallen last night into fornication." "Yes, I knew that," said the other. "How could you possibly know?" "While I was sleeping last night on my journey I heard demons talking among themselves and boasting about your lapse, and I was very sorry about it." "Yes, I might just as well go back to the world." "No, don't do that, brother. Much rather stay here patiently. Let's send the woman away, back to her own place. This is obviously all a trick of the devil.

Much better that we should remain where we are, in affliction of body and soul for the rest of our life, in tears and mourning, casting ourselves on the kindness of our Lord and Saviour, if perchance we may find mercy in the great and terrible judgment day of God."

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