

De Vitis Patrum Book V

by Heribert Rosweyde

The sermon emphasizes the importance of humility, inner stillness, and the monastic path to spiritual growth and salvation.

Scripture: Psalm 34:18, Psalm 46:10, Psalm 51:17, Proverbs 4:25, Ecclesiastes 7:2, Matthew 5:4, Romans 12:2, Philippians 4:7, James 4:8, 1 Peter 5:6

Topics: "Desert Spirituality", "Monastic Life"

Description

Heribert Rosweyde preaches on the wisdom and teachings of the early desert fathers as recorded in De Vitis Patrum Book V. The fathers emphasize the importance of living a life that pleases God by following rules such as keeping God before one's eyes, being temperate in speech and appetite, and submitting to necessity. They also stress the significance of inner stillness, solitude, and compunction in the monk's life, highlighting the need to avoid distractions, seek after quietness, and maintain a humble and contrite heart before God.

Transcript

De Vitis Patrum Book V

By an Unknown Greek Author,

translated into Latin by Pelagius the Deacon

Libellus 1: Rules of the Fathers

V.i.1. When abba Antony was asked, "What rule should I keep in order to please God?" the old man replied, "Follow this rule which I give you. Wherever you go, keep God continually before your eyes and apply the yardstick of Holy Scripture to everything you do. Wherever you happen to be don't try to move on too quickly. Do these three things and you will live." V.i.2. "What should I do?" Abba Pambo asked abba Antony, The old man replied, "Don't put your trust in your own righteousness, don't go back on any promises, and be temperate in speech and appetite."

V.i.3. Holy Gregory said, "God asks these three things of everyone who tries to live up to his Baptism, an unwavering faith with all his soul and strength, temperate speech and bodily chastity.." V.i.4. Abba Evagrius said, "Certain of the fathers used to say that a moderate and balanced diet together with charity will readily lead a monk into the way of passionlessness." V.i.5. And again he said, "A certain monk when

told of the death of his father replied to the one who brought him the news, 'Don't be blasphemous.

My father has immortal life." V.i.6. Abba Macarius said to abba Zacharias, "Tell me, what is the work of a monk?" "Do you mean to say that you are asking me, father?" he replied. "Yes, you, Zacharias, my son. Something compels me to ask you." "For my part, father, I think that whoever trains himself to submit to necessity is a true monk." V.i.7. It was said of abba Theodore (that is, Theodore of Pherme) that he was ruled by three things above all else, poverty, abstinence, and seclusion.

V.i.8. Abba John The Dwarf said, "I would have everyone get a grip on all the virtues. Get up early in the morning every day, and make a start with them all. Patiently keep the commandments of God with fear and generosity and in the love of God, alert in body and mind and with great humility, in patience, in tribulation of heart, with circumspection, with many heartfelt prayers and intercessions, in purity and cleanliness of tongue with custody of the eyes, bearing injuries without anger, seeking peace without returning evil for evil, rejoicing not in other people's sins neither being conceited.

Be self-effacing and humble before all other creatures, renouncing material gain, avoiding those who walk according to the flesh, striving always to follow the cross in humility of spirit with a strong will and spiritual discretion, with fasting, patience and tears in times of testing, with balanced judgment, chastity of soul, seeking the good in silence and manual labour, in nightly vigils, in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in labour, reckoning yourself to be as one already dead in the sepulchre, so that death may be a present reality to you every day."

V.i.9. Abba Joseph Thebaeus said, "There are three courses of action pleasing in the sight of God. The first is when temptations assail you in your weakness and you overcome them with the help of grace. The second is when you do everything for God and not for any human consideration. The third is when you submit to the counsels of your spiritual father and renounce your own will." V.i.10. Abba Cassian told a story about a certain abba John, head of his congregation, a great man in his manner of life.

When he was on his death bed, ready to depart with joy, his mind fixed firmly on God, his brethren who were standing by asked him to leave them by way of a legacy some wholesome plan by which they might rise up to the perfection of Christ. "I have never followed my own inclinations," he replied with a groan, "nor have I ever enjoined on anyone else anything which I have not first done myself." V.i.11. A brother asked an old man, "What manner of life is so beneficial that if I walk in it I shall live?"

"God alone knows what is good," the old man said, "but I have heard that when one of the fathers questioned abba Nistero the great, the companion of abba Antony, he replied, 'Not all works people do are the same. Scripture tells us that Abraham was given to charity, and God was with him; Elijah sought silence and God was with him; David was humbled, and God was with him.' Whatever therefore you perceive in your heart to be a following of God, that do, and preserve your heart in peace."

V.i.12. Abba Pastor said, "There are three operations of the soul, to be watchful, to reflect maturely, and to exercise discretion." V.i.13. A certain brother asked him, "In what way should a person live?" "Look at Daniel, who could be accused of nothing except the worship which he paid to God." The old man replied. V.i.14. Again he said, "Poverty, tribulation and discretion, these are the works of the solitary life. These are described as if they were three men, Noah, Job and Daniel.

Noah personifies poverty, Job tribulation, and Daniel discernment. If anyone practises these three activities God takes up his dwelling with him." V.i.15. Abba Pastor said, "If a man hates two things he can

become free from the world." "What are those two things?" a brother asked. "Vainglory and pandering to the body." was the reply V.i.16 It is told of abba Pambo that as he was on his deathbed he said to the holy men standing around him, "Since the time that I came into this place of solitude, and built my cell and lived my life, I do not recollect ever having eaten bread that I have not worked for with my own hands, nor am I ashamed of any word which has come forth from my mouth right up to this moment.

Yet now as I go to the Lord I have not even begun to serve God." V.i.17. Abba Sisois said, "If you humble yourself and thrust your desires behind you will be securely free from worldly care and you will find rest." V.i.18. Abba Chame said to his sons on his deathbed, "Have no dealings with heretics, neither fall foul of the law. Let not your hands be directed to piling up possessions but rather let them be stretched out to give." V.i.19. (Also in VII.xxi.2) A brother asked an old man, "How does the fear of God come to anyone?"

"If you have humility and poverty and don't judge others the fear of God will enter in." the old man said. V.i.20. (Also in VII.xxi.3) An old man said, "May fear, humility, abstemiousness and weeping make their dwelling in you." V.i.21. Certain old men used to say, "Do not do to others what you yourself find repugnant. If you hate it when people insult you, don't insult anyone yourself. If you hate it when people say things falsely about you don't speak falsely about others.

If you hate being tempted to return calumny for calumny, or suffering injury, or having your possessions stolen, or anything of that sort, do not do such things to others. He who can keep this saying is on the way to salvation." V.i.22. An old man said, "The life of a monk is labour, obedience, meditation, refraining from condemning and despising others and grumbling. For it is written, 'You who love the Lord flee from evil' (Psalms 96.10). This is the life of a monk, to bear with injustice, to keep his eyes from evil and vain imaginings, not to be forever seeking novelties and hearing strange tales, to keep his hands from stealing but rather open them to give, not to be proud of heart or evil in thought, neither to be gluttonous, but to manage all things with discernment.

In these things a monk lives." V.i.23. An old man said, "Beg God to shed light and humility into your heart, keep your sins always in mind and pass no judgment on others. Be subject to all, but have no familiarity with women, boys or heretics. Root out presumption, keep guard over your tongue and your stomach and abstain from wine. If someone picks a quarrel with you don't argue with him. If he speaks sensibly agree with him, but if maliciously, say, 'Well, I expect you know what you are talking about'. Don't argue with what he says and your mind will then remain in peace."

Libellus 2: Inner stillness

V.ii.1. Abba Antony said, "Just as fish die if kept on dry land so monks are drawn away from their original intentions if they linger outside their cells or spend too much time with worldly people. Therefore just as the fish must needs return to the sea so should we hasten to our cells, lest through lingering abroad we lose our inner watchfulness." V.ii.2. Again he said, "He who remains quietly in solitude is saved from three areas of conflict, that is, hearing, speech and sight.

He only has one area of conflict, the battle in the heart." V.ii.3. Abba Arsenius while still at the imperial court prayed to God, saying, "Lord, how can I be saved ?" And he heard a voice saying, "Arsenius, fly from human beings and you will be on the path of salvation." And after he had departed to follow the monastic life he prayed again in the same words. And he heard a voice saying, "Fuge, tace, quiete, (fly, say nothing, be at peace). From these three things sinlessness will grow."

V.ii.4. Archbishop Theophilus of blessed memory once visited Arsenius in the company of a certain magistrate, and begged the old man for his counsel. He remained silent for a moment. "If I give you counsel, will you keep to it?" he asked. And they promised to do so. "Wherever you hear Arsenius is near at hand go in the opposite direction," the old man said, On another occasion when the Archbishop wished to see him he sent a message beforehand asking whether he would see him.

And he replied, "If you come I will see you, but once I have seen you I would have to go on and see everyone and then I would stay here no longer." When the Archbishop heard this he said, "If I am really serious about following his example I won't intrude upon this holy man." V.ii.5. Arsenius once paid a visit to a certain place where there was a bed of reeds blown about by the wind. "What is that rustling noise?" he said to the brothers. "It is the reeds," they replied. "Really, if someone sitting quietly heard so much as the song of a bird," the old man said, "he would no longer have quietness in his heart.

How much more the sound of these reeds!" V.ii.6. They say other people ministered to his needs, because his cell was thirty-two miles into the desert and he was never in a hurry to go out. But he did go out weeping when that part of the desert known as Scete was invaded. "Just as the world has lost Rome, so the monks have lost Scete," he said V.ii.7. (Also in III.65) Once when Arsenius was in Canopus a certain very rich but god-fearing matron came from Rome in search of him.

She went first to Archbishop Theophilus and asked him if he would use his influence with the old man to allow her to visit him. So Theophilus went to visit Arsenius. "There is a woman come from Rome who wants to see you," he said. But the old man would not agree that she should visit him. When she was told about this refusal, she ordered her horses to be saddled. "I believe in God. I shall see him," she said. "There are men enough in Rome, but I have come in order to see a prophet."

And when she arrived near the old man's cell, by the providence of God he happened to be outside it. When she saw him she prostrated herself at his feet. He indignantly made her get up and glared at her. "Well, if you must see my face, here it is. Stare at it," he said. But she modestly would not meet his eye. "You've heard of my deeds, haven't you?" the old man said to her. "Well then, you really must look at me. What possessed you to undertake such a long journey? Don't you realise that you are a woman, and you ought not to go wandering about?"

And won't you go back to Rome and boast to the other women that you have seen Arsenius and thus make the sea into a high road for women to come and see me?" "If only God will allow me to get back to Rome," she replied, "I won't let anyone else come here. But pray for me and remember me always." "I pray to God that he will wipe out the memory of you from my heart." he replied. Greatly upset she went away, and when she got back to the city she became quite ill in her distress.

The Archbishop was told that she was ill and came to console her. He asked her what the matter was, "How I wish that I had never come here!" she replied. "I asked the old man to remember me and he replied, 'I pray to God that he will wipe out the memory of you from my heart,' and now I am just dying from distress." "Don't you realise that you are a woman," the Archbishop said to her, "and the devil uses women in his attack upon the holy men? That is why the old man said what he did, but he does pray always for your soul."

Her mind was soothed, and she went home happy. V.ii.8. Abba Evagrius said, "Stop hankering after a whole lot of things lest your mind gets into a turmoil and you lose your quiet way of life." V.ii.9. A brother once went to abba Moses in Scete asking for a word, and the old man said to him, "Go and sit in your cell

and your cell will teach you all things." V.ii.10. Abba Moses said, "The man who avoids other people is like a ripe grape, but the person who mixes a lot with others is like a grape that is sour."

V.ii.11. Abba Nilus said, "Any one who loves quiet is safe from the arrows of the enemy, but the person who mixes with the multitude suffers many wounds." V.ii.12. Abba Pastor said, "The beginning of evil is to let your mind be distracted." He also said "It is good to take no thought for bodily needs. For when a person is embroiled in a physical battle he is like a man standing next to a deep lake, and the moment an enemy sees him he is easily thrust in. If however he detaches himself from bodily things he is like a man a long way off from the well, so that while the enemy is trying to drag him in, God has time to send him help while he is being violently dragged towards it."

V.ii.13 Abraham the disciple of abba Sisoe once said, "Father, you are getting old. Let us return to the world for a while." "Alright," Abba Sisoe replied, "if we can go somewhere where there aren't any women." "And where is the place without any women, except in solitude?" his disciple asked "So keep me in solitude," the old man said, V.ii.14. Amma Matrona said, "Many in the desert who seek for popularity will perish. However it is better to mingle with the multitude while at the same time longing for the solitary life than it is to live in solitude and long to be with the multitude."

V.ii.15. An old man said, "A monk ought always to seek after inner stillness, regretting even the physical loss of it." V.ii.16. The story is told of three students who became monks. One of them chose to bring reconciliation to those engaged in lawsuits, in obedience to the Scripture, 'Blessed are the peacemakers' (Matthew 5.9). The second took to nursing the sick, and the third sought inner stillness in solitude. The first one found that in his efforts to settle quarrels he couldn't always succeed.

Totally discouraged he went to see the second one who was nursing the sick and found him similarly depressed and unable to fulfil what he had set out to do. So the two of them agreed to go and see the one in the desert. They told him their troubles and asked him if he had managed any differently from them. He didn't answer for a while, then poured some water into a bowl and told them to look into it while the water was still disturbed. And after a while when the water had become still he asked them to look again.

And when they looked they saw their own faces as in a mirror. Then he said to them, "Thus it is with anyone living in the midst of people; there is so much agitation that you can't see your own shortcomings. But when you find inner stillness, especially in solitude then you can see your own sins."

Libellus 3: Compunction

V.iii.1. It was said of abba Arsenius that throughout his life when he sat down to do his weaving he would hold a basin in his lap to catch the tears which flowed freely from his eyes. V.iii.2. A brother asked abba Ammo for a word. "Go and model your thinking on those in prison," the old man said, "for they are wondering where is the judge and when will he come and they weep in expectation of punishment. Likewise the monk should hold himself in distrust and chide himself inwardly saying; 'Woe is me that I must stand before the judgment seat of Christ - for how shall I give an account of my deeds?'

If you therefore always think along these lines you will be safe." V.iii.3. Abba Evagrius said, "When you sit in your cell, retire into yourself and think of the day of your death. You will then realise how the body will decay. Think of its dissolution and mourn. Conceive a repulsion for the vanities of the world. Be self-effacing and take thought as to how you might always remain in this state of quiet, and you will be all right. Think of all those who are in hell. Picture to yourself the state of their souls, their bitter silence, their

heart rending groans, their fearful struggles, their grief and longing, their unending tears without relief.

Consider also what confusion engulfs the sinners, suffering as they do in the sight of Christ and in the presence of Angels and Archangels, and Powers and all mankind. Think of all their punishments, the eternal fire, the deathless worm, the darkness of Tartarus, and above all, the gnashing of teeth, the fears and the torments. "Contrast that with the good things laid up for the righteous, confidence before God the Father and Christ his Son, in the presence of the Angels and Archangels and Powers, in the presence of the whole company of the kingdom of heaven, with its gifts of joy and peace.

"Keep the memory of both these alternatives with you, and groan over the judgment pronounced upon sinners. Weep, imagine how they grieve, and fear lest you fall into the same condemnation. But over the good things laid up for you, rejoice, exult, and be glad. Hasten to enjoy them, but keep the other place far from you. Never forget these things whether you are in your cell or elsewhere. Let the image of these things remain ever in your mind, for by this means you will at least rid your mind of evil and harmful thoughts."

V.iii.4. Abba Elias said, "I fear three things, first, the hour of my death, secondly having to stand before God, thirdly the sentence which will be pronounced upon me." V.iii.5. When holy Theophilus the Archbishop was on his deathbed he cried, "Blessed art thou, Arsenius, for you always kept this hour in your mind." V.iii.6. Some brothers related how one of them had broken into laughter at the table when they were all eating peaceably together. When abba John noticed this he wept and said, "What do you think this brother has in his mind that he should laugh, when rather he ought to weep because he has disturbed their brotherly peace?"

V.iii.7. Abba Jacob said, "Just as a lantern brings light into a dark room so does the fear of God as it comes into the heart illuminate it and teach it all virtue and the commandments of God." V.iii.8. Certain of the fathers asked abba Macarius of Egypt why his body remained so lean whether he ate or whether he fasted. "If you use a piece of wood over and over again to poke the fire with," the old man replied, "the piece of wood itself gets burnt up in the end. So it is that if anyone keeps on immersing his mind in the fear of God, then the fear of God will burn up his bones."

V.iii.9. Once the old men of Mount Nitria sent to abba Macarius in Scete asking him to visit them and telling him that a large crowd was about to visit him if he did not come to them, for they longed to see him before he departed to the Lord. So he came to the mountain and met a large gathering of all the brothers who asked him to give them a word. He however shed tears and said, "Let us weep, my brothers, let our eyes shed tears before we depart hence, that tears may waste away our flesh."

And they all wept and fell on their faces saying, "Father, pray for us." V.iii.10. As abba Pastor was travelling in Egypt he saw a woman sitting by a gravestone weeping so bitterly that he said, "All the pleasures in the whole world would not be able to outweigh this poor soul's grief. So ought the monk always to let compunction dwell in his heart." V.iii.11. On another occasion he was travelling with abba Anub in the land of Diolcus and passing by a cemetery they saw a woman beating her breast and weeping.

They stood and looked at her before going on a little way where they met someone whom they asked what the woman's trouble was, that she wept so bitterly. "Her husband, son and brother are all dead," was the reply. And abba Anub records that abba Pastor said, "I tell you, unless you put to death all the desires of the flesh and learn how to grieve like this woman you will never be a monk. For the whole heart and soul

of this woman are in her weeping." V.iii.12. Abba Pastor said, "There are two tasks in grieving, getting it and keeping it."

V.iii.13. A brother asked him, "What should I do?" "When Abraham got to the promised land," he said, "he arranged for a burial place for himself, and thus by means of a sepulchre secured the land to his seed for ever."

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