

ELEMENTS OF MONASTIC LIFE

TWO 'ASCETICAL DISCOURSES' ASCRIBED TO ST BASIL THE GREAT AND TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK BY DOM JOHN HIGGENS, MONK OF QUARR.



THE following two short pieces have been commonly ascribed to St Basil the Great; since the Venice edition of 1535 they have been printed among his works (Amand: *Revue bénédict.*, t. LVI, pp. 162 sq., nn. 7, 8). In the Maurist edition (Paris, 1721-30) they follow the *Moralia*, and immediately precede the *Regulae fusius tractatae*. This text, with the accompanying Latin translation, was reprinted at Paris in 1839 (*S.P.N. Basilii . . . opera omnia*, t. II, pp. 445-456), and less accurately by Migne (*Patrol. Graeca*, t. XXXI, col. 869-888). The Paris text of 1839 is here followed, though the division into short paragraphs, and their headings, are the translator's. It is worth noting that there is in the library at Quarr another Latin version, or rather paraphrase, under the title *Sancti Basilii Magni . . . De Institutione Monachorum Tractatus duo Ascetici*, published at Paris in 1660, with no translator's name. The copy was once the property of the Abbey of The Most Holy Trinity of Tiron (diocese of Chartres), 'Monasterii SS. Trinitatis de Tyronio', of the Congregation of St Maurus. A modern English translation also already exists, the work of Dr W. K. Lowther Clarke, with a critical Introduction. It is included in *The Ascetical Works of St Basil*, S.P.C.K., 1925; pp. 133-9, 141-4.

The title of *Ascetical Discourse* is commonly given to each of these pieces: but they can hardly have been meant for oral delivery. They are, rather, elementary treatises on the monastic life. The Maurist editor, Dom Julien Garnier, in a note to the second of them, quotes a manuscript title, which may be rendered: 'a sketch, or outline (the Greek is *hypotyposis*; Latin, *informatio*) of monasticism, and prologue to the Rules'. Whether or not the piece was ever intended as an introduction to the *Regulae*, it, as well as that which precedes it, is well described as an outline of monastic life; and this title has suggested that adopted for the present translation. These so-called 'Discourses' are in fact elementary monastic Rules.

As to their authorship: Dom Julien Garnier, in his Preface to volume II of the Maurist edition of St Basil (Edition of Paris, 1839, t. II, Praef. (XI), 32, pp. XLIV-XLV) allows that they have as a rule been accepted as authentic; yet he says that he has not found them so quoted or referred to by any ancient writer. His own opinion is, that though at first sight they may pass for St Basil's, they must in reality be rejected. His reasons are as follows. In both (both are evidently from the same hand) the terms used for the monastic Community are never so employed in certainly authentic works; the same is true of the titles commonly given to the Superior;

and of the expression 'the philosophic, or contemplative, life', to describe the life of the Monk. The authenticity of the two pieces is equally denied by Dr Lowther Clarke (*op. cit.* p. 11); who adds further reasons: Biblical quotation, ubiquitous in St Basil's undisputed writings, is here infrequent; the vocabulary as a whole is not St Basil's; the arrangement of the monastic horarium, and the provision for confession of faults before all the Community, are not in harmony with the *Regulae*. However, even if these two short treatises cannot be ascribed to 'our Holy Father Basil', no doubt they represent the Greek monastic tradition of fairly early times, and will help to illustrate its continuity, even its substantial identity, with that familiar to Monks and Nuns of the present day.

ELEMENTS OF MONASTIC LIFE

ASCRIBED TO ST BASIL.

I.

1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES. Man was made in the image and likeness of God; but sin, by subjecting the soul to the desires of passion, spoilt the beauty of that image. Yet God, the maker of man, is his true life. So he who lost the likeness of God, lost the fellowship of life; being separated from God, he was incapable of the blessed life.

Detachment. We must therefore return to that grace first given us, from which we were estranged through sin. We must adorn ourselves anew with the image of God, and by the virtue of detachment be made like to our Creator. For he who reproduces in himself, as best he may, the detachment that is God's by nature, has restored God's image in his soul. And he who is thus made like to God, has also fully acquired the likeness of God's life, and will dwell for ever in eternal blessedness. If therefore through the virtue of detachment we recover God's image once again, and if God's likeness imparts to us everlasting life, let us leave all the rest and care for this thing only: that our soul may never be mastered by any passion, but our mind remain unmoved, unconquerable, under the assaults of temptations, and so we may be made sharers in God's blessedness.

Chastity. In this task our fellow-worker is virginity, when we seek this gift with understanding. For the gift of virginity consists not only in abstaining from begetting children; but our entire life, all our ways and manner of living, need to be kept virgin, and to display a maiden purity in every undertaking. For it is possible to be a fornicator in word, to commit adultery by the eye, to be defiled by hearing, to receive pollution in the heart, and by lack of moderation in food and drink to pass the bounds of chastity. For if in all these things a man, by self-control, observes the rule of virginity, truly he displays the gift of virginity perfect and complete.

2. RELIGIOUS PROFESSION. If then we earnestly desire that our soul's character may, by means of detachment, be so adorned with the likeness of God, that thereby life eternal may be ours, we must take care never to do anything unworthy of what we have promised, and so fall under the condemnation of Ananias. For Ananias at first was free not to promise God his possessions; then, out of human respect, he did indeed consecrate his goods to God by a promise, that men might admire him for his liberality; but by keeping back part of the price, he so aroused God's displeasure that, through the ministry of Peter, he found no space for repentance (Acts 5, 1-5; Hebr. 12, 17). Therefore, before professing the religious life, any man is free, within the limits of what is lawful and right, to take what life offers, and to accept the yoke of marriage. But when once bound by his profession, he must keep himself at God's disposal, just like a votive offering; for he will be held guilty of sacrilege if, by again living to serve the world, he defiles a body which by profession he has dedicated to God.

Renunciation of all passions. But when I say this, I have not in mind a single kind of passion, as some think for whom the whole virtue of virginity lies in custody of the body. I mean rather passions of every kind: that one who would keep himself at God's disposal must be corrupted by no earthly passions. Anger and jealousy and resentment, falsehood and arrogance, an elated mind and untimely speech, slothfulness in prayer and desire of vanities, neglect of what is commanded, display in dress, affected elegance, meetings and conversations apart from what is fitting and necessary: how carefully must anyone who is dedicated to God by virginity guard against such things as these! Since it is almost as dangerous for him to fall into one of these as to commit the particular sin he has renounced. For whatever is due to passion corrupts the purity of the soul to some extent, and is an obstacle to the life of God.

So, then, he who has renounced the world must take the greatest care not to defile God's vessel, that is to say himself, by letting it serve his passions. He must consider above all that, since he has chosen the life of angels, he has passed the frontier of man's nature, and made his home in the incorporeal realm. For it belongs to the nature of angels to be free from the yoke of marriage; and undistracted by any other beauty, to gaze continually upon the face of God. So he who has attained the angelic dignity, if then he is defiled by human passions, is like the leopard's skin; for its fur is neither wholly white nor entirely black, but spotted with a mixture of the two, and is reckoned neither black nor white.

So much, then, for more general advice to those who have adopted a life of self-discipline and chastity.

3. PRACTICAL METHODS OF ASCETICISM: *Community Life*. Since, however, we ought to treat more carefully of particular points, we must briefly make mention of them also. Those who have forsaken the world and are practising this diviner life, should not pursue it by themselves apart. For this life has need of witnesses, that no base suspicions may be aroused. And just as the spiritual Law will not suffer those who eat the mystical Passover to be fewer than ten (cf. Exod. 12, 4; Josephus, *De bell. jud.* VI, ix, 3); so here, those who pursue in common the spiritual way of life should be more than ten in number rather than less.

The Superior: Obedience. There shall preside over the regularity of their life a single head, one preferred to the rest for his approved life and conduct and orderly behaviour; with consideration also for his seniority, for it is natural to men to give a certain reverence to age. And while the brethren willingly obey him from mere docility and lowliness of mind, yet he must have such authority that none of the Community may be allowed to resist his will when he directs them in anything that makes for the good order and strictness of their life. As the Apostle says, 'We are not to resist the authorities ordained by God, for whoever resist God's ordinance are condemned' (Rom. 13, 1-2). And so, in the present case, the rest of the brethren must be assured that such authority is not given their Superior by accident, but by God's will. Then their advancement in God's ways will be unhindered, when their Superior enjoins whatever is useful and profitable to their souls, and they receive his good counsel with ready obedience.

His qualifications. Therefore, since it is in every way fitting that the Community should be obedient and submissive to its Superior, a leader must necessarily be chosen for their society, whose life will be an example of every virtue to his followers: as the Apostle says, 'sober, discreet, orderly, apt to teach' (1 Timothy 3, 2). It is of this that his life must give a proof, so it seems to me: not merely whether he is old in years—for one white haired and wrinkled may be no more than a youth in his ways—but chiefly, whether he has grown grey in regularity of life and character, so that all he says and does may set a rule and standard for the Community.

Manual Work. The provision of food for those who lead this life should be as the Apostle commands: that working honourably with their hands they may eat their own bread (2 Thess. 3, 12). Their work should be regulated by one of the elder brethren, of proved holiness of life. He should assign their manual work according to

their necessities; so that that command also may be fulfilled which bids us earn our food with labour and sweat (Gen. 3, 19.): and that their regularity may be always blameless and beyond reproof, since need will never arise for them to seek their livelihood in public places.

Temperance. As the best rule and measure of self-discipline let this be observed: not to be inclined either to luxury or to afflicting the body, but to avoid both excesses: so that the body may neither be disordered by too much flesh; nor be sickly, and unable to carry out what is commanded. For in either way, like harm is done to the soul; whether the body is unruly, and from sheer well-being starts away with every unseemly impulse; or whether it is kept slack and feeble and sluggish by its pains. For in such a bodily state the soul has no leisure to look freely upwards; it cannot help but be possessed and subdued by the distress it feels, and humiliated by the body's affliction.

4. So then, use should be in proportion to need. Even wine, so long as it is taken for health's sake, must neither be looked on with disgust, nor yet sought for without necessity. And in the same way, all other things must serve the Monks' needs, and not their desires.

Prayer: The Divine Office. As regards prayer, the whole of life is the time for that; but since the strain of the psalmody and kneeling calls for certain intervals of relief, they should keep to the hours that have been assigned to prayer by holy men. Now the great David says, 'At midnight I will rise to praise thee for the judgments of thy righteousness' (Ps. 118, 62); and we find Paul and Silas in agreement with him, when at midnight they praised God in the prison (Acts 16, 25). The same prophet says once more, 'In the evening and at morning and at midday' (Ps. 54, 18). And again, the coming of the Holy Ghost was about the third hour, as we learn in the Acts. For when the Pharisees mocked the disciples as they gave utterance in various tongues, Peter replied that it was not from drunkenness that they spoke like this, for it was but the third hour (Acts 2, 15). And the ninth hour puts us in mind of our Lord's Passion, which he bore that we might live. But since David says, 'Seven times a day have I praised thee for the judgments of thy righteousness' (Ps. 118, 164), and the times we have mentioned do not complete the seven hours of prayer, the prayer at midday must be divided: part to come before the meal, and part after it; so that praise of God seven times in the whole course of the day may be the pattern we follow.

Enclosure. The doors of the monasteries shall be closed to women.

And not all men may enter, but those only to whom the Superior grants admission. For often, to admit them without distinction induces untimely talk and unedifying stories, and from vain words leads to vain and unprofitable thoughts. And therefore this must be the law for all, that only the Superior may be consulted and may reply about what needs to be spoken of; and the rest are to give no answer to the chatterers who carry on frivolous conversations, that none may be drawn into a string of idle speeches.

5. *Poverty.* One common store let there be for all, and let nobody call anything his own: neither clothes nor shoes nor any bodily necessities. But the use of them must be in the Superior's power; each to be given his portion from the common stock, as the Superior directs.

Avoidance of Private Friendships. Moreover, in this mutual fellowship, the law of charity does not allow of private friendships and associations. For if private affections arise, they are quite certain to impair the general harmony in many ways. So they must all have equal regard for one another, and one and the same measure of charity must prevail in the whole body. If anyone is found to have a greater affection towards a fellow-monk, because he is his brother or relative, or on some other pretext, he must be corrected as doing wrong to the Community. For an excessive regard for one person is strong proof of too little towards the rest.

Punishments. The punishment of anyone convicted of a fault should be in proportion to the offence: either he must be forbidden to stand with the others for the psalmody, or he must not be admitted to the common prayer, or be forbidden to share their meals; here too he who has charge of the general discipline shall assign the punishment according to the greatness of the fault.

Service of the Community. The service of the Community shall be by turns, two at a time each week carrying out the necessary duties: that the reward of humility may be common to all: that no one may have the advantage of the rest even in what is good: and everyone alike may have relaxation. For with a turn of work and a turn of repose, those who labour feel no weariness.

Leaving the Enclosure. The Superior has the power both to send some out as need arises and as he judges best, and to bid others more usefully mind the house and remain at home. Often in the case of the young, even when they are doing their best to discipline their bodies, the fair bloom of their youth is somehow visible and gives occasion of desire to those who meet with them. If, then, there is one who is in the flower of youth, let him keep out of sight and conceal his good looks, until he can fittingly appear.

No Gestures of Resentment. There must be among them no sign of anger, resentment, envy or contentiousness, either in bearing or act: not a word, a glance of the eye, an expression of countenance, or anything else apt to provoke a companion to anger. And if anyone falls into any of these things, the fact that he was in some way first aggrieved is no sufficient excuse for the fault of which he is guilty. For a wrong, on whatever occasion committed, is equally a wrong.

No Oaths. Every oath must be banished from the monastic Community: but a nod of the head, or a sound of assent, shall be held as good as an oath, whether one is speaking or listening. But if anyone will not credit a bare assertion, he shows evidence of being guiltily aware that he himself is failing to speak the truth; and so the Superior must reckon him as a delinquent, and inflict wholesome punishment.

Nightly Self-examination. At the close of day, when every task, bodily and spiritual, is ended, each one, before going to rest, should make a heart-felt examination of his own conscience. And if there is anything amiss, whether a thought of forbidden things, or an improper speech, or sloth in prayer, or carelessness in the psalmody, or desire for the world, he must not hide his fault, but confess it to the Community: that such mischief having befallen him, his hurt may, by the prayers of all, be healed.

(The second Discourse will appear in the September issue.)



CORRESPONDENCE

LIFE OF THE CURE D'ARS

To the Editor, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.

Sir,—There might have been some justification in Father Branney's strictures if I had been reviewing the first edition of Trochu's *Life of the Curé d'Ars*. I was, however, reviewing a book 'now in its ninth edition and of which 80,000 copies of the French text have already been sold'. To underline my point, I was reviewing a book which has established itself as a *de facto* popular life: for Father Branney to say that Trochu had no intention of writing a popular life is therefore to miss completely the point of my review.

Continuing my review of the book (and not of the author) I said that its style, 'useful for research students', was not 'best suited to a popular life'. My assailant dashes to my rescue: he points out that the book was written 'for a Doctorate's thesis' and that 'spiritual edification and theological criticism or appreciation are