

ST. PETER DAMIAN

Selected Writings on the Spiritual Life

translated with an Introduction

by

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THE THIRTEENTH TREATISE OF
ST. PETER DAMIAN

On the Perfection of Monks

Peter the sinful monk sends to the venerable Lord Abbot O. . . . and to his holy community the duty of devoted service.

Even if a poor debtor cannot pay all that he owes, it is considered that he has fulfilled his obligation if he offers that little amount which he possesses. Often, indeed, a poor peasant who has borrowed money at interest is absolved from the obligations of his note of hand simply by bringing a gift of herbs to his creditor. And so I, who owe so much to your kindness, send this poor screed; poor, let me say, because of my clumsiness, not of its own nature, for its subject is the will of God, and it sets forth faithfully matters old and new.

CHAPTER ONE

You are well aware, my brothers (I say it with tears), into what lack of zeal our holy order has fallen, and does not cease to fall more deeply every day; so that now, having carelessly forgotten almost all its precepts, we seem to be content to wear merely the outward habit of our calling. Under the cloak of religion we live worldly lives, and outrage the spirit of discipline when we abandon ourselves to the flowing stream of pleasures, disgracing the title of our nobility, and vainly bearing the name of monks. We are like bastard sons, who delight in being called by their father's name, but whose dishonourable origin bars them by law from inheritance. Ishmael and the sons of Cethura were all equally said to be the sons of Abraham. But when the laws of succession came into effect, the inheri-

tance in all its entirety was bequeathed to Isaac, the lawful son: the sons of the concubines received only gifts; for Solomon says that bastard slips shall not send forth deep roots.¹ I beg you not to take my words as an insult to yourselves. For you know that it is best to lay the kindling at that point where some spark of fire seems to remain; who is so foolish as to blow upon ashes from which all heat has completely departed? Unless, through Christ's grace, I hoped for better things from you, I should regard it as a waste of time to forsake my other tasks and pursue you with hortatory letters.

Therefore, beloved, gather your forces, with Christ's aid, and do not bear the yoke of His service to whose banner you are pledged idly or weakly, but rather zealously and manfully; so that the foundation of your way of life, which stands at present in the middle way, may not through your carelessness return to nothing (which God forbid), but may, through the perseverance of your abiding fervour, reach the peak of perfection. Remember what was said to the angel of the Church of Sardis: 'Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die; for I have not found thy works perfect before God.'² Since he did not find his works perfect before God, he declared that even those things which had been well done were at the point of death. If, therefore, that which is dead in us be not fanned into life, what remains alive in us will soon be extinguished. It is certain that he who does not bring his labours to completion loses the benefit of the work he has done. Of what use is it that a body begins to be formed in the mother's womb, if it does not reach the fullness of natural growth? You know well of what child it was said: 'A woman, when she is in travail, hath sorrow, because her hour is come; but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world.'³

CHAPTER TWO

God, who weighs the deeds of every person and office, of

¹ Wisd. of Sol. iv, 3.

² Rev. iii, 2.

³ John xvi, 21.

every state and rank most meticulously and carefully in the balance, and has different scales for each order, does not look with favour upon an abortive work. Did not he who wrote upon the wall with his finger: 'Thy kingdom is weighed in the balance, and thou art found wanting',¹ have a balance fit for weighing the works of a king, and place his deeds therein? And immediately after he added: 'Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.'

If, then, almighty God took from this man both his kingdom and his life, for no other crime than this, that there was not found in him that fullness of good works which becomes a king, what is to be thought of us, who in our monastic profession vowed that we would scale the heights of perfection, and yet lie inert in the valley of our shortcomings in a torpor of sloth? Why does a man strive with all his might to complete what he has begun? Only so that he may not lose all that his previous labour has won for him. Of what use is it, may I ask, for a man to set out on any road, if he does not reach his destination? In the same way, if a man has incurred the enmity of a king, and can only be re-established in his favour if he presents him with a hundred pounds of silver, and knows too that if he pays his debt to the king he will receive not only favour, but the distinction and insignia of some great office, would he not be foolish to allow ninety-nine pounds which he has already paid into the public treasury to slip through his fingers because he did not pay the remaining pound which was necessary to make up the amount? Is it not better for him to pay the little which was lacking in full, and to receive royal favour and great office, than to lose what he has given, and, which is more terrible, still to be subject to the king's wrath?

I make so bold as to say, brethren, that we have given ninety pounds of silver to Christ our king, for whose sake we have abandoned our possessions and spurned marriage; for whom we avoid the eating of meat, hold ourselves apart from the pomp and glory of the world, and exchange the splendour of worldly dress for our humble garb. These, I confess, are

¹ Dan. v, 27.

great and difficult things, and will be more greatly rewarded with divine gifts; but something is still needed before we can complete the payment of our debt and deserve admittance to the treasure-house of the eternal King. You ask what this is: the answer presents itself to me at once: obedience, love, joy, peace, patience and the other virtues enumerated by the teacher of the Gentiles.¹ But I wish to put it more succinctly, so that it may the more easily, and therefore the more firmly, stay in your minds. It is nothing other than this: a fervent love of God and mortification of yourself. For if those apostolic words which say: 'Always bearing about in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus' were alive in us, all our delight would necessarily be in God, since fleshly love would have nowhere to spread within us; our leaping fire would burn there with him, since it would find no room within ourselves. The truly wise man, he who is intent on the guarding of his salvation, watches over the curbing of his vices with such anxious care that he binds with the girdle of perfect mortification his loins and his reins, his belly and his flanks. He achieves this when the greedy gullet is kept in check; when the wanton tongue is compelled to be silent; when the ears are shut to scandal-mongering; when the eyes are forbidden to look upon unlawful things; when the hand is bound, for fear it should strike cruelly, and the foot, lest it should wander idly; when the heart is withstood, for fear it should envy the prosperity and happiness of another, or desire or covet that which is not its own, lest it should be cut off from brotherly love by anger, or raise itself above others in its pride, or succumb to the delights of enticing pleasure; lest it should be too much weighed down by grief, or lay itself open to the seductions of joy. Since, then, the human mind cannot be utterly empty, but must always be concerned with love of something, it must be completely surrounded with this wall of virtue; that which is not permitted to expand in its own surroundings must necessarily be carried above itself.

¹ Gal. v, 22-23.

CHAPTER THREE

Thus, when our mind begins to rest in its Creator and to taste those delights of inner sweetness, it soon rejects anything which it considers to be opposed to the law of God, and abhors whatever is not in harmony with the rules of eternal justice. And from this true mortification springs; this is how it happens that a man, bearing his Redeemer's cross, seems dead to the world. From now on, he takes no pleasure in frivolous gossip, nor does he waste time in idle conversation; he occupies himself with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; he desires solitude and seeks a quiet place; the workshops where the brethren speak together and the cloisters of the monastery are to him like the public market-place; he searches for and takes pleasure in remote and lonely places; as far as he can, he avoids all human contact, so that he may the more easily stand in the presence of his Creator.

When this man has destroyed the citadels of the enemy; when he has trodden on the necks of the kings hiding in the cave and brought them to utter ruin; when he has overthrown the kingdoms of the sea and the plains and the mountains, what is left for him, except to possess the promised land in peace and security with the triumphant Joshua? What is the use of having left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea dryshod, if we are confined in the desert for forty years, and can neither return to the fleshpots nor enter by right of possession into the land flowing with milk and honey? We lie snoring in sleep, and drowse in idleness.

We may justly be reproached with those words which Joshua spoke to the seven tribes which had not yet received their inheritance: 'How long are ye slack to possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers hath given you?'¹ He is indeed a foolish soldier who is content with victory if he has not been eager in the fight beforehand; he is lacking in manhood if he desires to gain the victory before going out to battle. The farmer will be disappointed if, before he has

¹ Joshua xviii, 3.

laboured in the sowing of his seed, he seeks to reap the harvest; for it is certain that he who wishes to gather in the grain must first root out the bushes and briars. And the voice of God truly says to sinful man: 'Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee';¹ this earth, if it is to produce a rich harvest, must first endure the hoe and the ploughshare; so that, having been cultivated by many afflictions and by the discipline of perfect mortification, it may be made beautiful with the abundance of all the virtues, which are like a crop of rich fruits.

Joshua figuratively urged the sons of Joseph to this work of husbandry when he said to them, who were complaining of the slenderness of their wretched portion: 'If thou be a great people, then get thee up to the wood country, and cut down for thyself there in the land of the Perizzites and of the giants, if mount Ephraim be too narrow for thee.'² Now, if I may without incongruity refer this to the matter in hand, he who has decided to be content with the Rule of the blessed Benedict alone has confined himself within the narrow territory of mount Ephraim. But listen, and you shall hear how the new Joshua urges you to the heights, and commands you to make haste towards a wider inheritance: 'We have written this rule in order that, by observing it, we may show ourselves to have some degree of goodness of life, and a beginning of holiness.'³ This is Mount Ephraim. But because he considers this portion to be a narrow one, he immediately goes beyond it to higher and broader things: 'But for him who would hasten to the perfection of religion, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers . . . the *Conferences of the Fathers* and their *Institutes*' etc.⁴ Because these are so well known to you, there is no need for me to name them.

CHAPTER FOUR

But, since we who are lukewarm and base in no way strive to reach the heights, would to God that we might at least

¹ Gen. iii, 18.

³ R.S.B. c. 73.

² Joshua xvii, 15.

⁴ Ibid., loc cit.

diligently plough the narrow fields of this little mountain; so that there might be no corner in all the precepts of the Rule so permitted to fall into neglect that it was not furrowed by the plough of our great efforts there where we see the most difficult and exalted precepts set forth as if these were a steep mountain or the living rock itself. For although we wish to be counted among the ranks of soldiers, we do not take the trouble to wear the badges of virtue. We set before the eyes of men an appearance of integrity, but we do not bother to show that we have its reality in the sight of the hidden Judge. For there are some (I cannot say this without lamentation) who enter into the new life of religion without abandoning the old ways of their former life; these indeed are Gibeonites, not Israelites. Now you know that the inhabitants of Gibeon, smitten by the fear of death, came to the Israelites in a cunning and deceitful way, clothed in old garments and shoes, and bearing mouldy bread and old wineskins and sacks; soon after their lives were restored to them by means of the treaty which they obtained, their fraud was brought to light. Now Joshua, having learned of their guile, cursed them, and decreed that they must be hewers of wood and drawers of water for ever.

These Gibeonites, who go over to the Israelites through fear of death, symbolize those who take refuge in the ranks of the servants of God, not because they love perfection but because they tremble at the thought of the enormity of their crimes. Many of them, changed in outward appearance but not in heart, carry dry bread to eat because they have as yet no knowledge of the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. They are clothed in old garments because, not having put off the old man, they do not know how to put on the new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.¹ And all that they do seems hardened with age, because they persist in the evil ways of their old life, heedless of the words of the Apostle: 'Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.'² Those words which say: 'Old things are passed away; behold,

¹ Eph. iv, 24.

² Ibid.

all things are become new',¹ do not apply to them. They appear on the surface to have come to a new way of life; but in reality they remain in the old; for their behaviour does not bear witness to any reformation of their habits or new intention. And such as these are punished by a curse; nor will they be permitted to share the inheritance of the Israelites. For they are not numbered among those to whom it is said: 'Ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.'² Now water is tasteless and wood is hard. And so they are commanded to hew wood and to draw water; for being ignorant of the savour of spiritual wisdom, they must concern themselves with the hard and savourless tasks of outward labour. And although they may seem by their service in these outward things to confer some benefit on the Church, yet, because they live as slaves, they cannot enter into possession of the inheritance of the Israelites.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nevertheless, some of these men, if admonished frequently and sternly corrected, if told of the heavy penalty which is their due, and threatened with the terror of the last judgment, will pass from servitude to freedom and rise up with the rest to establish their right to a share of the inheritance. They are symbolized by those tribes who were given, first by Moses, and then by Joshua, the task of cursing, as the Scripture bears witness: 'And all Israel, and their elders, and officers, and their judges stood on either side of the ark before the priests, the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord, as well the stranger, as he that was born among them; half of them over against Mount Gerizim, and half of them over against Mount Ebal. Now they who stood over against Mount Gerizim blessed the doers of the law; but they who stood over against Ebal cursed the transgressors of the law.'³ Those whose office it was to bless symbolize those who seek the Lord's

¹ 2 Cor. v, 17.² 1 Pet. iii, 9.³ Joshua viii, 33; Deut. xxvii, 12-13.

service not through fear of punishment, but in the hope of heavenly reward and for the love of perfection, and who in all the actions of their holy lives bless God without ceasing. But those who were appointed to curse are like those who do not burn with love of perfection or yearn with desire for heavenly glory, but who observe the precepts of the law to escape the pains of hell.

They are appointed to curse so that, while so doing, they may themselves return to a knowledge of what is right, and, pondering on the penalties which are meted out to sinners in the Scriptures, restrain themselves by fear from the evils of sinning. And so it clearly follows that those tribes which were appointed to bless are the nobler; they are the sons of the wives. Those appointed to curse are baseborn, the sons of handmaidens, namely Gad and Asher, Dan and Naphtali, and among them Reuben, who dishonoured his father's bed and Zabulon, the youngest son of Leah.

It is noteworthy that we are told that all stood around the ark of the covenant, for none of them, whether baseborn or noble, whether lukewarm or fervent in their love of God, abandon holy Church. Now all these things were commanded by Moses, but put into execution by Joshua long afterwards. Moses represents the Law, and Joshua the Gospel. Not only did the old Law foretell that blessing was due to the just and that cursing would be meted out to sinners; the grace of the new Gospel has shown this to be so. But although some are noble, whose task is to bless, and others baseborn, who tremble with fear of being cursed; yet all alike, because they make common cause against the enemy, because they labour together perseveringly to establish their right to the promised land, shall be granted a portion, and they shall be co-heirs with one another without any distinction of right. Nevertheless, it is far more glorious that we, being zealous and strong, should be found to be invested with the titles of nobility, than that because of our weakness we should be marked by our base inferiority.

Let us then fly from Ebal; and we must even more greatly

despise the Gibeonites; so that we may not bear the yoke of slavery through being involved in outward observance alone, nor be reduced by our idleness to the status of baseborn sons, held in check only by the fear of hell. Let us establish our right to our inheritance with the weapons of virtue, so that we may extend the boundaries of our estate by the unremitting labours of our husbandry. But perhaps some idle fellows will reply in those words which the Scripture tells us the sons of Joseph used to Joshua: 'The hill is not enough for us: and all the Canaanites that dwell in the land of the valley have chariots of iron.'¹ Such as these seek the heights, but fear those who dwell in the depths; for they strive to hasten towards the summit of virtue, but mistrust their ability to overcome the promptings of the vices of the flesh. But they are not allowed to sit back like weaklings; in the same place they are given their answer: 'Thou art a great people, and hast great power: thou shalt not have one lot only: but the mountain shall be thine, and thou shalt cut down the wood and clear a space in which to dwell; and the outgoing from it shall be thine.'² And to give greater courage to the faint-hearted, almighty God Himself cries out: 'Them will I drive out from before the children of Israel.'³ And Joshua encourages the warriors of the heavenly army, and promises them an easy victory over their enemies: 'Fear not, nor be dismayed, be strong and of good courage: for thus shall the Lord do to all your enemies, against whom ye fight.'⁴

CHAPTER SIX

There is another matter, dearest brethren, if I may speak familiarly to you as fellow-workers, of one mind in Christ; I would humbly beg you to renounce a certain custom which is observed in several monasteries of my acquaintance. Some rulers of monks, attributing to the power of the monastic rule more than is profitable, impose no penance on those coming from the world, however seriously these may have sinned,

¹ Joshua xvii, 16.³ Ibid., xiii, 6.² Ibid., loc. cit.⁴ Ibid., x, 25.

other than the observance of the common way of life of the monastery. How thoughtless, how cruel, and above all how unwise this is, those who know anything at all of the matter will understand. For these men condemn their hearers to the mean condition of the Ebalites; they deprive them of zeal for penance; they do not exhort them to absolve their obligations and then, out of love of perfection, to seek the heights, but teach them to lie inert in shameful sloth, for ever held back by their fear of punishment, bound by their promise to pay their debts; so that they cannot, with those who stand by Mount Gerizim, bless the Lord in safety, but must stand by Mount Ebal with the sons of the handmaidens, terrified by the javelins of cursing. He who acts like this obviously does not know the difference between ten thousand talents and a hundred pence. For if we take into account the law of discretion, it is clear that the burden of satisfaction laid on each man must be in proportion to the weight of his crimes. He who has borrowed an ounce will repay it more easily than he who has borrowed a pound; nor must the man who steals a sheep be compelled to make the same reparation as him who steals an ox.

If we consider the matter carefully, we will find that the very apostles themselves, the princely founders of our knowledge and our leaders in the Christian faith, had different tasks and fates given to them to correspond to the shortcomings of their former lives. St. Paul, because he took a cruel part in the murder of Stephen, endured more torments and pains than the others; St. Peter wiped out the stain of his marriage in the blood of his martyrdom; but John, choosing to be a virgin, was loved more than all the rest; and because, having renounced the world in boyhood, he committed no serious sin, he passed from this world not in the torments of martyrdom but sweetly and peacefully as one who falls asleep. And if that splendid preacher St. Paul could say: 'I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God';¹ if he chastised his body and

¹ 1 Cor. xv, 9.

brought it into subjection;¹ if he refused for himself that right which he allowed to others, of living by the Gospel, and earned his bread by the work of his own hands; if he, whose labours were greatest of all, feared that he had not attained his goal; if he, I say, who had performed such splendid works of virtue, could yet have no faith in his apostleship, how dare we poor wretched creatures presume to rely on our slothful monastic life?

It is true that the man who takes refuge in the monastic life puts an end to his evil-doing. But what is the good of ceasing to commit sins unless we also endeavour to wipe out those which we have already committed, atoning for them by severe penances? If you do not believe me, see what the blessed Pope Gregory says about this in his book on the Pastoral Care: 'Those who have given up their sinful ways, but do not weep for them, must be warned, lest they think that the sins to whose number they have ceased to add, but which they have not cleansed by their tears, are already absolved.' These matters are so clearly and so reasonably set forth there that he who reads it through carefully will have no further doubts on the subject; I have not added any more of it here because I wish to avoid wearying you by being verbose. How indeed can he be sure that his offences will be pardoned who, coming to a place of penitence, performs no penance?

It may perhaps be said that the rule does not prescribe for those coming from the world any fast except the common one. To this I answer that St. Benedict, in setting down his rules for monks, did not destroy those holy canons which deal with sinners; rather, he gave new strength to all the writings of the Catholic Fathers. To those who embark on the monastic profession he gave a rule of life; he did not, however, remit the sinner's obligation to do penance; for otherwise there might be just complaints and murmurings both from the boys and from those grown men who come to the monastic life without having committed serious sin if they were forced to follow the same rule of life as those burdened with sin. If we must never

¹ 1 Cor. ix, 27.

fast or perform any other act of penance otherwise than it is prescribed in the Rule, why does St. Benedict command: 'The superior may break his fast for the sake of the guests, unless it happens to be a principal fast-day' ?¹

Make haste now, and read, scan the pages, turn over the leaves, make a most diligent search; and then show me where the holy doctor has commanded by his authority the observance of this 'principal fast-day' which he mentions here in passing. When you fail to find the place, you will be bound to admit that the holy man did not wish us to observe only those things which he himself set down, and that he did not annul the precepts of the earlier Fathers in establishing his own. But, lest any man should be so bold as to reproach me, saying that by my disparagements I am sitting in judgment upon and making light of our holy order, let me say here that I have so high a regard for it as to think it second in dignity only to the apostolic order, and confess that it is no less than a second baptism. But I wish to repeat also the words of the prince of the apostles to certain men who wished to be converted: 'Repent; and be baptized every one of ye.'² By what stretch of the imagination can that man who does not trouble to weep for the sins he has committed be said to be safe, when the greatest shepherd and teacher of the Church believed that penance was a necessary condition of that sacrament which has more power than any other to absolve us from sin? The holy rule is set forth with skilful discretion and regulated with balance and moderation for the benefit of those who truly desire to renounce the world, and who do so freely, out of love for perfection, not for the sake of those who, aghast at the enormity of their crimes, are compelled by necessity to flee from it. It was written, I say, for those who come out of love for obedience; not for those who are dragged to the monastery by the fear of hell; for those who desire to grow in grace, not for those who endeavour to escape punishment. This is quite plain at the very beginning of the rule if we carefully consider to whom it is that the Holy Spirit directs his words.

¹ R.S.B. c. 53.

² Acts ii, 38.

I say the Holy Spirit. For it was certainly not that holy and humble man St. Benedict who, at the very beginning of his work, sat himself in the master's seat and usurped the place of the loving Father: 'Hearken, O my son, to the precepts of thy Master, and incline the ear of thine heart; willingly receive the admonition of thy loving Father.'¹ Rather, the Holy Spirit made his servant the instrument of his voice, just as he did at the beginning of the books of prophecy, when he cried, through Isaias: 'I have nourished and brought up children.'²

Let us see, then, to whom he directs what he has to say, for what sort of man all that follows is written. He says: 'To thee, therefore, my words are now addressed, whoever thou art that, renouncing thine own will, dost take up the strong and bright weapons of obedience, in order to fight for the Lord Christ, our true king.'³ As far as we can gather from the words of the holy man, the school of the holy Rule was established more for the learning of obedience than for the performance of penance. This is not to say that it excludes either the sinner or the just man, or rejects any sort of person; but rather that its whole strength and purpose lies in the teaching of the rules of obedience.

I know that in writing in this way I am displeasing some of the brethren, namely those who believe that a turning to our way of life brings about both the absolution of our offences and the perfection of virtue. I hope it may be enough if I reply that in setting forth my opinions I have no desire to cast a snare upon any man, as the Apostle says,⁴ but rather wish to urge you on towards the good. You may wonder why I write at such length on these matters; let me explain myself, so that you may see that they are not irrelevant. A certain brother came to us from a monastery, and confessed to me the sins which he had committed as a layman. If I understood rightly, it seemed to me that according to the decrees of the holy canons he was bound to perform seventy years' penance. He had been wearing the habit of religion for almost seven years;

¹ R.S.B. Prol.² Isa. i, 2.³ R.S.B. Prol.⁴ 1 Cor. vii, 35.

but when I asked him how much penance he had already done for these sins, he replied that he had confessed all these matters to the Lord Abbot, who had imposed upon him no other penances above and beyond the common practice of the monastery; because he declared that his changed way of life was in itself enough to procure full absolution for all his sins. What can I say? I must admit that I was gravely displeased by all this; I looked down, I trembled, I cried that the man had been misled; for he had not even begun to do his penance, whereas if only he had imposed upon himself certain mortifications, he could already have completed it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I trust that these and many other matter, of which some deluded men, who believe themselves to be acting rightly, are unaware, are displeasing to you also, dearly beloved; and that, since you have the power by your free authority to correct these men in other matters of sin, you will show them that these also are to be shunned that they may the more carefully avoid them. But let us return to the matter in hand. The Holy Rule has become a great and spacious mansion, in which all sorts and conditions of men may dwell, boys and old men, the strong and the weak, the delicate, and those who differ from one another in every conceivable way. And so we must not deceive ourselves with a vain belief in our own safety; we must not boldly claim for our own behaviour all the forbearance of the Rule. Although the public highway is open to all travellers, he is a foolish voyager who endeavours to take up the whole of its width with his great strides. The spring which flows in the centre is for any man's use; but he who wants to claim the whole for himself is an arrogant fellow. I believe that the same is true of the mildness of the Holy Rule; and I beseech you that every brother who is concerned for his salvation should recognize his own capacities and adopt for his own use not all the indulgence which the rule permits, but only as much as is necessary to him. For the commands of