

Letter II.¹⁷⁴³

Basil to Gregory.

1. [I recognised your letter, as one recognises one's friends' children from their obvious likeness to their parents. Your saying that to describe the kind of place I live in, before letting you hear anything about how I live, would not go far towards persuading you to share my life, was just like you; it was worthy of a soul like yours, which makes nothing of all that concerns this life here, in comparison with the blessedness which is promised us hereafter. What I do myself, day and night, in this remote spot, I am ashamed to write. I have abandoned my life in town, as one sure to lead to countless ills; but I have not yet been able to get quit of myself. I am like travellers at sea, who have never gone a voyage before, and are distressed and seasick, who quarrel with the ship because it is so big and makes such a tossing, and, when they get out of it into the pinnace or dingey, are everywhere and always seasick and distressed. Wherever they go their nausea and misery go with them. My state is something like this. I carry my own troubles with me, and so everywhere I am in the midst of similar discomforts. So in the end I have not got much good out of my solitude. What I ought to have done; what would have enabled me to keep close to the footprints of Him who has led the way to salvation—for He says, "If any one will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me"¹⁷⁴⁴—is this.]

2. We must strive after a quiet mind. As well might the eye ascertain an object put before it while it is wandering restless up and down and sideways, without fixing a steady gaze upon it, as a mind, distracted by a thousand worldly cares, be able clearly to apprehend the truth. He who is not yet yoked in the bonds of matrimony is harassed by frenzied cravings, and rebellious impulses, and hopeless attachments; he who has found his mate is encompassed with his own tumult of cares; if he is childless, there is desire for children; has he children? anxiety about their education, attention to his wife,¹⁷⁴⁵ care of his house, oversight of his servants,¹⁷⁴⁶ misfortunes in trade, quarrels with his neighbours, lawsuits, the risks of the merchant, the toil of the farmer. Each day, as it comes, darkens the soul in its own way; and night after night takes up the day's anxieties, and cheats the mind with illusions in accordance. Now one way of escaping all this is separation from the whole world; that is, not bodily separation, but the severance of the soul's sympathy with the body, and to live so without city, home, goods, society, possessions, means of life, business, engagements, human

1743 Placed circa 358, on Basil's retiring to Pontus. Translated in part by Newman, *The Church of the Fathers*, p. 131, ed. 1840. With the exception of the passages in brackets [], the version in the text is that of Newman.

1744 [Matt. xvi. 24.](#)

1745 γυναῖκος φυλακή, rather "guardianship of his wife."

1746 οἰκετῶν προστασίαι, rather "protection of his servants."

learning, that the heart may readily receive every impress of divine doctrine. Preparation of heart is the unlearning the prejudices of evil converse. It is the smoothing the waxen tablet before attempting to write on it.¹⁷⁴⁷

Now solitude is of the greatest use for this purpose, inasmuch as it stills our passions, and gives room for principle to cut them out of the soul.¹⁷⁴⁸ [For just as animals are more easily controlled when they are stroked, lust and anger, fear and sorrow, the soul's deadly foes, are better brought under the control of reason, after being calmed by inaction, and where there is no continuous stimulation.] Let there then be such a place as ours, separate from intercourse with men, that the tenour of our exercises be not interrupted from without. Pious exercises nourish the soul with divine thoughts. What state can be more blessed than to imitate on earth the choruses of angels? to begin the day with prayer, and honour our Maker with hymns and songs? As the day brightens, to betake ourselves, with prayer attending on it throughout, to our labours, and to sweeten¹⁷⁴⁹ our work with hymns, as if with salt? Soothing hymns compose the mind to a cheerful and calm state. Quiet, then, as I have said, is the first step in our sanctification; the tongue purified from the gossip of the world; the eyes unexcited by fair colour or comely shape; the ear not relaxing the tone or mind by voluptuous songs, nor by that especial mischief, the talk of light men and jesters. Thus the mind, saved from dissipation from without, and not through the senses thrown upon the world, falls back upon itself, and thereby ascends to the contemplation of God. [When¹⁷⁵⁰ that beauty shines about it, it even forgets its very nature; it is dragged down no more by thought of food nor anxiety concerning dress; it keeps holiday from earthly cares, and devotes all its energies to the acquisition of the good things which are eternal, and asks only how may be made to flourish in it self-control and manly courage, righteousness and wisdom, and all the other virtues, which, distributed under these heads, properly enable the good man to discharge all the duties of life.]

3. The study of inspired Scripture is the chief way of finding our duty, for in it we find both instruction about conduct and the lives of blessed men, delivered in writing, as some breathing images of godly living, for the imitation of their good works. Hence, in whatever respect each one feels himself deficient, devoting himself to this imitation, he finds, as from some dispensary, the due medicine for his ailment. He who is enamoured of chastity dwells upon the history of Joseph, and from him learns chaste actions, finding him not only pos-

1747 Rather "for just as it is impossible to write on the wax without previously erasing the marks on it, so is it impossible to communicate divine doctrines to the soul without removing from it its preconceived and habitual notions."

1748 The following paragraph is altogether omitted by Newman.

1749 Rather "season."

1750 Omitted by Newman.

sessed of self-command over pleasure, but virtuously-minded in habit. He is taught endurance by Job [who,¹⁷⁵¹ not only when the circumstances of life began to turn against him, and in one moment he was plunged from wealth into penury, and from being the father of fair children into childlessness, remained the same, keeping the disposition of his soul all through uncrushed, but was not even stirred to anger against the friends who came to comfort him, and trampled on him, and aggravated his troubles.] Or should he be enquiring how to be at once meek and great-hearted, hearty against sin, meek towards men, he will find David noble in warlike exploits, meek and unruffled as regards revenge on enemies. Such, too, was Moses rising up with great heart upon sinners against God, but with meek soul bearing their evil-speaking against himself. [Thus,¹⁷⁵² generally, as painters, when they are painting from other pictures, constantly look at the model, and do their best to transfer its lineaments to their own work, so too must he who is desirous of rendering himself perfect in all branches of excellency, keep his eyes turned to the lives of the saints as though to living and moving statues, and make their virtue his own by imitation.

4. Prayers, too, after reading, find the soul fresher, and more vigorously stirred by love towards God. And that prayer is good which imprints a clear idea of God in the soul; and the having God established in self by means of memory is God's indwelling. Thus we become God's temple, when the continuity of our recollection is not severed by earthly cares; when the mind is harassed by no sudden sensations; when the worshipper flees from all things and retreats to God, drawing away all the feelings that invite him to self-indulgence, and passes his time in the pursuits that lead to virtue.]

5. This, too, is a very important point to attend to,—knowledge how to converse; to interrogate without over-earnestness; to answer without desire of display; not to interrupt a profitable speaker, or to desire ambitiously to put in a word of one's own; to be measured in speaking and hearing; not to be ashamed of receiving, or to be grudging in giving information, nor to pass another's knowledge for one's own, as depraved women their supposititious children, but to refer it candidly to the true parent. The middle tone of voice is best, neither so low as to be inaudible, nor to be ill-bred from its high pitch. One should reflect first what one is going to say, and then give it utterance: be courteous when addressed; amiable in social intercourse; not aiming to be pleasant by facetiousness, but cultivating gentleness in kind admonitions. Harshness is ever to be put aside, even in censuring.¹⁷⁵³ [The more you shew modesty and humility yourself, the more likely are you to be acceptable to the patient who needs your treatment. There are however many occasions when we shall do well to

1751 Clause omitted by Newman.

1752 Omitted by Newman.

1753 Here Newman notes that Basil seems sometimes to have fallen short of his own ideal. His translation ends at this point.

employ the kind of rebuke used by the prophet who did not in his own person utter the sentence of condemnation on David after his sin, but by suggesting an imaginary character made the sinner judge of his own sin, so that, after passing his own sentence, he could not find fault with the seer who had convicted him.¹⁷⁵⁴

6. From the humble and submissive spirit comes an eye sorrowful and downcast, appearance neglected, hair rough, dress dirty;¹⁷⁵⁵ so that the appearance which mourners take pains to present may appear our natural condition. The tunic should be fastened to the body by a girdle, the belt not going above the flank, like a woman's, nor left slack, so that the tunic flows loose, like an idler's. The gait ought not to be sluggish, which shews a character without energy, nor on the other hand pushing and pompous, as though our impulses were rash and wild. The one end of dress is that it should be a sufficient covering alike in winter and summer. As to colour, avoid brightness; in material, the soft and delicate. To aim at bright colours in dress is like women's beautifying when they colour cheeks and hair with hues other than their own. The tunic ought to be thick enough not to want other help to keep the wearer warm. The shoes should be cheap but serviceable. In a word, what one has to regard in dress is the necessary. So too as to food; for a man in good health bread will suffice, and water will quench thirst; such dishes of vegetables may be added as conduce to strengthening the body for the discharge of its functions. One ought not to eat with any exhibition of savage gluttony, but in everything that concerns our pleasures to maintain moderation, quiet, and self-control; and, all through, not to let the mind forget to think of God, but to make even the nature of our food, and the constitution of the body that takes it, a ground and means for offering Him the glory, bethinking us how the various kinds of food, suitable to the needs of our bodies, are due to the provision of the great Steward of the Universe. Before meat let grace be said, in recognition alike of the gifts which God gives now, and which He keeps in store for time to come. Say grace after meat in gratitude for gifts given and petition for gifts promised. Let there be one fixed hour for taking food, always the same in regular course, that of all the four and twenty of the day and night barely this

1754 Basil's admirable little summary of the main principles of conversation may have been suggested by the recollection of many well known writers. On such a subject no wide reader could be original. *cf. inter alios*, the ἄκουε πολλά λάλει δ' ὀλίγα of Bias; the γλῶττα μὴ προτρεχέτω τοῦ νοῦ of Pittacus. Aulus Gellius (*Noct. Att.* i. 15), referring to the Γλώσσης τοι θησαυρὸς ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ἄριστος Φειδωλῆς πλείστη δὲ χάρις κατὰ μέτρον ἰούσης of Hesiod, says: "*Hesiodus poetarum prudentissimus linguam non vulgandam sed recondendam esse dicit, perinde ut thesaurum. Ejusque esse in promendo gratiam plurimam, si modesta et parca et modulata sit.*" On the desirability of gentleness in blame, *cf. Ambrose, In Lucam.*: "*Plus proficit amica correctio quam accusatio turbulenta: illa pudorem incutit, hæc indignationem movet.*"

1755 This was the mark of the old heathen philosophers. *cf. Aristoph., Birds* 1282, ἐρρύπων ἔσωκράτων.

one may be spent upon the body. The rest the ascetic¹⁷⁵⁶ ought to spend in mental exercise. Let sleep be light and easily interrupted, as naturally happens after a light diet; it should be purposely broken by thoughts about great themes. To be overcome by heavy torpor, with limbs unstrung, so that a way is readily opened to wild fancies, is to be plunged in daily death. What dawn is to some this midnight is to athletes of piety; then the silence of night gives leisure to their soul; no noxious sounds or sights obtrude upon their hearts; the mind is alone with itself and God, correcting itself by the recollection of its sins, giving itself precepts to help it to shun evil, and imploring aid from God for the perfecting of what it longs for.]

1756 ἄσκητις, firstly an artisan, came to=ἀθλητής, and by ecclesiastical writers is used for hermit or monk. The ἐρημίτης, or desert dweller, lives either in retreat as an anchorite, or solitary, μοναχός, whence “monk;” or in common with others, in a κοινόβιον, as a “cœnobite.” All would be ἀσκηταί.