

On the Nature and Dignity of Love, 24-27: The School of Charity

by William of St.-Thierry

But let us move on to what the Apostle calls the fellowship of the Spirit (Phil 2:1), and to the praise of discipline, to that good and joyful dwelling together of brothers in unity, where the Lord gives his blessing and life (Ps 133:3), about which the Lord says: *Do not fear, my small flock; for it has pleased your Father to give you a kingdom* (Lk 12:32). The praise of this discipline, then, takes its origin from the Apostles, who, as they learned from the Lord or from the Holy Spirit, with whose power they had just then been endowed, instituted for themselves a way of living together such that for the group there was one heart, one soul, and all things in common, and that they were always together in the temple.

Certain men, imitating this form of apostolic institution, do not have homes, or places to rest, except the house of God, the house of prayer. All that they do, they do in the name of the Lord; dwelling together in one order, living by one law, having nothing of their own, having in their own power neither their bodies nor their wills. Together they sleep, together they rise; together they pray, together they sing, together they also read. Their hard and fast intention is to obey their superiors, and to be subject to them. But these, watching out for them as if they are going to render an account for their souls, truly preach to them what Gedeliah is said to have preached to the people of Israel in Jeremiah: "I myself will answer for you to the Chaldeans who are coming against you. You, then, gather grain, wine, and oil in your jars, and dwell secure in your cities (Jer 40:10).

Sed veniamus ad eam quam dicit Apostolus societatem spiritus (Philipp. II, 1), et laudem disciplinae; ad bonum illud et jucundum cohabitationis fraternae in unum; ubi mandat Dominus benedictionem et vitam (Psal. CXXXII, 3), de quo dicit Dominus: *Nolite timere, pusillus grex; quoniam placuit Patri vestro dare vobis regnum* (Luc. XII, 32). Laus ergo hujus disciplinae ab Apostolis sumpsit exordium, qui sicut a Domino didicerant, vel a Spiritu sancto, cujus virtute nuper ex alto fuerant induti, modum convivendi sic sibi instituerunt, ut esset multitudinis cor unum, anima una, et omnia communia, et essent unanimiter semper in templo (Act. II, 44-47; IV, 34, 35).

Hanc apostolicae institutionis formam quidam aemulantes, non habent domos, vel diverticula, nisi domum Dei, domum orationis. Omnia quaecunque faciunt, in nomine Domini faciunt; simul habitantes uno ordine, una lege viventes, nihil habentes proprium, nec ipsa corpora sua, nec voluntates in potestate sua habentes. Simul dormiunt, simul surgunt; simul orant, simul psallunt, simul et legunt. Fixum et immobile propositum eorum obedire praepositis suis, et subjacere eis. Ipsi vero pervigilantes pro eis quasi rationem reddituri pro animabus eorum, re ipsa ipsis praedicant, quod in Jeremia populo Israel Godolias legitur praedicasse: *Ego pro vobis respondebo Chaldaeis qui veniunt ad vos. Vos autem colligite frumentum, vinum et oleum in vasis vestris, et habitate in urbibus vestris securi* (Jerem. XL, 10).

And they offer up for them each day the laugh of their heart and their joy, their Isaac, the son of the free woman, the son of the promise; they retain and keep for themselves Ishmael, the son of slavery, since on account of the others they pass by the fruits of the Spirit, and in caring for their salvation they set all the desires for their own progress behind the deeds in the others' service: preaching the eternal sabbath rest to them, they render them strangers to the cares of the world and the anxieties of daily necessities. When even these needs are reduced to a minimum, one lives on little. Cheapness in clothing, moderation in eating, and all things restricted within the other limits of the established law, so that no one have more than is allowed, and there be enough for all; nor anyone want to have more, if they have what one is allowed to have.

Is this not a heavenly rather than an earthly paradise? But in this paradise only the superiors are allowed to eat incessantly from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that is, to administer the arrangements discretion requires. As for the subjects, whose task is to obey rather than to judge, should one of them touch the tree, he would surely die.

They all strive at all times for silence of the mouth, and speak together with the desire of the heart. Fuel is added to the furnace by the frequent exhortations of those who are set over the others, though the mutual example they offer each other spurs them on even more. They eagerly outdo each other in honoring and serving each other, as the Apostle says (Rom 12:10), encouraging each other in the encouragement of love, bearing each other up. They allow no one among them to be alone, lest Solomon say to him: *Woe to the solitary man!* (Eccl. 4:10). They consider someone solitary when he does not want to open his conscience in confession to make way for a companion there, or when he disturbs the brothers' fellowship with new and solitary contrivances.

Risumque cordis sui, et gaudium Isaac quotidie Deo pro eis immolantes, filium liberae, filium repromissionis; reservant et conservant Ismael filium servitutis, cum propter eos fructum negligunt spiritus, et serviendo ipsorum saluti, actibus servitutis eorum omnes postponunt affectus profectuum suorum: ipsis vero perpetuum praedicantes sabbatum, a curis saeculi, a necessitatibus anxietatibus reddunt alienos. Coactis enim in brevi necessitatibus ipsis, parvo vivitur. Vilitas in vestibus, sobrietas in victu, et caeteris omnia praefixae legis terminata limitibus, ut nec plus habeat quis quam licet habere, et sufficiat omnibus; nec plus habere libeat, si habent quod liceat habere.

Nunquid non ista est non terrestris, sed coelestis paradisus? Sed in ista paradiso solis praelatis permittitur manducare assidue de ligno scientiae boni et mali; id est, dispensationes administrare discretionis; subditis vero, quorum est obedire, non discernere, si quis illud tetigerit, morte morietur.

Omnes omni tempore student oris silentio, invicem cordis loquuntur affectu. Crebris eorum qui praesunt exhortationibus oleum additur camino, licet plus ipsi mutuo se excitent exemplo. Honore et obsequio invicem certatim se praeveniunt (Rom. XII, 10), secundum Apostolum, in provocatione se charitatis invicem provocantes (Hebr. X, 24), invicem suscipientes. Nullum inter se patiuntur esse solitarium, ne dicat ei Salomon: *Vae soli!* (Eccle. IV, 10). Solitarium eum deputant, qui in conscientia sua per confessionem non vult habere socium, vel qui novis et solitariis adinventionibus suis conturbat societatem fratrum.

If ever the matter requires it, a calm conversation is allowed regarding spiritual matters or what is necessary for the body: otherwise, however, there is everywhere an even calmer silence. There is everywhere such and so steady a devotion to the endeavor of prayer that the entire place is a place of prayer, like part of the divine domain: the singing of the psalms is so faithful, so harmonious, so fervent, that, in a certain likeness to the harmony, the monks seem to bring before God as their sacrifice a melody of life and practices and good desires composed not according to the rules of music, but of love. In the common efforts of devotion, in a certain grace even of countenances and bodies and behaviors all together, seeing in themselves the presence of divine goodness, they engulf themselves in such longing that, like seraphim, one is kindled to the love of God on account of another, and whatever one gives to another can in no way be enough to the one giving it.

This especially is the school of charity, here its pursuits are cultivated, its disputations are conducted, the solutions are determined not so much by reasoning as by reason, by the very truth of things, by experience. Here, if someone is tired along the way and sits back down by the baggage he still bears with himself on account of his and his companions' burdens, he will neither die, nor slip backward, nor be compelled by law to go further on: and if sitting here he guard the baggage faithfully, he will not be any different in the victory parade than the one who went on ahead.

Si quando res exigit, permittitur de rebus animae vel corpori necessariis mite colloquium: sin autem, mitius ubique silentium. Ad studium orationis tanta et tam continua ubique devotio, ut locus orationis omnis, sicut locus divinae dominationis: psalmorum tam pia, tam consona, tam fervens melodia; ut vitae, et morum, et bonorum affectuum, non musicae, sed charitatis regulis melos compositum quadam similitudine consonantiae Deo representare et sacrificare videantur. In communibus pietatis studiis, in quadam etiam vultuum, et corporum, et habituum gratia invicem, in se ipsis bonitatis divinae videntes praesentiam tanto se affectu complectuntur, ut, sicut seraphim, in amorem Dei alter ardeat ex altero (Isa. VI. 3), nec ullo modo satis esse possit deferenti quodcunque alter defert alteri.

Haec est specialis charitatis schola, hic ejus studia excoluntur, disputationes agitantur, solutiones non ratiocinationibus tantum, quantum ratione et ipsa rerum veritate et experientia terminantur. Hic qui in proficiendo fassus est, si residet ad sarcinas, quas adhuc de suis et cohabitantium sarcinis et necessitatibus secum trahit, nec morietur, nec retro regredi, nec ultra procedere lege compellitur: et si fideliter residens hic sarcinas custodierit, in triumpho victoriae parum ei erit dissimilis, qui ulterius processerit (I Reg. XXX).