

Conferences, I, I-IV: The End and Aim of the Monk

by St. John Cassian

When, in the desert of Skete, where dwell the most distinguished fathers of monks and every perfection, in my desire to be fixed firm by his instruction I sought out abbot Moses, who among those outstanding blossoms gave forth a sweeter smell with his virtue both practical and contemplative, accompanied as I was by the holy abbot Germanus — my continuous dwelling with whom, from the very first campaign and basic training in spiritual warfare, in both monastery and desert, was so inseparable that, to indicate the equality of our companionship and purpose, everyone would say that there was one mind and soul in two bodies —, the two of us begged with outpoured tears that that same abbot give us an edifying sermon — for, in fact, we knew quite well that the rigor of his soul was such that he would never agree to open the door of perfection to anyone but to those who desired it faithfully and sought it with all contrition of heart, lest, should he offer it at random to those who do not want it or long for it only tepidly, he might seem to fall headlong into the vice of boasting or the crime of betrayal by laying before the unworthy and disdainfully receptive matters that are necessary and that should be revealed only to those who desire perfection — finally, then, worn down by our entreaties, he started up like this:

“All arts and disciplines have a certain *scopos*, that is, goal, and *telos*, that is, they have their proper end, and, ever mindful of it, one who diligently strives for any art sustains the sufferings, dangers, and losses calmly and gladly. For the farmer, at one time turning aside the scorching rays of the sun, at another the frosts

Cum in heremo Sciti, ubi monachorum probatissimi patres et omnis commorabatur perfectio, abbatem Moysen, qui inter illos egregios flores suavius non solum actuali, uerum etiam theoretica uirtute fragrabat, institutione eius fundari cupiens expetissem una cum sancto abbate Germano (cum quo mihi ab ipso tirocinio ac rudimentis militiae spiritalis ita indiuiduum deinceps contubernium tam in coenobio quam in heremo fuit, ut cuncti ad significandam sodalitatis ac propositi nostri parilitatem pronuntiarent unam mentem atque animam duobus inesse corporibus), pariterque ab eodem abbate aedificationis sermonem fuis lacrimis posceremus (quippe cuius hunc animi rigorem manifestissime noueramus, ut nisi fideliter desiderantibus et cum omni cordis contritione quaerentibus nequaquam adquiesceret ianuam perfectionis aperire, ne scilicet, si passim uel nolentibus eam uel tepide sitientibus exhiberet, res necessarias et quae solis perfectionem cupientibus debent esse conpertae, indignis et fastidiose susipientibus pandens aut iactantiae uitium aut prodicionis crimen uideretur incurrere), tandem fatigatus precibus nostris ita exorsus est.

Omnes, inquit, artes ac disciplinae scopon quendam, id est destinationem, et telos, hoc est finem proprium habent, ad quem respiciens uniuscuiusque artis industrius adpetitor cunctos labores et pericula atque dispendia aequanimiter libenterque sustentat. Nam et agricola nunc torridos solis radios, nunc pruinas et

and chill, untiringly breaks up the earth and often subjects the untamed clods of his field to the plow, at least as long as he seeks the goal, that by working the field free of all brambles and grass he crush it into something like loose sand, trusting that in no other way will he attain the end of harvesting copious fruits and abundant grain, with which then to live life more securely or be able to increase his substance. And once his barns are stuffed with grain, he gladly empties them out and with eager labor entrusts the seed to the crumbling furrows, unaware of the present loss because he contemplates the harvests to come.

And those who are used to working business deals do not fear the uncertainties of the sea, and do not tremble at every decision, as long as they are stirred to seek their goal by the hope of profit.

Nor again do those who are enflamed by the ambition of worldly warfare notice the damage and danger of their wanderings, as long as they see ahead of them their goal of honors and power; neither are they broken by toils and battles while they still want to win glory, the end they proposed to themselves.

Our profession, therefore, also has its proper scopos and its end, for which we take on all the sufferings not only untiringly, but even joyfully: the hunger of our fasts does not wear us out, the tiredness of our vigils delights us, the steady reading and meditation of the Scriptures does not satisfy us, neither unceasing work nor nakedness nor the lack of everything, not even the dread of this emptiest of solitudes terrifies us. Surely that is why you yourselves have severed the attachment of parents and of ancestral lands, and have despised the world's delights by passing through so many territories, so you could get to us simple,

glaciem non declinans terram infatigabiliter scindit et indomitas agri glebas frequenti subigit uomere, dum scopon seruat, ut eam cunctis sentibus expurgatam uniuersisque graminibus absolutam in modum solubilis harenae exercendo comminuat, finem, id est perceptionem copiosarum frugum et exuberantium segetum non alias adepturum se esse confidens, quo uel ipse deinceps uitam securus exigere uel suam possit amplificare substantiam. Referta etiam frugibus horrea libenter exhaurit easque putribus sulcis instanti labore commendat, praesentem deminutionem futurarum messium contemplatione non sentiens.

Illi etiam, qui negotiationum solent exercere commercia, non incertos pelagi timent casus, non ulla discrimina perhorrescunt, dum ad finem quaestus spe praepeti prouocantur.

Nec non etiam hi qui militiae mundialis ambitione flamman-
tur, dum prospiciunt honorum ac potentiae finem, peregrinationum exitia ac pericula non sentiunt nec praesentibus aerumnis bellisque franguntur, dum propositum sibi dignitatis finem cupiunt obtinere.

Habet ergo et nostra professio scopon proprium ac finem suum, pro quo labores cunctos non solum infatigabiliter, uerum etiam gratanter inpendimus, ob quem nos ieiuniorum inedia non fatigat, uigiliarum lassitudo delectat, lectio ac meditatio scripturarum continuata non satiat, labor etiam incessabilis nuditasque et omnium rerum priuatio, horror quoque huius vastissimae solitudinis non deterret. Ob quem uos ipsi procul dubio parentum spreuistis affectum et patrium solum ac delicias mundi tot pertransitis regionibus despexistis, ut ad nos homines rusticos et idiotas atque in hoc heremi squalore degentes peruenire possetis.

ignorant men who pass our days in the harshness of the desert. And so tell me,” he said, “what is the true point of arrival or end, which summons you to bear all these things most gladly?”

And since he persistently demanded our judgment on this question, we answered that we endured all these things for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

To which he said: “Good, you have spoken subtly of the end. But above all else you must know what our scopos should be, that is, the destination ever clinging to which we may be able to reach the end.” When we had simply confessed our ignorance, he added: “In every art and discipline, as I have said, a certain scopos takes precedence, that is, the soul’s destination or the unswerving purpose of the mind. And should one not serve it with all diligence and perseverance, he would be unable to attain the end of the desired fruit. For as I said, the farmer, having as his end a secure and abundant life, in the yield of his fertile grain keeps in mind the scopos or target, to purge his field of all brambles and empty it of all unfruitful plants, nor does he think that he will obtain abundance in the peace of the end unless he already possesses, by a certain planning of his work and hope, whatever he desires to obtain for his use.

The businessman likewise does not let go of the desire to buy up merchandise, by which he could more profitably amass wealth, since he would seek profit in vain if he did not choose the path that leads to it. And those who want to be honored with some particular distinctions of this world first propose to themselves by what duty or order of action they must subject themselves, so that by a legitimate path of hope they might be able to attain the end of their desired dignity.

Propter quod respondete, inquit, mihi quae sit destinatio uestra vel finis, quid ad haec omnia libentissime sustinenda uos prouocat.

Et cum persisteret nostram elicere super hac interrogatione sententiam, respondimus regni caelorum causa haec cuncta tolerari.

Ad quod ille : Bene, inquit : argute de fine dixistis. Qui uero debeat esse scopos noster, id est destinatio, cui iugiter inhaerentes finem ualeamus adtingere, prae omnibus nosse debetis. Et cum ignorance confessi simpliciter fuissemus, adiecit : in omni ut dixi arte ac disciplina praecedit quidam scopos, id est animae destinatio siue incessabilis mentis intentio. Quam nisi quis omni studio perseuerantiaque seruauerit, nec ad finem desiderati fructus poterit peruenire. Nam ut dixi agricola finem habens secure copioseque uiuendi in prouentu segetum fecundarum scopon, id est destinationem gerit agrum suum cunctis sentibus expurgare eumque uniuersis infructuosis uacare graminibus, nec aliter se quieti finis opulentiam adepturum esse confidit, nisi id, quod usu obtinere desiderat, quadam prius operis ac spei suae ratione possideat.

Negotiator quoque conparandarum mercium desiderium non deponit per quod possit quaestuosius diuitias congregare, quia frustra concupisceret lucrum, nisi uiam qua ad id tenderet elegisset. Et qui certis quibusque dignitatibus mundi huius cupiunt honorari, cui se officio uel ordini debeant mancipare ante proponunt, ut per legitimum spei tramitem finem quoque ualeant desideratae dignitatis adtingere.

And so the end of our path is indeed the Kingdom of God. But one must carefully look after what the scopos is: if it be not likewise shown to us, we will wear ourselves out in vain effort, since without a path the traveler's trial is the wandering itself, not the actual progress." When we started to look lost, the old man told us: "Yes, the end of our profession, as we have said, is the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven; but our destination, that is our scopos, is purity of heart, without which it is impossibile that anyone come through to that end. Therefore, fixing our direction's heading on that destination, we guide our course straight on as can be as if on a clear-cut line, and if our thought should bend from it even a little, hurrying back right away to the contemplation of it and applying our thought to this one mark as to some kind of rule, it will show right away if our mind has wandered even a bit from its proposed course.

Itaque et uiae nostrae finis quidem est regnum dei. Qui vero sit scopos debet diligenter inquiri : qui si nobis similiter conpertus non fuerit, frustra nitendo fatigabimur, quia sine uia tendentibus labor est itineris, non profectus. Ad quod obstupescantibus nobis senex intulit : finis quidem nostrae professionis ut diximus regnum dei seu regnum caelorum est, destinatio vero, id est scopos, puritas cordis, sine qua ad illum finem impossibile est quempiam peruenire. In hac ergo destinatione defigentes nostrae directionis obtutus uelut ad certam lineam cursum rectissimum dirigimus, ac si paululum quid ab hac cogitatio nostra deflexerit, ad contemplationem eius ilico recurrentes rursus eam uelut ad quandam normam nostros ad unum hoc reuocans signum arguet statim, si a proposita directione mens nostra uel paululum deuiauerit.