

# THE GOAL OR OBJECTIVE OF THE MONK

1

The most celebrated fathers of monasticism, the ultimate in excellence, were to be found in the desert of Scete. And among all these very beautiful flowers of holiness none was more outstanding than the abbot Moses, both for the fragrance of the virtue he practiced and for the preeminence of his contemplation.

I wanted to find some base that would be secured by his teaching. So too did the holy abbot Germanus. Both of us had been together since our days as recruits fighting the first of our battles of the spirit. We had been together in community life and in the desert and, to show our close friendship and our common purpose, each of us would say that we were one mind and one soul living in two bodies. Together now and with an outpouring of tears we begged of the abbot that he would talk to us in a constructive way. We had known very well that he had a very determined mind and that he would never throw open the gates of perfection except to those who longed for it in all faith and with saddened hearts, since here is certainly not something to be made known to the indifferent or to those with a lukewarm urge. The revelation can be made only to those longing for perfection, and by handing it over to the unworthy or to begrudgers he seemed to fear to do wrong or to run the risk of a betrayal.

But he was worn down at last by our entreaties. And this is how he began.

2

“Every art,” he said, “and every discipline has a particular objective, that is to say, a target and an end peculiarly its own. Someone

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keenly engaged in any one art calmly and freely endures every toil, danger, and loss. The farmer, for instance, does not shirk the burning rays of the sun or the frosts and the ice as he tirelessly cuts through the earth, as, over and over again, he ploughs the untamed sods of the field. All the time he pursues his objective, cleaning all brambles from the field, clearing away all grass, breaking up the earth until it is like fine sand. He is aware that there is no other way to achieve his aim, which is the prospect of an abundant harvest and a rich yield of crops so that he may live securely or add to his possessions. He draws the grain willingly from the fullness of his barns and, working intensively, he invests it in the loosened soil. He pays no attention to what he is losing now because he is thinking ahead to the coming harvests.

“Again, there are those who engage in commerce. They are not frightened by the hazards of the sea. No dangers terrify them. Borne up by their hope of profit they are carried toward their goal.

“It is the same with those inflamed by military ambitions. They look toward the goal of honors and power and as they do so they shrug off doom and danger while they venture afar. They are brought down neither by the sufferings of the moment nor by wars, so long as they keep before themselves the honored plan to which they aspire.

“So also with our profession. It too has its own objective and goal to which, not just tirelessly but with true joy, we devote all our labors. The hunger of fasts does not weary us. The tiredness from keeping vigil is a delight to us. The reading and the endless meditation on Scripture are never enough for us. The unfinished toil, the nakedness, the complete deprivation, the fear that goes with this enormous loneliness, do not frighten us off. And I have no doubt that it was for this goal that you gave up the love of your family, your native soil, the pleasures of the world, that you traveled through so many countries in search of men like us, ignorant backwoodsmen who live the rough life of this desert.

“So, tell me then what is the end and the objective which inspires you to endure all these trials so gladly.”

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Since he really wanted to know our answer to this question we replied that we had taken on all this for the sake of the kingdom of God.

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"A good answer insofar as it concerns your goal," he said. "But now what should be our aim, what direction should we take which, if closely followed, will bring us to our objective? This, above all, is something of which you ought to be aware."

We admitted, in all honesty, that we did not know. "As I have remarked already, every art and discipline is preceded by some objective," he said. "The spirit points in a certain direction. There is an unwavering purpose in the mind. If this is not held on to with all eagerness and dedication there can be no coming to the longed-for fruits of the goal. The farmer, as I remarked, has the goal of living peacefully in sure abundance thanks to good rich harvests, and in order to reach that end he sets himself to clearing the brambles and the useless grasses from his land. He knows well that he will not enjoy that restful ease toward which he is striving unless somehow his work and his aspirations themselves become a sort of foretaste of what he hopes to actually enjoy one day.

"The merchant does not put aside his urge to amass goods, for it is through these that he can grow wealthy on the proceeds. It would be useless for him to have a wish for profit if he did not follow the road heading there.

"And there are those who have a wish for the honors of this world. They take on this job or follow that career, depending on the honor they want, and they do so in order to arrive at their wished-for plan by way of the right path along which hope leads them.

"In the same fashion the objective of our life is the kingdom of God, but we should carefully ask what we should aim for. If we do not look very carefully into this we will wear ourselves out in useless strivings. For those who travel without a marked road there is the toil of the journey—and no arrival at a destination."

Seeing our amazement at all this, the old man resumed: "As we have said, the aim of our profession is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. But our point of reference, our objective, is a clean heart, without which it is impossible for anyone to reach our target. If we keep to this point of reference we will proceed with all assurance, as though along a carefully drawn line. If our minds wander a little from this we can come back to it again and keep our eye on it, using it as a standard by which to give ourselves sure guidance. This standard will

draw all our efforts toward the one point and will serve as a warning to us if our minds waver even a little from the proposed route.

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“Take the example of those who are skilled in archery and who wish to demonstrate their prowess before some king of this world. They strive to hurl their darts or their arrows against tiny shields on which there are painted the rewards of achievement. They know well that they can attain the desired reward only if they come straight on target. It is there for them—if they can reach the set objective. Imagine, however, that the target was removed from their view and from the right line. They would fail to notice it was missing since they would lack a point of reference by which to demonstrate that their shot was accurate or poor. They would pour useless shots through the empty air and would have no idea of why they were going wrong and they would have no way of judging how far out of the way they were going nor could they therefore correct their own guideline nor summon it back.

“So too with our profession whose goal, as the apostle says, is eternal life. ‘As a reward you have your sanctification and your goal is eternal life’ (Rom 6:22). Our objective is purity of heart, which he so justly describes as sanctification, for without this the goal cannot be reached. In other words, it is as though he said that you have purity of heart for an objective and eternal life as the goal. And indeed, with regard to this sense of direction, the blessed apostle in the teaching he gives us actually makes significant use of the term ‘objective.’ ‘I forget the past and push ahead to what is yet to come. I am rushing toward the objective, to the prize to which God calls me from on high’ (Phil 3:13–14). The Greek has ‘I am rushing toward the object,’ that is, ‘I am running with a finishing line in view.’ It is as if the apostle said, ‘Guided by this aim of forgetting my past, namely the sins of the earlier man, I am driving myself toward the goal of a heavenly reward.’

“Therefore, we must follow completely anything that can bring us to this objective, to this purity of heart, and anything which pulls us away from it must be avoided as being dangerous and damaging. After all, it is for the sake of this that we undertake all that we do and all that we endure. For its sake we hold family, country, honors, riches, the delight of this world and indeed all pleasure in low esteem, and we do so always so as to hold on to purity of heart. With this as our continuous aim, all our acts and thoughts are fully turned toward its achievement, and if it were not ever firmly before our eyes all our efforts would be

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empty, hesitant, futile, and wasted, and all the thoughts within us would be varied and at loggerheads with one another. For a mind which lacks an abiding sense of direction veers hither and yon by the hour, and by the minute is a prey to outside influences and is endlessly the prisoner of whatever strikes it first.

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"This is why we see many who, having given up the greatest wealth not only in gold and silver but also in splendid estates, nevertheless become very upset over a knife, a scraper, a needle, or a pan. If they had looked unwaveringly to the purity of their hearts they would never have become involved with such trifles and they would have rejected these just as they did great and valuable possessions. There are some who guard a book so jealously that they can barely endure to have someone else read it or touch it. Such a situation, instead of gaining them the reward of gentleness and love, turns for them into occasions of impatience and even death. They have given away all their wealth out of love for Christ and yet they still hold on to their old heart-longings for things that do not matter, things for whose sake they grow angry. They are like those lacking the love of which the apostle spoke and in every way their lives turn fruitless and sterile. All this was foreseen in spirit by the blessed apostle. 'If I give all that I have to buy food for the poor,' he said, 'and if I hand over my body to be burnt, and yet have no love in me, then this is for nothing' (1 Cor 13:3). Perfection, then, is clearly not achieved simply by being naked, by the lack of wealth or by the rejection of honors, unless there is also that love whose ingredients the apostle described and which is to be found solely in purity of heart. Not to be jealous, not to be puffed up, not to act heedlessly, not to seek what does not belong to one, not to rejoice over some injustice, not to plan evil—what is this and its like if not the continuous offering to God of a heart that is perfect and truly pure, a heart kept free of all disturbance?

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"Everything we do, our every objective, must be undertaken for the sake of this purity of heart. This is why we take on loneliness, fasting, vigils, work, nakedness. For this we must practice the reading of the Scripture, together with all the other virtuous activities, and we do so to trap and to hold our hearts free of the harm of every dangerous passion and in order to rise step by step to the high point of love.

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“It may be that some good and necessary task prevents us from achieving fully all that we set out to do. Let us not on this account give way to sadness or anger or indignation, since it was precisely to repel these that we would have done what in fact we were compelled to omit. What we gain from fasting does not compensate for what we lose through anger. Our profit from scriptural reading in no way equals the damage we cause ourselves by showing contempt for a brother. We must practice fasting, vigils, withdrawal, and the meditation of Scripture as activities which are subordinate to our main objective, purity of heart, that is to say, love, and we must never disturb this principal virtue for the sake of those others. If this virtue remains whole and unharmed within us nothing can injure us, not even if we are forced to omit any of those other subordinate virtues. Nor will it be of any use to have practiced all these latter if there is missing in us that principal objective for the sake of which all else is undertaken.

“A worker takes the trouble to get hold of the instruments that he requires. He does so not simply to have them and not use them. Nor is there any profit for him in merely possessing the instruments. What he wants is, with their help, to produce the crafted objective for which these are the efficient means.

“In the same way, fasting, vigils, scriptural meditation, nakedness, and total deprivation do not constitute perfection but are the means to perfection. They are not themselves the end point of a discipline, but an end is attained through them. To practice them will therefore be useless if someone instead of regarding these as means to an end is satisfied to regard them as the highest good. One would possess the instruments of a profession without knowing the end where the hoped-for fruit is to be found.

“And so anything which can trouble the purity and the peace of our heart must be avoided as something very dangerous, regardless of how useful and necessary it might actually seem to be. With this for a rule we will be able to avoid the lack of concentration which comes as the mind follows highways and byways and we will be able to go with an assured sense of direction toward our longed-for goal.

8

“To cling always to God and to the things of God—this must be our major effort, this must be the road that the heart follows unswervingly. Any diversion, however impressive, must be regarded as secondary, low-grade, and certainly dangerous. Martha and Mary provide

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a most beautiful scriptural paradigm of this outlook and of this mode of activity. In looking after the Lord and His disciples Martha did a very holy service. Mary, however, was intent on the spiritual teaching of Jesus and she stayed by His feet, which she kissed and anointed with the oil of her good faith. And she got more credit from the Lord because she had chosen the better part, one which could not be taken away from her. For while Martha was working hard, responsibly and fully intent on her job, she realized that she could not do all the work herself and she demanded the help of her sister from the Lord. 'Does it not bother you that my sister leaves me to do the work alone?' she said. 'Tell her to come and help me' (Lk 10:40). Certainly she summons Mary to a task that is not inconsequential but is a praiseworthy service. Yet what does she hear from the Lord? 'Martha, Martha, you are full of worry and are upset over many things where actually it should be over a few or even one thing. Mary has chosen the good part and it will not be taken away from her' (Lk 10:41-42).

"You will note that the Lord establishes as the prime good contemplation, that is, the gaze turned in the direction of the things of God. Hence we say that the other virtues, however useful and good we may say they are, must nevertheless be put on a secondary level, since they are all practiced for the sake of this one. 'You are full of worry and are upset over many things when actually it should be over a few or even one.' In saying this the Lord locates the primary good not in activity, however praiseworthy, however abundantly fruitful, but in the truly simple and unified contemplation of Himself. He says that not much is needed for perfect blessedness. He means here that type of contemplation which is primarily concerned with the example of a few saints. Contemplating these, someone still on the upward road comes at last to that which is unique, namely the sight of God Himself, which comes with God's help. Having passed beyond the activities and the ministry of holy men he will live solely on the beauty and the knowledge of God. 'Mary therefore chose the good part and it will not be taken away from her.' But one must look carefully at this. In saying 'Mary chose the good part,' He was saying nothing about Martha and in no way was He giving the appearance of criticizing her. Still, by praising the one He was saying that the other was a step below her. Again, by saying 'it will not be taken away from her' He was showing that Martha's role could be taken away from her—since the service of the body can only last as long as the human being is there—whereas the zeal of Mary can never end."

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We were deeply stirred by this. “So then” we said, “the toil of fasting, the constant scriptural reading, the works of mercy, justice, piety, and humanity will be taken away from us and will not remain as we remain? And this when the Lord Himself promised the reward of heaven to the people who do these things? ‘Come you blessed of my Father,’ He said. ‘Take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world. I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink’ (Mt 25:34–35). And all the rest. These things which bring the people who do them into the kingdom of heaven, how can they be taken away?”

10

Moses: “I did not say that the reward of a good deed must be taken away, for the same Lord said, ‘Whoever will give even a glass of cold water to one of these little ones because he is one of my disciples, Amen I tell you, he will not lose his reward’ (Mt 10:42). But what I do say is that an activity which takes place as a result of the needs of the body, the onslaught of the flesh, or the inequality of this world must come to an end. The dedication to scriptural reading or the infliction of fasts only serve the useful purpose of purifying the heart and punishing the flesh in this present life as long as it is the case that ‘the flesh indulges itself against the spirit’ (Gal 5:17). These activities are sometimes lifted from those who, wearied out by too much hard work, by sickness or by old age, are unable to practice them continuously. All the more reason, therefore, for these to cease in the next life when ‘this corruption’ will take on ‘incorruptibility’ (1 Cor 15:53), when this body which is now animal will rise as ‘spirit’ (1 Cor 15:44), when flesh will no longer indulge in conflict with the spirit. The blessed apostle spoke clearly about all this when he said that ‘the exercising of the body has a limited value, whereas piety—and no doubt he means love—is useful for everything, holding as it does the promise of life both now and in the future’ (1 Tm 4:8). What is said here about limited value is clearly right, since this is something which cannot be done for all time nor can it by itself bring us to the summit of perfection. The notion of limit can also indicate either the brevity of time, for bodily exercise is not something to last throughout the present and the future life, or else it refers to the minimal value of such exercise. The demands made on the body are

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actually only the beginning of the road to progress. They do not induce that perfect love which has within it the promise of life now and in the future. And so we consider the practice of such works to be necessary only because without them it is not possible to reach the high peaks of love.

“As for those works of piety and charity of which you speak, these are necessary in this present life for as long as inequality prevails. Their workings here would not be required were it not for the superabundant numbers of the poor, the needy, and the sick. These are there because of the iniquity of men who have held for their own private use what the common Creator has made available to all. As long as this inequity rages in the world, these good works will be necessary and valuable to anyone practicing them and they shall yield the reward of an everlasting inheritance to the man of good heart and concerned will.

“But all of this will cease in the time to come when equality shall reign, when there shall no longer be the injustice on account of which these good works must be undertaken, when from the multiplicity of what is done here and now everyone shall pass over to the love of God and to the contemplation of things divine. Men seized of the urge to have a knowledge of God and to be pure in mind devote all their gathered energies to this one task. While they still live in the corruption of the flesh they give themselves to that service in which they will persevere when that corruption has been laid aside. And already they come in sight of what the Lord and Savior held out when He said, ‘Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God’ (Mt 5:8).

11

“Why should you be surprised if these good works, referred to above, shall pass away? The blessed apostle described even the higher gifts of the Holy Spirit as things that would vanish. He points to love as alone without end. ‘Prophecies will end, languages cease and knowledge will fail’ (1 Cor 13:8). As for love, ‘love will never cease.’

“Actually, all gifts have been given for reasons of temporal use and need and they will surely pass away at the end of the present dispensation. Love, however, will never be cut off. It works in us and for us, and not simply in this life. For when the burden of physical need has been laid aside in the time to come it will endure, more effectively, more excellently, forever unfailing, clinging to God with more fire and zeal through all the length of incorruption.”

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Germanus: "But, given the frailty of the flesh, who can ever be so intent on contemplation that his thoughts will never settle on the coming of a brother, the visit to a patient, the duties of hospitality which must be extended to travelers and to all passers-by? Who will not be turned aside by the requirements and need of his own body? What we really want to learn is the extent to which the spirit can actually be at one with the invisible, ungraspable God."

13

Moses: "As you say, a man surrounded by the frailty of the flesh cannot cling totally to God or be joined to Him in unbroken contemplation. Yet we certainly need to know the direction in which our mind must always go. We must be aware of the destination toward which we must always summon our spirit. And whenever the mind can succeed in this let it rejoice, and whenever it is distracted let it grieve and sigh, knowing that as often as it is turned aside from contemplation it has been cut off from the ultimate good, knowing that to veer for even a moment from beholding Christ is to be guilty of impurity. When our gaze has wandered even a little from Christ let us immediately turn the eyes of our heart back to Him and let our vision be directed to Him as though along the straightest line."

"For everything lies at the innermost recess of the soul. When the devil has been chased away from it and when sin is no longer in charge of it, then the kingdom of God is established there. This is what the evangelist conveys to us when he says, 'The kingdom of God will not come as something to be observed nor will people cry "Here it is! There it is!" Amen, I tell you the kingdom of God is within you' (Lk 17:20–21).

"Now there can be nothing else within us except the knowledge or unawareness of truth, the love of sin or of virtue, and with these we make a kingdom in the heart for the devil or for Christ. And what this kingdom is like is set out by the apostle when he says, 'The kingdom of God does not consist of eating and drinking, but in righteousness and peace and joy in the holy spirit' (Rom 14:17). If the kingdom of God is within us and that is a kingdom of justice, of peace, and of joy then whoever remains with these virtues is certainly in the kingdom of God. By contrast, all who deal in unrighteousness, in discord, and in death-bearing gloom have taken their stand in the kingdom of the devil, in

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hell and in lifelessness. It is by these tokens that the kingdom of God or of the devil is recognized.

“Actually, if we gaze upward in spirit to that condition enjoyed by the heavenly and celestial virtues who are truly in the kingdom of God, how else is this to be reckoned except as everlasting, continuous joy? What is more suitable and appropriate to true blessedness than an eternity of peace and joy?

“Do not imagine that what I am saying is simply my own point of view. Take it on the certain authority of the Lord Himself. Listen to Him as He gives a most luminous description of the character and condition of that world. ‘Look, I am creating new heavens and a new earth. The past will not remain in the memory nor will it rise up over the heart. But you will delight and rejoice forever in these things which I bring forth’ (Is 65:17–18). Or again, ‘Joy and happiness will be found in this, a blessing and a voice of praise. And it will be so month after month, from sabbath to sabbath’ (Is 51:3, 66:23). And again, ‘They will have joy and gladness; pain and lamentation shall flee’ (Is 35:10). If you want to have some clearer knowledge of that abode and realm of the saints, listen to the voice of the Lord speaking to the heavenly Jerusalem: ‘I will give you peace for a visitor and will put justice as your judges. Iniquity shall no longer be heard of in your country nor ravage and ruin within your frontiers. Salvation will hold your walls and praise will be at your gates. No more will the sun light your day and the splendor of the moon will not shine upon you. You shall have the Lord for your everlasting light and your God for your glory. Your sun will set no more and your moon will not diminish. For you the Lord will be light eternal and the days of your mourning will be at an end’ (Is 60:17–20).

“Accordingly, the blessed apostle does not describe joy in general or a particular joy as the kingdom of God but specifically and specially he points only to the joy in the Holy Spirit. He knows that there is another kind of joy, one which is blameworthy and of which it said ‘this world shall rejoice’ (Jn 16:20) and ‘woe to you who laugh because you shall weep’ (Lk 6:25).

“The kingdom of heaven can be understood in three ways. First, the heavens, that is to say, the saints shall rule over all the other men made subject to them, in accordance with the words ‘You! Rule over five cities. And you! Rule over ten’ (Lk 19:17, 19). And there is the statement to the apostles: ‘You will sit on twelve thrones and you shall judge the twelve tribes of Israel’ (Mt 19:28). Or, second, the skies them-

selves shall become the kingdom of Christ when all things have been put under His authority and when God shall be 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:28). Or, third, the blessed in heaven shall rule together with the Lord.

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"Let everybody know this. He shall be assigned to the place and to the service to which he gave and devoted himself in this life and he can be sure that in eternity he will have as his lot the service and the companionship which he preferred in this life. This is what the Lord means when He says, 'If anyone is my servant let him follow me and where I am he will be there as my servant' (Jn 12:26).

"Just as the kingdom of the devil is raised up by the concourse of sin, the kingdom of God is possessed by way of the practice of virtue in purity of heart and in spiritual knowledge. Where the kingdom of God is, there certainly is eternal life, where the kingdom of the devil is, there surely is death and damnation, and there, in the words of the prophet, one cannot praise the Lord. 'The dead will not praise you, Lord, nor those who have gone down into hell'—sinners no doubt—'but we who live'—not in sin, nor in the world, but in God—'we bless the Lord now and forever. No one who is dead remembers God, and in hell [i.e., sin] who shall utter his confession to the Lord?' (Ps 6:6). No one. Anyone who sins does not offer praise to the Lord, not even if he proclaims himself a thousand times to be a Christian and a monk. No one doing what the Lord abhors is mindful of God. Falsely he calls himself the servant of the One whose commands he rashly and contemptuously spurns. This is the kind of death of which the blessed apostle speaks when he refers to the widow who lives in luxury. 'The widow who lives for pleasure is in living death' (1 Tm 5:6).

"There are many indeed living in the body but actually dead. They lie in hell and cannot praise God.

"By contrast there are those who are dead to the body but who praise God in spirit and praise Him in accordance with the saying 'Spirits and souls of the just, give praise to the Lord' (Dn 3:86), and 'Let every spirit offer praise to the Lord' (Ps 150:6). In the Apocalypse the souls of those who have been killed are said not only to praise God but to cry out to Him. And in the gospel there is the clearer statement of the Lord when He says, 'Have you not read the utterance of God in the words "I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." He is not the God of the dead but of the living' (Mt 22:31–32).

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"Everyone therefore has life in him and regarding these the apostle says, 'That is why God was not ashamed to be called their God, since He has made ready a city for them' (Heb 11).

"The gospel parable of the poor man Lazarus and of the rich man clothed in purple shows us that souls separated from the body are neither inactive nor bereft of feeling. The one man wins as his blessed abode the peace that exists in the bosom of Abraham; the other is subjected to the unbearable scorchings of eternal fire. And if we wish to ponder what was said to the thief, namely, 'Today you shall be with me in paradise,' what other obvious meaning is there to this if not that souls continue to have their former sense of awareness and, further, that their lot is in keeping with their merits and with what they have done? The Lord would never have made this promise to the thief if He knew that the soul, once separated from the body, must lose all feeling and be turned into nothing. For it was the soul and not the body which would go with Christ to paradise.

"Now we must beware utterly of that most detestable distinction made by the heretics who do not wish to believe that Christ could not have been in heaven on the same day that He descended into hell. They break the sentence in two and have 'Amen, I say to you today' and then 'you shall be with me in paradise.' Hence the promise could not be considered to have been immediately fulfilled upon passing away from this life but rather after the resurrection. They do not understand what He said, quite some time before His resurrection, when speaking to the Jews who considered that He, like themselves, was locked into the limits and the fragility of human flesh: 'No one rises up to heaven except He who came down from heaven, the Son of man' (Jn 3:13).

"All of this clearly shows that not only are the souls of the dead not deprived of their intellectual faculties but that they also are not lacking in feelings such as hope and sadness, joy and fear. They already have a foretaste of what is in store for them after the general judgment. Nor does it happen, as some unbelievers would hold, that upon leaving this world they are turned to nothing. Actually they live more intensely and they concentrate more on the praises of God.

"If one might leave aside for a moment the evidence in Scripture and if I myself may be permitted to think a little about the nature of the soul, doing so to the extent possible to my poor intelligence, is it not the ultimate in stupidity, indeed of madness, to have a lightweight opinion of what is in fact the more valuable part of man? Here, as the blessed apostle says, is the image and likeness of God. Could this be-

come devoid of awareness after having shed the corporeal burden by which it is held back in this life? All the power of reason lies here and gives consciousness to the dumb, unfeeling stuff of the flesh. It must surely follow, it must certainly happen that when the mind has shed the inhibiting grossness of the flesh it recovers in improved form its intellectual capacities, that it gathers, not loses, these in a purer and more penetrating condition.

“The blessed apostle is so convinced of what I am now saying that he goes so far as to long to depart from the flesh in order that by virtue of this separation he may be enabled to enter into the closest union with the Lord. ‘I have a longing to be gone,’ he says, ‘and to be with Christ, which would be better’ (Phil 1:23), ‘because as long as we are in the body we are roaming from the Lord’ (2 Cor 5:8–9). Thus, he is saying that the sojourn of spirit in this body is an exile from the Lord, an absence from Christ, and he believes totally that the separation and the departure from the body means a coming into the presence of Christ. And, more knowledgeably, the apostle has this to say about the most intense life of souls: ‘But you have come to Mount Sion, to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the gathering of many millions of angels, to the church of the first-born who are enrolled as citizens of heaven, and to the spirits of the just who have been made perfect’ (Heb 12:22–23). About these spirits he says elsewhere, ‘Our fathers in the flesh have been our teachers and we have revered them. Should we not be all the more obedient to the father of the spirits and thereby have life?’ (Heb 12:9).

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“Contemplation of God can be understood in more than one fashion. For God is not solely known by way of that astonished gaze at His ungraspable nature, something hidden thus far in the hope that comes with what has been promised us. He can also be sensed in the magnificence of His creation, in the spectacle of His justice, and in the help He extends each day to the running of the world. He can be sensed too when with well-purified minds we consider what He has achieved in each generation by means of His saints. He can be sensed when we gaze with trembling hearts at that power of His which controls, guides, and rules everything, when we contemplate His immense knowledge and His knowing look which the secrets of the heart cannot evade. His presence is known when we meditate on the fact that the sands of the sea are numbered by Him, that He keeps a count of the waves. Astounded,

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we reflect that every drop of rain, every day and every hour of all the centuries, everything past and everything to come are all facts of which He is aware. Overwhelmed with wonder we think of that unspeakable mercy of His which allows Him to endure with unfailing patience the numberless crimes committed at every moment while He watches. We think of how in His pity for us He has called us to Him, though we had done nothing previously to deserve it. We think of all the times when He made it possible for us to be saved as His adopted sons. He ordained that our birth was to be such that His grace and the knowledge of His Law would be available to us from the cradle. And having overcome the adversary within us He offers us, in return merely for our goodwill, an eternity of happiness and of rewards. We think too of the incarnation, which He arranged for our salvation, and we think of how He spread to all people the wonder of His mysteries.

"There are innumerable other considerations of this kind. They surface within our sensibilities—depending on the quality of our living and purity of our hearts. By means of them God is seen and beheld in immaculate visions. And it is certain that none of them will be in the uninterrupted keeping of anyone who keeps alive in himself any of the desires of the flesh. 'You will not be able to look upon my face,' says the Lord, 'for a man will not look upon me and live' (Ex 33:20). Live, that is, in this world and amid earthly longings."

16

Germanus: "How is it then that despite ourselves, indeed without our even knowing it, useless thoughts slide into us, subtly and without our seeing them, so that it is no small thing not simply to drive them away but even to know and to grasp that they are there at all? Is it possible for the mind ever to be free of them, to remain unscathed by illusions of this sort?"

17

Moses: "It is impossible for the mind to remain undisturbed by thoughts, but anyone serious about the matter can certainly permit them entry or drive them away, and although their origin does not lie entirely under our control we can choose to approve of them and to adopt them.

"As I have said, it is not possible that the mind should be unapproached by thoughts. But these must not be attributed completely either to some incursion or those spirits which strive to slip them in

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among us. Otherwise man's free will would not remain nor would our task of self-discipline continue to be there. But I would say that to a great extent it is up to us to ensure the good character of our thoughts. It depends on us whether they turn holy and spiritual or else earthly and of the flesh. Now the regular reading and the continuous meditation on Scripture are undertaken so that a spiritual turn be given to our memory. The constant singing of the psalms is designed to produce a persistent compunction within us so that the mind, slimmed down, may not have a taste for the things of earth and will turn, instead, to behold the things of heaven. And if we carelessly neglect these, then of necessity the mind, filled with the squalor of sin, turns soon and comes rushing toward the domain of the flesh.

18

"This activity of the heart is compared, not inappropriately, to that of a mill which is activated by the circular motion of water. The mill cannot cease operations at all so long as it is driven round by the pressure of the water and it, then, becomes quite feasible for the person in charge to decide whether he prefers wheat or barley or darnel to be ground. And one thing is clear. Only that will be ground which is fed in by the one who is in charge.

"In a similar fashion, the mind is under pressure in this life. From all sides temptation comes in torrents to drive it along and in no way will it be free of turbulent thoughts. But the workings of zeal and diligence will decide which of those thoughts may be allowed in and cultivated. And, as I have said already, if we turn to the constant meditation on Scripture, if we lift up our memory to the things of the spirit, to the longing for perfection and to the hope of future blessedness, then the thoughts deriving from all this will of necessity be spiritual and they will hold the mind where the thoughts have been. However, if we are overcome by sloth or by carelessness, if we give ourselves over to dangerous and useless chattering, if we are caught up in worldly cares and in profitless worries, there will follow in effect from this a harvest of tares to serve as a ministry of death to our hearts. As the Lord our Savior proclaimed, where treasure lies for our works and for our hopes our hearts will of necessity abide there too.

19

"Above all we should realize that there are three sources for our thoughts—God, the devil, and ourselves.

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“They come from God whenever He deigns to approach us through an illumination of the Holy Spirit, thereby lifting us up to a more sublime terrain. They come from Him whenever He brings a most saving compunction upon us amid the poverty of our efforts and the laziness of our activities. They come from Him whenever He opens up the mysteries of heaven to us, whenever He turns our thoughts to better deeds and to better resolutions.

“Consider King Asuerus, for example. Punished by the Lord, he was moved to search the records of his kingdom. These drew his attention to the good offices of Mardochaeus, for whom he proceeded to decree the highest honors, and forthwith he revoked the most cruel death sentence which he had passed on the Jewish people.

“Or again, there are the words of the prophet, ‘I shall listen to what the Lord God has to say in me’ (Ps 84:9). Also, ‘The angel who was speaking within me had this to say’ (Zec 1:14). Or again, when the Son promised that He would come with the Father to make a dwelling place in us, or when He said, ‘It is not you who speak but it is the spirit of your Father who speaks in you’ (Mt 10:20). And there are these words from Paul, the vessel of election, ‘You are looking for a proof that it is Christ who is speaking in me’ (2 Cor 13:3).

“A train of thoughts comes too into being from the devil when these undermine us with the attractiveness of sin and when the devil gets to us with his hidden snares, when with the subtlest of skills he deceitfully presents evil as good and on our behalf transforms himself into an angel of light. Or, there is the story from the evangelist how ‘during the supper the devil put it into the heart of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray the Lord’ (Jn 13:2). And, again, ‘After the morsel Satan entered into him’ (Jn 13:27). Peter said to Ananias, ‘Why has Satan tempted your heart, causing you to lie to the Holy Spirit?’ (Acts 5:3). We read in the gospel what was said a long time before in Ecclesiastes: ‘If the spirit of the one having power shall rise up against you, do not leave your place’ (10:4). There is also what the unclean spirit said against Achab to God in book three of Kings: ‘I shall go forth and I shall be a spirit of untruth in the mouths of all his prophets’ (3 Kgs 22:12).

“Thoughts come from within ourselves when we think of what we do or have done or have heard. And this is natural. Regarding such matters, the blessed David said, ‘I thought of the old days and in my mind I had the everlasting years; I gave myself to meditation and by night I was busy in my heart and I looked deeply into my own spirit’ (Ps 76:6–7). Or again: ‘The Lord knows the thoughts of men, for they are empty’

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(Ps 93:11) and 'The thoughts of righteous men are thoughts of justice' (Prv 12:5). And in the gospel the Lord says to the Pharisees, 'Why do you think evil thoughts in your hearts?' (Mt 9:4).

20

"We must therefore keep a close eye on this threefold scheme of our thoughts and we must exercise a wise discretion concerning them as they surface in our hearts. Right from the beginning we will scrutinize their origins, their causes, their originators, deciding our necessary reaction to them in the light of who it is that suggests them. And we shall do this in order to become what the Lord described as skilled changers of currency whose greatest skill and knowledge consist in the fact that they can tell the difference between the purest gold and that which, having had the minimal testing in fire, is commonly described as *obryza* or standard gold. Or they can unfailingly observe when a cheap coin tries to look valuable, attempting with the gleaming color of gold to appear to be a precious item of money. It is not simply that they can tell which coins bear the heads of rulers but they can go farther and with their more informed skill they can spot the difference between fakes and those coins bearing a genuine likeness of the king. And they make careful use of the scales in case anything should be missing from the legal weight.

"We have the obligation to take the same precautions in all spiritual matters, as is clear from the use of the term *money-changers* in the gospel.

"So we must first scrutinize thoroughly anything appearing in our hearts or any saying suggested to us. Has it come purified from the divine and heavenly fire of the Holy Spirit? Or does it lean toward Jewish superstition? Is its surface piety something which has come down from bloated worldly philosophy? We must examine this most carefully, doing as the apostle bids us: 'Do not believe in every spirit, but make sure to find out if spirits are from God' (1 Jn 4:1).

"This is what has happened in the case of many who were actually fooled. Having solemnly undertaken monastic life, they were won over by the glitter of words or by the utterances of philosophers, all of which, as they heard them, seemed to be right and seemed to accord with religion, for they had the deceptive gleam of gold. And once they had enticed these men away it was as though they had deceived them with their spurious coinage and they thrust them down into unending nakedness and wretchedness. They dragged them back either into the

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tumult of the world or else into heretical error and swelling presumption.

“Such as the misfortune of Achor, of which we read in the book of Jesus, son of Nave. He turned a covetous eye on a golden ladle from the camp of the Philistines. He stole it, and for this he was condemned and earned an everlasting doom for himself.

“Secondly, it will be proper for us to watch very carefully in case a false interpretation, hammered out from the purest gold of Scripture, should deceive us with its merely metallic value. In this respect the devil, with his utmost skill, tried a deception on the Lord our Savior—as though he were dealing with a mere man. This is something which happens in the case of all the just. The devil changed scriptural sense by means of a maliciously intended interpretation and tried to make it fit particularly the very One who has no need at all of the guardianship of angels. ‘He has given orders to his angels concerning you that they are to guard you in all your paths. And they will carry you in their hands lest you should happen to strike your foot against a stone’ (Mt 4:6). By skilled abuse he disturbs the precious utterances of Scripture, twisting them to an opposite and dangerous sense in order that he might display the image of a tyrannous countenance in the deceptive guise of gold.

“He tries to fool us by means of counterfeit pieces. He urges us on to some task which has not the authentic stamp of the ancients and which, seemingly for the sake of virtue, leads us into sin. By means of excessive or inappropriate fasting, through unduly long vigils, through prayer out of turn or scriptural reading at the wrong time, he works deceit and leads on to a destructive end. He persuades us to undertake visitation for reasons of charity so as to drive us out of the spiritual enclosure of the monastery and from the quiet of friendly peace. He inspires us to show concern and care for women who are leading lives in religion and destitution, and all this so as to ensnare some monk beyond rescue in the coils of pernicious concerns. Or, again, he moves us to wish for clerical duties. The pretext is the edification of numerous souls or the desirability of spiritual gain. The purpose, however, is to draw us in this way from the lowness and the austerity of our lives.

“All these activities run counter to what is safe for us and to our profession. However, since they are covered by the cloak of mercy and of religion they easily deceive the unskilled and the unwary. They put on the show of being the coinage of the true king, for they seem for the

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moment to abound in piety. But they do not come out of the lawful mint. That is, they are not given their shape by the authentic Catholic Fathers nor did they come forth from the official and public quarters of their learning. They are the furtive, fraudulent work of demons who hand them on to the unskilled and to the ignorant and do so to their detriment.

“However useful and necessary these may seem at the moment, if they afterward begin to be at variance with the stability of our profession and to bring great harm to our way of life, salvation requires that they be thrown away and cut off from us, for they are like some necessary but damaging limb, a right hand or a foot which has an essential function to perform. Better to be minus a limb—that is, to forgo the fulfillment and benefit of some precept—to remain healthy and vigorous, to enter with an infirmity into the kingdom of heaven, better this than to fall over some stumbling block while one is preoccupied with some valuable precept. A dangerous habit can draw us away from the penitential rule and from the discipline of our adopted way of life. It can plunge us into such disaster that, unable to make up for the losses to come, all our past merits and indeed the body of all our work are burned up in the fires of hell.

“The book of Proverbs spoke very aptly of such illusions: ‘There are paths which seem right to a man, but their outcome is in the depths of hell’ (Prv 16:25). Or again, ‘The evil one does harm when he mingles with the just’ (Prv 11:15). That is, the devil deceives whenever he is protected by the color of sanctity.

21

“Indeed, we know that the abbot John, who lives in Lyco, was recently deceived in this way. At a time when his body was worn and weakened he put off the taking of food by prolonging his fast for an extra two days. Then on the following day, while he was getting ready to eat, the devil came to him in the form of a ghastly Ethiopian and threw himself on his knees before him. ‘Forgive me,’ he said, ‘It was I who imposed this toil on you.’ This most excellent man, outstanding in his perspicacity, realized that in the very prolonged fast, undertaken in the guise of abstinence, he had been got at by the skill of the devil in order that he might impose on his weary body an unnecessary fatigue, one that would actually be harmful to his soul. He had been deceived by specious coinage. He had shown respect for the image there of the true king and had paid too little attention to its authenticity.

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"Finally, there is the test to be applied to the money-changer, a test which, as I have already stated, has to do with checking the weight. This is how it is practiced. If our thoughts suggest something to us to be done we must handle it with the utmost scrupulosity. It must be placed on the scales of our heart and weighed with the most exacting care. Is it filled with what is good for all? Is it heavy with the fear of God? Is it genuine in the feelings which underlie it? Is it lightweight because of human show or because of some thrust toward novelty? Has the burden of vainglory lessened its merit or diminished its luster? This prompt testing will be done as something public. That is, it is measured against the acts and the witness of the apostles. If it looks to be whole, complete, and in conformity with these latter, then let us hold on to it. Or if it seems defective, dangerous, and not of equal weight with these, let us cautiously and carefully reject it.

22

"So, then, the four kinds of discernment to which I have been referring will be necessary to us. First, as to material, is it true gold or spurious? Second, we must reject as fake and counterfeit coinage those thoughts which have the deceptive appearance of piety. They bear a false and not the genuine image of the king. Then we must be able to detect and to abhor those which impose a viciously heretical stamp on the precious gold of Scripture. This is not the effigy of the true king but of a tyrant. Finally, we must drive away thoughts which are like underweight coins, dangerous and inadequate, thoughts which have lost weight and value because of the rust of vanity, thoughts which do not measure up to the standard of the ancients.

"In this way we shall avoid the misfortune against which the Lord warned us to be totally on our guard so as not to be cheated of the merit and the reward of our labors. 'Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth where the moths and the worms destroy them and where thieves can break in and steal them' (Mt 6:19). Whatever we do for the sake of human glory this we know to be, as the Lord says, the treasure we gather on earth. Hence it is like something hidden in the ground and buried in the earth, and it is there to be filched by various demons, to be used up by the consuming rust of vainglory, or to be devoured by the worms of pride. And it will be of no use or profit to the one who concealed it.

"All the corners of our heart must therefore be examined thoroughly and the marks of all that rise up into them must be investigated

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with the utmost wisdom. And all this must be done in case some beast of the mind, some lion or serpent, has passed through and has left its dangerous hidden marks there, marks by which, as a result of the way we neglect our thoughts, a way into the sanctuary of our heart may be made available to others. Every hour and every moment working over the earth of our heart with the plough of Scripture, that is, with the memory of the Lord's cross, we shall manage to destroy the lairs of the wild beasts within us and the hiding places of the venomous serpents."

23

The old man looked at us and at how we were stirred by all this. He saw that we were inflamed by an unquenchable enthusiasm for what he had been saying. He even stopped talking for a moment because he was astonished by our eagerness. Then he added thus:

"My sons, it is your zeal which led me to speak for so long. Because of your eagerness, some kind of fire has given a more urgent sense to what I have been saying. But in order that I may observe more clearly your thirst for the doctrine of the life of perfection, I want to say a few things to you about the particular excellence and beauty of discernment. Among all the virtues it holds the scepter and the rule. I want to speak of its preeminence and its value, and I wish to do so not only by means of examples taken from every day but also by means of the old sayings and opinions of the fathers. For I am reminded of what happened to me many times. People came to me with groans and tears asking for a discourse of this kind, and I myself was eager to bestow some doctrine upon them. But I could not. Ideas failed me. Words too. I found myself having to send my visitors away without even a little consolation. By these signs it is easy to realize that the grace of the Lord inspires a speaker in direct proportion to the merit and the eagerness of those who are listening to him.

"Very little remains of the night and not enough for me to say what I have to say. Better then to give this time over to rest. The body will claim everything if denied the little to which it is entitled. So we will put off until tomorrow or the next night the discussion of this subject. It is only right that the masters of discernment should give evidence of the good workings of their minds! They should show themselves to possess the virtue which they teach so that while they talk of that virtue which is the mother of moderation they do not succumb to the very opposite vice. May the virtue of discernment, which I propose to investigate with the Lord's help, have this first advantage to confer on us,

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namely, that while I speak of its splendor and of that moderation in which its primary excellence is known to consist, it may not permit my words to drag far beyond the limits of time."

In this way the blessed Moses put an end to the discussion. We of course were eagerly hanging on to what he might say. But he urged us to enjoy a bit of sleep, suggesting to us that we might stretch out on the mats on which we had been sitting. Under our heads we put the coverlets he gave us. These are made out of the thicker papyrus which are drawn into big or small bundles tied together at every foot and a half. They are also the low seats used by the brethren when they meet together in assembly and they put them under their heads to sleep on. They are not too hard and they provide support which is easily shaped and manageable. They are most suitable for these various monastic uses and are convenient. They are yielding and they can be acquired for little work and expense, since the papyrus grows everywhere along the banks of the Nile. Being handled easily and also light they can be carried or moved as needed.

This is how, on the advice of the old man, we got ready to have a little sleep. But what a nuisance this sleep! And we hung between the pleasures of the discussion we had just heard and the expectation of that which had been promised us.