

The Wisdom Of The Desert

Part 2, Section B: Spiritual Life and the World

Arranged by James O. Hannay.

Catholic Truth Society of Ireland No.pr113a (1910)

Chapter 14. On Evil Thoughts.

These are the things that defile a man. — Matthew 15:20.

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

— Philippians 4:8.

O Lord, my God, be not You far from me; my God, make haste to help me:
for there have risen up against me sundry thoughts, and great fears afflicting my soul.

Do, O Lord, as You say,
and let all evil thoughts fly before Your face.

— The Imitation of Christ, 3, 23.

1. Of a certain brother who was continually on the watch against evil thoughts.

It is related that seven brethren used to dwell together on the mountain of Saint Antony. At the time of the date-harvests one of them used to be always keeping watch, so as to drive away the birds from the dates. One of the seven, an old man, when it came to his turn to guard the dates, spent the day in crying out, "Depart from within, ye evil thoughts; depart from without, ye birds."

2. The abbot Pastor teaches that evil thoughts are not to be avoided, but overcome.

A certain brother came to the abbot Pastor, and said, "Many evil thoughts come into my mind, and I am in danger through them." The old man led him out into the air, and said to him, "Stretch yourself out, and stop the wind from blowing." The brother, wondering at his words, replied, "I cannot do that." Then the old man said to him, "If you cannot stop the wind from blowing, neither can you prevent evil thoughts from entering your mind. That is beyond your power; but one thing you can do — conquer them."

3. The teaching of the abbot Moses on the same subject: that evil thoughts are not to be avoided, but overcome.

It is impossible for the mind not to be approached by thoughts, but it is in the power of every earnest man either to admit them or reject them. Their rising does not depend upon ourselves, but their admission or rejection is in our own power. The movement of the mind may well be illustrated by the comparison of a millwheel.

The headlong rush of water whirls it round, and it can never stop its work so long as it is driven by the water. Yet it is in the power of the man who directs it to decide whether he will have wheat, or barley, or darnel ground by it. For it must certainly crush that which the man in charge of it puts in. So the mind is driven by the torrents of temptation, which pour in on it from every side, and cannot be free from the flow of thoughts, but the character of the thoughts we control by the efforts of our own earnestness.

4. The abbot Pastor speaks of a way in which we may overcome evil thoughts.

The abbot Isaiah once asked the abbot Pastor about evil thoughts, which troubled him. Pastor answered him, "Just as clothes which are put away for a long time in some trunk, and not taken out at all, moulder and decay, so the evil thoughts of our hearts, if we do not put them into action, after a long time will fade away.

5. The abbot Moses speaks also of a way of overcoming evil thoughts.

We must constantly fall back upon meditation on the Holy Scriptures, and raise our minds towards the recollection of spiritual things, and the desire of perfection, and the hope of future bliss. In this way, spiritual thoughts are sure to arise in us, and our minds will dwell on the things on which we have been meditating. If we are overcome by sloth and carelessness, and spend our time in idle gossip, or if we are entangled in the cares of this world and unnecessary anxieties, the result will be that tares will spring up in our hearts and take possession of them. As our Lord and Saviour says, 'Wherever the treasure of our works or purpose may be, there also our heart is sure to continue'.

6. Of the infirmity of forgetfulness, and how we ought not to despond because of it.

A certain brother said to one of the elders, "Lo, my father, I frequently consult the elders, and they give me advice for the salvation of my soul, yet of all that they say to me I can remember nothing." Now it happened that there were two vessels standing empty beside the old man to whom he spoke. He therefore said to the brother, "Go, take one of the vessels. Put water in it. Wash it, and pour the water out of it again. Then put it back, clean, into its place." The brother did so. Then said the old man, "Bring both vessels here. Look at them carefully, and tell me which is the cleaner." "Surely," said the brother, "that is the cleaner which I washed with the water." Then said the old man to him again, "Even so it is, my son, with the soul which frequently hears the words of God. Even although the memory retain none of them, yet is that soul purer than his who never seeks for spiritual counsel."

7. Advice for the conquering of evil thoughts.

A certain brother once asked one of the elders, "How shall I overcome the evil thoughts which ceaselessly trouble me?"

The elder said to him, "Do not attempt to strive with all of them. Strive only against one. All evil thoughts have a single head and source. — In one man, it is this, in another that. It is necessary, first of all, to find out each man for himself what is the origin of his evil thoughts. Then let him bend his energies to the conquest of that one thing, and all other evil thoughts will give way before him."

8. That evil thoughts are evil deeds.

"Brethren," said a certain elder, "you are striving to commit no evil deed. I beseech you strive, at the same time, to think no evil thought."

9. How temptation is not sin, but the means of being good.

A certain elder said, God will not condemn us because evil thoughts enter our hearts, but only if we make a bad use of our evil thoughts. It happens sometimes that men's souls are shipwrecked through evil thoughts, but also it is by the entering in of such thoughts that we become worthy of being crowned.

10. How we are to deal with evil thoughts.

A certain elder said, 'The devil is an enemy, and your mind is a house. The enemy ceases not to throw into your house every kind of filth that he can find, and to pour into it a world of sordidness. It is your part to be diligent in casting out of your habitation what he throws in. This if you neglect to do, your house will soon be filled with sordid things, and even you yourself will strive in vain to enter into it. Therefore, from the very first, cast out bit by bit everything that he puts in. Then will your house remain clean for you, by the grace of God.'

11. Of our strife against evil thoughts.

A certain elder said, 'If we have no evil thoughts we are no better than the beasts. The enemy does what is in his power when he suggests them to us. Let us also do the duty, which lies within our power. Be instant in prayer, and the enemy will flee. Find time for meditation on divine things, and you will conquer. Persevere, and the good in you will win. Strive hard, and you will be crowned.'

12. How the abbot Moses saw the vision, which once the servant of Elisha saw at Dothan, and was strengthened. (2 Kings 6:11-23.)

Once, while the abbot Moses dwelt in the region called Petra, he was attacked by the demon of impurity with such fierceness that he could not remain in his cell, nor dared he be alone. He went, therefore, to the holy abbot Isidore and told him of the vehemence of the evil thoughts which came to him. The abbot Isidore bid him be of good cheer, and brought forth from the Holy Scriptures many words of encouragement and strength.

Then he bid Moses return to his cell. But this Moses was not willing to do, dreading still to be alone. Then Isidore led him up to the hill, which was behind his cell, and said to him, "Turn your eyes westwards and look." He gazed as he was bidden, and beheld a host of demons. Their regiments swept passionately past.

They seemed as those prepared for battle, and eager for strife. Then said the abbot Isidore again, "Turn your eyes to the east and look." He gazed as he was bidden, and beheld a numberless array of holy angels. They seemed more glorious and splendid than the shining of the sun, and marched as the army of the good powers of heaven. "Behold," said Isidore, "those whom you saw in the west are the powers which fight against the saints of God. Those whom your eyes looked on in the east are they whom God sends to help His saints. Be sure that the army which fights for us is the stronger one, as says the prophet Eliseus (Elisha). Truly, also, Saint John says, 'Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world'." When he heard these words Moses took heart of grace, and, being comforted in the Lord, returned to his cell. There he gave God thanks, and praised the long-suffering and the kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

13. How a certain elder overcame the evil thought, which prompted him to postpone his penitence.

It is told of a certain elder that very often his thoughts said to him, "Let today go by. Tomorrow will be time enough to repent." He always answered them, "I cannot do this, because tomorrow some other part of God's will must be worked out in me."

COMMENTARY 'On Evil Thoughts':

THE necessity for struggling against evil thoughts occupies, as we might expect, an important place in the hermits' scheme of the religious life. The circumstances under which they lived afforded ample opportunities for all kinds of thought and meditation. Often for whole days, literally nothing happened to distract the mind from its own musings. The voices of the world were silenced. Only occasionally faint rumours of great events reached the lauras (or monasteries) in the desert. The isolation of even those of the Lower Egyptian hermits, who came nearest to living a community life, was for five days of the week almost complete. Other cells were in sight. The figures of other hermits could be descried going for their water-supply or toiling in their gardens. Yet, save for the weekly gatherings on Saturdays and Sundays, there was, under ordinary circumstances, little or no intercourse even between members of the same lura. The rare advent of some stranger might bring the hermits swarming from their cells to bid him welcome; an event of peculiar importance might set the abbot's rude bell ringing to summon the brethren to a consultation; but, as a rule, the life was solitary, and there was little or nothing in its outward circumstances to distract the mind.

The work of mat-weaving and basket-making became, for their skilled fingers, purely mechanical. The thoughts were elsewhere even while the hands were busy. So it came that thoughts were not, as they are for men who live amid the world's hurried happenings, swift reflex responses to the excitements of impressions from outside, but wrought out mind-pictures and imaginings of things on earth and things in heaven. We think of such day-dreams as the result of the mind's working upon the recollection of experiences long past, or its effort to realize the imagery of Holy Scripture. The hermits conceived them as the result of the mysterious suggestions of powers outside themselves, powers bent upon the conquest of their minds for good or evil. Thus, when Isidore showed the abbot Moses the vision of Dothan, he displayed a picture of what seemed to him to be literally taking place around the mind of every hermit. The demons never ceased suggesting evil thoughts. The hosts of angels crowded round with thoughts of what was holy and honest, and of good report.

Though the battle was thus being fought by powers outside himself, the hermit was no passive spectator, nor his mind the mere booty of the victorious side. He himself took an active part — indeed, bore the chief share in the strife. On him depended, in the end, the issue of the conflict. It was, indeed, beyond his power to prevent the suggestions of the demons. He could not check the entrance of evil thoughts into his mind. He was, however, able to prevent the evil from obtaining a lodgment in his mind. He could refuse to dream and meditate on thoughts of pride, or hatred, or impurity. According to the vivid imagery of one of their teachers, the mind was a house into which the devil cast sordid things. It was the part of the good householder to pitch them out again speedily, before their accumulation made the home uninhabitable for what was good. Or, as another taught, the evil thoughts might be smothered and packed away, given no opportunity to develop their horrible nature, until, like garments shut unaired into boxes, they mouldered into decay.

The advice of the teacher who would have us struggle against only one kind of evil thought, since for each man there is one from which all others draw their power, is suggestive of some deep spiritual experience. It seems as if there is in each soul some one weak point where, once the

entrance is won by the demon who assaults it, all other demons are easily able to follow him. Thus to him who has given way to dreams of pride there comes a time when avarice and lust will obtain possession also of his mind. For each man, therefore, it is necessary only in reality to set himself to strive with one kind of evil thought.

While the hermits felt the necessity for watchfulness and struggle, lest they should fall, they gladly recognised that it was through the same strife that they obtained the chance of rising.

It is, they taught, through evil thoughts that men make shipwreck of their souls, but also it is through evil thoughts that men are crowned. To them it did not seem a desirable thing to be freed, if that were possible, from the suggestions of evil. What they did wish was to meet the evil at its strongest, and then, through Christ, to vanquish it. To have no evil thoughts is to be no better than a beast. To be afflicted with them, and yet conquer them, is to rise into communion with God.

There are infirmities of the mind, like forgetfulness, which are not evil save in so far as they hinder the soul from the highest flights of all. To those who suffered thus, the fathers were very tender. It is most comforting to read the gentle parable by which the brother was encouraged who was unable to bear in mind the religious exhortations, which he heard.

In all their teaching about the struggle against evil thoughts, the hermits recognised that the truest victory is to be obtained by filling the mind with holy imagery.

It is not enough to cast the demons out. We must welcome the angels when they come, must store the mind with good thoughts by constant reading and repetition of Holy Scripture; we must keep it stretched in meditation upon the love and the work of the Lord.

This, if we can perfectly accomplish it, will certainly give us the victory over evil thoughts, and reduce to impotence the demons who suggest them.

Chapter 15. On the Life in the World.

This day is salvation come to this house,
for-so-much as he also is the son of Abraham.
— Saint Luke 19:9.

This the Lord said, rebuking those who thought that Zacchaeus was outside the region of the grace of God.

It is not granted to all to forsake all, to renounce the world, and to undertake a life of religious seclusion. — The Imitation of Christ, 3, 10.

1. How the divine guidance enabled Saint Antony to see that a life well pleasing to God may be accomplished by one who is in the world as well as by a monk.

Once, while Saint Antony was praying in his cell, there came to him a voice, which said, “Oh, Antony, for all your life in the desert you have not yet attained the measure of the perfection of a tanner who lives in Alexandria.”

When he heard this, the saint rose up early, took his staff; and came with haste to Alexandria. He speedily found the man of whom he had been told. The tanner was struck dumb at the sight of so great a saint.

Saint Antony said to him, "Describe to me the manner of your life. I have come here from the desert to learn about your good deeds." The tanner answered him, "I have not, so far as I know, done anything good at all. I am a very sinful man. When I rise from my bed in the morning, before my work begins I say, 'All the people in this city must be better than I am. From the least to the greatest, they may well be entering into the kingdom of heaven. I, because of my sins, am certainly going to everlasting punishment.' Then when I am going to rest at night I find myself obliged to repeat this same saying."

Then Saint Antony replied to him, "Of a truth, my son, you, as you sit here quietly in your house, are on your way to the kingdom of God. I, like a man without wisdom, am passing the time of my solitude without attaining to the measure of the perfection that you have told me of."

2. How Saint Macarius was guided by the Spirit to a knowledge of the same truth.

Once, while the abbot Macarius was praying, a voice sounded in his ears, which said to him, "Macarius, you have not yet arrived at the measure of the sanctity of two women who dwell in the neighbouring city."

When he heard this, he arose and, taking his staff, set forth for the city, which had been named. He sought and found the house where the women lived. When he knocked at the door one of the women came out, and, perceiving who he was, welcomed him into the house with great joy. Saint Macarius called the two together to him, and said, "On your account I have endured the toil of coming here from my solitude. I desire to know your way of life. I pray you to describe it to me."

They, however, replied to him, "Most holy father, what kind of life is ours for you to ask about?" He persisted in asking that they would describe it to him. Then, since he compelled them, they said, "We are not, indeed, related to each other by blood, but it happened that we married two brothers. Now, though we have lived together for fifteen years, we have had no quarrel, neither has either of us spoken a sharp word to the other. We both desired to leave our husbands and enter a community of holy women. We begged our husbands to permit us, but they would not. Then we vowed that until the day of our death we should hold no worldly talk with each other, but converse only about spiritual things." When Saint Macarius heard what they told him, he said, "Truly virginity is nothing, nor marriage, nor the monk's life, nor dwelling in the world. It is purposes and vows like this which God seeks from us, and He gives the spirit of life to all alike."

3. How the monk must not reckon himself safe because he is a monk, nor must think of those who live in the world as lost.

The abbot Muthues said, 'The nearer a man draws to God the more he sees his own sinfulness. Thus when the prophet Isaiah had his vision of God he exclaimed that he was wretched and unclean. Let us be careful to hold this truth fast, for the Scripture says, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." We voyage doubtfully across the waves of this world. We indeed may seem to be sailing over quiet seas while they who dwell in the world go amid dangers. We shape our course in the daylight, lit upon our way by the Sun of Righteousness. They, as if in the night-time, may steer in ignorance of where they go. Yet it often may come to pass that the dweller in the world, just because he voyages through a dark night, is very watchful, and his ship comes safe to port. So too we, just because we voyage over quiet seas, grow careless. Too often from our very security we perish, letting go the helm, which is humility. Just as no ship can be safe without a rudder, so it is impossible for a man to come safe to his journey's end without humility.'

COMMENTARY 'On the Life in the World':

THE hermits succeeded in separating their lives not only from the world but from the ways of those Christians who lived in the world. Save for their own brief excursions into village market-places to sell their baskets, and the visits of pilgrims in search of teaching or healing to their cells, the hermits came very little into contact with ordinary members of the Church. It is not to be supposed, therefore, that they either gave much thought to the position of Christians in the world or tried to persuade them to leave it. The hermits were neither theorists nor philosophers. Their religion was entirely practical, and mainly personal. They made no effort whatever to explain why some Christians married, grew rich, and accepted the world's honours, while others retired into the solitude of the wilderness. The hermit was very vividly conscious of his own call to the ascetic life, but he was content to leave others to work out for themselves their own salvation in their own way. The question of the relation of the monastic to the secular life had occupied the mind of Origen, but the hermits either did not know or were totally uninterested in his speculations. The same problem came up for solution afterwards, and was argued out by men like Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine, but the hermits did nothing towards providing a philosophy of the life they lived. In spite of the mass of teaching that they left behind them, references of any sort to Christians who lived in the world are extremely few.

The spirit of these few references is wholly different from what we might expect. Experience teaches us that men who are rigorists, who, to a greater or less extent, stand aloof from the common joys and labours and ambitions of mankind, find it necessary, as it were in self-defence, to judge sternly of those who do not walk in their ways. It is a lamentable fact that the great earnestness which enables men to make real renunciations is too often connected not only with want of charity, but with a total incapacity to appreciate the amount of genuine religion, which exists in systems less rigorous than their own. It has come to be recognised as almost an unvarying law that the Christian who fasts and weeps, even if he does not fail in charity to individuals will never be able to recognise that there is a real religion in which laughter and dancing find their place. Of all men, the hermits were the most rigorous in their life. We should expect therefore to find them most ready in definite condemnation of religious ways, which differed from their own.

I do not suppose that anyone who has learnt to appreciate the depth and spirituality of their religion would expect to find them bitter and uncharitable towards individuals. Such a spirit cannot coexist with the seeing and desiring to see the God who is love. Nor, I think, should we be surprised to find them recognising some possibility of good in the life of the Christian in the world. It is, however, with real amazement that we read the few judgments, which they passed on the secular life. It is not that they look on such life as good, though poorer and lower than their own; still less do they regard it with that pitying contempt which is often misnamed charity. They recognise gladly that it may be in every way equal to their own lives. They go back to their cells from the kitchens of housewives and the workshops of tradesmen humbled by the contemplation of a perfection to which they themselves have not been able as yet to attain.

Saint Macarius of Alexandria was one of the very sternest of the hermits in his ascetic practices. The fierceness of his efforts to subdue his body shock us, while we wonder at the strength of the man who made them. Of all the leaders of the movement he would seem the least likely to appreciate the beauty of a Christian life lived in the world. Yet it is he who says, "Truly virginity is nothing, nor marriage, nor the monk's life, nor life in the world." Certainly it was a special revelation which led him to the house of the two women whose way of life taught him this truth; yet

we must suppose an almost incredible magnanimity in the man, placed as Saint Macarius was, who could receive and profit by such a revelation.

It is not so wonderful that Saint Antony should have reached to the understanding of the many different ways in which God leads men upwards to Himself. We know enough about him to appreciate the broadness and sanity of his character. Yet even from him it is startling to hear such words as those he spoke to the Alexandrian tanner: "Of a truth, my son, you are on your way to the kingdom of God, and I, like a man without wisdom, am passing the time of my solitude without attaining to the measure of the perfection that you have told me of."

The words of Muthues are poorer, perhaps, than the confessions of Saint Antony and Saint Macarius, yet they have a special value. They show us how it was that the hermits became capable of such clear-sightedness in the recognition of good. It was through their humility, that virtue which is likened, aptly, to the rudder of a ship. God Himself could not have revealed the great truths about life, which these saints saw, except to men whose hearts were well prepared for His Spirit by a long discipline of subduing pride.

Chapter 16. The Inner Life and the Visible Church.

The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:
all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do;
but do not ye after their works.
— Saint Matthew 23:2-3.

1. Of a hermit who refused the ministration of a priest who was a sinner.

Once a man said to a certain hermit, "The priest who ministers to you is a sinner." Then doubt concerning the priest took possession of the hermit's mind, and when, according to his custom, the priest came again, he shut the door against him. There came a voice to him as he sat in his cell, which said "Assuredly men are governed by someone else than me." Then he beheld a vision. He stood in a great garden wherein were fruit trees of every kind. He saw there the engine by which water was raised from the river for the watering of the garden, and lo, all the vessels connected with it were of gold. He was about to drink of the water when he saw that the man who tended the engine was a leper, loathsome to behold. Then all desire of drinking departed from him. There came the voice and spoke to him again, "Oh man, have you beheld the beauty of the garden and the trees? Have you seen the wheel with its golden furniture? Have you seen, too, the gardener and the misfortune which has overwhelmed him?" The hermit answered, "I have seen all this." Then said the voice, "Does his disease injure at all the trees or the beauty of the garden?" And he answered "No."

The voice said to him, "It is even so with the priest who makes the sacrifice. He may be a sinner, but his sin diminishes nothing of the honour due to the body of the Lord. The divine virtue is ever active in the Eucharist. The prayers with which he celebrates are always the same as the prayers of holy fathers." [This story particularly opposes the heresy of the Donatists.]

2. How the Lord himself taught the abbot Schnoudi the respect due to those who sit in Moses' seat.

It happened one day that the abbot Schnoudi was holding converse with our Saviour Jesus Christ, when the Bishop of Schmin arrived at the monastery. He sent to ask the abbot to come to him that he might talk to him.

But Schnoudi sent back a message, by the servant, "Schnoudi at this time has no leisure." Schnoudi, as has been told, resumed his ecstasy of being with the Saviour and delighted in Him. When the servant had given this message to the bishop, the bishop sent again, saying, "Bid him be kind to me, for I have come here for the purpose of knowing him." But Schnoudi said to the brother who brought the message, "Tell him again that I have no leisure to see him." Then the bishop was vexed, and said, "Say to him, If you do not come I shall excommunicate you." Schnoudi, when he heard the message, smiled and said, "Behold the folly of this man of flesh and blood. Lo, here is with me the creator of heaven and earth. I shall continue to abide with Him."

Then the Saviour Himself spoke, and said to him, "Oh, Schnoudi, rise and go to the bishop, lest he excommunicate you. If he does, I shall not receive you into heaven. The Father promised, and I Myself passed on His words, saying, 'Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven'." Then when Schnoudi had heard these words, he hastened to the presence of the bishop.

COMMENTARY 'On the Visible Church':

DURING the earlier stages of the monastic movement, the hermits came very little into contact with Church authority. They lived, at first, outside the sphere of clerical activity. They were often far out of reach of village churches, and a priest in order to minister to them must have been himself prepared to become a hermit, as many did. They were, I believe, at first almost entirely uninterested in the controversies which rent the Church, or so it seems.

Their devoted loyalty to Saint Athanasius, it could be argued, was less the result of their dogmatic orthodoxy than a tribute to the noble un-worldliness of the great patriarch's character. For them the entire interest of religion centred in the effort to keep the commandments of God and follow the example of Jesus Christ, true God and true man. Afterwards, of course, their spirit changed, and they became the earnest and sometimes even fanatical opponents of positions deemed heretical. They fought hard against the Arian errors. Long before that time came, however, they had been obliged to adjust their relations to ecclesiastical authority.

It is not to be supposed that even the earliest hermits were in any way hostile to the clergy or opposed to the system of Church government, still less that they were contemptuous of the means of grace committed to the Church's guardianship. Rather, we must think of them as men so absorbed in fostering and perfecting the inner life of personal communion with God, that they did not place high emphasis on the need of absolution or of Sacraments. It was inevitable that as their numbers grew, and as they gathered into the communities of the lauras, this position must give way. The change was a very critical one. There was the possibility of a revolt against all the external machinery of religion. It is quite easy to understand that this was the most likely consequence of the earlier aloofness. Men who are genuinely on fire with a love for holiness are sure to resent the marks of corruption and insincerity, which must ever be visible in the garments of the Church on earth. Men of intense spirituality are likely to revolt against the claims of authority, which sometimes must seem to break in upon their own communion with God. It is not the least wonderful thing in the history of Egyptian monasticism that it never produced even the beginnings of a schism.

The change from the original position of entire spiritual independence to that of faithful loyalty to the Egyptian patriarchs, to the bishops and priests of the Universal Church, took place silently, and has left but few traces of the steps by which it was accomplished. The two stories, which formed this chapter, are quoted as examples of the way in which the hermits learned their lesson of

obedience. They furnish us, I think, with valuable spiritual lessons, and give evidence of a grace in these heroes, which is very worthy of imitation.

Chapter 17. In the Hour of Death.

If a man keep My saying, he shall never see death.

— Saint John 8:51.

Love Him and keep Him for your friend,
who when all go away will not forsake you,
nor suffer you to perish at the last.

— The Imitation of Christ, 2, 7.

In the hour of death, and in the Day of Judgment,
Good Lord, deliver us.

— The Litany.

1. How in the hour of death Pammon was fain to confess that his service of God had been but very imperfect.

The abbot Pammon in that hour when he was passing away from the body spoke thus to the other holy men who stood around him, “Brethren, since the day that I came here to the desert, and built this cell of mine amid these ruins, I do not think that I have ever eaten anything except what the work of my hands earned. “I do not remember that I have reason to repent of any exhortation, which I ever gave to the brethren.

“Yet, if indeed I am now going to God, it seems to me that I have not yet begun to learn to worship Him.”

2. How in the hour of death the abbot Agathon, though he knew nothing against himself, yet was not thereby justified.

At the time when the abbot Agathon lay dying his eyes were fixed for three whole days, as if he were in a trance. The brethren who were with him touched him to awaken him, and said, “Father, where are you now?”

He replied, “I stand gazing at the God who judges me.” Then the brethren said, “Surely you are not afraid.”

He answered them, “While I was with you on earth, as far as in me lay, I strove to obey the commandments of God. Yet I am but a man, and now I am not sure — how can I be sure? — that the things I did were really pleasing in God’s sight.”

The brethren said, “Have you no confidence that your deeds were in accordance with the will of God?”

He replied, “I have no confidence now that I am standing in the sight of God. Man judges about what is right and wrong. That is one judgment. God also judges what is right and wrong. His judgment is another and different.”

3. The glorious vision of the abbot Sisois in the hour of death.

Many elders gathered round the abbot Sisois when the time of his falling asleep came to him. They saw his face shining with a wondrous radiance, and he said to them, "Lo, the abbot Antony is coming to me." After a little while he said, "The company of the prophets is along with him." Then his face shone with a brighter light, amid he said, "The blessed apostles are beside me." It seemed, then, to those who stood by as if he spoke to someone, and they asked him to tell them with whom he talked. He said, "The angels have come to bear away my soul, and I am asking them to grant me yet a little while for penitence."

Then the fathers said to him, "Surely you have no need of penitence?"

But he replied, "Verily I say to you that I have never yet grasped even the beginning of true penitence."

Then they felt that in him the fear of God was indeed perfected. Suddenly his face was lighted with all the splendour of the sun, and he cried out to them, "Behold, behold my brethren, the Lord Himself is come to me."

Then while he spoke these words, his spirit fled, and all the place was filled with a sweet smell.

4. The words of Theophilus the Archbishop, which he spoke in the hour of death.

Theophilus the Archbishop, of blessed memory, when he was about to depart, said, "Blessed are you, Arsenius, for you have always had this hour before your eyes."

COMMENTARY 'On the Hour of Death':

THE tendency, which sometimes manifests itself among pious people, to think much of the last moments of those who depart hence in the faith of Christ can certainly sometimes be morbid and often leads to devotional thought of a sentimental kind. For most men the arrival of the supreme moment has been preceded by a weary period of physical suffering. The body is worn and wasted. The mind has lost its power, even the power of expectation.

The spirit is depressed with weakness, sympathetic with the decay of the home God formed for it. Neither brave words nor clear vision of what lies beyond are commonly to be looked for. Very often, too, a certain self-forgetfulness, which we cannot but praise, fixes the thought of him who is to go, more on the grief of the parting and the foreseen desolation of those who are left, than on the hope of the breaking forth of glory when the veil is lifted. Then from the mouth of the dying believer come, haltingly, words meant to be comfortable.

They form no message from beyond. That they are spoken from the grave's brink adds only a great pathos to the familiar attempts at consolation with which we who are left try to lighten the mourners' grief. Yet sometimes, even in the hour of death, the spirit is so far triumphant over bodily decay as to recognise the supreme importance of the crisis through which it passes. The world beyond is realized, is felt — we may say, is seen. This world, and all that life in it has meant, is seen too, not any longer as a succession of incidents of which the nearest alone seem great, but seen whole with all its days in true perspective. From such vision, there is every hope that we should learn. The Christian will not indeed expect or hope to grasp at secrets unrevealed, but he may reverently expect to be told of what the great emotion will consist. Is it to be joy or fear? Shall we be absorbed with regret looking backwards, or rapt in expectation of what is to come? Will joy and fear, regret and hope, all alike yield to an overmastering curiosity about what that other world is

like? Will doubt for the last time harass us, or may we look for the extreme beatitude of the satisfaction at length of desire for the Beloved?

Of the four death-bed stories, which I set forth here, one seems at first to speak only of regret for past mistakes.

The Archbishop Theophilus tells us only that he knew at last that death ought to have been more often present in his mind. No doubt he was conscious that he would have lived better had he lived more as one who was about to go. Yet even here, it is possible to feel that he regretted not only a mistake, but the missing of a great source of joy. If the passing away was a glad thing to him when it came, he would regret that he had failed to get the joy of its anticipation.

The abbot Pammon saw his past life in the light of that which was dawning for him. We catch in his summary of his life's accomplishments something of the triumph of Saint Paul's — "I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course."

Yet all that he was, or did, or felt, seems nothing to him in comparison to the vista of devotion, which stretches before him. Some regret there is in what he says, but in the main, he speaks to us of expectation.

To the abbot Agathon, the hour of death brings a certain doubt. He, too, sees the life that is past, but his vision of that which is to come stops short at the judgment act. God is to pronounce that he has done well or been mistaken. He is not sure, even at the last, what God's pronouncement is to be. This is his doubt.

But it is a doubt which neither terrifies nor unmans, for it is covered by a larger faith. The pronouncement is to be God's. That insures that it, at least, will be just and right. The man may have been mistaken. Death takes him where his mistake is surely to be rectified.

For Sisois, the hour of death brings an unspeakable rapture. Saint Antony is with him, and the prophets and the apostles. He speaks to the angels, and they to him. Death means union with all whom he loved best. It is the satisfaction of long unfulfilled desire.

Yet even for him there is regret. He knows that he is not good enough to join such company. Sins only half repented of crowd to his remembrance. He asks for time for more repentance. He is answered by the beatific vision of the Lord Himself, and love made perfect casts out fear.

(Thanks to Methuen Company.)
