

ST SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN

Discourse on Faith and Instruction

TO THOSE WHO SAY THAT IT IS NOT POSSIBLE FOR
THOSE LIVING IN THE WORLD AND WHO SHARE ITS
INTERESTS, TO ARRIVE AT PERFECTION OF VIRTUE.
INCLUDING A VERY USEFUL TALE

Well-beloved brothers and fathers, it is a very good thing, and useful to the soul, to preach the great and infinite mercy of our very good and compassionate God communally to all, and to reveal to all our Christian brothers the bottomless ocean of pity and of goodness that God has for us. Now I, as you see, brothers, and as you know very well, I do not have a routine of numerous and excessive fasts, nor vigils, nor nights spend on the floor, I have never mortified my body beyond measure, but I have know my unworthiness, I have reflected on my sins, I have condemned myself, I have humiliated myself, and the very merciful and very good Lord has saved me, as the divine David has said: 'I am humiliated, and he has saved me' (Ps. 115 : 6. LXX). In a word, I have not done nothing but believe in the words of God, and the Lord my God has received me with that faith. For whoever acquires humility finds many obstacles in front of him. But nothing will oppose whoever discovers faith and believes in the words of God. If, in fact, we want with all our soul to find faith, we find it without any trouble, because faith is a grace and gift of very good God, who has sent it naturally to our disposition, and when we want to have it. That is why even the Tartars, barbarians and all the heathens naturally have faith, so that each believes the words of the other, and they have confidence among them.

But to prove to you what I have said, with actions and not only with words, hear this story:

A man named George, in the prime of his life – about twenty years of age - , lived in Constantinople, in our times. He was very attractive in his appearance, and his dress was so refined that many thought badly of him for this, those above all who customarily only look at the exterior of a man and who, without knowing the secrets of any, condemn and judge others inconsiderately. This young man made the acquaintance of a holy monk who lived in a monastery of Constantinople. Having revealed all the secrets of his heart to him, he added that he desired the safety of his soul and had a great desire to quit the world and to become a monk. The venerable old man praised him for this plan, and gave him the necessary advice and confided to him the book of St Mark the Ascetic, so that he could read what was written about the spiritual law. The

young man received the book with so much love and piety as if it had come from God himself, and with the confidence and hope that he could derive from it the greatest profit. When he returned home, he set about reading from start to finish with great attention. Then he reread it, piously, three or four times. And as he had hoped, he was entirely comforted. But he retained three chapters above all, which he lodged in his heart, and he made the decision to put them into practice and to observe them attentively. The first chapter said this: 'If you search the health for your soul, take great care that you conscience has nothing to reproach you with. Everything it tells you to do, do it, and you will find profit.'¹ The second said: 'He who searches to acquire the energies of the Holy Spirit before practicing the commandments of God, is similar to the slave who, at the very moment his master buys him, declares his freedom from him.'² And the third said: 'He who prays with his mouth and who has not yet acquired spiritual knowledge nor knows how to pray with his intellect, is like the blind man who cried: "Son of David, have mercy on me"' (cf. Matt. 10 : 47). But he who has acquired spiritual knowledge, who prays with his intellect and who has open eyes of the soul, is like the blind man when the Lord had cured him of his blindness: He received the light with his eyes, he saw the Lord, and he no longer called him "Son of David", but he confessed him "Son of God", and he adored him as we fitting' (cf. John 9 : 38).³

These three texts were very pleasing to the young man. He was astonished, received in his soul a great certainty, and he believed completely that he would find a great profit when taking care of his conscience, as St Mark says, that he would enjoy the energies of the Holy Spirit and of its energy if he kept the commandments of God and that finally, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, he would be rendered worthy of opening the eyes of his soul and of seeing the Lord with his intellect. He hoped to see this indescribable beauty of the Lord, and he was injured by a love the more he desired it. Nevertheless he was did nothing more, as he affirmed much later, than to pray and to prostrate himself each evening, before going to bed to sleep, following the instruction of the old man.

¹ St Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law* 69; E.T., *Philokalia*, vol. i, p. 115.

² St Mark the Ascetic, *On Those who Think that They are Made Righteous by Works* 64; E.T., *Philokalia*, vol. i, p. 130.

³ St Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law* 13-4; E.T., *Philokalia*, vol. i, p. 111.

A little while later, an evening while following the rule of the old man, and always attentive to his conscience, he was commanded by it to continue the prayer and the prostrations and to say: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me', for as long as he could. He obeyed with good heart and set himself, without the least hesitation, to do what his conscience demanded, persuaded that God himself demanded this of him. Afterwards, he did not go to bed to sleep without having done what his conscience had told him. And as he did not cease to listen to it, and as it always required of him to do more, in a little time his evening prayer was greatly lengthened. In fact, during the day he took care of the house of a patrician, occupied with numerous affairs, going every day to the Palace, and he did not have much time for prayer. But by evening, before going to sleep, he prayed, as we have said. His heart was filled with the warmth and the compunction, and the tears flowed from his eyes. He multiplied the prostrations and, wailing and crying, prayed in this way to Mother of God. It seemed to him that the Lord was before him in his body, he prostrated himself at his feet and asked him for compassion on him, like the blind man of whom the Gospel speaks, and to accord light to the eyes of his soul. So the prayer which he did each evening lengthened ever more. He held on until midnight, and so much as he prayed, straight like a column, without moving his feet nor any limb of his body and without turning his eyes to look here or there, he lived immobile, with fear and trembling.

Then one evening while he was praying and saying in his intellect: 'God, have compassion on me, the sinner', a divine splendour shines suddenly on him and filled him with light entirely. The young man, made ecstatic, lost conscience of himself and forgot that he was in a house. For he did not see anything in any direction but the light, he knew no more whether he had feet on the ground or if he was held up by the air, and had no concern in his intellect for his body at all. He forgot the entire world. He was one with the divine light, and he seemed to him that he was himself become light. He was inundated with tears and with inexpressible joy. Then his intellect rose in the heavens and there, he saw another light still more radiant, and, near to that light, the holy man appeared to him, the one who had given him the book of Mark the Monk and his rule, as we have said.

When I had heard the young man's story, I thought that the intercession of the old holy man had been a great salvation, and that in this way providence of God had shown him to what height of virtue this saint found himself, by giving him the chance to see him near to such a light.

The contemplation having passed, the young man, returned to himself, was full of joy and amazement. He wept from the bottom of his heart. And his tears were accompanied with extreme gentleness. Finally he fell on his bed, and at that moment the cock crowed. A bit later, the church bells rang for matins, and he rose from sleep to psalmodise, following his habit. All through the night, he had not slept nor dreamed.

See what happened to the young man. How he told me about it himself, he did nothing else than what you have heard. Simply, and this is why he was given this visionary contemplation, he was resolute in his faith and hope. And nobody says that he had done this so as to get the experience. Such a thing, he told me, was never in his mind. He had nothing in mind but his firm faith. So he had rejected from himself every thought touching the body or the world, and he took so much care to protect his conscience and to be led where it guided him, that he was as if insensible to all the things of this life. Eating and drinking were indifferent to him, and he stayed always in a state of fast.

You have heard, beloved friends, what faith can accomplish, and what power it has when it is confirmed with works? You have understood that our youth does not harm, and that our old age is of no use, if we lack faith in God? You have grasped meanwhile that neither the world, nor the life in the city can stop us from practicing the commandments of God if we are attentive, and that the extreme solitude and the desert serve no purpose for us if we are negligent or lazy. Have we all heard talk of David who, in the middle of his royal duties, kept watch over his intellect consecrated to God, whom we admire saying that there was a David and there was no other like him? And see that in this young man, there is more than David. For David received the evidence of God himself, he was anointed a prophet and king, he was filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit. So then, after having fallen away from God, having lost the grace of the Holy Spirit and the dignity of prophet, and moved far from the conversation of God, he regained conscience, remembered the goods he once had and had lost, and had sought to acquire it again, what is admirable about this? But when the young man of twenty years totally attached to the passing things of this world, without his intellect ever having thought on anything higher than these things, at length have heard a little which the old man told him, and the three chapters of the Abbe Mark, and yet had been able to believe without hesitation, and set himself to work in hope that with that his intellect would rise to heaven, to receive for him the compassion and the intercession of the Mother of God, and to reconcile himself in this way to God, to the extent that the illumination of heaven came to him and the grace of the Holy Spirit, which permitted him to attain heaven and to enjoy that light which so many desire but which few discover, see one who is admirable and worthy of praise.

So this young man who, during those years, did not fast, nor make vigil, nor engage in ascetic combat of asceticism, nor lie on the ground, nor wear a hair shirt, who was not made a monk, who had not abandoned the world of the body, became, after watching only a while, when praying only for some time, a terrestrial angel and a celestial man, man in sensible reality and incorporeal in the inner essential reality, knowable and unknowable, seen by all and only with God alone who knows everything. It was given him to see this very gentle light of the essential sun of justice. And it was well. For the love and

the desire which he had for God had made him escape from the world in spirit, had permitted him to forget the flesh and all the vain things of this life, and attached him entirely to God. He became entirely spiritual, entirely light. And he knew such contemplation and such rejoicing, even though he lived in the city, that he passed his time in the royal palace, that he had charge of seigneurial house and numerous servants, and that he was very engaged with these occupations.

But we have said enough, as much about the praise of this young man as for pushing ourselves to follow his love and to imitate him, so as to render you worthy of receiving equal grace from God. Or do you want me to tell you of things yet greater? But what is greater than the fear of God, as Gregory the theologian says,¹ when 'the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God' (Prov. 1 : 7)? For where there is the fear of God, there is the keeping of commandments; where there is the keeping of commandments, there is the purification of the flesh, which is a cloud which covers the soul and blocks one seeing in its purity the divine splendour; where the purification of the flesh is, there is divine splendour; where there is the divine splendour, there the accomplishment of desire of God. Now there where the divine splendour is found and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, that the infinite end of all virtue. He who is arrived at this end is come to the end of the sensible and has entered in to knowledge of the spiritual.

Such, brothers, are the marvels of God. It is thus that God manifests his hidden saints, whether that others can imitate them and change their conduct, or whether, if they do not imitate them, so that they can have no excuse. For those who live in the middle of distractions, if they behave as they ought, are saved and received from God great good, by the unique faith that they have in him. Therefore, have pity on your soul, and confide yourself with all your heart in the Lord and in his words. Have an aversion and abandon the things of the world, lying and passing. Go toward God and attach yourself to him (cf. Ps. 34 : 6. LXX). For without God there is no world. Things are nothing, and God is lacking.

That is why I weep, I lament and I afflict myself when I think that we have such a generous master who loves us to the point that, if we show by our actions how we have faith in his words and his promises, he accords grace which we come to see, and yet like beasts without reason, we prefer the earth and corruptible things that, in his great pity, he has given in abundance for the needs of our body, so that he can make use of them moderately for what is necessary to his life and so that the soul does not become constrained, but so that it might make its own search, and it can conduct itself as it must while living with inner essential nourishment and with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

It is for this that man has been created: to find in things of the world a reason to glorify God who gives them to him, to know Him who manifests to him his beneficence and his good will, to desire him, to render him grace in word and act, and to be judged worthy in this way of receiving from him other still greater benefits in eternity. But we, alas, we do not care for the things to come, attached as we are only to present things so that we force ourselves to acquire in abundance, without any attention for Him who has given them to us, and without any gratitude. Thus we are similar to demons, or even worse, to tell the truth. That is why we merit being punished more than them. For we have been showered with the greatest benefits, ever since we have become Christians, since when have received so many mysteries, so many gifts, and we have believed in a single God, who was made man for us, who suffered so many torments, and finally died on the cross, to liberate us from the error of the devil, and from sin. Now all this, we believe in words, but we deny it with our actions. Is the name of Christ not preached everywhere today, in the cities, in the villages, in the monasteries and in the deserts? Nevertheless, if you wish, examine how many Christians take notice of the commandments. It is with difficulty that you will find one person who is truly Christian in both words and actions. Has not the Lord said in the Gospels: 'He who believes in me will also do the things which I do, he will do even greater things' (John 14 : 12)? But today, who among us can say: 'I do the works of Christ, and I believe in him with a right faith'? Do you see, brothers, that we risk being found without faith on the terrible day of Judgement, and of being corrected more harshly than those who do not know Christ and have never believed in him? For it must be, either we will be condemned as unbelievers, or that Christ will be vanquished by lies, which is impossible.

I have written this, not so as to prohibit Christians from solitude and the life of stillness, and to give preference to the life in the world, far from that, but to make it known to all those who read this story that he who wants and desires with all his soul and all his heart to do good, will receive from God the power to do so in every place and will be surrounded with spiritual gifts and divine contemplations, like this young man I knew, who was my friend, and who told me what I have written. That is why, I pray you, brothers in Christ, to have in our hearts the desire to do good and force ourselves to accomplish the commandments of God, in resolute faith and hope. Our Lord is faithful and does not lie (cf. 2 Thes. 3 : 3). Our faces will not be confounded (cf. Ps. 34 : 6. LXX). Let us be sure that we will do good wherever we are, in the cities, the villages, in the monasteries, in the deserts. For in the good and according to his promise, God opens the doors of his Kingdom to whoever does not cease knocking (cf. Matt. 7 : 8), and he gives the grace of the Holy Spirit to whoever asks (cf. Luke 11 : 13). It is not possible that he who searches all of his soul will not find (cf. Matt. 7 : 9) the wealth of the gifts of God. To him be the glory in the ages of ages. Amen.

¹ Gregory of Nazianze, Disc 39, 8.