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THE WORKS OF
WILLIAM OF ST THIERRY

The Golden Epistle

A Letter to the Brethren at Mont Dieu

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tumor weighing down the body that must be cast out as it were with manual force.

VIII. 227. But let us return to the praise of virtue. What is virtue? It is the daughter of reason, but still more of grace. It is a certain force issuing from nature but it derives from grace the fact that it is virtue.³³ The approving judgment of reason makes it a force, but the desire of an enlightened will makes it virtue. For virtue is a willing assent to good;³⁴ virtue is a certain balance of life, conforming to reason in all things. Virtue is the use of free will according to the judgment of reason. Virtue is a certain humility, a certain patience. It embraces obedience, prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice and very many other qualities, in each of which virtue is nothing other than, as has been said, the use of free will in accordance with the judgment of reason.

228. For a will that is good is the source of all good in the soul and the mother of all the virtues. Contrariwise an evil will gives rise to all evils and vices. Therefore one who keeps guard over his soul should be very anxious in his watch over his will, so that he may understand and discern wisely what is or ought to be the universal object of volition, the love of God, and what is a subordinate object, for example, love of vocation.

229. For every indiscretion to be safe in the former there must always be in the latter a vigilant and prudent discretion, according to the rules of obedience.

230. In the love of God all reason and all discretion amount to this: as he in his love for us went to the limit of love³⁵ so, if possible, we should love him without any limit, just as that man is happy whose desire to keep his commandments is without bounds.³⁶

33. In eliciting an act of virtue there is a certain force at work which comes from nature but for the act to be truly virtuous it is necessary that grace inform it to its very depths and give it its finality. For this reason for William the virtues of the pagans were not in truth true virtues. See Exp 105; CG 12.

34. Cf. Med 5:7, CF 3:121.

35. Jn 13:1.

36. Ps 111:1.

IX. 231. But although the gift of self which is prompted by love should be without any limit or bound, external activity should be kept within fixed limits and governed by rule. In this regard, to prevent excesses on the part of the will, truth must always be present keeping guard by means of obedience.

232. For nothing is of greater advantage to the man who is making progress on his way to God than will and truth. These are the two which, as our Lord says: "If they agree in asking for anything, whatever it may be, they will obtain it from their Father, God."³⁷

233. If these two things are in perfect accord, combining to form one principle, they contain in themselves all the plenitude of the virtues without the interference of any vice. They are capable of anything even in a man who has no strength; they are endowed with everything and possess everything in the man who has no possessions; they give, lend, contribute, make themselves useful in the man who is living quietly in retirement. There are glory and wealth in the soul of that blessed man,³⁸ issuing from the fruits of his good will. Externally he is protected not only on one side, as with the shields of this world, but on all sides by the shield of God's truth.³⁹ For interiorly he is made always cheerful and pleasant by good will, while in outward activity truth keeps him grave and serious, safe and assured. Therefore that man rises above the things of men and is always tranquil, as men tell of the air above the moon.⁴⁰

X. 234. The will is a natural appetite of the soul with various objects: now God and the interior life, now the body and external things relating to the body.

37. Mt 18:19.

38. Ps 111:3. Cf. Exp 67, 118, CF 6:54, 95.

39. Ps 90:5.

40. An idea taken from the Stoics. See Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 59:16; trans. R. M. Gummere, *The Epistles of Seneca*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard, 1934), p. 421. Cf. Exp. 203, CF 6:163.

235. When the will mounts on high, like fire going up to its proper place,⁴¹ that is to say when it unites with truth and tends to higher things, it is "love." When it is fed with the milk of grace in order to make progress it is "dilection"; when it lays hold of its object and keeps it in its grasp and has enjoyment of it, it is "charity," it is unity of spirit, it is God.⁴² For God is charity.⁴³ But in these matters a man is only beginning when he arrives at the end,⁴⁴ for they do not admit of full perfection in this life.

236. When the will turns aside to the things of the flesh, it is carnal concupiscence. When it is governed by worldly curiosity, it is concupiscence of the eyes. When it makes glory or honor its ambition, it is the pride of life.⁴⁵

237. Yet as long as in such things it serves the advantage or the necessities of nature, it is nature or natural appetite. When, however, it abandons itself to superfluous or harmful objects, it is a vice of nature or a vicious will. You will find the proof of this in yourself, in the first movement of desire. When it is a question of bodily necessities and the will goes no further than the first desire, it is the soul's natural appetite. But when its desires extend ever further and further, it betrays itself. It is no longer will but a vice of the will, avarice or covetousness or something of that sort. For the will is soon satisfied in such matters, while its vices never have enough.⁴⁶

XI. 238. In spiritual things and matters relating to God the will is praiseworthy when it takes as its object something that is within its reach. When it wills something outside or exceeding its possibilities it must be governed and checked. When it does not will what is within its reach it must be aroused and stimulated. For often if it is not kept in check it breaks away and rushes headlong to disaster. Often if it is not stirred up it sleeps and delays, forgets its destination and easily turns aside, letting itself be caught in the shackles of any pleasure that may offer itself.

41. Cf. NDL 1.

42. For a similar enumeration of the types of names of love, see Exp 6, CF. 6:8.

43. 1 Jn 4:16. 44. Sir 18:6. 45. 1 Jn 2:16. 46. Cf. NDL 4f.

239. Therefore, as is usually the case with the body too (for a man's body is seen better by another than by himself), in such matters the eye of someone else often has a clearer view of us than our own. Someone else, someone whose will is not a prey to the same fervor, is often a better judge of our acts than we are. For often either through negligence or through self-love we have a mistaken idea of ourselves.

240. Therefore obedience is a trusty guardian of the will, whether it be obedience to a command or to advice, whether it involve subordination or be prompted by charity alone. For, as the Apostle Peter says,⁴⁷ those who practice obedience often cleanse their hearts more effectively and more smoothly by submitting to their equals or even to their inferiors in the obedience of charity than by subjection to their superiors in the obedience of necessity. In the former case it is charity alone that orders or advises and obeys, while in the latter there is the fear of punishment or the threat of an imperious authority or constraining necessity. In the former case greater glory is owing to him who obeys, while in the latter disobedience incurs greater punishment.

241. It is clear to all therefore how necessary it is for the man whose heart is raised on high that his will should have due custody, to govern, regulate and order his exterior, but even more for the sake of his interior. For when a soul often thinks of itself or of God the will is the starting point of all its thoughts and it is by this starting point that the whole character of his thinking is determined.

XII. 242. Three things go to make up thought: will, memory and intellect. The will impels the memory to bring forth the matter, it impels the intellect to give shape to what is brought forth. It applies the intellect to the memory so that the concept may be formed from it. To the intellect it applies the power of thought so that the concept may spring from it. It is because the will impels these two principles into one and joins them by its effortless behest that

47. 1 Pet 1:22.

THE SPIRITUAL MAN

THE PERFECTION OF MAN IN THIS LIFE

WHEN THE OBJECT OF THOUGHT is God and the things which relate to God and the will reaches the stage at which it becomes love, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life, at once infuses himself by way of love and gives life to everything, lending his assistance in prayer, in meditation or in study to man's weakness. Immediately the memory becomes wisdom and tastes with relish the good things of the Lord, while the thoughts to which they give rise are brought to the intellect to be formed into affections. The understanding of the one thinking becomes the contemplation of one loving and it shapes it into certain experiences of spiritual or divine sweetness which it brings before the gaze of the spirit so that the spirit rejoices in them.

250. And then, insofar as it is possible for man, worthy thoughts are entertained of God, if indeed the word "thought" (*cogitatio*) is correct where there is no impelling principle (*cogit*) nor anything impelled (*cogitur*),¹ but only awareness of God's abundant sweetness leading to exultation,² jubilation and a true experience of the Lord in goodness on the part of the man who has sought him in this simplicity of heart.³

1. See above, n. 242, note 48.

2. Ps 144:7.

3. Wis 1:1. A key text in the mystical doctrine of William of St Thierry. We have in these first three paragraphs of his treatment of the Spiritual Man a summary of his teaching concerning the contemplative experience of God.

251. But this way of thinking about God does not lie at the disposal of the thinker. It is a gift of grace, bestowed by the Holy Spirit who breathes where he chooses, when he chooses,⁴ how he chooses and upon whom he chooses. Man's part is continually to prepare his heart by ridding his will of foreign attachments, his reason or intellect of anxieties, his memory of idle or absorbing, sometimes even of necessary business, so that in the Lord's good time and when he sees fit, at the sound of the Holy Spirit's breathing the elements which constitute thought may be free at once to come together and do their work, each contributing its share to the outcome of joy for the soul. The will displays pure affection for the joy which the Lord gives, the memory yields faithful material, the intellect affords the sweetness of experience.

XV. 252. A will that is neglected gives rise to thoughts that are idle and unworthy of God; a will that is corrupted yields thoughts that are perverse and alienated from God; a rightly ordered will leads to thoughts that are necessary for the living of this life; a dutiful will engenders thoughts which are rich in the fruits of the Spirit and bring enjoyment of God. "Now the fruits of the Spirit," the Apostle tells us, "are charity, joy, peace, patience, forbearance, goodness, kindness, meekness, faith, modesty, chastity, continence."⁵

253. In every kind of thought all that occurs to the mind conforms to the intention of the will through the intervention of God's mercy and judgment, so that the just man is made still more just and the man who is defiled becomes still more defiled.⁶

254. Therefore the man who desires to love the Lord or already loves him should always question his spirit and examine his conscience as to the object and motive of his basic desire; ask, too, what else the spirit wills or hates and what inordinate desires the flesh entertains in opposition to it.⁷

255. For the desires which make their way in as if from outside and then disappear and those which brush against the soul in

4. Jn 3:8.

5. Gal 5:22f.

6. Gal 22:11.

7. Gal 5:17.

passing, so that at one moment it feels desire and at the next moment feels none, are not to be counted among the objects of volition but only among idle thoughts. They may even go as far as to cause the mind some pleasure, but none the less it quickly shakes itself free of them if it is its own master.⁸

256. As to the basic desire, first of all the object of desire should be considered, then the extent to which it is desired and the way in which it is desired. If a man's basic desire is for God he should examine how much and in what way he desires God, whether to the point of despising self and everything which either exists or can exist, and this not only in accordance with the reason's judgment but also following the mind's inclination, so that the will is now something more than will: love, dilection, charity and unity of spirit.⁹

257. For such is the way in which God is to be loved. "Love" is a strong inclination of the will toward God, "dilection" is a clinging to him or a union with him; "charity" is the enjoyment of him.¹⁰ But "unity of spirit" with God for the man who has his heart raised on high is the term of the will's progress toward God. No longer does it merely desire what God desires, not only does it love him, but it is perfect in its love, so that it can will only what God wills.¹¹

258. Now to will what God wills is already to be like God, to be able to will only what God wills is already to be what God is; for him to will and to be are the same thing. Therefore it is well said that we shall see him fully as he is when we are like him,¹² that is when we are what he is. For those who have been enabled to become sons of God¹³ have been enabled to become not indeed God, but what God is: holy, and in the future, fully happy as God is. And the source of their present holiness and their future happiness is none other than God himself who is at once their holiness and their happiness.

8. See above, n. 248, note 53.

10. Cf. above, n. 49.

12. 1 Jn 3:2. Note that William has inverted the saying of the Apostle.

13. Jn 1:12.

9. See above, n. 235.

11. Cf. below, nn. 262f.

XVI. 259. Resemblance to God is the whole of man's perfection. To refuse to be perfect is to be at fault. Therefore the will must always be fostered with this perfection in view and love made ready. The will must be prevented from dissipating itself on foreign objects, love preserved from defilement. For to this end alone were we created and do we live, to be like God; for we were created in his image.¹⁴

260. There is however a likeness to God which is lost only with life itself, left to every man by the Creator of all men as evidence of a better and more sublime likeness that has been lost. It is possessed regardless of acceptance or refusal, alike by the man who is capable of conceiving it and by the man who is so stupid that he cannot conceive it. It consists in the fact that, as God is everywhere, and is present with the whole of his being in his creation, so every living soul is in like manner present in its body.¹⁵ And as God is never unlike himself, and without any unlikeness carries out dissimilar operations in his creation, so, although man's soul vivifies the whole of the body with one and the same life, in the bodily senses and in the thoughts of the heart without any unlikeness it is constantly carrying out dissimilar operations. As far as merit is concerned this likeness to God in man is of no importance with God, since it derives from nature, not from will or effort.

261. But there is another likeness, one closer to God, inasmuch as it is freely willed. It consists in the virtues and inspires the soul as it were to imitate the greatness of Supreme Good by the greatness of its virtue and his unchangeable eternity by its unwearrying perseverance in good.

262. In addition to this there is yet another likeness, of which something has been said already.¹⁶ It is so close in its resemblance that it is styled not merely a likeness but unity of spirit. It makes man one with God, one spirit, not only with the unity which comes of willing the same thing but with a greater fullness of virtue, as has been said: the inability to will anything else.

263. It is called unity of spirit not only because the Holy Spirit

14. Gen 1:26.

15. Cf. NBS 3, 12.

16. See above, nn. 257f.

brings it about or inclines a man's spirit to it, but because it is the Holy Spirit himself, the God who is Charity. He who is the Love of Father and Son, their Unity, Sweetness, Good, Kiss, Embrace and whatever else they can have in common in that supreme unity of truth and truth of unity, becomes for man in regard to God in the manner appropriate to him what he is for the Son in regard to the Father or for the Father in regard to the Son through unity of substance. The soul in its happiness finds itself standing midway in the Embrace and the Kiss of Father and Son. In a manner which exceeds description and thought, the man of God is found worthy to become not God but what God is, that is to say man becomes through grace what God is by nature.¹⁷

XVII. 264. That is why in his list of spiritual exercises the Apostle prudently inserted the Holy Spirit. He says: "In chastity, in knowledge, in forbearance, in graciousness, in the Holy Spirit, in unfeigned charity, in the word of truth, in the power of God."¹⁸ See how he put the Holy Spirit in the midst of the good virtues, like the heart in the middle of the body, doing and ordering everything, imparting life to everything.

265. For he is the almighty Artificer who creates man's good will in regard to God, inclines God to be merciful to man, shapes man's desire, gives strength, ensures the prosperity of undertakings, conducts all things powerfully and disposes everything sweetly.¹⁹

266. He it is who gives life to man's spirit and holds it together, just as it gives life to its body and holds it together. Men may teach how to seek God and angels how to adore him, but he alone teaches how to find him, possess him and enjoy him. He himself is the anxious quest of the man who truly seeks, he is the devotion of the man who adores in spirit and truth, he is the wisdom of the man who finds, the love of him who possesses, the gladness of him who enjoys.

17. To get a full understanding of the sublime doctrine which William here presents, see Exp 95; MF 31; Med 6:7f.; see also the excellent note in this place in Déchanet, *op. cit.*, p. 182, note 277.

18. 2 Cor 6:6f.

19. Wis 8:1.

267. Yet whatever he bestows here on his faithful of the vision and the knowledge of God is but as in a mirror and a riddle,²⁰ as far removed from the vision and the knowledge that is to be in the future as faith is from truth or time from eternity. This is true even when what we read in the book of Job happens: "He hides the light in his hands and commands it to mount on high, then he tells his beloved that it belongs to him and that he can ascend to it."²¹

XVIII. 268. For the man who is chosen and loved by God is sometimes shown a certain light of God's countenance, just as light that is enclosed in a man's hands appears and is hidden at the will of him who holds it. This is in order that what he is allowed to glimpse for a passing moment may set the soul on fire with longing for full possession of eternal light, the inheritance of full vision of God.

269. To make him realize to some extent what he lacks,²² grace sometimes as if in passing touches the affections of the lover and takes him out of himself, drawing him into the light of true reality, out of the tumult of affairs into the joys of silence, and to the slight extent of which he is capable, showing him for a moment, for an instant, ultimate reality as it is in itself.²³ Sometimes it even transforms the man into a resemblance of ultimate reality, granting him to be, to the slight extent of which he is capable, such as it is.

270. Then when he has learned the difference between the clean and the unclean²⁴ he is restored to himself and sent back to cleanse his heart for vision, to fit his spirit for likeness, so that if at some future date he should again be admitted to it he may be the more pure for seeing and able to remain for a longer time in the enjoyment of it.

271. For the limits of human imperfection are never better realized than in the light of God's countenance,²⁵ in the mirror which is the vision of God. Then in the light of true reality man sees more and more what he lacks and continually corrects by means of

20. 1 Cor 13:12.

21. Job 36:32f. (Septuagint). Cf. MF 31.

22. Ps 38:5.

23. 1 Jn 3:2.

24. Ezek 44:23.

25. Ps 4:7.

likeness whatever sins he has committed through unlikeness, drawing near by means of likeness to him from whom he has been separated by unlikeness. And so clearer vision is always accompanied by a clearer likeness.

272. It is impossible indeed for the supreme Good to be seen and not loved, or not to be loved to the full extent to which vision of it has been granted. So eventually love arrives at some likeness of that love which made God like to man by accepting the humiliation of our human lot in order that man might be made like to God by receiving the glorification of communion in the divine life. Then indeed it is sweet for man to be abased together with supreme Majesty, to become poor together with the Son of God,²⁶ to be conformed to divine Wisdom, to make his own the mind which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.²⁷

XIX. 273. For here there is wisdom with devotion, love with fear, exultation with trembling,²⁸ when God is thought of and understood as brought down unto death, the death of the Cross,²⁹ to the end that man might be exalted to the likeness of the godhead. From here there flows the rushing stream that gladdens God's city,³⁰ the remembrance of his abounding sweetness³¹ in the understanding and consideration of the benefits he has conferred on us.

274. In this regard man is easily led to love God by thinking about or contemplating what is worthy of love in him, which of itself shines upon the affections of the contemplative: his power and strength and glory and majesty and goodness and beatitude. But what especially carries man away in his spiritual love into the object of his love is that God in himself is whatever there is lovable in him; he is in the whole of himself what he is, if one can speak of a whole where there is no part.

275. In his love of this good the devout man who has been so

26. This was part of the expressed ideal of the Cistercian Founders: "To be poor with the poor of Christ."—*Exordium Parvum*, 15.

27. Phil 2:5.

28. Ps 2:11.

29. Phil 2:8.

30. Ps 45:5.

31. Ps 144:7.

affected centers himself upon it in such a way as not to be distracted from it until he becomes one or one spirit with him. Once arrived at this point he is separated and kept at a distance only by the veil of this mortality from the Holy of Holies and from that supreme beatitude of highest heaven. Yet since he already enjoys it in his soul through his faith and hope in him whom he loves, he is able to bear what is left of this life also with a more ready patience.

XX. 276. This is the goal for which the solitary strives, this is the end he has in view, this is his reward, the rest that comes after his labors, the consolation for his pains; and this is the perfection and the true wisdom of man. It embraces within itself and contains all the virtues, and they are not borrowed from another source but as it were naturally implanted in it, so that it resembles God who is himself whatever he is. Just as God is what he is, so the disposition of the good will in regard to the good of virtue is so firmly established in the good mind³² and impressed on it that in its ardent clinging to unchangeable Good it seems utterly unable to change from what it is.

277. For when that "taking up by the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, our King,"³³ befalls the man of God, the wise and devout soul, with grace to enlighten and assist it, in the contemplation of supreme Good gazes also upon the laws of unchangeable Truth to the extent that it is found worthy to attain to them by means of the understanding that comes of love. From this it forms for itself a way of life which is heavenly and a model of holiness.

For it gazes upon supreme Truth and everything which derives truth from it, upon supreme Good and everything which derives goodness from it, upon supreme Eternity and everything which derives from it. It models itself upon that Truth, that Charity and that Eternity while directing its life here below. It does not fly above those eternal realities in its judgment but gazes up at them in desire or clings to them by love, while it accepts the realities of this created world to adapt and conform itself to them, not without using its

32. Cf. Exp 19, CF 6:14.

33. Ps 88:19.