

WILLIAM OF SAINT-THIERRY AND THE CHURCH IN HIS DAY

HE LAYS BARE HIS BLINDNESS, DESIRING GOD TO GIVE HIM
LIGHT AND LET HIM LAY ASIDE HIS PASTORAL CHARGE

[*In thought.*] “THE LORD said unto Peter, “Lovest thou Me?” He answered, “Thou knowest that I love Thee!” and was bidden “Feed My sheep.” Three times He said it, that it may be seen a threefold cord cannot be lightly broken; for love’s proof lies in shepherding the flock.’²⁰

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‘Intents.’^[18] A shepherd who is not a hireling, even though he lay down his life for the sheep, scarcely meets all their needs. But it is a very serious thing for him to be in charge of the flock, when he cannot give it profitable service. There was a time when David the king was so weak in body that he took to his bed, so chilly from old age that no coverings could warm him;²¹ and from his bed he had to rule God’s people by his word alone, and the eyes of all Israel looked to him in all things. Bewitchment with trifles did not as yet obscure the good; the stubborn wickedness of a decadent [cf. corrupt] age had not then reached such a pitch as to withhold its respect from old men of proved worth.

But now, although the Church’s shepherds have to feed the Lord’s flock in body and soul at once—for all [cf. even

though] the Lord accounts the soul as more important, saying, 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God,'²² and frees His ministers from care for the body, as secondary, saying further, 'And all these things shall be added unto you'—in spite of all this, who would listen to any one who preached thus to-day? Who would suffer [cf. allow] him to practise it? Who would have any consideration for the old man? Who would make allowances for the weak? The wisdom of the flesh, the spirit of this world, a zest for knowledge, elegance of manner, and the like are required to-day of those who control the Church; simplicity is mocked, religion is despised, humility is held of no importance. And whereas hitherto [cf. previously] it has seemed sufficient if a person in authority was competent in the administration of interior [cf. spiritual] goods, who is there to-day for whom this is enough, unless there be plenty of exterior [cf. temporal] goods as well?

And O that a superior might know his own limitations! Woe is us for this, for we have sinned. Because of this, as the prophet says, 'We have given the hand to Egypt and to Assyria, to be satisfied with bread.'²³ For, in contradiction to the apostle's teaching, we have become the servants of men,²⁴ of thieves [*sic*] and usurers, the sons of strangers abounding in the riches of this world. If a superior be not obedient to the nod of such as these to-day, if he be not conformed to the world that is fashioned on these lines, if he do not cringe to those set over his head and flatter his subjects, making pretence of much and concealing even more, what will he do? What can he do? Where will he find himself? For to-day even compliance makes

only a few friends, and those unsure and independable [*sic*]; and truth makes open, cruel, and persistent enemies.

If only this may really be the way by which we lay down our life for the brethren! If only the outward covering of goats' hair curtains²⁵ may so absorb the buffeting of this wind, that the House of God within may abide in its beauty! And O that the sword may not reach to the soul! For we have grown benumbed by the bewitchment of trivial matters and the importunity [cf. insistence] of desire, and our hearts have got hardened; we are become as Ephraim, an heifer taught to tread out corn.²⁶ Thus have we departed from ourselves; thus have our heart's interests been transferred to unavoidable tasks; so that we, whose duty requires us only to perform them, take pleasure in tasks for which we ought to feel nothing but shame and disgust. Yes, and even those on whom they are not laid strive after this same pleasure! Where to-day is Martha, with her complaint that she is left to serve alone?²⁷ Is it not Mary's grumble that is heard all over the house to-day, because she is permitted to sit at the Lord's feet?

—William of Saint-Thierry (between 1070 and 85–1148), Cluniac Abbot of Saint-Thierry or Theoderic, later (from 1135), Cistercian monk at Signy, in meditation 11 of his *Meditations* (*Meditativae orationes*, written between 1128 and 35, meditation 13 (known as 'Meditatio') towards 1145), translated from the Latin by a Religious of CSMV, i.e., Ruth Penelope Lawson (1890–1977), and published by A. R. Mowbray & Co., London, in 1954, pages 79–81.

NOTES

¹⁸ Hebrews 4:12–13. William is chewing on the words of this passage, soul and spirit, joints and marrow, thoughts and intents, to the end of the meditation.

²⁰ See Saint John 21:15–17 and Ecclesiastes 4:12.

²¹ 3 Kings 1:1 (DV), cf. 1 Kings 1:1 (RSV-CE).

²² Saint Matthew 6:33.

²³ Lamentations 5:6.

²⁴ See 1 Corinthians 7:23.

²⁵ Exodus 26:7.

²⁶ Osee 10:11 (DV), cf. Hosea 10:11 (RSV-CE).

²⁷ See Saint Luke 10:38–42.

