

BLESSED HUMBERT ON STUDY

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PART II AGAINST THOSE WHO NEGLECT RELIGION ON ACCOUNT OF STUDY



LET US NOT FAIL TO NOTE however that there are some religious who because of an inordinate love of knowledge oftentimes put off the things of religion. They spend their time in writing, transcribing, recording, hearing lectures—busying themselves without let-up in other affairs of this sort pertaining to study. These are the kind of religious who, when they hear the bell for choir or chapter or something else, or when they are summoned to some duty by their superiors, are so attached to their studies that they postpone obedience. In this they are like our first parents who at the instigation of the devil incurred disobedience because of a desire for knowledge (Gen. 3, 5). Opposed to this is the example of that excellent and celebrated monk Marcus who was so obedient to the voice of his abbot that he left half-formed a letter he had been transcribing. It is the work of holy men to nourish their affections in prayers and secret devotions—in the celebration of Mass, in frequent confession, in regular recourse to the divine praises, and especially in the Office of the Blessed Virgin. But alas! sometimes they let all these things slip by on account of study, although through study they only perceive divine things but do not taste them. They are like the miser who has great wealth, but who spends all his time looking at it and never makes use of it. Of what avail to him are such riches, except insofar as he can enjoy them with his eyes. The Psalmist counsels otherwise: “Taste and see that the Lord is sweet” (Ps. 33, 9), thus preferring taste to vision because taste is a greater treasure.

Likewise it is the mark of true religion that, being designated specifically as brothers in religion, we ought to manifest brotherly service to each other in all necessities, and this “before all things.” Nor is it strange that among brothers this precept is to be preferred to everything else when we find that Peter himself imposed it upon us; “But before all things have a constant mutual charity among

yourselves" (I Pet. 4, 8). Those who pervert this order frequently prefer study to charity, and try to give it a higher place. This is not a science which is subordinated to charity but rather a science elevated above charity. But this is opposed to the words of the Apostle; "the charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge" (Eph. 3, 19). Therefore, since all religion consists either in obedience as regards our superiors, who stand in the place of God, or in holy affections as regards our own souls, or in fraternal service as regards our neighbor—all of which an inordinate love of study impedes—it is plain that those who pervert this order actually abandon religion in the name of study.

Remember that when one comes into the order he acquires a knowledge which enables him to see many evils of the past which he did not recognize as such before, and it also points out future evils which menace him in his temptations. Without the works of religion he can neither make justification for those past sins nor guard himself from the ones he fears in the future.

Also, when knowledge is not allied to religion it brings sadness in the present, on account of the many defects it reveals in the one who is lacking in the virtues of religion; nor can it bring joy in the future, because of itself it cannot lead us to the end of religion—which is eternal joy.

But religion can do all of these things. We read in Eccli. 1, 18: "Religiousness shall keep and justify the heart"—there you have the first two things mentioned, namely, justification and safekeeping; "it shall give joy" in the present, "and gladness" in the future. Behold the other two effects.

In summary we can say that when one enters religion the things most necessary are justification in regard to past sins and a safeguard against future ones, spiritual consolation in the present to overcome sadness, and, finally the attaining of eternal joy. All of these benefits are conferred by religion, not by science. How foolish then, nay how dangerous, it is for the man of religion to neglect the things of religion for the sake of study!

CONCERNING THE PREROGATIVES OF VIRTUE OVER SCIENCE

This same point becomes very clear if we consider the prerogatives of virtue, towards which religion is directed, over science, which is the goal of study. Let us note first of all that virtue is the way to salvation; "Health of the soul in holiness of justice" (Eccli. 30, 15).

It is not so with science. If it were, the demons who know more than any man alive would not be in hell; nor would philosophers be there, for they have reached the heights of science; nor would Solomon, the wisest of men. Yet condemnation is asserted of all of these, even of Solomon. Therefore virtue is superior to science because the one leads to salvation while the other does not. Augustine says: "The unlearned rise up and storm the gates of heaven, while we with our great knowledge are swallowed up in the abyss."

Also, science is of little or no avail in the attainment of virtue, as the Philosopher says in the *Ethics*; whereas virtue helps a great deal in attaining wisdom, as we read in Eccli. 1, 33: "Son, if thou desire wisdom, keep justice; and God will give her to thee."

Then too, virtue is more to be praised insofar as it is more remote from science, and this is true in the learned as well as in the simple. Whereas science without virtue is not worthy of the name of science. Cicero says: "Plato has an excellent maxim—'Knowledge which is a stranger to justice ought to be called cleverness rather than wisdom.'"

Now it belongs to demons to molest others, as we learn in Matt. 16, 23. But those who have knowledge without virtue are sometimes more skilled than anyone else in the art of molesting others. They annoy a whole community with their learning. It is also the work of demons to break all bonds asunder, as we read in Mark 5, 4. The aforementioned religious excel in this too, for they break religious observance more than others. Likewise the demons have a horror of prayer and fasting, as is proved by the saying: "This kind can go out by nothing, but by prayer and fasting" (Mark 9, 28). Many of these religious show the same aversion. From all of this it can be concluded that knowledge without virtue makes men demons, for the very word demon signifies one high in knowledge. As they are alike in name, so are they alike in the qualities they possess. On the other hand virtue makes men like angels. In the legends of the Blessed Cecilia, St. Urban, a man of great virtue, is described as having the countenance of an angel. We read this of David, in 2 Kings 14, 17: "For even as an angel of God, so is my Lord the king." The Jews saw the face of Stephen—"as if it had been the face of an angel" (Acts 6, 15).

Thus it was that our master Jesus Christ, Who is God Himself teaching us what is profitable, never taught any other science than how to lead a virtuous life. "Learn of Me," He said, not the subjects of the Quadrivium or the Trivium, not the Natural Sciences, not Metaphysics, not Ethics, not how to construct the heavens, or raise

the dead, or anything like that. "Learn of Me," He said, "because I am meek and humble of heart" (Matt. 11, 29).

Observe too that the work of study is sometimes a great penance. "I hated all my application wherewith I had earnestly labored under the sun" (Eccl. 2, 18). But when one rests from his labors after the work of acquiring the virtues, he always rejoices. "It is nought, it is nought, saith every buyer," that is, he who buys the kingdom of heaven by the labor of virtue; "but when he is gone away," that is, when the work is done, "then he will boast" (Prov. 20, 14).

It is virtue that makes men great (Eccli. 44, 6). Virtue glorifies men, but science without virtue brings them low. "If I should have prophecy and should know all mysteries and all knowledge, and have not charity," which is the mother of virtues, "I am nothing" (I Cor. 13, 2).

Thus a careful consideration will show us that virtue, not science, is the way to salvation; that virtue is a great help to knowledge whereas knowledge is not of much help to virtue; that science without virtue is not worthy of the name of science; that science alone makes men demons while virtue makes them angels; that virtue makes one an imitator of Christ, which science alone cannot do; that the labor of science leaves one unsatisfied, while the work of virtue brings gladness; that virtue raises up, science bring to nought. If these truths were really kept in mind, no one would dare to neglect the virtues of religious life out of a misguided zeal for knowledge.

CONCERNING THE EVILS WHICH ARE THE RESULT OF SCIENCE WITHOUT VIRTUE

At this point let us note that not only is science inferior to virtue, but in the absence of virtue it often occasions harm even of a sinful nature.

For instance, it sometimes makes a sin out of what was not a sin. For there are many things which are not sinful for one in a state of ignorance, but they are sinful for one with the requisite knowledge, as when he knows that he ought to do something and yet fails to do it. "To him therefore who knoweth to do good and doth it not, to him it is sin" (James, 4, 17).

It also aggravates things which were already sins. According to Gregory: "As the endowment of knowledge is greater, so is the transgressor subject to greater blame."

Then again it confirms one in sin. For this is typical of the learned—that whatever they do, even though it be evil, they defend it sci-

entifically. And therefore they persist in their sins. ". . . you say: We see. Your sin remaineth" (John 9, 41).

Science without virtue has the effect of multiplying sins. In Isaias 15, 9 we read: "The waters of Dibon," which is interpreted as men of great learning, "are filled with blood," the blood of sins. Observe too the apt saying—that knowledge of this kind generates presumption. "Knowledge puffeth up" (I Cor. 8, 1).

It is productive of vainglory. "They became vain in their thoughts" (Rom. 1, 21), referring to the philosophers. And: "In much wisdom there is much indignation" (Eccli. 1, 18).

It proves to be a burdensome occupation. "This painful occupation hath God given to the children of men"—he is speaking about study (Eccli. 1, 13).

Even worse, it sometimes leads to heresy. For it is not the simple who have instituted heresies, but the learned. "Which," namely false science, "some promising, have erred concerning the faith" (I Tim. 6, 21).

Upon others it sometimes has the effect of withdrawing them from good. For there are some who by reason of their knowledge form the consciences of others, and discourage them from some worthy project. "Woe to you lawyers, for you have taken away the key of knowledge. You yourselves have not entered in: and those that were entering in, you have hindered" (Luke 11, 52). Rightly therefore are the waters of Dibon, that is, men of great learning, said to be full of blood, because presumption, vainglory, impatience, evil occupations, heresies, impediments to good and many other evils arise, at least occasionally, from this kind of learning.

Science without virtue not only generates evils but, if it be abused, is itself turned into evil. St. Bernard declares: "Some seek to know—in order that they may know, and that is curiosity; others—that they may be known, and that is vanity; still others—that they may grow rich, and that is cupidity."

PUNISHMENT OF FALSE SCIENCE

Besides the evils which pertain to the evil of fault, this kind of learning engenders many others that pertain to the evil of punishment, in the future and in the present. In the future their knowledge will be their accuser at the time of Judgment, for these savants will bear letters patent of their own damnation, as did Urias in 2 Kings 11, 14. This testimony will show them to be inexcusable on the grounds of ignorance. Thus did the law of Moses testify against the

Jews. "There is one that accuseth you, Moses," that is, the law of Moses. And the text continues: "... for he wrote of me" (John 5, 46).

Men of knowledge are held to a stricter account for more has been given to them; the greater the gift, the greater the accountability. "And unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required" (Luke 12, 48).

Knowledge makes a man deserve greater punishment. Again we read in Luke 12, 47: "And that servant who knew the will of his Lord, and prepared not himself, and did not according to His will, shall be beaten with many stripes."

As for the present—knowledge without virtue proves most deceptive. For many, looking to the knowledge they possess, rely on their own prudence, and thinking themselves wise, are made foolish, and do many foolish things. "Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, this hath deceived thee" (Isaias 47, 10).

There is another point. Anyone can enter the race for virtue; but hardly anyone can acquire science, even with great labor. "And the more he shall labor to seek, so much the less shall he find" (Eccli. 8, 17). He is speaking here about wisdom, and concludes that it entails great labor. "He that addeth knowledge addeth also labor" (Eccli. 1, 18).

There are those who in their zeal for study wear themselves out in its pursuit, and never accomplish anything in the way of good works. Such men as these are corrupted by their knowledge. "They are corrupt and are become abominable in their ways" (Ps. 13, 1). Thus it appears, as regards the present, how deceptive, how laborious, how corruptive, is science without virtue.

It is obvious, therefore, for all of the aforesaid reasons, that science without virtue is the source of many evils, that virtue is to be preferred before science, that religion confers on a man benefits which science is incapable of conferring. Therefore it must never happen that the thing which generates science, I mean study, should cause us to neglect that which generates virtue—which is religion.

CERTAIN BLAMEWORTHY PRACTICES IN RESPECT TO STUDY

There are some students who always want to go into matters which are beyond the scope of philosophy, and even beyond the inspired Scriptures—the sort of thing which ought to be a source of wonderment, but not the object of science. The Apostle says: "O the

depths of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God" (Rom. 11, 33). It was against such students that we find it written: "Seek not the things that are too high for thee" (Eccli. 3, 22).

Then there are others who, while they leave such lofty speculations to the Lord, nevertheless agitate themselves about foolish problems which are more subtle than useful. Seneca had this to say to them: "Why do you torture and flay yourselves about such a question. You would have been wiser to despise it entirely rather than to try to solve it."

There is also the type who by means of study hope to gain an insight into problems which, though plain and comprehensible to others, are not so to them, because they do not have sufficient talent. We read in Prov. 23, 5: "Lift not up thy eyes to riches which thou canst not have; because they shall make themselves wings like those of an eagle, and shall fly towards heaven."

Another type of student works with great solicitude over questions which are more curious than useful. "In unnecessary matters be not over-curious and in many of his works thou shalt not be inquisitive" (Eccli. 3, 24).

There are still others who with itching ears, putting aside accustomed truths, are always gaping after novelties, just as we read concerning the Athenians: "Now all the Athenians and strangers that were there, employed themselves in nothing else, but either in telling or hearing some new thing" (Acts 17, 21). To their condemnation we read in the Gospel that old wine is to be preferred to new, although the new is more delightful to connoisseurs (Luke 5, 39). The wine is a figure of doctrine.

Others are so covetous of knowledge that they want to know everything, at one time reading in the Law, now dipping into philosophy, now into medicine, theology, and engineering. Seneca remarks: "We can show ourselves just as intemperate in letters as in anything else." And in Rom. 12, 3, we are admonished: "... not to be more wise than it behoveth to be wise, but to be wise unto sobriety."

There are others who never fix their studies on any one thing but, like those who go promenading from place to place, go wandering from book to book. Seneca chides them: "Beware lest the reading of many authors and all kinds of books make your knowledge vague and unstable."

Another type of student glides over everything so quickly that he scarcely retains any of the matter at all, and thus his study is of

no profit to him. Cato issues this warning: "To read and not to understand is to be negligent."*

Then there is the student who understands a thing very well but does not retain it in his memory, and therefore the knowledge is of little or no use to him, like food which one has eaten but not digested. Jerome advises us: "Turn the Scriptures over and over again in your mind."

Others take such delight in science that they put off other works, even though they are more important. As Seneca says: "This is a most pernicious practice, I mean the conduct of those who are delighted by the sweetness of knowledge and give all their time to it, while a multitude of other things cry out for attention."

Then there is another group—those who make great strides in knowledge, and little or none in the performance of good works. "And this I pray, that your charity may more and more abound in knowledge and in all understanding" (Philipp. 1, 9), because the more a man has of knowledge and understanding the more he ought to abound in the works of charity. For example; a certain abbot once asked a theologian of Paris: "Master, tell me what is better—to practice some virtue which one already knows, or to learn a new one." He replied: "It is better for a man to practice the one he knows." "Then," said the abbot, "what must I think of you theologians at Paris who know so much and do so little. You spend your time inquiring about new virtues, forever learning, forever bending over your studies."

And another story is told about a certain pious man who came to Paris to study theology. The first time he attended class the lecture was on the commandment "Love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and thy whole strength," etc. He returned to the inn and saddled the horses for the trip back to his own country. His companions were amazed at this, and asked him why he wanted to return so soon. He replied: "With the help of God I am determined to put that lesson into practice; that is all the theology I need for the rest of my life."

Again in the *Lives of the Fathers* we read that a certain brother asked an old man to teach him something profitable. The old man replied: "I said. I will take heed to my ways: that I sin not with my tongue" (Ps. 38, 1). The brother returned home and tried to follow this advice. It was a long time before he was able to return and give

*The Latin has a more axiomatic compactness: "*Legere et non intelligere est negligere.*"

an account of his endeavors to acquire this one virtue. It is clear from this that as far as good works are concerned it is better to be able to say—"from a little knowledge great zeal," than to confess—"from much learning small profit."

There are others who are so unwise as to study without some definite end in view. In *Jeremias* 18, 11, we are told: "Make ye your ways and your doings good," that is, direct them to a good end. That end can be any of three things. It can be the glory of God, as *Isaias* says: "Glorify ye the Lord in instruction" (*Isaias* 24, 15). Or it can be the good of one's neighbor, as we read in *I Cor.* 14, 12: "Seek to abound unto the edifying of the Church." Finally, the end of study can be one's own spiritual profit, that we may perform our actions according to reason. Thus we read: "Give me understanding and I will search Thy law; and I will keep it with my whole heart" (*Ps.* 118, 34). Our studies therefore ought to be informed by charity, whether it be the love of God, or love of neighbor, or a true love of self. This is signified in the 3rd Book of *Kings* 6, 28: "And he overlaid the Cherubim with gold." The Cherubim, that is, the plenitude of knowledge, are overlaid with the gold of charity, because all knowledge is to be ordered by charity.

CONCLUSION

Thus we conclude that study is to be judged blameworthy when it is concerned with matters too lofty, or too subtle, or exceeding our powers; also when it springs from curiosity or a love of novelties; when it tries to cover a multitude of subjects, when it is too vague and cursory, or so superficial that nothing is remembered. It is reprehensible too when the student becomes wholly absorbed in study, when his advance in learning is not accompanied by a growth in virtue, or is not ordered to a fitting end. Men of religion must be alive to these dangers that surround the pursuit of study, for their lives ought to be free from blame in every way.