



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

But I say this to you: anyone who is angry with his brother shall answer for it... (Matthew 5:22) Any bitterness or bad temper or anger or shouting or abuse must be far removed from you (Ephesians 4:31). God's saving justice is never served by human anger (James 1:20).

Monastic Voices

"Why is it that sometimes when a person hears words that hurt him he can let them pass by without any bother as if he had not heard them, whilst at other times, as soon as he hears them he is troubled and upset? I think there are several reasons, but there is one in particular, which is the source of all the others. If we examine the matter closely, we can say that the reason for all disturbance is that no one blames himself.

This is the reason for every taking of offense and upset. This is why at times it is impossible to find peace of soul. Nor should we be surprised at this, since it is the teaching of spiritual men that there is no other way of peace for us. And yet, we hope for peace, but do not follow their teaching. Or, we believe we are on the right path while we are irritated by everything and cannot bear to take any blame upon ourselves. A man may indeed accomplish innumerable good deeds, but if he does not master this he will never attain peace. Instead, he will always oppress himself and oppress others and his labours will go for nothing.

Perhaps someone will object, 'But what if a brother should vex me and after examining myself I find that I have given him no cause? How then can I blame myself?'

But surely if such a person were to examine himself in the light of the fear of God he will never find that he is blameless. He will see that he has provided an occasion by some action or word or attitude: if not at present, then at some other time. Or he may be deservedly suffering for many other sins he has committed elsewhere.

Another may ask why he should accuse himself when he has been sitting in peace and quiet and a brother has come up and upset him with some hurtful or insulting word. Since he is not going to put up with that, he feels that it is reasonable for him to be annoyed and upset. For, if the other had not intruded and spoken and made trouble, he would not have sinned.

This is indeed ridiculous and it is bad logic. Surely that brother did not inject the passion of anger into him by saying what he did? Rather he revealed the passion already within him, so that if he so wishes he may repent of it. This brother is like early wheat, outwardly bright and shining: but when it is crushed its rottenness appears.

So this man who sits in peace and quiet, as he thinks, has within him a passion he does not see. One hurtful word spoken by another who happens by and immediately all the poison and rottenness within gushes out. If he wishes to gain mercy let him repent and purify himself and make serious efforts to do better, and he will see that instead of insults, he should give thanks to that brother as one responsible for bringing him such a benefit."

(St. Dorotheos of Gaza, 6th century Abbot, and great monastic teacher: a younger contemporary of St. Benedict. cf. Readings for the Divine Office Week 9, Monday-Tuesday.)

"One of the brethren questioned Abba Isidore, the elder of Scete, saying: Why is it that the demons are so grievously afraid of you? The elder replied: From the moment I became a monk I have striven to prevent anger rising to my lips.

Abba Pastor said: He who is quarrelsome is no monk: he who returns evil for evil is no monk: he who gets angry is no monk.

Abba Ammonas said that he had spent fourteen years in Scete praying to God day and night to be delivered from anger."

(From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers: 4th century Egypt).

Dear Oblates and friends,

The monastic life is a constant, relentless warfare, against powerful and determined enemies, never ended this side of the grave. Who are these enemies? Monks are warned to resist the temptation to identify them with their superiors, or brethren, or indeed with anyone else at all. For as St. Paul says, "it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness of this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens" (Eph 6:12). So how is the monk supposed to fight against his true enemy the devil? St. Benedict gives the answer in Chapter 1 of the Holy Rule. He does it, above all, by grappling with his own vices (HR 1:4-5).

But you can't fight an enemy you know nothing about, or perhaps don't even recognize. So a great deal of monastic literature is devoted to the subject of vice. I want to reflect in this letter on a hoary old favourite: the vice of anger. It should go without saying that what applies to monks applies in principle to all Christians, in their various different circumstances, and especially to Oblates, who have promised the reformation of their life according to the spirit of the Holy Rule.

Anger is one of the two fundamental appetites inscribed into our nature by the Creator. The first, primary appetite, which we all have and need, is our desire for the good: the "concupiscible" appetite. As St. Augustine realized, God gave it to us ultimately to draw us to Himself, for any good less than the one supreme, infinite good, which is God, will never perfectly satisfy us. "Our hearts are restless until they rest in You". But because of our fallen condition, this appetite is easily perverted into possessiveness, self-indulgence, and lust.

The other fundamental appetite, the "irascible", is at the service of the first. It is the urge to fight and overcome whatever stands between me and the good thing I desire. At its best, it manifests itself in a courage and energy beyond our normal strength which can be admirable. But like the other, this appetite is easily turned aside, and becomes the unreasoning passion of rage, hatred and violence.

Some ancient philosophers, such as the Stoics, thought all emotion in principle bad. They advised people to cultivate indifference to everything, in order to achieve inner peace. But this indifference could be quite un-Christian, or inhuman: very different from the peace of Christ. Jesus was filled with desire (Lk 22:15), and felt emotions of sorrow (Mk 14:34) or joy (Lk 10:21) more keenly than those whose sensitivity is dulled by sin. Sometimes he used anger to break the complacency of the hard-hearted (Jn 2:14-16; Mk 3:5). Surely, then, this means that sometimes, at least, we can be angry?

The answer given by the whole monastic tradition to this question is quite uncompromising. No: we must never give way to anger.

John Cassian (c.360-435), who insists on this, gives as his main reason our duty to pray at all times (1 Thess 5:17). Prayer and anger, he says, are simply incompatible. One or other of them has to go. He describes the passion of anger as a deadly poison that can corrupt otherwise good monks. It destroys our peace, darkens our intellect, and blinds our judgement. Anger nursed in the heart makes us unable to be temples of the Holy Spirit. Cassian draws an amusing picture of the angry monk, in a rage with everything and everyone: irritated by his

pen for being the wrong size, annoyed with his knife for being blunt, cursing a flint for stubbing his toe. Is all anger then to be merely suppressed? Not quite. Cassian interprets the verse from Psalm 4 "Be angry and do not sin" as an instruction to turn our anger against itself. We are to be angry with our own anger and lust, and fight fiercely to root them out.

St. Benedict follows Cassian in distinguishing active and passive anger. "Do not perfect your anger" he says (HR 4:22). That is, never just let all your boiling aggression out, to express itself as it wishes. But then immediately he adds "Do not nurse a grudge" (4:23). That is, festering resentment, bitter thoughts, sullen grievance can be just as destructive as manifested wrath: or even more so.

It is sobering that St. Benedict thinks it worth while to warn his monks not to kill (HR 4:3). But it is a traditional monastic principle to start at the beginning, with external actions, before working our way down to the roots, in the heart. It is actually rather good if a monastic community can get through a whole year, or day, without anyone killing anyone! But we are not merely to stop short of murder. After ruling out both external and internal anger, St. Benedict goes on: "Do not repay evil for evil; do not injure anyone, but bear injuries patiently; love your enemies; if people curse you, do not curse them back, but rather bless them... hate no-one... pray for your enemies out of love of Christ; if you have a dispute with someone, make peace with him before the sun sets" (HR 4: 29-32, 65, 72-3).

Only a person possessing humility is able to achieve this noble Christian ideal. The humble are rarely angry, since the chief cause of anger, as St. Thomas Aquinas teaches, is the sense of being belittled. Humility is at the root of all virtue, because pride, which is the first sin, is at the root of all vice. So the first step towards a cure for anger is also the first step of humility (HR 7:10-30). We must keep our eyes fixed on God, and acknowledging that we are sinners, guard ourselves from our vices.

Chapter 72 of the Rule, on the good zeal of monks, wonderfully describes the end result of this ascetic combat. Misdirected anger, fuelled by pride, is the "wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell". But properly directed zeal, rooted in humility, "separates from evil and leads to God and eternal life". Do read this chapter again and note the characteristics of this zeal: respect, patience, obedience, self denial, charity; love of God, of the Abbot, of Christ.

And look at how anger is turned around. Instead of wallowing in the offense that someone has caused him, St. Benedict's disciple only wants to know he has not caused anger in another. If he thinks he has, off he rushes, and "there and then without delay, he casts himself on the ground at the other's feet to make satisfaction, and lies there until the disturbance is calmed by a blessing" (HR 71:8). For their part, those who run the monastery are to take care never to give reasonable grounds for anger in the brethren, for "no-one should be disquieted or distressed in the house of God" (HR 31:6-7, 19).

St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) is an inspiring example of someone who overcame his anger. Renowned particularly for his gentleness and endless patience, he confided that he actually had a terrible temper. He gives a very good answer to those who cite the anger of Christ as justification for their own. Jesus, says Francis, was God, and always in perfect control of his actions. I'm neither. Once I let my anger go, I lose control. It is like a small fire which becomes a conflagration. Once started, there is no stopping it. Hatred of sin soon turns into hatred of the sinner; righteous indignation quickly loses its mask, revealing the self love lurking beneath. So even if notionally legitimate, anger in my case is sure to do more harm than good. Francis' personal decision and invariable advice was: never, under any circumstances, to give way to anger. Jesus on the cross should be our model. There, he was meek and forgiving: yet precisely there he defeated the devil, and destroyed his enemies, sin, and death.

Dante (1265-1321) has given us an unforgettable picture of what anger is in itself. Hell, in his artistic imagination, is the state where people are simply left with the sin they have chosen, in preference to God. In his journey through Hell, he meets the wrathful as he crosses by boat the marsh of Styx, led as always by Virgil (Inferno 7-8). You may know the famous painting of the scene by Delacroix (1822). Naked anger is vile, degraded and dangerous. So the angry sinners are appropriately immersed in slimy mud. There, on the surface, those who indulged their anger actively are perpetually snarling at and rending each other. With penetrating insight, Dante also pictures them wounding themselves; for the chief victim of anger is always the angry person himself. Submerged at the bottom of the marsh lie those whose anger was of the passive, sullen kind. They gurgle incoherently, unable to express themselves for the rage that chokes them, in a permanent state of savage

self-frustration. The moral of all this, of course, is that Dante is shown what sin is, and so can hate it, and reject it.

God knows that our world today is filled with anger. With lust too. Everywhere uncontrolled violence and sex: and all the damage and human misery they inflict. But with God's help, we Christians, adopted children of the Father, and temples of the Holy Spirit, have the power, and the freedom to opt out of the vicious, self-perpetuating circle. We ourselves can refuse to get angry.

Meanwhile, the natural remedies for anger should not be under-estimated. Some passions can be deflated simply by adequate sleep, fresh air and exercise. Singing helps: the calming effect of Gregorian Chant especially is widely recognized. And it is wonderful what therapy can be found in a cup of tea, or an aspirin, But of course the only radical antidote for anger, and for every other vice, is the love of God. Let me leave the last word on this subject to the great English mystic Walter Hilton (1340-1396):

"To one who truly loves God, it requires no great effort to endure every vexation and annoyance, because Divine Love, that is the Holy Spirit, fights for him and imperceptibly destroys all feelings of anger and resentment. His spiritual union with God and the experience of His blessed love renders his soul so quiet and peaceful, so patient and devoted, that he is unaffected by the contempt and criticism inflicted upon him by men. He refuses to get angry, for to do so would be to lose his peace of soul, and he does not wish to do this. It is easier for him to forget all the wrongs done to him than for another man to forgive even when pardon is asked. He would rather forget than forgive, for he finds that easier. But love and humility of this degree are beyond unaided human achievement; they become possible only by the working of the Holy Spirit in those whom He makes true lovers of God" (The Ladder of Perfection II, 38).