

Institute 6: The Spirit of Fornication

Outline (Source: J.C. Guy, Sources Chrétiennes 109, pp. 261, 263)

Introduction: The proper nature of this struggle (1)

A. How to acquire chastity

- a. Purification of heart (2)
- b. Solitude (3-4)
- c. Special help of God (5-6)

B. How to preserve chastity

- a. Great vigilance: comparison with stadium contests (7-9)
- b. Thoughts during the day and night (10-11)
- c. Guarding the heart so as to squelch temptations at their inception (12-13)
(indication of plan: 14)

C. The goal of chastity

- a. Dwelling of the Holy Spirit: 1 Th 4:3-8 (15)
- b. Vision of God: Heb 12:14-16 (16-17)
- c. Spiritual knowledge (18)

D. Teaching of the Fathers: Basil (19)

E. The state of perfect integrity

- a. Its criteria (20)
- b. How to preserve it (21-22)

Conclusion: Resumé (23)

1. The second battle [the first battle is against gluttony, *Inst 5*], according to the tradition of our elders, is against the spirit of fornication. This battle is more widespread and of longer duration than others, and few can claim complete victory in it. Although this huge struggle starts at the awakening of puberty, it does not cease until the other vices have been conquered. The attack of our enemy is two-pronged, for he comes to the battle armed with a double vice. Therefore, we must also resist on two fronts; and just as he battens on both bodily and spiritual weaknesses, just so he cannot be

conquered except by those who fight on both of those fronts. For bodily fasting alone does not enable us to acquire and retain perfect chastity unless we also have a contrite spirit and persevere in prayer against this filthy spirit. Then too we need to meditate the Scriptures constantly, and also have spiritual understanding. Further, there must be manual labor to restrain and recall the wanderings of the fickle heart. And above all, true humility is the foundation without which no vice can ever be conquered.

2. But the correction of this vice comes mainly from perfecting the heart, the source of the poison of this sickness. The Lord himself instructs us: "From the heart issue forth evil thoughts, homicide, adultery, fornication, theft, false testimony," and so forth (Mt 15:19). Therefore, we must first purify that spring of life and death, according to the saying of Solomon: "With the closest custody guard your heart, for life comes forth from it" (Prov 4:23 LXX). For the flesh obeys its judgment and command. Thus abstemiousness must be carefully maintained, otherwise the flesh, surfeited with food, may insolently cast aside its spiritual guide. However, if we concentrate exclusively on the punishment of the body and do not engage the soul in abstinence from other vices, nor in holy meditation or spiritual studies, we will never be able to attain the heights of true wholeness. And this is the root cause of bodily defilement. Thus we must first cleanse "the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside might get clean," as the Lord has taught us (Mt 23:26).

3. Further, certain vices can be cured by human commerce and daily living. In a certain way, they are cured by the very committing! Thus for example, anger, sadness and impatience are cured by heartfelt meditation and persistent vigilance, but also by the provocations experienced in the human community. For the more frequently these faults come to the surface and are rebuked, the more quickly they are healed. But if we are to put aside the harmful passionate fever of fornication and attain a state of full health, we must add something to bodily punishment and heartfelt contrition: solitude and distance from others. Just as it is often useful to keep harmful food away from the gaze of those suffering from a certain illness,

lest the sight of it provoke a lethal appetite, just so quiet and solitude often serve to drive out this malady: They enable the mind, unharried by many images, to reach a pure inner vision more easily and to utterly quench the pestilential fire of concupiscence.

4. But no one should conclude from this that we think that there are no continent persons in monastic communities: we recognize that this can easily be the case. In fact, it is one thing to be continent, that is *enkratite*, and another to be chaste. This latter means to advance to that state of integrity and incorruption that they call *agnos*, which only refers to those who remain virginal in both mind and body. John in the New Testament, and Elijah, Jeremiah and Daniel in the Old Testament, are known to have been thus. It is not unjust to include in the same category those who, after an experience of corruption, arrive at the same state of purity of mind and body by dint of long labor and industry. In this condition, they feel the stings of the flesh not so much as the assault of base concupiscence as merely the movement of nature. We hold that this condition is very difficult to attain among crowds of men. But whether it is impossible, each one should personally judge on the basis of conscience. We don't expect everyone to agree with our opinion on this.

Moreover, we don't doubt that there are many continent persons who suffer infrequent or daily assaults of the flesh, but who manage to put them down and repress them either for fear of hell or desire for the kingdom of heaven. But our elders tell us that just as these men cannot be entirely overwhelmed by the assaults of vices, neither can they always be secure and unscathed. For it is inevitable that someone in the midst of the fray sometimes be thrown into confusion himself, even though he frequently conquer his adversary.

5. If we really desire to enter into this spiritual combat on the same terms as the Apostle (2 Tm 4:7), let us concentrate our every effort at dominating this unclean spirit by placing our confidence not in our own forces but on the help of God. Human effort will never be able to win through here. For the soul will be attacked by this vice as long as it does not recognize that it is in a war beyond its powers and that it cannot obtain

victory by its own effort unless it is shored up by the help and protection of the Lord.

6. While all progress in virtue and successful expulsion of vice is due to the grace of God, the specific aid and special gift of God is necessary for chastity. This is attested by the teaching of the elders and the purgative experience of those upon whom it has been bestowed. In a certain sense, to escape the flesh is to remain in the body while surpassing nature: to remain surrounded by fragile carnality but not to feel the stings of the flesh. Thus it is impossible, as we have said, for us to fly to such an exalted and heavenly reward on our own wings, unless the grace of God lift us up from the slime of the earth by the gift of chastity. There is no virtue which renders the lives of carnal men more similar to that of the angelic spirits than the attainment and the gift of chastity. As the Apostle says, while still living on earth they have their homeland in heaven (Phil 3:20). They already possess in their fragile flesh here in this life that which the saints are promised to possess in the future when they have left their carnal corruptibility behind.

7. Hear what the Apostle says: "Everyone who enters a contest abstains from all things" (1 Cor 9:25). Let us inquire what are "these things" that he mentions so as to acquire instruction for spiritual combat comparable to the carnal combat (see *Inst.* 5.12). For those who desire to struggle according to the rules in this visible contest do not have the freedom to use just any foods that appetite might suggest, but only those laid down as the training regime for those battles.

Not only must they abstain from forbidden foods and all drunkenness and tippling, but also from inertia, idleness and ennui so as to increase their strength by daily exercise and assiduous concentration. They are so removed from every care and sadness and business affair, and even affection and conjugal duty, that they know nothing beyond the exercise of discipline. They are completely freed from all worldly care, only hoping to acquire from him who presides at the games the substance of daily food, the crown of glory and prizes worthy of their victory. They guard themselves to such a degree from carnal pollution when they are preparing for the games that they cover their loins with leadfoil so that the cool metal on

their privates might inhibit obscene humors. Otherwise their hard-earned strength might be dissipated by nocturnal delusions. No doubt they understand that they will be defeated if a false image of harmful phantasm corrupts the strength produced through continence; nor will they be able to bring off the struggle they have undertaken with their strength gone.

8. Therefore, if we know all about the discipline for the worldly fight, an example the Apostle wishes us to learn so as to teach us how much concentration, diligence and care goes into it, what ought we do, with what purity ought we guard the chastity of our mind and body, we who must daily eat the sacred flesh of the Lamb, which even the Old Law prohibited anyone unclean to touch! For in Leviticus (7:19-20 LXX) it is laid down: "Everyone pure will eat meat. But if anyone in whom there is uncleanness eats of the meat of the saving sacrifice which is the Lord's, that one will perish before the Lord." How great is the boon of integrity, without which even those who were under the Old Law were not able to participate in the typical sacrifices, and without which those who wish to gain a corruptible crown in this world cannot be crowned.

9. It is first of all necessary to purify carefully the hidden recesses of our heart. For that which we desire to gain by bodily purity we must possess in the depths of our conscience, where the Lord resides as judge and superintendent of the games (see *Conf.* 7.20). He carefully observes how we run and fight. Thus those things which we are loathe to admit in the open will not even take shape in our interior and we will not even be soiled by any secret connivance. For although it might escape the notice of men, it cannot lie hidden from the knowledge of Almighty God and the holy angels, from whom no secret is hidden.

10. It will be an evident sign and full proof of our purity if no lewd image comes to us when we are plunged in sleep. If there be any disturbance, it will still not excite movements of concupiscence. Although such a disturbance may not be thought to bring about the full harm of sin, nevertheless it is a sign of a mind that is not yet perfect and a manifestation of vice that is not yet purified, since illusion is produced by these

deceptive images.

11. The quality of the thoughts, which are guarded negligently during the day because of distractions, is tested during the night rest. When such a fantasy occurs, it ought not to be thought a fault of sleep, but rather due to some negligence of the preceding time. It is a manifestation of a hidden interior fault, and not really produced by the hour of the night. Though it has lain hidden in the depths of the soul, sleep brings it to the surface. Repose reveals the hidden fever of passion which we have been stoking all day with harmful thoughts. Likewise, bodily sicknesses are not thought to be caused at the time they emerge, but contracted previously when the person imprudently ate harmful food and so took on harmful and lethal humors.

12. God, the creator and founder of the human race, knew better than anyone the nature of his handiwork and the means to correct it. He applied the medicinal cure to what he knew to be the principal cause of the malady, saying, "Whoever looks at a woman with evil intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28). Although he notes wanton eyes, he does not blame them as much as that interior sense which employs them for evil looking. For the heart is sick and wounded by the weapon of lust. It gazes with desire, twisting the gift of sight given to it by the creator for right use to the service of evil works by its own vice. When a spectacle presents itself, it must call forth the evil of concupiscence hidden in itself.

This is the reason why this salutary command is enjoined on one whose evil and vicious malady results from the occasion of seeing something. For we are not told to guard our eyes as if they must be guarded as the source of our lustful affections. The eyes perform nothing more than the simple service of vision. Rather it says: "Guard your heart with all vigilance," (Prov 4:23 LXX) since the remedy is imposed on that which can especially abuse the function of the eyes.

13. This will be the first concern of the purgation: when the thought of the feminine sex first creeps up on our mind through the subtle suggestions of the crafty demon, beginning with the recollection of our mother, sisters, relatives or of certain pious

women, we should hasten to drive it out of our inner being. If we were to linger over it, the tempter might take the occasion to make us gradually think of other women and so introduce evil thoughts. That is why we must carefully remember this precept: "Guard your heart with all vigilance." We should observe according to God's chief commandment the deadly head of the serpent. It is the principle of evil thoughts, by which the devil tries to creep into our soul. Nor should we negligently allow the rest of his body to penetrate into our heart, that is, by assenting to temptation. If allowed in, it will doubtless destroy the captive mind with its virulent bite. "In the morning" we must extinguish even "the sinners of our land" (Ps 100:8), that is, our carnal sins as they emerge. And while they are still small, "smash the sons of Babylon on a rock" (Ps 136:9). Unless they are killed off, they will rise up full-grown to do us damage and that will be through our own complicity. Then, they will surely not be conquered without great tribulation and labor.

When a "strong, armed man," that is, our spirit, "guards his house," fortifying the exits in the fear of the Lord, "his goods are secure." This refers to the fruit of his labor and the virtues he has acquired over a long time. "But if a stronger man comes and conquers him," that is, the devil, who makes him think his way, "he will strip him of his arms in which he confides." This means the memory of Scripture and the fear of God. "And he will divide his spoils," destroying the merits of his virtues by certain contrary vices. (Lk 11:21-22)

14. It is not my purpose here to sing the praises of chastity, but rather to explain by means of the elders its qualities, how it can be acquired and preserved, and what its purpose is. Therefore, passing over all that is found in Scripture in praise of this virtue, I will offer only one saying of the Blessed Apostle, from the Letter to the Thessalonians, where it is evident how he prefers (chastity) to all other virtues, commending it with great nobility of style.

15. "This is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Th 4:3). It is thought that sanctification can be acquired by the virtues of justice or charity or humility or patience. But rather than leave us in doubt what kind of sanctification he means, Paul

says: "This is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from fornication. Each one of you must know how to honor and sanctify his vessel and not to give it over to passionate desire as do people who do not know God" (1 Th 4:3-5). See what praises he lavishes on our honorable vessel, that is, our body, and how he pursues its sanctification! On the contrary, those who give in to passionate desire find themselves in uncleanness and shame; they are strangers to sanctification. Thirdly, a little further on he adds something more on the subject of holiness: "God has not called us to immorality but to holiness. Therefore, he who rejects these things spurns not man but God, who also gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit" (1 Th 4:7-8). He adds an inviolable authority to his precept by saying: "He who rejects these things," that is, what I have just said about holiness, "spurns not man," that is, he who commands this, "but God, who speaks in me." He has also destined our hearts as the dwelling of the Holy Spirit.

You see how simple and limpid are the words of esteem and praise he lavishes on this virtue, first of all by attributing to its sanctification in the proper sense; next, by claiming that the vessel of our body must be freed from uncleanness by it; third, that when the body has put aside shame and disgrace, it ought to remain in honor and holiness; finally, he claims that by means of this virtue the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts, and that is the greatest of all rewards and happiness.

16. Although we are approaching the end of this chapter, I will add yet another testimony from the Apostle like the one already given. Writing to the Hebrews about peace, he says: "Pursue it in all things, and holiness, without which no one will see God" (Heb 12:14). Here also he evidently is referring to that integrity of mind and purity of body which he normally associates with the holiness needed to see God. And he makes the same point when he explains: "Let no one be a fornicator and profane like Esau" (Heb 12:16).

17. Furthermore, the more sublime and heavenly the reward of chastity, the more severe the attacks of the enemy on it. Therefore, it is all the more incumbent on us to add contrition of heart, and not only bodily continence, to our fervent and tearful prayers. Thus the furnace of our flesh,

which the Babylonian king does not cease to stoke with carnal suggestions, may be quenched by the dew of the Holy Spirit descending into our hearts.

18. Just as our elders state that chastity cannot be attained before the foundations of humility are laid in our hearts, likewise they claim that one cannot reach the source of true knowledge as long as the root of this vice remains in the deep recesses of our hearts. And while integrity can be attained without true knowledge, spiritual knowledge cannot be had without integral chastity. For the gifts of the Spirit are diverse, and a grace of the Holy Spirit is not given except to those who make themselves worthy and fit for it by effort and striving. Finally, although the apostles are believed to have possessed the virtue of perfect integrity, still this gift abounded more in Paul because he prepared himself for it by clever study and industry.

19. The following severe saying is reported of St. Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea: "I know not woman and yet I am not a virgin." By this he means that bodily purity consists not so much in foreswearing women but in integrity of heart. For it maintains a perpetual incorrupt holiness of heart whether from the fear of God or from love of purity.

20. Therefore, this is the goal of integrity and its perfect proof: that no movement of the flesh creeps up on us while asleep, and that we have none of the nocturnal emissions to which nature is subject. While it is beyond nature to avoid these completely and definitively, it is proper to exalted virtue to restrict them to the least frequent and naturally inevitable cases, which for a monk would occur every two months. But we have stated this according to our own experience and not according to the teaching of the elders, who judge that the periods of cessation stated here are still too short. We are afraid that if we expound this as we heard it from them, we might be thought, by those who have experienced a lesser purity due to negligence and less effort, to have described the impossible and the incredible.

21. We can maintain this condition continually and never

exceed the natural time-limit set down 'above if we recall that God is not only the observer of our secret actions but also of our thoughts day and night; we must render him an account for everything that transpires in our heart as well as for our works and acts.

22. Therefore we must struggle to attain this point and we must battle against the movements of the mind, and the urgings of the flesh to such a degree that the flesh satisfies its natural demands without arousing desire and can rid itself of superfluous humors without any harmful prurience, and without necessitating a struggle for chastity. Otherwise, the mind will know that it has not yet attained perfect chastity since it is still subject to fantasies in sleep.

23. Therefore, we must always maintain a balanced and moderate fast, so that these delusions not even come upon us while asleep. For whoever exceeds the proper bounds of fasting must then also need an immoderate relaxation. Whoever is subject to these ups and downs will doubtless not attain that very even state of tranquillity, whether from too little or too much food. Finally, we need to have profound humility and a constantly patient heart, and we also must remain cautious against anger and other passions. For when anger burns, the fire of passion will penetrate us as well. But above all, we must remain vigilant during the night. For just as daytime purity and watchfulness prepare us for nighttime chastity, likewise nightly vigils provide a solid and strong basis for our hearts in their daytime watchfulness.