

De Vitis Patrum, Book Iv

by Heribert Rosweyde

Heribert Rosweyde's sermon explores the virtues of monastic life, the challenges of heretical teachings, and the profound faith demonstrated by hermits in the desert.

Scripture: Psalm 25:9, Psalm 34:10, Proverbs 3:5, Proverbs 22:4, Isaiah 35:5, Matthew 6:26, Matthew 15:31, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6

Topics: "Desert Spirituality", "Early Church Fathers"

Description

Heribert Rosweyde preaches about the journey of faith and discovery in the East, highlighting encounters with saints, hermits, and the monastic way of life. The sermon delves into the controversies surrounding Origen's heretical opinions and the steadfastness of Jerome in Jerusalem. It also explores the humility, obedience, and miraculous encounters of desert dwellers, including the provision of heavenly bread, taming of wild animals, and restoration of sight to blind lion cubs by an anchorite.

Transcript

De Vitis Patrum, Book IV

By Severus Sulpitius and John Cassian

Excerpts from Dialogue 1 of Severus Sulpitius

and from the Institutes and Conferences of John Cassian

Prologue

(Sev.Sulp., Dial.1, chap.1) Since I returned from overseas, my brothers, you have often begged me to give an account of my journeying: how the faith of Christ flourished in the East, whether the rulers preserved the peace, whether the saints lived undisturbed, what was the state of the monasteries, what sort of way of life the hermits were leading, whether indeed it was lawful for Christians to live in the desert, what were the signs and virtues Christ was working in his servants, whether indeed I had found my journey profitable, and where my journeys had taken me. Supported by your prayers, therefore, I shall do so, seeing that is what you want, and I hope you will be pleased to hear what I have got to say.

[Vitae Patrum here has a marginal note: This is a selection from the words of Sulpitius' prologue. Everything here is to be understood as an account given by (Sulpitius' friend) Posthumianus]

Chapter 1 (Sev.Sulp., Dial.1, chap.2)

The solitary monk living in a small hut in the region of Cyrenia

We left here three years ago, taking ship from Narbona, and God smiled so favourably on our journey that we entered port in Africa on the fifth day. I had particularly wanted to go to Carthage in order to visit the shrines of the saints, especially the tomb of the martyr Cyprian. On the fifteenth day we returned to port and set sail for Alexandria, but the southerly wind failed us and we would have been driven on to the sandbanks of Syrtis if the careful watch of the sailors had not noticed in time for them to lower the anchors and heave the ship to.

We came ashore in the ship's boats, the continent lying open before our eyes, empty of any human habitation as far as we could see. But I wanted to explore the place more closely, and moving further inland I caught sight of a small hut about three miles from the shore among the sandhills. The roof of this hut looked like the upturned keel of a ship, constructed of fairly stout planks coming right down to the ground, not for protection against rainstorms, for rain is hardly ever heard of in these parts, but because the force of the wind is such that when any breeze begins to blow, even on the most beautiful day, the danger of shipwreck is greater than in any sea.

Nothing germinates there, there is no seedtime. The ground is unstable because the parched sand moves about with every movement of the wind. Only where headlands reaching back from the sea give a little protection from the wind and provide ground a little more solid do rough grasses find some foothold, sufficient to feed a few sheep. The natives live on their milk. The more skilful among them, or I should say, richer, make a sort of rough barley bread. This is their only crop.

It grows quickly because the effect of the sun and air is to prevent it being damaged by the force of the wind. It matures within thirty days of being sown. That people should live there makes no sense apart from the fact that they pay no taxes, for this farthest edge of Cyrenia is next to the desert between Egypt and Africa, through which Cato once led his army as he fled from Caesar. We hastened towards a hut which we had perceived from a distance, where I found an old man dressed in skins, turning a hand mill.

He greeted us and welcomed us kindly. We told him that we had disembarked upon these shores perforce, unable to continue our journey till the weather should improve. Human curiosity had brought us inland eager to learn what the place was like and how the inhabitants lived. We were Christians and would especially like to know if there were any Christians in these solitudes, upon which he wept for joy, embraced our knees, and kissed us over and over again before asking us to pray with him.

Then he spread out some skins of wild beasts on the ground, bade us sit, and brought out quite a generous meal, half a loaf of barley bread. There were four of us, he made a fifth. He added a small bundle of herbs whose name escapes me but was rather like mint, its leaves giving off a smell rather like honey. We satisfied our hunger and were delighted by this act of gentle kindness. We stayed seven days with him, until on the last day some of the other desert dwellers began to gather there, and we realized that our host was in fact a presbyter, something which he had concealed from us.

Then we went to the church, about two miles off, which we had not previously been able to see because of an intervening hill. It was built of rough branches woven together, hardly more ambitious than the hut of our host, in which you would not be able to stand except in a stooping position. Upon enquiring about the way of life of these people we learned, amazingly, that they neither bought nor sold anything, fraud and

theft was unknown among them, they possessed neither gold nor silver nor any desire for it.

For when I offered that presbyter ten golden pieces he refused them. When we saw he would not accept them we pressed some of our clothes upon him. These he accepted gratefully, and so we departed from him, the sailors summoning us back to the ship.

Chapter 2 (Sev.Sulp., Dial.1, chap.3)

The heretical opinions of Origen

Favourable winds brought us to Alexandria on the seventh day, where an unseemly controversy was raging among the bishop and the monks. The basic reason for this was that the clerics had got together and in various synods had frequently decreed that no one ought to read or possess Origen's books. Origen was a most learned translator of the Holy Scriptures, but the bishops pointed to several really outrageous passages in his books. Origen's supporters did not presume to defend these things but claimed that they had been maliciously inserted by heretics, and that the body of his works should not be condemned simply because some parts of them were rightly to be deplored; the faithful had sufficient discrimination in their reading to avoid following what was false and would not accept anything which was contrary to the Catholic faith.

It was not in the least surprising that in some of the new avant-garde writings there should be some heretical deceit involved, even daring to impugn the truth of the Gospel in some places. The bishops firmly set their faces against such writings and used their power to condemn all the wholesome parts as well as the bad, and their author with them, for there were quite enough books already which were acceptable to the church, whereas those writings were to be thoroughly condemned which might be harmful to the simple even if profitable to the learned.

For myself, as I teased out the meanings of his books, I found it rather strange that there were so many things which were quite admirable together with other things which were not acceptable. There was no doubt that he held to some of the opinions which his advocates claimed had been falsely inserted. I myself was amazed that one and the same person could hold ideas so much at odds with each other. In the wholesome parts there was none since the apostles to equal him, but in the parts which were to be condemned there was no one who had gone more sadly astray.

The bishops quoted many things out of his books which they agreed were contrary to the Catholic faith, but the extract which provoked the most anger was the claim that whereas the Lord Jesus Christ came in the flesh for the redemption of humanity, suffered on the cross for human salvation and died to gain for humanity eternal life, the same power of the passion could win redemption even for the devil. He maintained that just as Christ had reformed lost humanity, so it would be compatible with his goodness and piety to restore a fallen angel.

When the bishops pointed this out, and other things of similar nature, great controversy arose among those who studied his works. The authority of the priesthood was powerless to stamp it out. The governor of the city was called in, and he used such severe measures in order to impose discipline upon the church, that the brethren were scattered in terror of their lives, and the monks fled abroad, but were unable to find a secure haven anywhere because of the edicts which had been decreed.

It weighed very heavily with me that whereas Jerome, a thorough Catholic deeply versed in doctrine, had at first been reckoned among the followers of Origen, he now condemned him and everything he had written. I did not dare presume to judge these matters, seeing that many most learned and outstanding people were on different sides. But whether his writings were simply mistaken, as I take them to be, or heretical, as they were accused of being, it is certain that the condemnations of the priests stood no chance whatever of suppressing them, nor would his fame have spread so far and wide had it not been fed by their very opposition.

Alexandria was agog with all this turmoil when I arrived there, but the bishop of that city received me very kindly, better than I expected, in fact, and even tried to keep me there. But I had no mind to stay long in a place where victimization had so recently caused such havoc among the brethren.

Chapter 3 (Sev.Sulp., Dial.1, chap.4)

The lifestyle of Jerome in Jerusalem

I set out therefore on a sixteen-day journey to Bethlehem, which is six miles from Jerusalem. The church there is a parish of the bishop of Jerusalem and is in charge of the presbyter Jerome. On a previous journey I had soon discovered that there could be no one whom it would be more enjoyable to meet. He is a man who deserves praise for his faith and his many gifts of virtue and his skill in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Nobody can be compared to him in all branches of learning. I had already spent six months with him, and his never-ending opposition towards evil people involved him in perpetual strife, which brought down upon him the hatred of the ungodly. To tell you the truth, I could see how in various little treatises he pointed out the vices of so many people, how he seized upon them, exposed their falsity and tore them to shreds. He was especially fierce on avarice no less than vanity; he discussed the many aspects of pride and superstition. And is there anyone who has more truthfully and boldly laid bare the familiarities which have taken place between monks and virgins, and even among clerics? No wonder that some people do not love him, or that he is hated by clerics whose vices and crimes he has brought out into the open.

Anyone who calls him a heretic is mad. Let me make it quite clear, the learning of the man is always Catholic, his doctrines are completely sound. He is always involved in some study, he gives himself to his books with his whole heart, he is forever either reading or writing something. If I had not already decided, and indeed made a promise to God, that I would visit the desert, I would not have wanted for an instant to be separated from this man.

My family, much against my will, had embarrassed me by following me here, but I was able to hand them over, together with everything I had, to his care, and freed in a way from a great burden I was able to return to Alexandria. I renewed acquaintance with the brothers there and set out for the Thebaid, the most distant parts of Egypt. There, the vast open spaces of the desert are said to contain a great number of monks. It would take a very long time to tell you everything that I saw there. I will confine myself to just a few.

Chapter 4 (Sev.Sulp., Dial.1, chap.5)

How the abbot provides for the food of those brothers who with the abbot's permission go to live in solitude

Next to the Nile and not far from the desert there are many monasteries, usually of about a hundred monks. The chief point of their rule is that they live in obedience to an abbot. They do nothing of their own

will, but depend on his authority. If any of them wish to seek a higher path of virtue, they move on to a solitary life in the desert, but not unless the abbot gives his permission, for obedience to the will of another is for them the primary virtue. Once the abbot has approved of their moving on to the desert, he provides them with bread and any other food they need.

Chapter 5 (Sev.Sulp., Dial.1, chap.5)

A brother in the desert has bread from heaven

It so happened that during the time when I was there the abbot had told two boys to take bread to a solitary who had only recently left the monastery to build his cell about six miles away. The older boy was fifteen, the younger twelve. As they were coming back they came upon a very large asp, but they were not in the least bit frightened of it. Before it came near to their feet it stretched out its blue-green neck as if charmed by some incantation. The younger of the boys picked it and put it in a fold of his garment, and came back to the monastery very pleased with himself.

He went into the gathering of the monks, shook out the fold of his garment and put the captive beast down, with a visible air of pride. There were some who praised the boy's faith and virtue, but the abbot took a wider view and subjected them both to punishment lest at their tender age they should think too much of themselves. He blamed them for making a public spectacle of what the Lord had done through them, for it was not their own faith that had done it, but the power of God; they must learn rather to serve God in humility than boast about signs and wonders; to know your own weakness is much better than taking pride in your own power.

When the solitary heard that the boys had been put in danger by meeting a serpent, and also that their victory over it had earned them a beating, he begged the abbot not to send bread or any other food any more. After a space of eight days the man of Christ found that he was very hungry. His limbs were wasting because of his fast, though his thoughts were continually fixed on heaven. His body may have been fatigued by lack of nourishment, but his faith never wavered. Meanwhile the abbot was warned by the Spirit to visit his disciple.

He had a genuine concern for him, and wanted to ask him what kind of life-giving force was sustaining this faithful man who did not want to be given human bread. So off he went, and when the solitary saw him coming while still some way off, he ran to meet him, gave thanks, and led him back to the cell. As they were going in together they noticed a basket of palm leaves, full of warm bread, hanging from the doorpost. It smelt and felt as if it had just come out of the oven, but it did not look in the least bit like Egyptian bread.

They were both overwhelmed with amazement, recognizing this as a gift straight from heaven. The solitary asserted that it was occasioned by the abbot's arrival, but the abbot ascribed it to the faith and virtue of the solitary. And with great joy they broke the heavenly bread together. When the abbot got back to the monastery he told the brothers all about it, and they began to rival each other in burning desire to hasten themselves to the desert and sacred solitude. In this monastery I saw two old men who I was told had been there for forty years without going out at all.

If I were to say anything else about them, it would simply be to relate what every body by common consent said about their virtues, including the abbot himself, that one of them had never been known to overeat, the other had never been seen to be angry. Now that you have been told the virtue of one of these hermits

I must tell you something about many others.

Chapter 6 (Sev.Sulp., Dial.1, chap.7)

A lioness accepts food from an old man as if it were tame.

In entering the nearest part of the desert I had as guide one of the brothers who knew the area well. We came to an old monk, living at the foot of a mountain, who had a well, a most rare thing in these parts. He had an ox whose sole task was to turn a wheel which drew the water up. The well was reputed to be a thousand feet deep or more. There was a garden with many vegetables of various different kinds, contrary to what one would expect in a desert where the soil is dry, burned up by the heat of the sun, incapable of sustaining the smallest seed or root. By the ingenuity of this holy man and the labour of both him and his ox, they were able to irrigate the sand regularly, providing sufficient fertility for the vegetables that we could see growing and coming to maturity so wonderfully in that garden. The ox and his master both lived off them, and the holy man was able to provide us with a meal from his plentiful store.

After the meal, as it drew towards evening, he took us to a palm tree about two miles away the fruits of which he often gathered. This is the only sort of tree which grows in the desert, albeit rarely. Whether wise people of old planted them, or whether the soil produces them naturally, I know not, unless God in his providence prepared them for his servants against the time when the desert should be inhabited. For those who settle in these lonely places live off the fruit of these trees for the most part, since nothing else will grow there.

As we approached the tree towards which our host was leading us we suddenly came upon a lion. My guide and I were terrified, but the holy man went up to it quite casually. We followed, though still frightened. At his command the beast stopped and sat down, while he picked some of the fruit within easy reach on the lower branches. When his hands were full the beast came up to him and accepted fruit from him as easily as any domestic animal, and having eaten, departed. As we watched, still trembling, we were not quite sure which was the greater, the virtue of faith in this man, or our own weakness.

Chapter 7 (Sev.Sulp., Dial.1, chap.8)

A she-wolf is fed by an old man, and begs pardon for her sin of theft.

We found another remarkable old man living in a small hut with room for only one person. A wolf had the habit of coming to him for food, and it was rare that she failed to turn up for her meal at a regular hour. She used to wait outside for him to give her what bread he had to spare out of his store, then lick his hand before departing as if to show her respect for the kindness offered her. But one day it so happened that a brother had been visiting him and that holy man had walked back with the brother for such a distance that it was nighttime before he returned home. Meanwhile the animal had come to the empty cell at the usual time to be fed, and when she saw no sign of her familiar benefactor, went inside, curious to discover where he was. Now there happened to be a basket of palm leaves hanging up containing five small loaves. She took one and devoured it, then, the crime committed, went away.

When the hermit came back he saw the basket had been disturbed and contained fewer loaves than there should have been. His house had been despoiled, and he noticed fragments of the stolen bread on the threshold. He had a pretty good idea of who had been responsible for the theft. But the next few days the animal did not come at the usual time; no doubt ashamed to come near the person to whom she had done

harm, and the hermit missed greatly the pleasure of her company. He prayed earnestly for her return, until at last on the seventh day she appeared outside at the usual time to be fed. But you can always easily tell when someone feels guilty, and the wolf herself did not dare to approach very close, but stood there shamefacedly with her eyes cast down to the ground, as if to make it clear that she was asking pardon for her fault. The hermit took pity on her embarrassment, called her closer and gently stroked her sorrowful head. He restored their relationship by giving her a double ration of bread, and thus by his forgiveness was able to dispel all sadness and reinstate their usual custom.

Just think, I beg you, of the power of Christ in this affair. To him everything brutish is made wise, everything savage becomes gentle. A wolf is aware of her duty, a beast acknowledges the crime of theft, a wolf is thrown into confusion by a sense of shame, she comes when called, she bows her head, and is as much aware of having her sins forgiven as of shame at what she had done. Yours is the power, O Christ, yours are these miracles! Even though it is your servants who do these things they do them in your name; the wonder is yours. And it saddens us that wild beasts can know the power of your majesty while human beings show you no respect. And if all this seems unbelievable I shall show you even greater things. As God is my witness I am not making these things up, but simply telling you what I have seen.

Chapter 8 (Sev.Sulp., Dial.1, chap.9)

An anchorite restores the sight of

five blind lion cubs

There are numbers of people called anchorites living in the desert with no roof over their heads. They live on roots, far from the haunts of human beings, and are not confined to any one particular spot. Two monks from Nitria heard of the virtues of one particular person whom they had formerly liked and respected in the life of the monastery, and went on a journey through this extensive region to try and find him, now that he was living in this kind of way. It was a long search, but at last after seven months they found him in a most distant part of the desert not far from Memphis. He was said to have been living in these solitary places for the previous twelve years. Now although he had fled from human intercourse, he did not run away when he recognized the brothers, but welcomed them for the next three days.

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