

De Vitis Patrum, Book Viii

by Heribert Rosweyde

The Vitae Patrum is a book that provides a model for those who want to enter upon the path to the Kingdom of Heaven and live a heavenly life, through the stories of the holy fathers and mothers who struggled with spiritual struggles and overcame them through faith and devotion.

Scripture: Psalm 24:3, Psalm 146:8, Proverbs 11:28, Matthew 6:19, 1 Corinthians 9:24, Philippians 3:13, 1 Timothy 6:10, Hebrews 12:1, James 1:22

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Perseverance"

Description

Heribert Rosweyde preaches on the lives of holy fathers and wise women who grew in spiritual strength through solitude, serving as examples for those seeking the Kingdom of Heaven. The sermon highlights the struggles, virtues, and spiritual disciplines of these renowned athletes for Christ, emphasizing the importance of faith, perseverance, and selflessness in their pursuit of a heavenly life. The stories of individuals like Isodore, Doroteus, Potamiaena, Didymus the Blind, Alexandra, and The Virgin showcase the diverse paths and challenges faced in the journey of spiritual growth, urging listeners to reflect on their own commitment to God and the dangers of succumbing to worldly temptations.

Transcript

Prologue of Palladius, Bishop of Helenopoleos

In the Eighth Book of the Vitae Patrum

Known as the Lausiac History

This book consists of a description and explanation of how the blessed and holy fathers grew in spiritual strength in the course of their wonderful lives in solitude, to provide a model for those who want to enter upon the path to the Kingdom of Heaven and live a heavenly life. We remember also the renowned wise women inspired by God, who entered upon the task of developing in spiritual strength with wholehearted courage. May they serve as examples for those who seek redemption through continence and chastity, and may they encourage a desire to imitate them.

I am indebted to the inspiration and encouragement of a man learned in various wide-ranging subjects, gentle in manner, religious and devout in heart and mind, liberal in giving help to the needy. Among the most prominent people he has been chosen for the highest honours because of the integrity of his life. He is a man governed by the power of the Holy Spirit. He it is who motivated me, or rather, to be more truthful,

inspired my dull mind to the contemplation of higher things.

He wanted me to set forth how our holy and immortal spiritual fathers struggled to develop in spiritual strength, as an example to be emulated. In order to serve God they spent their lives in hard and rigorous bodily discipline. He wanted me to send him descriptions of the lives of these famous athletes, and to make known the hard won virtues of each one of these great men. This man's name is Lausus, a man who is devoted to everything spiritual and godly. By the grace of God he is the chamberlain of the divinely inspired and religious emperor [Theodosius II, 401-450] I, however, am unskilled in writing, I have not attained to a spiritual knowledge any deeper than a sort of lip service, I am not worthy to examine the roll of holy fathers and the way they led their spiritual lives.

I fear that this great commission will be beyond my strength. I can scarcely bear the responsibility of it, for it demands both wide-ranging knowledge and spiritual discernment. Nevertheless I trust in the wisdom of him who has bidden me undertake this task. I believe it will be useful to those who may read it, and I am aware of the danger I might be in if I refuse to agree. So I take this commission to have been given to me by divine providence, and have used the utmost diligence in undertaking this task, upheld by the intercession of the holy fathers, simply setting out as in a sort of catalogue the struggles and signs of these great men, famous athletes as they were.

And I describe not just the men who lived such outstandingly good and virtuous lives, but also those blessed women who led their lives in blameless integrity. I have been blessed in having been able to look upon the holy faces of some of them myself before at last they finished their faithful course. I have learned about the heavenly life of others from those still running their godly race. I have journeyed on foot to many cities and villages, to all the caves and tents of the monks, to learn assiduously about their piety and religion.

So I have written down partly what I have seen, partly what I have heard from the holy fathers, concerning the struggles of these great men and women. Because of their hope in Christ they were stronger than you would think nature would allow. I have committed this book to writing and commend it to your friendly ear, O Lausus, brother and friend of Christ, servant of God. Your divine eloquence is exceptional. You are a paragon among the best and most religious of men, an ornament to this most faithful and religious empire.

As far my limited skill will allow, I mention by name each one of those remarkable athletes for Christ, women as well as men, briefly saying a few words about each of their many great triumphs. For many of them I am able to say what nation and city they came from as well as the place where they spent most of their lives. We mention also some men and women who began by seeking the strength to perfect their lives, but who succumbed to that stupid mother of arrogance called vainglory and were cast down into the lowest pit and abyss of torment.

Through studious practice and hard work over a long period they had brought to birth in themselves great benefits which they lost in one moment of time through arrogance and empty self deception. But by the grace of our Saviour, by heartfelt repentance, and with the help of the holy fathers, they were snatched out of the spiritual snares of the devil and through the prayers of the saints were restored to the life of virtue which they had followed previously. [Palladius' dates are c.365 to 425]

Chapter I

THE LIFE OF ISODORE, PRESBYTER AND XENODOCHUS

I first came to the city of Alexandria during the second consulship of Theodosius, the great emperor, who because of his faithful life in Christ now rests with the angels. There I met Isodore, a wonderful man, accomplished in every way, in speech, wisdom and way of life. He was the presbyter and xenodochus (Greek, "one who gives hospitality". It seems to have been an official position in many of the churches of that time) of the Alexandrian church. As a young man he went to live in solitude, taking upon himself the disciplined struggle. I have seen his cell in Mt Nitria, though I came across him when he was seventy years old, fifteen years before he died in peace.

Up to the day of his death this holy man wore no linen apart from his headband, he had no bath, he ate no meat, he never rose from the table with his appetite fully satisfied. But he always appeared to be in such good bodily health that if you did not know about the sort of diet he had you would have thought he lived well and sumptuously.

Time would fail me were I to try and recount all his many virtues. Because of his unswerving faith in Christ he was so gentle, kind, and peaceful that even the unfaithful and hostile people respected him (or the aura of Christ) for his sheer goodness. He possessed such spiritual grace, knowledge of the Scriptures, and theological understanding that sometimes even at the accustomed time of dining with the brothers his holy mind would go off in a daze, he would fall silent and go into a sort of trance. When asked to tell what had been going on in this state he would say, "My mind had gone off somewhere else, snatched up in a sort of contemplation." I know myself that he was often in tears at the dining table and when asked the reason I heard him say, "I am distressed at having to be fed with this alien food for the reason that I am destined to be led into the delights of paradise, to be fed on ambrosial food, according to the power given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ."

At Rome he was well known to the whole senate and the wives of the nobility from the time that he first went there with the blessed bishop Athanasius, and later with the holy bishop Demetrius.

Although he was well provided with the goods and necessities of life he left no will. He gave no money or anything else to his sisters who were members of a convent of seventy virgins. For he said, "God who created you will also provide for you as he has for me."

When I was young I went to him and asked to be initiated into monastic life. I was a lusty youth at the time, in need not of sermons but of hard labours to subdue the flesh, and a rigorous and severe rule of life to discipline the body. Like a good horse breaker he led me out of the city into the place called the Cells of the hermits, about five miles from the built up areas.

Chapter II

DOROTHEUS of THEBES

He took me to a certain Dorotheus, a Theban athlete who had been living in a cave for sixty years. He told me to live three years with him in order to learn how to control my troubled thoughts, for he knew that the old man lived a fairly hard and disciplined life. At the end of that time I was to go back to him for further spiritual teaching. But I became very ill and being unable to fulfil the three years I left him before the due time.

His way of life was very disciplined, squalid and quite meagre. All day, even in the midday heat, he would gather stones from the waste land near the sea and build cells which he gave to those who didn't know

how to build. He built one each year. I said to him once, "What is the point, father, in your old age, of killing your poor little body in this terrible heat?"

He replied, "I kill it so that it won't kill me." Each day he ate six small pieces of bread and a handful of small olives, and drank a little water. As God is my witness, I never knew him to put his feet up. Of set purpose he never slept in a bed or even a couch but sat the whole night long weaving a rope from palm branches to make a shroud for himself. I wondered whether he had practised such an extreme regime only since I had come to be with him, so I sought enlightenment from several of his disciples as to whether this elaborate and demanding regime was such as he had always practised. They were good and virtuous people, who had each been with him one after another, and they told me that from the beginning he had arranged his life in this way, never deliberately going to sleep except that sometimes in between working and eating he closed his eyes for a cat-nap. Sometimes through lack of sleep the food would just fall out of his mouth when he was eating. Once when I urged this holy man to lie down for a while he sharply replied, "You could persuade the angels to go to sleep first, before persuading someone on a quest for perfection."

One day he sent me to the well at about the ninth hour to fill the jar from which he refreshed himself when the hour for eating was at hand. It so happened that when I got there I saw an asp down below in the well and was too frightened to draw any water and ran back to tell him. "We are in great danger, father," I said, "for I saw an asp down below in the well".

He laughed out loud, understanding my fear very well, and with a shake of his head he said, "If the devil were known to have put serpents, asps, tortoises or any other venomous creature into every well or fountain would you therefore not drink?"

He left the cell, drew some water himself, blessed it with the sign of the cross, drank without taking any food, then said, "Where the cross is, the power of the devil cannot prevail."

Chapter III

THE ACTS AND DISCRETION OF POTAMIAENA

Blessed Isodore the xenodochus told me that he had met the blessed Antony and heard from him a story worthy of being put into writing.

Potamiaena was a beautiful girl who at the time of the Maximian persecutions was the servant of a most intemperate and lecherous person. He importuned her persistently, promising her all sorts of things, but did not succeed in beguiling her. Consumed with rage he decided to denounce her to the Prefect of Alexandria as a Christian and as one who because of the persecutions had slandered the Emperor and his decrees. He promised the prefect a large sum of money for her downfall, saying that if he could persuade her to consent to his desires he would not press for any punishment from her guards. If however she persisted in the inflexibility which she had shown from the beginning he asked for her punishment to be death, lest she should be able to make a mockery of his intemperance if left alive.

This brave virgin was brought before the tribunal and subjected to bodily torture by different instruments of punishment, but remained mentally as firm and steadfast as a tower in spite of many various arguments put to her. Among all the instruments of torture the judge devised one more cruel than all the others that were there. He ordered a large cauldron filled with pitch to be heated by a scorching fire.

When the pitch was hot and boiling fiercely, this heartless judge turned to that blessed woman and said, "Come now, submit to the will of your master, otherwise, you must understand, I shall order you to be thrown into the cauldron."

She replied, "May a judge never be so wicked as to order me to submit to his unrestrained lechery." Infuriated, he ordered her to be stripped and thrown into the cauldron.

She cried out, "By the head of the emperor whom you serve I beg you not to have me stripped, but lower me bit by bit into the cauldron that you may see how bountifully I have been endowed with the patience of the Christ whom you deny."

For a space of three hours she was lowered into the pitch and gave up her spirit when the pitch reached up to her neck.

Chapter IV

THE LIFE OF DIDYMUS THE BLIND

At that time there was a great company of holy men and women gathered together in the church of Alexandria, who were found worthy of being numbered among the meek of this world. Among them was the blessed Didymus, a writer who was blind. I met with him four times over a period of ten years. He died aged eighty-five. He told me that he had lost his eyes when he was four years old, never learned to write, and never resorted to any teachers. All he had was his own conscience, a naturally strong and authoritative teacher. He was so greatly endowed with the grace of spiritual knowledge that in him was literally fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet, "The Lord gives light to the blind" (Psalms. 146.8). He was able to interpret the words of both old and new testaments, and expounded their teachings so subtly and forcefully that he exceeded in wisdom all who had gone before.

In his cell he once asked me to say the prayers but I was not willing to do so. He said to me, "Blessed Antony came to see me three times in this cell, and when I asked him to say the prayers, he immediately prostrated himself in this cell. He did not make me ask him twice, and in so doing gave me a valuable lesson in obedience. So then, if you want to follow in his footsteps by becoming a monk and seeking virtue, don't argue."

He also told me the following story, "One day I was feeling troubled and distressed in mind because of the terrible career of the Emperor Julian and his persecutions, so much so that I could eat nothing from Vespers until late at night, when I fell asleep sitting in my chair. I dreamt that I saw four white horses with riders, galloping along and crying, 'Tell Didymus that today at the seventh hour Julian died, so get up and eat, and send this news to the house of Bishop Athanasius, so that he may know about it also.' I made a note," he said, "of the hour, the day, the week and the month, and so it turned out to be."

Chapter V

THE LIFE OF ALEXANDRA

This blessed man also told me about a certain woman called Alexandra, who left the city and shut herself up in a tomb. She was supplied with what was necessary for life through a window, and was seen by neither man nor woman for ten years. They say that in the tenth year she died in her sleep, so that when those who usually visited her got no reply they came and told us about it. When we got there we broke

down the door of the tomb, went in and found her dead.

Blessed Melania of Rome, whose life I will talk about in due course (Ch CXVII) had this to say about her:

"I was not able to see the face of this blessed woman," she said, "but I stood outside her window and asked her why she had left the city and shut herself up in a tomb. She spoke to me through the window and said, 'There was a certain man who was infatuated with me, and so as not to seem to despise him or cause any ill will, I preferred to shut myself up in this tomb, rather than cause offence to anyone created in the image of God.'

"I said to her, 'How do you manage, you servant of Christ our God, to go on without consulting anybody, and do nothing but battle all alone with your thoughts?'

"'I pray from morning to the ninth hour', she replied, 'and for the rest of the time I meditate upon the lives of the holy fathers and patriarchs, and the struggles of the blessed apostles, prophets and martyrs. After I have given praise to God at Vesper time I take my meal of bread, and spend the greater part of the night in prayer, looking forward to the time when I shall leave this world and appear before the face of Christ our God.'"

I shall not omit to tell of those who have also lived in this kind of way, and let those who read be circumspect and attentive if they would condemn such a one while at the same time praising those who have lived ordinary lives of virtue.

Chapter VI

A CERTAIN VIRGIN WHO STRUGGLED WITH THE LOVE OF MONEY.

There was a certain woman of Alexandria known only as The Virgin who dressed quite modestly but whose nature was niggardly, proud and insolent, governed by avarice, fonder of gold than of Christ. She would not spend a single obol of her money on guests, the poor, the afflicted, the monks, the virgins, or the church. In spite of the many warnings given her by the holy fathers she would not get rid of the heavy burden of her riches. She had a family however, for she had adopted her niece as her own daughter.

Night and day she thought of nothing but spending her treasure on this daughter, and in so doing began to care less for treasure in heaven. One kind of deceit which the devil offers is to encourage avarice under the disguise of family concern. It is obvious that he has no real concern for families, for it is he who encourages fratricide, matricide and patricide, as Scripture proves. (Deuteronomy 12:31). And although it may seem that he sometimes encourages concern for family, it is not in order to do people good but to provoke parents' souls to wickedness.

He is not ignorant of that far-reaching precept, 'the unjust shall not inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 6:9). Of course when your family lacks anything it is quite possible to supply their needs without danger to your soul, as long as you are spiritually aware and your motives are directed towards God. But when you set your whole mind on concern for family to the neglect and exclusion of all else you fall under the condemnation of the law as one who rates the salvation of your own soul as of no importance.

David the sacred psalmist who feared God sings about those who seek their soul's salvation, when he says, 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord' (as if to say, not many) 'or who shall stand in the holy

place? Even he who has clean hands and a pure heart, and has not reckoned his soul to be of no value' (Psalms.24.3). Those neglectful of their spiritual health reckon that their souls are of no value and will disappear when this little body dies. When the holy presbyter, Macarius, saw that this woman, known only by the name of Virgin, had become very negligent in her prayer, he decided to take action to remove from her this insidious fault of avarice.

He was the warden of a hostel for physically disabled people, and in his youth had been a jeweller. "I have come across some precious stones, green emeralds and blue irises," he said to her. "I don't know whether it is a genuine merchant or a thief who owns them, but no price has been put upon them, because I think they are priceless. However, the person who has them is selling them for five hundred solidi. If you would like to have them, give me five hundred solidi. You will be able to get five hundred solidi for one gem alone, and the rest you can use for your niece's benefit."

Totally absorbed in this niece as she was, she immediately conceived a desire to see her decked with this jewellery, and falling at Macarius' feet she begged him not to let any one else get hold of it. "Come to my house and you can see them," Macarius said. "No," she said, "but take these five hundred solidi and buy them yourself if you will. I don't want to see the man who is selling them." Macarius took the money and put it into the funds of the hostel. Some little time passed by and she hesitated to say anything to him, such was the respect in which he was held among the Alexandrians for his faith and generosity.

But at last she went to him at church and said, "Can I ask what is happening about those stones that I gave you five hundred solidi for?" "From the day that you gave me that gold," he said, "I have been spending it on the gems, and if you would like to see them come to my hostel. That is where the gems are. You can see them and if you don't like them you can have your money back." She came eagerly. Now in the hostel the women were in the upper floor and the men in the lower.

When they got there Macarius asked her in the vestibule which she wanted to see first, the irises or the emeralds. "Whatever you like," she said. So he took her upstairs and showed her the women, with distorted limbs and faces disfigured by all kinds of sores. "These are the irises," he said. He took her downstairs and showed her the men. "These are the emeralds," he said. "I don't think there is anything more precious than these. But if you disagree of course you can have your money back."

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