

De Vitis Patrum, Book X

by Heribert Rosweyde

The book 'De Vitis Patrum, Book X' is a collection of stories about the holy fathers and their virtues, written by John Moschus to inspire readers to live a virtuous life.

Scripture: Psalm 1:3, Matthew 12:50, 1 Timothy 2:1, Hebrews 12:1, James 5:16

Topics: "Marian Devotion", "Monastic Life"

Description

Heribert Rosweyde delves into the 'Spiritual Meadow' by Benedict Baker, highlighting the shift in atmosphere and theological reflections in Book Ten, focusing on the reverence towards the Blessed Virgin Mary as 'genetrix Dei'. The book emphasizes the importance of the holy Catholic Church, intercession of saints, and the struggles faced by monks and devout individuals living in cities. Through captivating stories of ordinary people and remarkable feats of faith, the book offers a unique insight into the monastic life and spiritual battles of the time.

Transcript

Introduction to Book Ten, the 'Spiritual Meadow'

by Benedict Baker

In the Spiritual Meadow, we come to writings with a very different atmosphere from those of the earlier Fathers of the 3rd and 4th Centuries. John Moschus' dates are c.550-619, and by the time he was writing the church had been through various theological turmoils which are reflected very clearly in this book. You may search the earlier books almost in vain for any reference to the Blessed Virgin, and then only when referring to the Gospel stories, but in Book Ten there are constant references not just to 'Maria' but to 'Maria sancta Domina nostra Dei genetrix semper virgo', every word of which is directed at some particular heresy.

She is always thought of as a powerful intercessor in Heaven and she is always 'genetrix', not 'mater' as is usual in later Western thought - 'genetrix Dei' is after all a more accurate translation of the Greek 'theotokos, god-bearer' - and anyone who does not believe her to be truly 'genetrix Dei' (birthgiver of God) is a heretic doomed to hell fire, as we read in chapter xvi where a father has a vision of a 'dark and stinking place throwing up flames of fire, and in the flames he saw Nestorius, Eutyches, Apollinaris, Dioscuros, Severus, Arius, Origen and others like them.'

There is safety only in the holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which also references abound. There is a charming story about how one particular priest of a rather simple mind was using a non-Catholic rite until a deacon with angelic help persuaded him of his error (chapter cxcix). Another big difference from the earlier books is the picture one gets of the monastic scene in this later century. The hermits and anchorites are still there, but set very much against the main picture of large settled monasteries.

The ascetic life of the desert is not so much in the forefront as the lives of monks and devout seculars living in cities such as Constantinople, Jerusalem and Alexandria. The word 'abba', meaning 'father', very often becomes amended into 'abbas', in contexts where it is clearly intended to mean what we understand by the English word 'abbot'. There is a difficulty for the translator here, of course, in that there is no distinction possible between the two words in their declined forms.

So I have translated 'abbatem, abbatis' etc sometimes as 'abba' and sometimes as 'abbot', depending on the context. There are fascinating glimpses into the lives of ordinary people also in this book. There is the farmer who rages furiously at monks who carelessly trampled down some of his crops (chapter ccxviii), there are the children playing at being priests in chapter cxcvii. It is interesting also that the word 'presbyter', which means 'elder', is the word most usually used for him who makes the offering at the Eucharist.

The first time 'sacerdos', which really does mean 'priest', is used is in connection with the 'priesthood' of an Archbishop (chapter xlii), and only later as the meaning for those who assist the archbishop in his priesthood (chapter cxcvii). Similarly, the word 'Papa' is used in a manner which completely antedates any exclusive use of the title by the bishop of Rome. There is a delightful story of how Pope Eulogius of Alexandria has a dream in which Pope Leo of Rome visits him to thank him for his support in a theological controversy (chapter cxlviii). It is a fascinating book, but in a quite different way from the wisdom of the earlier books. John Moschus loves telling a good story

De Vitis Patrum, Book X

By John Moschus

Translated into Latin by Ambrosius Camaldulensis

In Praise of the Author This "Book of the Meadow", or Life of the Saints, was written by John, surnamed Moschus, of blessed memory. He was a presbyter and monk, and began his life of renunciation in the monastery of our holy father Theodosius, abbot and archimandrite of all the cenobia and monasteries of Jerusalem. Its subject is the virtues of the God-loving fathers, and other accounts of great benefit to the soul, that is, the words of the holy and righteous Christ-loving fathers and brothers.

He lived for quite some time with the holy fathers who lived in the desert near the sacred Jordan, and gathered together [accounts of] their virtues, which he then included in this book. He lived for a while in the so-called "New" monastery, built by our great and holy Father Saba and his disciples, which remains with us to this day. When he heard of the tyranny with which the Persians were oppressing the Romans after the murder of the Emperor Mauritius [died 602] and his children, he left the New monastery and went to the region of Great Antioch.

Here he found the heathen in control, and moved on again to Alexandria from where he travelled through all the deserts roundabout. (He had previously been sent to Egypt for administrative purposes at the beginning of [the reign of] the Emperor Tiberius II [578-582]). He travelled as far as Oasis and visited the Fathers who were there in the neighbouring deserts. Here he heard that the holy places had been occupied and Romans were panic-stricken, whereupon he left Alexandria and took ship for the great city of Rome along with his beloved disciple Sophronius.

They documented several islands in the course of their journey. This blessed man was so gifted by the Lord that he would put into writing whatever he heard or saw of the lives of outstanding men, and the deeds of power they performed. This plan was put into action when he was at Rome. For knowing that the time of his departure was at hand, he wrote this book, not in the order in which he had seen them or heard of them, but linked together in writing according to the relationship of one to another, whether heard or seen.

When he was about to leave this troubled world, and pass to the world of rest and tranquillity, at the urging of his beloved disciple he gave him this book containing the lives and deeds, acceptable to God, of the holy fathers. He charged him also not to leave his remains at Rome, but to put them in a wooden coffin and try as far as possible to take them to Mount Sinai and bury them there with the holy fathers. If he should be prevented from doing this by ravaging barbarian bands, then he was to take them to the monastery of the holy Theodosius, where he began his renunciation of the world.

In obeying this command his beloved disciple and his fellow disciples (for there were twelve of them), carried John's body away, following the example of the great Joseph, who along with his brothers took Israel from Egypt to the land of his fathers, as Israel had bidden them. He got as far as Ascalon when he learned that he could go no further towards Mount Sinai because of hostile attacks by the Agareni, so he took blessed John's remains to Jerusalem at the beginning of the octave of the Indiction. [September 1.

The beginning of the Byzantine year.] There he sought out Georgius, the presbyter-ruler of the monastery of our holy father Theodosius, and told him all that John had urged upon him. Together with the brothers who came with him, and all the brothers of the monastery who were then in the city, he discharged his duties towards the blessed John by burying him next to the holy fathers buried there in the cemetery of the holy Theodosius as he had been bidden. He himself passed the rest of his life in that same monastery.

This cemetery is in a cave where a story (not in the Gospel) tells us that the Magi rested after tricking Herod by avoiding him as they returned to their own country. In this cave our holy father Theodosius waged his spiritual battles and was granted the gift of casting out demons not only for the space of this short life, but also after his death, even to this day, to the glory and praise of Christ our true God and Saviour, to whom be glory unto the ages of ages. Amen

Prologue of John Moschus

To his beloved in Christ Sophronius Sophista

It is obvious to all, my beloved son, that the meadows present their most beautiful appearance in Springtime, with its pleasing variety of flowers of every sort, demanding the attention of all who gaze, impossible to ignore, beneficial in all sorts of ways, for they delight the eyes and give pleasure to the sense of smell. Part of this meadow indeed flourishes with the colour of roses, part grows white with lilies, easily attracting the attention of the onlooker away from the colour of the roses. Other parts shimmer with

the colour of violets, copying in their own colour the imperial purple. The profusion of various differing sights and fragrances of countless flowers everywhere gratify the senses. Think of this present work like this, Sophronius, my holy and most faithful son, since you will find in it the virtues of the holy men who have enlightened our time "planted by the running waters", as the Psalmist says (Psalms 1.3). And though all of them are acceptable to God and of great grace, yet each one of them is distinguished by some particular grace more than the others, so that out of this great variety of virtues arises a charming picture of pleasing beauty. Out of these flowers I have picked the most beautiful, and woven a corona for you out of this imperishable and everlasting meadow, my most faithful son, which I offer to you, and through you to everyone.

For this reason it seems good to call this present work a Meadow, for the delight, comfort and usefulness which those who read may take from it. It is not only right belief and meditation on divine truth which lead to a life and morals of integrity, but also the examples of other people, and written accounts of their virtuous lives. Therefore I have undertaken this task trusting in the Lord, beloved son, and hoping that it will commend itself to your charity. Just as a bee seeks out only what is useful and true so I have I described the lives of the holy fathers that souls may be enlightened.

Chapter I

The life of the holy old man JOHN and the Cave of Sapsa

There was an old man called John in the monastery of Eustorgius whom the holy Elias, Archbishop of Jerusalem, wanted to put in charge of all the monasteries in Jerusalem. John demurred, saying that he was wanting to travel to Mt Sinai in order to pray there. The Archbishop urged him to be made an abbot first before going off to wherever he wanted. The old man still would not agree, but at last the bishop let him go on the strength of a promise that John would accept this responsibility on his return. He thanked the Archbishop and began his journey to Mount Sinai, taking his disciple with him. They crossed the Jordan and had hardly taken one more step when the old man began to feel stiff and shortly afterwards became feverish. The fever increased to such an extent that he was unable to walk, so they went into a little cave that they found, in order to rest. The fever got so bad that after staying the cave for three days he was still unable to move. The old man then had a dream in which he saw someone standing next to him saying: "Tell me, old man, where are you going?"

"To Mount Sinai", he replied.

"No, I beg you, don't go," came the answer.

The old man would not agree, and the vision faded, but his fever got even worse. The next night the same person appeared and said "Why do you persist in being punished like this old man? Listen to me and stop trying to go anywhere."

"Who are you," said the old man

"I am John the Baptist," came the reply, "and I warn you, don't go anywhere, for this narrow cave is greater than Mount Sinai. For the Lord Jesus quite often used to come into this cave when he was visiting me. Promise me that you will stay here and I will restore your health."

Hearing this the old man freely promised that he would stay in that same cave. His health was immediately restored and there he spent the rest of his life. He made that cave into a church and gathered other

brothers about him. The name of that place is Sapsa, and it is watered by the nearby brook Cherith to which Elias was sent in the time of drought from the other side of Jordan.

Chapter II

The life of an OLD MAN who fed lions in his own cave

In this same area of Sapsa there lived another old man of such virtue that he welcomed lions into his cave and fed them by hand, so full of divine grace was that man of God.

Chapter III

The life of CONON, a presbyter of the monastery of Penthucula.

When we visited abba Athanasius in the monastery of our holy father Saba he told us of an Alexandrian presbyter called Conon who was in charge of Baptisms. The fathers had decreed that the high quality of his character made him worthy of baptising those who came seeking for it. So he anointed with the holy Chrism and baptised those who came. But whenever he had to anoint a woman he became so agitated that he wanted to leave the monastery. While battling with this thought the holy John Baptist appeared to him, saying: "Endure, and persevere and I will lift this burden from you."

One day an attractive young Persian woman came to be baptised who was so beautiful that the presbyter could not bring himself to anoint her bare flesh with oil. When Archbishop Peter heard that the girl had already been there two days he was exceedingly angry with the old man, and even wanted to delegate this ministry to a deaconess, but refrained from doing so as he did not want to be seen to be doing anything contrary to the canons. But Conon the presbyter took his cloak and went, saying that he would not remain any longer in that place. He had got as far as the hills, when behold, the holy John Baptist met him in the way and spoke to him gently, saying: "Go back to your monastery and I will lift this battle from you."

"I certainly will not go back," replied abba Conon indignantly. "You have so often made these promises and not fulfilled them."

Then the holy John made him sit down and take off his clothes. He made the sign of the cross three times on his navel and said: "Believe me, presbyter Conon, I had been hoping that you would have been able to receive a reward because of this battle. As it is, however, look, I have taken this battle away from you, but you have forfeited any reward."

The presbyter returned to the cenobium, to take up once more his baptismal ministry. The next day he anointed and baptised the young woman, hardly even noticing that she was, in fact, a woman. He continued the ministry of baptism for another twelve years in such tranquillity of mind and body that he never experienced any excitement of the flesh, nor consciously thought of anyone specifically as a woman. And so in peace he lived out his days.

Chapter IV

The life of abba LEONTIUS.

Abba Leontius was the superior of the coenobium of our holy father Theodosius. He told us the following story:

After fleeing from the infidels, the monks suffered persecution in a new monastery called a Laura. I went thither and stayed in the same Laura. One Sunday I went to church to receive the sacred mysteries and as I entered I saw an Angel standing at the right hand of the altar. Terrified, I returned to my cell. And a voice came to me from heaven saying: "That altar has been made holy. Therefore I am commanded to remain with it for ever."

Chapter V

A story about three monks told by abba POLYCHRONIUS

Abba Polychronius a presbyter of this same Laura, told me the following story:

When I was in the monastery of Turrius near the Jordan I noticed that one of the brothers was very lax in fulfilling his Sunday duties. But a little while afterwards I noticed that he was fulfilling them with great zeal and devotion.

"You are doing well, now, brother," I said, "curing your own sickness."

"Father, I have but a short time to live", he said.

And in three days he was dead.

A brother in the same monastery of Turrius died, and the steward (dispensator) asked me to do him a kindness and help him carry his effects (vasa) to his office. As we did so I noticed him weeping.

"Why are you weeping so, abba," I asked.

"Today we are carrying my brother's things," he said. "But in two days' time others will be carrying mine."

On the third day this brother rested in peace, as he had predicted. The Lord had established in him a sure hope.

Chapter VI

Another story of POLYCHRONIUS

Abba Polychronius the presbyter also told this story of the time when he was in the monastery of abba Constantinus, the superior of the monastery of St Mary the Birthgiver of God, known as the New Monastery.

A certain brother who died in the guesthouse at Jericho was being taken back by the brothers to be buried at the Turrius monastery. As soon as they began their journey with the body a star appeared over the head of the deceased as a companion for the journey, and did not disappear until they put him in the grave.

Chapter VII

The life of a certain OLD MAN, who refused to be made abbot in the monastery of Turrius

There was another old man in this same monastery of Turrius of such great and obvious virtue that the fathers of that monastery wished to make him their abbot.

"I am not worthy of such an honour", the old man said. "Take no notice of me. Just leave me to weep for my sins. I have no ability in the cure of souls. That is the business of such great and outstanding fathers as Antony, Pachomius and the holy Theodore."

The brothers would not accept this and urged him every single day.

"Let me pray about it for three days," he said at last, overwhelmed by their incessant arguments, "and whatever the Lord tells me to do I will do it."

This was on Good Friday. By the morning of Easter Day he rested in peace.

Chapter VIII

The life of abba MYROGENES, who had dropsy.

In the same monastery of Turrius there was an old man called Myrogenes, who because of the great austerity of his life had developed dropsy. To the old men who came to visit him he always said: "Pray for me, fathers, lest one becomes dropsical inside. As for me, in this disease I pray to God daily that I may endure."

When Archbishop Eustochius of Jerusalem heard about him, he decided to send him a few things which might be needed, but he refused to accept any of them. The only message he sent to the archbishop was: "Pray for me, father, that I may be spared crucifixion for eternity."

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