

Life in the Primitive Church

by Thomas a Kempis

This sermon reflects on the holy and united life of the primitive church in Jerusalem, emphasizing the importance of unity in faith, renunciation of worldly possessions, compassionate care for the poor and sick, and the endurance of persecution for the sake of Christ. It highlights the challenges faced by the early believers, the need for humility, patience, and compassion towards one another, and the ultimate goal of striving for true perfection and heavenly joy amidst earthly trials.

Scripture: Acts 4:32, 1 Peter 3:8, James 1:27, Romans 12:12, 1 Corinthians 13:4, Philippians 2:3, 1 Peter 4:8, Galatians 6:2, Colossians 3:12

Topics: "Unity in Faith", "Compassionate Care"

Description

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Transcript

Of the holy and united life of the primitive church in Jerusalem, the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul in God. Oh, how holy and pleasant was that assembly in the primitive church, gathered by the Holy Ghost, which was proof against disturbance, as long as the unity of faith was kept whole in the bond of charity. To keep this perfectly, very great help is found in the renunciation of proprietorship in temporal goods, conformity in holy conduct, ready obedience in subjects, exemplary life in superiors, loving condescension towards the weak, severe amendment of excesses, due order in divers' office.

And that nothing happily be wanting or lost to the community, all according to their power should promote the common good, that love may be resplendent in all for the holy work, and God be thereby greatly glorified. All these good things are seen first practiced by the holy apostles, and by them afterwards handed down to others of the faithful, but especially commended for imitation to religious and the prelates of the church, for as long as the apostolic life shone in the head and the members, good things were with them, and great grace in all things. And because they sought God and spurned earthly things, temporal goods were added unto them with spiritual gifts, and they were held worthy of so much the greater honor, and more humbly they esteemed themselves and despised all worldly glory.

Well, and moderately they used the gifts received. They did not become haughty in the dignities and benefices bestowed on them, but with fatherly care they ruled their subjects in great discipline. Moreover in compassion they were most generously secured great numbers of the poor and sickly.

They offered likewise words of holy comfort to the afflicted and tempted. They restrained themselves, and others from idle discourse. Knowing that for every word that men shall speak each must render an account in the judgment.

But when some had commenced to cool from the heat of faith, and to turn aside without restraint after ease of the flesh, to seek their own to ambition, honors, alas, at once murmurs arose in the scandals, and the terrors of discord wickedly sown by the evil one appeared, to spoil the grain of the good seed in the Lord's field. But this deadly disease and commencement of dissension the holy apostles met with a most wise counsel, and they chose faithful ministers to provide the needful nourishment to the multitude of the saints. But they themselves were instant in prayer and preaching, as they had been taught by the Holy Ghost, preferring spiritual to temporal things.

And they brought forth the witness of the law and the prophets to settle the questions that were moved and the cases that arose. And the Holy Ghost went still further in bestowing His gifts more fully upon the newly converted. For He filled some of the believers with the spirit of prophecy for the consolation of the primitive church.

He appointed others teachers for the instruction of the ignorant. He converted also many priests and masters of the law to the gospel truth. He likewise wrought many signs and wonders among distant nations to spread the Catholic faith.

The implacable foe, the devil, saw this and envied. He grieved and moved the kings and princes of the earth to rage arms and pursue the faithful on all sides. And because more plenteous grace flourished in Jerusalem, and the apostolic fervor commenced to make greater increase, therefore Satan stormed more furiously there, and strove to crush the beginnings of the budding church with the scourge of persecution, and to drive them from their dwellings to foreign nations.

But this malice of the devil and temporary persecution of the faithful, God turned to the salvation of many, and to the more widespread knowledge of His holy name. And the temporal tribulation of the just was made the washing away of vice. And what the crafty tempter had designed for their destruction, the loving Savior ordained for the crown of patience.

For if there had not been so grievous a persecution in the world, there would not be so many martyrs crowned in heaven. For many of the faithful resolved rather to shed their blood than to deny the faith, and more willingly to undergo death than depart from the love of Christ. Far be it, far be it, that Satan should be more powerful with his foes to harm than Christ with His holy angels to defend.

For the malignant spirit could have done nothing against the pious unless God had justly suffered it, who, knowing the deeds and strengthening of each, by such occasions of sorrow, raised his elect to everlasting glory, and buried their foes by an exorbitant damnation and eternal fire. Thus good and bad, according to their deserts, merit to receive what is just, for the justice of God leaves no good unrewarded, and no evil unpunished. Nor should it scandalize weak souls, that so soon terrors and many murmurings arose in the church.

For the evil are always mingled with the good, and some imperfect walk with the perfect. For the more holy they are, the fewer they are, as we experience in the diverse religious places. For the number of beginners is seen greater than the number of the perfect, and the total of the contemplative is fewer than that of the active.

Amid many subjects also few are found fitted for office, and for ruling themselves and others well still fewer. Herein appears human weakness, and our pride is humbled, that we are so prone to vice, and so slow to pursue the more perfect. No one, however, can rightfully reproach another that he is wanting and unsuited, for as another is weak, so art thou also.

A rare bird is true perfection on earth, and in every place are found broken vessels. Every man then should have his eye upon himself, and pity in his erring neighbor, nor be angry if at times he transgresses. Whence blessed James saith, In many things we all offend.

We must have recourse then to the confession of humility, that where the shortcoming of our holiness is wanting, the acknowledgment of our own weakness may supply. And so much the more humble, let us be in all things, the more distant we are from true perfection. In sinning and in falling we are brethren, no one is sure of his perseverance.

As long then, as we live here, it is necessary to bear with the weak, and also to have some foes. For Christ long bore with the imperfection of his disciples, and often heard columnies of the Pharisees, who was in all things perfect. But God knows that the adversities of this world lead to much good, which are seldom wanting to the good and right of heart.

For by these thorns and distresses the soul is drawn back from earthly pleasures. The heart is aroused to the love of heavenly things. A man is exercised in patience.

He learns to compassionate the afflicted. He is humbled in grief. He is made like the sufferings of Christ.

He becomes more compunctious, less dissipated. He prays more fervently. He groans more frequently.

He wearies of living. He longs to be dissolved and to be with Christ. Because there is no peace in this world.

But the loving Lord, who knows what is more wholesome for us, often delays to grant the desires of his servants for the sake of the better, that thereby they be more fitted in purity to obtain the promised joys in heaven. He hears their cry. He sees the trouble of the afflicted.

But he does not immediately take away their grief, that they may merit the more by endurance of evils. He pities certainly, and hears unto their salvation, but not always unto their own desire. And because he decrees to give them a kingdom of everlasting happiness, he mingles with their life diverse cups of bitterness, that they may not place their hope in earthly things, nor love their exile more than the fatherland of heavenly bliss.

But temporal miseries, patiently born, avail very much for the washing away of sins, for the reconciliation of the divine mercy, for the lessening of purgatorial pain, for the gaining of greater grace, for the increase of higher glory to come. What man is so pure, so guarded and perfect in all his conduct from morning even on to night, who does not fail sometimes in word or deed or thought, knowingly or unknowingly, who is possessed of so good a conscience that he has nothing to confess, who is so chaste and abstinacious

that he fears not to be reprov'd of some fault in the judgment to come? For all things shall be very closely searched in the presence of God, the most righteous judge, even those things that now seem of little or no account. While therefore there is time and room for mercy, let us all together repent and fervently amend ourselves.

God is kind. He freely pardons our faults if we truly acknowledge and grieve for them. And since we are brothers in Christ, let us pray for one another, as brotherly charity demands.

Let us serve one another, support one another, warn one another, comfort one another, rejoice together, be sad together. Let us love one another, as Christ also has loved us, and delivered Himself for us, who long bore with us in our offenses of the past, and still daily bears with our imperfections in the hope of amendment, that we may learn to compassionate our neighbors and pray for them. Heeding these things and doing them, we shall fulfill the law of Christ, and we shall be His true disciples and most dear friends.

Beloved of the Father, adopted by the Son, enkindled by the Holy Ghost, predestined and blessed by all the Holy Trinity, then also of us shall that be able to be said and verified, which is written in the Book of Mormon.

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