

2. Language of the Flesh (chaps. 5–16)

CHAPTER 5

The flesh speaks of delights and pleasures, at times clearly, and at other times, under the heading of necessity. The war waged against us by this enemy, besides being very troubling, is more dangerous, because it fights with pleasures, the strongest weapons of all. Thus, many who have not been overcome by riches, honors, or cruel torments, have been overcome by pleasure. It is no wonder that this happens, for the war is so hidden and treacherous that much caution is needed to defend oneself. Who would believe that under cover of soft and sweet pleasures, death, eternal death, comes hidden? Death is the most bitter of all things, while delight is sweetness itself. False pleasure is a golden cup with poison inside that intoxicates those who look only at external appearance. It is the treachery of Joab (cf. 2 Sam 20:9–10), who killed Amasa as he was embracing him; it is the treachery of Judas, who, with a false kiss of peace, handed his blessed Master over to death (cf. Luke 22:47). So, when one drinks from the pleasure of mortal sin, Christ dies in the soul, and when he is dead, the soul dies, because its life comes from him. This is what Saint Paul says: "If you live according to the flesh, you shall die" (Rom 8:13). In another place he says that "the widow that lives in pleasures is dead while she is living" (1 Tim 5:6). She lives in the life of her body but is dead in that of her soul. The more closely the flesh is joined to us, the more it is proper to fear it, for the Lord says that "a man's enemies are those of his own house" (Matt 10:36). Not only does the flesh belong to our house, but it is one of its two walls.

For this and other reasons, Saint Augustine said that "the struggle of our flesh is continual and the victory very difficult."⁵⁶ Anyone who wants to emerge victorious must go armed with many strong weapons. The precious jewel of chastity is not given to all, but to those who, through the labor of many earnest prayers and holy deeds, obtain it from our Lord. He desired to be wrapped in a clean linen sheet, passed through many scrubblings to become white. This teaches that the man who wants to arrive at or to preserve chastity, and thus to have Christ lodge within himself as in a new sepulcher, must be content to earn this purity at great cost and labor. So rich is this virtue that whatever the cost, it is a bargain.

Those who have offended our Lord a great deal must perform many more difficult works of penance and satisfaction than those who have offended less. All of us who live in the flesh must fear it, watch

over it, hold it in check, and rule it with prudent moderation. But those who are especially assaulted need particular remedies and labors. Therefore, those who feel this necessity within themselves must first of all deal severely with their flesh by cutting down on food and sleep, by using a hard bed and the hair shirt, and by other helpful means of this kind. As Saint Jerome says, "Through fasting are the plagues of the flesh healed."⁵⁷ Saint Hilary addressed his own flesh: "I will tame you and make sure that you do not kick any more, but that, hungry and weary, you will think more about eating than about lust."⁵⁸ Saint Jerome advises the virgin Eustochium that, even though she was raised with many delicacies, she should be serious about abstinence and corporal penances. He assures her that without this medicine she will not be able to possess chastity.⁵⁹ If weakness of the flesh or damage to health follows from such treatment, Saint Jerome says in another place that "it is better that the stomach should suffer rather than the soul, that you command the body rather than serve it, that the legs tremble from weakness rather than that chastity should waver."⁶⁰ (It is also true that elsewhere he says that fasts should not be so excessive as to weaken the stomach. In still another place he corrects some whom he learned had run the risk of losing their judgment through excessive fasting and vigils.)

In all these things, it is impossible to lay down a general rule that fits everyone. Some means help some and not others, and what harms the health of one person may not harm another. Also it is one thing when the war is so fierce that a person is in danger of losing chastity, in which case it is fitting to inconvenience the body so that the soul may live. But it is another thing to struggle with a moderate temptation in which a person does not fear such great danger and does not have to put forth such great effort to have the victory. Taking the most fitting means in these cases is the responsibility of the one who prudently guides the person being tempted, but both must pray humbly to our Lord that he will give his light in all this. Saint Paul, a "vessel of election" (cf. Acts 9:15) did not trust his flesh. He says that he chastises it and brings it into subjection lest, while he preaches to others about living virtuous lives, he might himself become wicked (1 Cor 9:27) by falling into some sin. How can we, who have less virtue and greater causes for fear than Saint Paul, think that we can be chaste without disciplining the body? It is very hard to preserve humility in the midst of honors, temperance in the midst of abundance, and chastity in the midst of pleasures. Anyone who sought to quench the fire burning up his house by throwing dry wood on it would be worthy of scorn. Much more worthy of scorn are those who, on the one hand, desire chastity,

and on the other hand, satiate their flesh with delicacies and pleasures and give themselves to idleness. These things not only do not quench the fire that is already burning, but they suffice to rekindle it where it has been practically quenched. The prophet Ezekiel testifies that the reason why the unfortunate city of Sodom arrived at the height of such an abominable sin was "the fullness and abundance of bread and the idleness which it had" (Ezek 16:49). Who will dare to live in pleasures and idleness, or even to look on them from afar? For the things that were able to produce the greater sin in them can more easily produce lesser sins in us. Let those who love chastity also love temperance and discipline of the flesh. If they seek to have the one without the other, they will not succeed but will end up with neither. What God has joined together, no one should desire to separate (cf. Matt 19:6). Nor will anyone be able to do so, even if he so desires.

CHAPTER 6

The remedy of afflicting the flesh that we have spoken about usually helps when temptations spring from the flesh, as happens with young people and those in good health who are used to the pleasures of the flesh. In these cases it is helpful to apply the remedy to the flesh since that is the root of the infirmity.

In other cases the temptation may come from the devil. One sign by which to recognize this is that the struggle is more with thoughts and foul images than with impure feelings in the body. If there are such feelings, the temptation did not begin in them. Rather, the temptation that began in thoughts leads to feelings in the flesh. As the flesh is sometimes very weak and almost dead, evil thoughts can be very lively in it. This happened to Saint Jerome, according to his own account.⁶¹ Another sign that such temptations come from the devil is that they come suddenly, when the person least wants them, and when there is least motive for them. Such temptations do not respect times of prayer or of Mass, or sacred places, where a person, however wicked, usually is reverent and abstains from such thoughts. At times, these thoughts are so many and so terrible that the person never heard, knew, or thought of the kinds of things that come to his imagination. By the strength with which they come and by the things he hears within himself, the person experiences that they do not spring from himself, but that another says and does them. When you have these and other signs, hold it as certain that the devil is persecuting the flesh. But what you suffer in the flesh does not spring from there. This war is more dangerous than that against the flesh, in that the one who wages it wishes

such evil upon us. He is an enemy who never wearies of the fight, whether we are awake or sleeping, and at all times and places.

The remedy for this evil is to find some good occupation that requires attention and effort, by which one may forget such foul images. With this intention, Saint Jerome, by his own account, undertook the study of the Hebrew language, with much labor though not without fruit. He says: "Let the devil always find you well employed."⁶² So advantageous is this for those living in monasteries that Jerome gives the following advice:

See that every day you perform whatever is in your charge and submit yourself to whomever you would not. Go to bed so weary that, even as you are walking along, you are falling asleep. Oblige yourself to get up before you have satisfied your desire for sleep. Recite your psalm when it is your turn; serve your brethren and wash the feet of strangers; when you are wronged, be quiet. Fear the abbot of the monastery as though he were a lord and love him as a Father. Believe that everything that he commands is good for you. Do not judge your superiors since your office is to obey and fulfill what is commanded, according to the words of Moses: "Hear, O Israel," and hold your peace (cf. Dt 6:3). If you are occupied in such matters, there will be no place for evil thoughts, and as you pass from one occupation to another, keep in mind only what you are obligated to do in the present.⁶³

This is what Saint Jerome says, and in conformity with it, it was the custom in the monasteries to exercise their young men more in good occupations than in solitude and lengthy prayer, because of the danger that might, and at times did, come upon them, because of their flesh and its as yet unmortified passions.

But even this rule has its exceptions, because people have different dispositions and receive their particular gifts from God. Consequently, there may be just cause for allowing a young man to have a long period of time for prayer while shortening that of someone who is older. I said that young men should not be occupied in long prayer. By "long prayer" I mean that in which almost all their time is spent as if they had no other office. But not to permit him to have some periods of prayer would be a very great error because of the goods he would lose. Also, for a person to perform any occupation well, it is necessary for him to gain spirit and strength in prayer. Otherwise, those who are busy at their work often complain and go about grumbling. Without the tenderness of devotion, they are like a heavily loaded cart with squeaky wheels.

Let beginners be warned that the devil particularly tries to trouble them with impure images at the time of prayer. He does this to make them leave prayer and that he may take a rest. Though the devil tires us out a lot with his temptation, we tire him much more, and our devout prayers even set him on fire. Therefore, he tries to prevent us from making them or from making them well. But we must, as it were, stubbornly, do everything possible not to stop our exercise of prayer, for even the persecution that he wages against us demonstrates how advantageous it is. If the war presses down on us while we are praying mentally, and we sense that we are in danger from impure images, we must do everything possible to pray vocally. We can beat our breast, mortify our flesh, extend our arms in the form of a cross, raise our hands and eyes to heaven, asking the Lord for help. In this way we end by spending well the time designated for prayer. We might also do something to distract ourselves, especially speaking with a wise person who may encourage us. However, this last has to be a last resort, lest our weakness become used to trying to conquer by flight, and lest our enemy cause us to leave the battlefield and to lose our strength for fighting. In the end, when it is good for us, our Lord, full of pity and full of power, will command our adversary to keep quiet and not to prevent the secret and friendly conversation we were accustomed to have with the Lord.

CHAPTER 7

These skirmishes in the war of chastity usually happen when the Lord permits his warriors to be tested to determine if they truly love him and the chastity for which they struggle. Once he has found them faithful, he sends his omnipotent favor and forbids our adversary to hinder our peace and secret conversation with him. Man then rejoices at the work accomplished; he is aware of it, and it is more meritorious.

It is also necessary, and very much so, for preserving chastity, to avoid familiar conversation of women with men, however good or close in relation these men might be. The ugly and unexpected falls that have happened in this world ought to be for us a perpetual warning of our weakness, and the lessons we learn from others' punishment should disabuse us of any false security. Our pride would promise us that we, weak as we are, will pass through without injury, where those who were so strong, wise, and, what is more, such great saints, were very seriously wounded. Who will trust in blood relationship, reading of the error of Ammon with his sister Tamar (2 Sam 13:11-14), and many other very ugly things and worse, which have happened to per-

sons blinded by this bestial passion of the flesh? Who will trust in his own holiness or anyone else's, seeing David, "a man according to God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14), so blindly fallen into many ugly sins, only for looking at a woman (2 Sam 11:2-4)? Who will not tremble at his own weakness, hearing of the sanctity and wisdom of King Solomon when he was young, and the horrible falls against chastity that corrupted his heart in old age, so that he even set up a throng of idols and adored them as the women he loved did and desired (1 Kgs 11:1-8). Let no one be deceived in this, or trust in chastity past or present, even though he feels his soul to be very strong and hard as a stone against this vice. The experienced Jerome spoke a great truth: "Lust masters souls of iron."⁶⁴ Saint Augustine did not want to live in the same house with his sister, saying: "The women who converse with my sister are not my sisters."⁶⁵ Through this path of modest reserve all the saints have traveled, and we ought to follow them if we do not wish to stray.

Therefore, my daughter in Christ, do not be careless in this. Rather, hear and fulfill what Saint Bernard says: "Virgins who are truly virgins fear in all things, even in those that are safe."⁶⁶ Those who do not act this way are soon seen to be as miserably fallen as at first they were miserably deceived by false security. Even though pardon of sin is obtained through penance, the crown of lost virginity is not attained. It is a horrible thing, says Saint Jerome, if a young woman who was awaiting a crown should have to ask pardon for having lost it.⁶⁷ It would be as if the king had a much-loved daughter whom he kept for a marriage in conformity with her dignity. When the time for it came, the daughter told him that she asked pardon for not being ready for the marriage because she had disgracefully lost her virginity. The remedies of penance, says Saint Jerome, are remedies for misfortunes, and there is no greater misfortune or misery than to commit mortal sin, for the remedy of which penance is needed.⁶⁸ Therefore, you should work with all vigilance to be faithful to the one who has chosen you and to keep what you have promised him, because you know by experience what is written: "Know and see what a bitter thing it is to have left the Lord your God, and that his fear has not been with you" (Jer 2:19). But rejoice at fecundity, and at the name of the chaste spouse, and at the crown that is prepared for such.

CHAPTER 8

Be aware that the devout do not at first understand their falls as what they are, and for that very reason, such falls are more to be feared. At first, the devout think that they experience benefit in their souls