

*A Prayer to Christ*¹⁷

Where's the injustice? I was born human—well and good!
 But why am I so battered by life's tidal waves?
 I'll speak my mind—harshly perhaps, yet still I'll speak:
 Were I not yours, my Christ, this life would be a crime!
 We're born, we age, we reach the measure of our days;
 I sleep, I rest, I wake again, I go my way
 With health and sickness, joys and struggles as my fare,
 Sharing the seasons of the sun, the fruits of earth,
 And death, and then corruption—just like any beast,
 Whose life, though lowly, still is innocent of sin!
 What more do I have? Nothing more, except for God!
 Were I not yours, my Christ, this life would be a crime!

THREE PRAYERS FOR A DAY¹⁸*A Morning Prayer*

At dawn, I raise my hand in oath to God:
 I shall not do or praise the deeds of darkness.
 Rather, this day shall be my sacrifice;
 I shall remain unshaken, rule my passions.
 My age would shame me, if I were to sin,
 As would this altar over which I stand.
 Thus my desire, my Christ: you bring it home!

An Evening Lament

O Truth, O Word, this morning I deceived you,
 Marking this day as yours by consecration!
 Night finds me now not fully in the light,
 Although I prayed and hoped that might be so;
 My feet have strayed and stumbled here and there.
 The dark has come, begrudging me salvation.
 Be light for me, O Christ—shine here once more!

A Prayer to Christ the Next Morning

Yesterday, Christ, turned out a total loss!
 Rage came upon me, all at once, and took me.
 Let me live *this* day as a day of light.

Gregory, look—be mindful, think of God!
 You swore you would; remember your salvation!

*Supplication*¹⁹

Christ, light of mortals, pillar of glowing flame
 For Gregory's soul, wandering this bitter waste:
 Curb Pharaoh, hold his taskmasters in check,
 Rescue my feet from Egypt's shifting mud,
 Chasten my enemies with unsightly plagues—
 Give me a level way! And if my foe
 Should close on me in rage, come, split apart
 The Red Sea, let me cross it like a road
 To destiny and dry land, as you promised.
 Stop the vast rivers, turn aside the spears
 Of fierce invaders; if I ever reach
 Your holy land, I'll sing your praise forever.
 Lord Christ, why have you snared me in this flesh—
 This chilly life, this muddy pit of squalor—
 If I am, as they say, your heritage,
 Truly divine? My limbs have lost their strength,
 My knees won't hold me. Time has done me in,
 And raging illness, and consuming care,
 And friends whose thoughts are those of enemies.
 My sins won't let me be, but track me down,
 In weakness, just as dogs track down a hare
 Or circle a fawn, craving to eat their fill.
 Have mercy, bring this misery to an end,
 Or else decide I've struggled long enough
 And take me, set some measure on my pain;
 If not, then let the sweet cloud of forgetting
 Enfold my mind and shroud me in its veil.

from life only half-perfected, or leave anything belonging to herself imperfect. She was also not disappointed in this request, by the one who accomplishes the will of those who fear Him, and brings their earnest longings to completion.

21. When everything had taken place according to her plans, and none of her desires remained unfulfilled, and the appointed day was near, she made final preparations for death and for her departure from this world, and fulfilled the law that governs these things by taking to her bed for the last time. And having given the kind of instructions to her husband and children and friends that might befit one who loved husband and children and fellow human beings as she did, having reflected luminously about the things of heaven and so turned her last day into a festival,⁶⁶ she fell asleep: not full of years according to human reckoning—for she never asked that from God, knowing that human days are evil, and most of them full of dust and error—but indeed full of days according to God, to a degree that one who dies in rich old age, and counting many turns of years, might not so easily claim. So she found her end⁶⁷—or, to put it better, she was taken up, or flew away; she was brought to a new dwelling place; she withdrew for a while, in advance of her own body.

22. But think of what I have almost omitted from her story! Yet perhaps you would not have allowed me to do so—you who were her spiritual father, who carefully observed the wonder and made it known to us.⁶⁸ It is a great thing, both for her own credit and as a way of reminding us of her virtue and leading us to long for a death like hers. Yet a shiver runs over me and a tear starts in my eye, as I recall the marvel.

She was at the point of deliverance and was breathing her last; a chorus both of family and outsiders stood around her, chanting the funeral prayers. Her aged mother was bowed beside her, her soul torn apart by a kind of envious desire to experience such a departure. For all, affection was mingled with anguish: some longed to hear something, as an ember for the memory;⁶⁹ others wished to say something, but did not dare. Their tears were mute, the agony of their grief incurable, for it seemed irreverent to honor one departing in such a way with lamentations. The silence was deep—death-seemed a rite of initiation! She lay, to all appearances, without breath or motion or sound; the silence of her body seemed due to a kind of paralysis, as if her organs of speech were already dead, because that which could set them in motion had slipped away. But her shepherd, who observed every aspect of her life with care, because all of them were wonderful, noticed that her lips were gently moving and put his ear near them; he drew courage to do so from his own manner of living, and from his sympathy with her. You tell us, now, the mystery of her peace—what it was, what was its meaning! No one will disbelieve it if you say it! It was a psalm that she was

murmuring—psalmody was her language in death! Blessed be anyone who goes to his rest with words such as these: “In peace, all at once, I shall lie down and fall asleep.”⁷⁰ That is what she, the most beautiful of women, prayed in your ear, and indeed, it came true: the psalm-verse both described what happened, and became a motto to accompany her departure. How well you have come to peace after all your sufferings, receiving the sleep due the beloved, as well as our common sleep of death! This was only fitting for you, who have lived and died with the words of piety on your lips!⁷¹

23. Your present joys, I know well, are far more precious than the joys of this visible life: the sound of festival, choruses of angels, the heavenly army, a vision of glory, and yet another, higher illumination, purer and more perfect than that of this world, the light of the Trinity, which no longer eludes a mind bound and diffused by the senses but is contemplated as a whole by the whole mind, grasping us now and letting its radiance illumine our souls with the full light of the godhead. Now you enjoy all the things which, while yet on earth, you possessed only in distant distillations, through the clarity of your instinct for them.

If you still take any account of the honors we pay you—if this, too, is part of the reward God gives holy souls: to be aware of such things—then receive our discourse, too, in place of, even in preference to, the many memorial gestures we have paid, to Caesarius before you⁷² and now to you in your turn. For we have been spared by God to speak the funeral orations of our brother and sister! Whether or not anyone will honor us in a similar way, after both of you, I cannot say. In any case, let us only be honored with the honor that is in God, whether we still live here in exile, or have finally come to live in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for all ages. Amen.

2. ORATION 14: ON THE LOVE OF THE POOR

One of Gregory's most moving orations, *On the Love of the Poor* is an appeal to a Christian congregation to notice the destitute (especially the homeless victims of an outbreak of leprosy) in their own city and to open their homes to them in compassion; probably it was originally delivered in Caesarea during the years 369–371. Like the two Biblical homilies of Gregory of Nyssa dealing with the same theme, it seems to form part of a campaign to win public support for the efforts of Basil of Caesarea to organize relief for the poor and sick, a project that culminated in the opening of a new hostel for the homeless just outside Caesarea during the early years of Basil's work there as bishop (370–379).⁷³ Gregory begins here with a discussion of human virtue, leading to the conclusion that it is human kindness, or “love

of humanity" (φιλανθρωπία), that makes us most closely resemble God. After a reflection on the highly ambivalent situation in which our present condition of embodiment places us, Gregory moves on to speak of physical disease and human want, of the deceptiveness of material pleasures and possessions, and of the hidden ways of Providence in allotting different degrees of well-being to the human race. Drawing on a dazzling array of Biblical texts, he then makes an eloquent appeal to his listeners to use their own resources to express their love for their neighbors in misery, reminding them that love of one's neighbor is, for the Christian, the most direct way of loving Christ.

*Oration 14: On Love of the Poor*⁷⁴

1. Brothers and sisters, poor with me—for all of us are beggars and needy of divine grace, even if one of us may seem to have more than others when measured on a small scale—accept my words on love of the poor, not in a mean spirit but generously, that you may be rich in God's Kingdom; and pray that we may bestow these words on you richly, and nourish your souls with our discourse, breaking spiritual bread for the poor. Perhaps we may make nourishment rain from heaven, as Moses did in ancient times, lavishing on you the bread of angels; or perhaps we may feed many thousands in the desert with a few loaves, and leave them satisfied, as Jesus later did, who is the true bread and the source of true life.

Now it is no easy matter to find the supreme virtue and award it first place, as conquering the rest—just as in a flowery, fragrant meadow it is not easy to find the fairest and most fragrant flower, since each one draws our sense of smell towards itself, urging us to pluck it first of all. But as it seems best to me, at least, to divide the subject, let us consider these things as follows.

2. "Faith, hope and love, these three,"⁷⁵ are all a good thing. And the example of faith is Abraham, who was justified by faith.⁷⁶ The example of hope is Enos, who was first to be moved by hope to call on the name of the Lord,⁷⁷ along with all those just ones who suffer because of their hope. And the example of love is the divine Apostle, who dared to speak out even against his own best interests for Israel's sake,⁷⁸ and also God himself, who is called love.⁷⁹ Hospitality is a good thing; among the just its example is Lot, who came from Sodom but did not imitate Sodom in his actions, while among sinners it is Rahab the harlot, who was not a harlot by choice and who was praised and spared because of her hospitality. Love of one's brothers and sisters is a good thing; its example is Jesus, who was ready not only to be called our brother, but even to suffer for our sakes. Love of humanity is a good thing; its example is the same Jesus, who did not only

create the human person for the sake of good works,⁸⁰ and unite his image to clay as a guide towards the highest things and a harbinger of heavenly life, but himself also became a human being for us. Patience is a good thing; again, he is its example, who did not only decline the help of legions of angels against those who had risen up against him to oppress him, nor only rebuke Peter when he drew his sword, but who restored the ear of him who had been struck.⁸¹ Gentleness is a good thing; its examples are Moses and David, who embodied this virtue before all others, as well as their teacher, who "did not quarrel or cry out, or make his voice heard in the streets,"⁸² not struggle against those who led him away.

3. Jealous zeal is a good thing; an example is Phineas, who slew the Midianite with the sword along with the Israelite,⁸³ to remove shame from the children of Israel, and who made a name for himself by this decision. After him, there were others who said, "With zeal I have been jealous for the Lord,"⁸⁴ and "I am jealous for you with a divine jealousy,"⁸⁵ and "Jealous zeal for your house consumes me."⁸⁶ Mortification of the body is a good thing; let Paul persuade you, who continued to keep himself in training, and who was fearful for Israel because they relied on themselves and indulged the body; Jesus himself fasted, and in time of temptation conquered the tempter. Prayer and watching are a good thing; let God himself⁸⁷ persuade you, who stayed awake to pray the night before his passion. Chastity and virginity are a good thing; let Paul persuade you, who laid down rules for these things, and acted as impartial judge on questions of marriage and celibacy.⁸⁸ And Jesus himself was born of a virgin, that he might both honor childbirth and give first honor to virginity. Self-control is a good thing; let David persuade you, when he gained control of the well at Bethlehem and then did not drink, but only poured out the water on the ground, not being willing to slake his own thirst at the cost of others' blood.⁸⁹

4. Solitude and silence are a good thing; my teachers in this are Elijah's Carmel, or John's desert, or Jesus' mountaintop, to which he often seems to have withdrawn, to be by himself in silence and peace. Frugality is a good thing; here my teacher is Elijah, who lodged with a widow, and John, who was cloaked in camel's hair, and Peter, who fed himself on a few pennyworth of lupines.⁹⁰ Humility is a good thing, and there are many examples of this on all sides; before all the rest is the Savior and Lord of all, who did not only humble himself as far as taking "the form of a slave,"⁹¹ or simply expose his face to the shame of being spat upon, and let himself be "counted among sinners"⁹²—he who purged the world of sin!—but who washed the feet of his disciples dressed as a slave. Poverty and contempt for money are a good thing; examples here are Zacchaeus and Christ himself: the former, by putting almost all his wealth at the disposal of others when Christ entered his house,⁹³ the latter by defining perfection in these terms when he spoke with the rich

man.⁹⁴ To put it still more concisely concerning all these virtues, contemplation is a good thing, and action is also a good thing: the first, when it raises us up and leads us to the Holy of Holies, guiding our mind upwards towards what is akin to it; the second, when it receives Christ as its guest and looks after him, revealing the spell of love by its works.

5. Each of these virtues is one path to salvation, and leads, surely, towards one of the blessed, eternal dwellings; just as there are different chosen forms of life, so there are many "dwelling places" with God,⁹⁵ distributed and allotted to each person according to his merit. So let one person cultivate this virtue, the other that, another several, still another all of them—if that is possible! Let each one simply walk on the way, and reach out for what is ahead, and let him follow the footsteps of the one who leads the way so clearly, who makes it straight and guides us by the narrow path and gate to the broad plains of blessedness in the world to come. And if, following the command of Paul and of Christ himself, we must suppose that love is the first and greatest of the commandments, the crowning point of the law and the prophets, I must conclude that love of the poor, and compassion and sympathy for our own flesh and blood, is its most excellent form. For God is not so served by any of the virtues as he is by mercy, since nothing else is more proper than this to God, "before whom mercy and truth march as escorts,"⁹⁶ and to whom mercy is to be offered as a sacrifice in preference to justice;⁹⁷ nor will human kindness be repaid with anything else than the same kindness, by him who makes just recompense and weighs our mercy with his balance and scales.⁹⁸

6. We must open our hearts, then, to all the poor, to those suffering evil for any reason at all, according to the Scripture that commands us to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep."⁹⁹ Because we are human beings, we must offer the favor of our kindness first of all to other human beings, whether they need it because they are widows or orphans, or because they are exiles from their own country, or because of the cruelty of their masters or the harshness of their rulers or the inhumanity of their tax-collectors, or because of the bloody violence of robbers or the insatiable greed of thieves, or because of the legal confiscation of their property, or shipwreck—all are wretched alike, and so all look towards our hands, as we look towards God's, for the things we need. But of all these groups, those who suffer evil in a way that contradicts their dignity are even more wretched than those who are used to misfortune. Most especially, then, we must open our hearts to those infected by the "sacred disease" [i.e., leprosy], who are being consumed even in their flesh and bones and marrow, just as some have been threatened in Scripture.¹⁰⁰ They are being betrayed by this deceiving, wretched, faithless body!

How I am connected to this body, I do not know, nor do I understand how I can be an image of God, and still be mingled with this filthy clay; when it is in good condition, it wars against me, and when it is itself under attack, it causes me grief! I love it as my fellow servant, but struggle against it as an enemy; I flee it as something enslaved, just as I am, but I show it reverence as called, with me, to the same inheritance. I long that it be dissolved, and yet I have no other helper to use in striving for what is best, since I know what I was made for, and know that I must ascend towards God through my actions.

7. So I treat it gently, as my fellow worker; and then I have no way of escaping its rebellion, no way to avoid falling, weighed down by those fetters that drag me or keep me held down to the earth. It is a cordial enemy, and a treacherous friend. What an alliance and an alienation! What I fear, I treat with honor; what I love, I fear. Before we come to war, I am reconciled to it, and before we have made peace, I am at odds with it again. What wisdom lies behind my constitution? What is this great mystery? Is it God's will that since we are part of him, drawn in an upward stream, we should always look towards him from the midst of a fight and struggle with the body, so that we might not be lifted up by our own dignity and think ourselves so high that we begin to look down on our creator? Is this weakness with which we are joined a kind of training for that dignity, making us aware that we are both the greatest and the most lowly of creatures, earthly and heavenly, temporal and immortal, heirs of both light and fire, or even of darkness, depending on which way we may lean? Such is the blend of our nature, and for this reason, it seems to me, whenever we are exalted in spirit because of the image [of God], we are humbled because of the earth. Let anyone so inclined speculate!¹⁰¹ about these things—we will speculate with him at a more appropriate time!

8. Now, however, as I feel pain at the weaknesses of my own flesh and sense my own weakness in the sufferings of others, what reason urges me to say is this: brothers and sisters, we must care for what is part of our nature and shares in our slavery. For even if I lay charges against it, because of its passibility, still I stand by it as a friend, because of the one who bound me in it. And we must, each of us, care no less for our neighbors' bodies than our own, the bodies both of those who are healthy and of those who are consumed by this disease. "For we are all one in the Lord, whether rich or poor, whether slave or free,"¹⁰² whether in good health of body or in bad; and there is one head of all, from whom all things proceed: Christ. And what the limbs are to each other, each of us is to everyone else, and all to all. So we must by no means overlook or neglect to care for those who experience our common weakness before we do, nor should we delight more in the

fact that our bodies are in good condition than we grieve that our brothers and sisters are in misery. Rather, we must consider this to be the single way towards the salvation both of our bodies and of our souls: human kindness shown towards them. Let us examine this point together.

9. For most people, only one thing causes misery: something is lacking. Perhaps time, or hard work, or a friend, or a relative, or the passing of time has taken it away. But for the people I am speaking of,¹⁰³ misery is present even more abundantly, in that the resources to work and to help themselves in need have been taken away along with their flesh, and the fear of growing weaker is always greater to them than the hope of recovery. Indeed, they find little support in hope, which is the only drug that really helps the unfortunate. In addition to their poverty, illness is a second evil: the most abominable and depressing evil of all, suggesting to many the most obvious formula for a curse! And a third evil for them is the fact that no one will approach them, that most will not look at them, that all run away from them, find them disgusting, try to keep them at a distance. So that for them something still more burdensome than the disease is to perceive that they are hated because of their misfortune. I cannot bring myself to think about the suffering of these people without tears, and I am brought to confusion when I recall them; you should feel the same way yourselves, that you might put tears to flight with tears. I know, in fact, that those among you who love Christ and love the poor do feel this way; for you have received the gift of sharing God's mercy from God himself, and you give witness to your feelings yourselves.

10. There stands before our eyes a terrible, pitiable sight, unbelievable to anyone who did not know it was true: human beings both dead and alive, mutilated in most parts of their body, scarcely recognizable either for who they are or where they come from; they are, rather, wretched remnants of once-human beings. As marks of identification, they call out the names of their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters and homes: "I am the son of so-and-so, so-and-so is my mother, this is my name, you were once my dear companion!" They do this because they cannot be recognized by their former shape; they are truncated human beings, deprived of possessions, family, friends and their very bodies, distinctive in being able both to pity themselves and hate themselves at once. They are uncertain whether to lament for the parts of their bodies that no longer exist, or for those that remain—those which the disease has consumed, or those left for the disease to work on. The former have been consumed most wretchedly, the latter are still more wretchedly preserved; the former have disappeared before their bodies are buried, the latter have no one who will give them a burial. For even the kindest and most humane of neighbors is insensitive to them; in this instance alone, we forget that we are flesh, clothed in this lowly body,

and we are so far from caring for our fellow creatures that we think the safety of our own bodies lies in fleeing from them. One approaches a body that has been dead for some time, even if it has begun to reek; one carries about the stinking carcasses of brute animals, and puts up with being full of filth; yet we avoid these lepers with all our might (what inhumanity!), almost taking offense at breathing the same air they breathe.

11. Who could be more upright than a father? Who more sympathetic than a mother? But nature's operation is shut off even for them. The father looks at his own child, whom he begot and raised, whom alone he considered the light of his life, for whom he prayed often and long to God, and now both grieves over that child and drives him away—the first willingly, the second under compulsion. The mother recalls the pangs of childbirth and her heart is torn apart: she calls his name wretchedly, and when he stands before her she laments for her living child as if he were dead: "Unfortunate child of a miserable mother, bitter disease has come to share you with me! Wretched child, unrecognizable child, child whom I have raised only for the cliffs and mountaintops and desert places! You will dwell with wild beasts, and rock will be your roof; only the holiest of people will ever look on you!"¹⁰⁴ Then she will utter those pitiable words of Job, "Why were you formed in the womb of your mother? Why did you not come forth from her belly and immediately perish, so that death and birth might have been simultaneous? Why did you not depart prematurely, before tasting the evils of life? Why did these knees receive you? Why were you allowed to suck at these breasts, since you were going to live so wretchedly, a life more difficult than death?"¹⁰⁵ So she speaks, and lets loose floods of tears; the unfortunate woman wishes to embrace her child, but fears his flesh as if it were the enemy. From all the neighbors come loud shouts and gestures, driving him away—cries not directed against criminals, but against the wretched. There have been instances when people have allowed a murderer to live with them, have shared not only their roof but their table with an adulterer, have chosen a person guilty of sacrilege as their life's companion, have made solemn covenants with those who have wished them harm; but in this person's case suffering, rather than any injury, is handed down as a criminal charge. So crime has become more profitable than sickness, and we accept inhumanity as fit behavior for a free society, while we look down on compassion as something to be ashamed of.

12. They are driven away from the cities, driven away from their homes, from the market-place, from public assemblies, from the streets, from festivals and private celebrations, even—worst of all sufferings!—from our water; not even the springs flow for them, though they are common property for everyone else, nor are the rivers allowed to wash off any of their impurities. Most paradoxical of all, we drive them away as bearers of pollution, yet we

draw them back towards us again, as if they caused us no distress at all, by giving them neither housing, nor the necessary food, nor treatment for their lesions—by not cloaking their disease, as far as we can, with some form of covering.¹⁰⁶ For this reason they wander around night and day, destitute and naked and homeless, showing their disease publicly, talking of the old times, crying out to their Creator, crafting songs that constrain us to pity, asking for a bit of bread or some tiny scrap of food, or for some tattered rag to protect their modesty and offer some relief to their sores. The kindest person, for them, is not someone who supplies their needs, but someone who does not send them off with a sharp word. Most of them, too, are not ashamed to appear at festivals—just the opposite: they thrust their way into them, because of their want. I am speaking both of public festivals and of the sacred ones that we have instituted for the care of our souls, when we come together either because of some mystery of faith or to celebrate the martyrs who witnessed to the truth, so that by paying honor to their struggles we might also imitate their piety. These people feel shame at their condition, surely, before their fellow human beings, since they are human themselves; they would wish to be hidden by mountains or cliffs or forests, or finally by night and darkness. Yet they throw themselves into the midst of the crowd, nonetheless, a wretched rabble worthy of our tears. Perhaps this all has a reason: that they might remind us of our own weakness, and persuade us not to lean on any of the present things we see around us, as if it were stable. They throw themselves into our midst, some from a longing to hear the human voice, others to see a face, others in order to gather up some scanty provisions from those who are feasting—all of them making their laments public, in hope of tasting some form of gentleness in return.

13. Whose heart is not broken by the mournful cries of these people, sounding forth a kind of pitiable music? Whose ear can bear the sound? What eye can take in the sight? They lie alongside each other, drawn into a kind of sickly bond by their illness, each one contributing another instance of misfortune to the general misery. They add to each other's suffering, wretched in their weakness and still more wretched in the fact that it is shared. A mixed audience gathers around them, touched with compassion—but only for a moment. They toss around in the hot sun and dust, at the feet of their fellow men and women; at other times they will lie there, suffering in the bitter frost, in rainstorms and violent winds. The only reason they are not trampled under our feet is that we shrink from touching them. The wail of their begging offers a counterpoint to the sacred singing within the church, and a miserable dirge is produced, in contrast to the sounds of the Mysteries. Why must I depict all their misfortune to people celebrating a feast day?¹⁰⁷ Perhaps it is that I might stir up some lament in your own hearts, if I carefully play out every detail; perhaps suffering will triumph

over celebration! For I say all this, since I have not yet been able to convince you that sadness is sometimes more precious than joy, and gloom than celebration—a tear more praiseworthy than unseemly laughter.

14. This is how they are suffering, and much more miserably than I have said: our brothers and sisters before God (even if you prefer not to think so) who share the same nature with us, who have been put together from the same clay from which we first came, who are strung together with nerves and bones in the same way we are, who have put on flesh and skin like all of us, as holy Job says when reflecting on his sufferings and expressing contempt for our outward form.¹⁰⁸ Or rather, if I must speak of greater things, they have been made in the image of God in the same way you and I have, and perhaps preserve that image better than we, even if their bodies are corrupted; they have put on the same Christ in the inner person,¹⁰⁹ and have been entrusted with the same pledge of the Spirit;¹¹⁰ they share in the same laws as we do, the same Scriptural teachings, the same covenants and liturgical gatherings, the same sacraments, the same hopes. Christ died for them as he did for us, taking away the sin of the whole world;¹¹¹ they are heirs with us of the life to come,¹¹² even if they have missed out on a great deal of life here on earth; they have been buried together with Christ, and have risen with him;¹¹³ if they suffer with him, it is so they may share in his glory.¹¹⁴

15. And what about us, who have inherited the great new name, in being called after Christ—us who are “the holy people, the royal priesthood, the people set apart,”¹¹⁵ specially chosen, “eager for good and saving works,”¹¹⁶ disciples of the gentle and kindly Christ, who “bore our weaknesses”¹¹⁷ and humbled himself so far as to share in the mixture of our nature, who “became poor for our sakes”¹¹⁸ in this flesh and “this earthly tent,”¹¹⁹ and suffered pain and weakness for us, so that we might be rich in divinity? What about us, who have received such a great example of tenderness and compassion? How shall we think about these people, and what shall we do? Shall we simply overlook them? Walk past them? Leave them for dead, as something loathsome, something more detestable than snakes and wild animals? Surely not, my brothers and sisters! This is not the way for us, nursed as we are by Christ, the Good Shepherd, who brings back the one gone astray, seeks out the lost,¹²⁰ strengthens the weak;¹²¹ this is not the way of human nature, which lays compassion on us as a law, even as we learn reverence and humanity from our common weakness.

16. Yet they live their wretched lives under the open sky, while we live in splendid houses, adorned brightly with stones of every color, glittering with gold and silver and mosaics¹²² and colored paintings, deceptive allurements for the eyes! We live in some of these houses; we are in the process of building others—but for whom? Perhaps not for our heirs, but

for strangers and foreigners, or even for those who do not love us, but are hostile and envious enemies—the worst fate of all! These people shiver in thin and tattered rags—perhaps they are not so lucky as to have even that—while we corrupt ourselves with soft and flowing robes, woven of linen and silk light as air, and make with them an impression more of disorder than of dignity; our clothes are stored away for us in chests—a useless and unprofitable precaution!—as food for the moths and for time, which consumes all things. These people are not even supplied with the most basic nourishment (how can I be so refined, while they so repine?), but lie before our doors, faint and starving, not even possessing the bodily power to beg; they have lost voices to lament with, hands to stretch out in supplication, feet to approach those with possessions, noses to give resonance to their complaints; and—though they judge this heaviest of all burdens to be lightest—with their eyes they can only give thanks, because they cannot look on their own mutilation.¹²³

17. Such is their condition. Yet we, by contrast—glorious figures that we are—lie back in splendor on high, raised beds, with coverings so exquisite one scarcely dares handle them, and we are annoyed if we hear so much as the sound of their pleading. For us, the floor has to be scented with flowers, often even out of season, and the table must be sprinkled with perfumes of the most fragrant and expensive kind, to encourage our decadent tastes all the more. Serving boys stand nearby; some of them in an orderly row, with flowing hair and effeminate appearance, their locks fashionably cropped around their faces, groomed far better than they should be, for the sake of hungry eyes; others hold wine cups carefully with their fingertips, trying to be as proper and as safe as possible, while still others use woven fans to circulate the air above us, cooling our fleshy hulks with artificial breezes. Beyond all this, the table is laden with food, which all the elements—air, earth, water—abundantly put at our service; it is crowded with the masterpieces of chefs and pastry-makers. There is a competition among them all, as to who can most flatter our hungry and ungrateful belly, that heavy burden that is the root of all our ills, that insatiable and untrustworthy beast, soon to be eliminated along with the foods it eliminates. For those standing outside, it is a great thing to have enough water; but for us, the bowls of wine are kept full until we feel merry—or rather, until the more intemperate of us are well beyond merriment. We send one of the wines away, savor another for its “nose,” wax philosophical about a third, and are disappointed if one of the well-known foreign names does not subdue our local wine as reigning emperor. For we simply must be—or be thought to be—people of refined tastes, furnished well beyond our needs; it is as if we were ashamed not to be thought wicked, not to be slaves of the belly and the regions below it!

18. What do you make of all this, my friends, my brothers and sisters? Why do we suffer ourselves from this spiritual sickness—a sickness much more serious than that of the body? I am convinced, after all, that as much as the one is involuntary, the other comes from our choice; as much as the one ends with this life, the other goes with us when we are brought to the next; as much as the one is pitiable, the other is hateful, for anyone of sound mind. Why do we not help our own natural kin, while we have time? Why do we not take steps to protect them in the lowly state of their flesh, since we are flesh ourselves? Why do we feast in the face of our brothers' and sisters' misfortunes? Let it not be so with me—let me not be rich while they are destitute, nor be in good health if I do not tend their wounds, nor have enough food or covering, nor rest under a roof, if I do not offer bread to them, and give them something to wear and a shelter to stay in, as far as I am able! Surely we must either give all things away for Christ's sake, so that we may follow him truly, taking up our cross, so that we might take our flight unburdened towards the world above, well equipped and held back by nothing, so that we might gain Christ at the expense of all else,¹²⁴ exalted through humility and made rich by poverty; or else we must share our goods with Christ, so that our possession of them may at least be sanctified by our possessing them well, by our sharing them with those who have nothing. Even if I were to sow for myself alone, I would still, surely, be sowing what others would later eat. To use the words of Job again, “Instead of wheat, nettles would come forth, and instead of barley, brambles;”¹²⁵ a burning wind would come up, and a violent storm would carry off my efforts, so that I would have labored in vain. And even if I were to build storehouses to save what my money has earned, this very night I would be asked for my soul,¹²⁶ and must give account for what I have improperly acquired.

19. Shall we not finally come to our senses? Shall we not cast off our insensitivity—not to say our stinginess? Shall we not take notice of human needs? Shall we not identify our own interests with the troubles of others? By nature, nothing human is lasting or in equilibrium, nothing is self-sustaining, nothing remains the same. There is a cycle in our affairs, often bringing new changes, of different kinds, in a single day or even in a single hour; and it makes more sense to trust in the inconstant breezes, or the wake of a ship sailing on the ocean, or the deceitful dreams of night that offer us joy for a while, or the forms that children make in the sand as they play on the beach, than it does to trust in human prosperity. The prudent ones, then, are those who do not rely on present circumstances, but make their treasure of what is yet to come, and who, because of the inconstancy and irregularity of human welfare, love that human kindness that never passes away. As a result, they will profit in one of three ways: either they will

never undergo misfortune themselves, since God so often forms bonds between his reverent followers and those who will later be kind to them, letting kindness call forth a similar response; or else they will feel free to ask for what they need from God, knowing that when they experience misfortune, it is not in return for wickedness, but for some providential reason; or else, finally, they will be able to ask for generosity from other prosperous people as something that is their due, since when things were prosperous for them they gave to those in need.

20. "Let not the wise person boast about his wisdom," we read, "nor the rich about her wealth, nor the mighty about his strength"¹²⁷—even if they should have reached the very summit of these things: one of wisdom, the other of possessions, the third of power. And in the same line of thought, I will add this: let not the person of good reputation boast in his glory, nor the healthy person in her bodily well-being, nor the handsome person in his good looks, nor the youth in her tender years, nor let the person puffed up with pride, to put it in a word, boast in any of the things that are praised in this world. Rather, let the one who boasts boast only in this: that he knows and seeks God, and grieves along with those who suffer, and lays away a deposit that will serve him well in the age to come. For these temporal things are fluid and temporary, and like the pieces in the game of draughts will be thrown away or passed on, in other circumstances, to other people; nothing belongs so properly to its owner that it will not either cease to exist out of age, or be transferred to others out of envy. But our possessions before God stand firm; they remain and are never taken away, never collapse, nor do they deceive the hopes of those who trust in them. For this reason, it seems to me that none of the good things of this world is trustworthy or long-lasting for us who are mortal. Rather, it seems that this has been devised best of all by the creative Word, by the Wisdom which surpasses every mind: that we should be set here to play among visible objects which change and are changed, now in one direction and now in another, and which are borne up and cast down again, vanishing and eluding us before we can grasp them, so that when we consider the instability and variety in all these things, we might turn to pursue what still lies ahead. For what would we have done if our prosperity here were something that abides, seeing that even when it is unstable we are so attached to it, and the deceptive joy it brings with it so enslaves us that we cannot imagine anything better or more valuable than the things of this present world—and this even though we have heard and believe that we are made in the image of God, an image which exists in a higher world and draws us towards itself?

21. "Who is wise, and understands these things?"¹²⁸ Who will pass beyond the things that are passing away? Who will attach himself to the things that last? Who will come to recognize the things now present before

us as destined to leave us, and the things we hope for as all that stands firm? Who will make a distinction between what is and what only seems to be, and pursue the one while letting the other go? Who will distinguish mere pictures from truth? Or this tent below from the city that is above? Or a temporary residence from a permanent home? Or darkness from light? Or the slime of the abyss from holy ground? Or flesh from spirit? Or God from the ruler of this world? Or the shadow of death from eternal life? Who will purchase what is to come for the price of present realities? Or the wealth that cannot be destroyed with that which is always in flux? Or what is unseen with what is seen? Blessed is the one who can make such a distinction, wielding the sword of the Word to separate what is better from what is worse! As holy David says, he has built steps in his heart,¹²⁹ and fleeing this deep valley of tears as far as he can, he "seeks the things that are above;"¹³⁰ crucified to the world with Christ, he rises from the dead with Christ and ascends with Christ to inherit the life that never fades or deceives—where no serpent lies on the way, ready to strike, watching for his heel and guarding its own head.¹³¹ To the rest of us, the same David cries out with good reason, like a loud-voiced herald shouting from a high public platform, and calls us slow of heart, lovers of lies,¹³² so that we might not be excessively attached to visible things, or suppose that all our happiness in this world consists only in satiating ourselves with corruptible bread and wine. Perhaps, too, this is what blessed Micah was thinking when, struggling to resist the specious blessings that come from below, he said, "Draw near the eternal mountains; rise and move on, for this is not the place of your rest."¹³³ This phrase, after all, is almost the same as the very words which our Lord and Savior gave us as a command. What did he say? "Rise, let us go from here!"¹³⁴ He was not simply urging the disciples of that time to move on from that place, as one might think; rather, he was attempting to draw all his disciples, in every age, away from earth and the things that surround it, towards heaven and heavenly things.

22. For this reason, let us now follow the Word. Let us seek our rest in the world to come, and cast away our surplus possessions in this world. Let us only hold on to what is good from all these things: let us come to possess our souls in acts of mercy, let us share what we have with the poor, in order that we may be rich in the things of the world to come. Give a portion of your goods to your soul, not simply to your flesh; give a portion to God, not simply to the world. Take something away from the belly and consecrate it to the spirit. Snatch something from the fire, store it far from the flame that eats away from below. Snatch it from the tyrant, and entrust it to the Lord. Give a share to the "seven"—that is, to this life—and also to the "eight"—to that which awaits us after this.¹³⁵ Give a little to him from whom you have received much; even give your all to the one who has given

all to you. You will never surpass the lavish generosity of God, even if you throw away all things, even if you add yourself to the possessions you give away. For this, too, is a way of receiving: to be given to God! However much you contribute, there is always more left over; and you are never giving away what is your own, since everything comes from God. And just as it is not possible to step over our own shadow, which moves along exactly as far as we do, and always reaches out the same distance before us—just as the height of a body cannot exceed the head, since the head is always above the body—so, too, it is impossible to outdo God in our giving. For we never give him anything apart from what belongs to him, nor beyond his munificence.

23. Recognize the source of your being, your breath, your power of thought, and (greatest of all), your power to know God and to hope for the Kingdom of Heaven, for equality with the angels, for the vision of glory—which now you have only “in a mirror and in riddles,”¹³⁶ but which someday will be more perfect and pure—for the chance to become a child of God, a fellow-heir with Christ, even (I make bold to say) to become yourself divine. From where do all these gifts come—and from whom? Just to mention the small and obvious things: who gives you the ability to look on the beauty of heaven, the course of the sun, the cycle of the moon, the multitude of stars, and the harmony and order that rules in all these things as in a lyre, always remaining the same? To witness the passing of the hours, the changes of season, the turning of years, the equal measures of day and night; the products of the earth, the abundance of the atmosphere, the breadth of the sea as it constantly flows yet remains, the depths of the rivers, the blowing of the winds? Who gives you the rains, the skill to raise crops, food, crafts, houses, laws, civilized society, an easy way of life, family relationships? Whence is it that some animals are tame and are subject to you, while others are provided for your food? Who appointed you lord and king of all things on earth? I will not mention every detail—but who endowed you with all the gifts by which the human person stands out over all other creatures? Is it not he who now, before all else and rather than all else, demands from you kindness towards other human beings? Are we not, then, ashamed, if receiving so much from him, either in fact or in hope, we do not give back this one thing to God: kindness towards our fellow men and women? God has separated us from the wild beasts, and honored us alone, of all creatures on earth, with reason; shall we, then, make ourselves into beasts? Are we so corrupted by our luxurious life, or have we gone so mad, that—I find it hard to put it into words—we come to think we are better by nature than others, as if we were barley mixed with bran in a careless harvest? And just as there was once (or so the myths tell us) one race of giants and another of ordinary humans, shall we be lofty and super-human in contrast to them,

like the famous Nimrod, or the race of Enak, who once harassed Israel, or like those who made it necessary that the flood purge the earth? God is not ashamed to be called our Father, though he is our God and Lord; shall we, then, deny our own human family?

24. Surely not, my friends—my brothers and sisters! Let us not be irresponsible stewards of the good things that have been given us, lest we hear St. Peter say, “Shame on you, who hold back what belongs to others! Imitate the even-handedness of God, and no one will be poor!”¹³⁷ Let us not labor to gather up treasure and protect it, while others labor in poverty, lest someone rebuke and threaten us in the words holy Amos once used: “Come, now, you who say, ‘When will the month be over, so that we may begin selling again? And the Sabbath, that we may open up our money-boxes?’”¹³⁸—and in the words that follow, in which those who have devised long and short weights for themselves are threatened with the wrath of God. In the same vein, blessed Micah¹³⁹ was perhaps attacking the same thirst for luxury when he insisted that surfeit breeds arrogance, while people behaved wantonly on their ivory couches, vainly anointing themselves with choice perfumes, feasting on tender calves from their stables and kids from their flocks, applauding in time with the music of pipes, and—worse still—thinking that there was something about all this that was stable and lasting. Yet perhaps he did not regard all this as so serious, compared with the fact that in their affluence they were not the least affected by the oppression of Joseph,¹⁴⁰ for he adds this to his charge of over-consumption. Let us not allow this to happen to us, nor carry our own fine tastes to such an excess that we, too, begin to make little of the kindness of God; he is angered by such behavior, even if he does not express his wrath against sinners immediately, or simultaneously with their crimes.

25. Let us imitate God’s highest and first law, which makes the rain fall on the just and sinners, and makes the sun rise equally on all.¹⁴¹ He has spread out the unsettled land for everyone on earth, with springs and rivers and forests; he provides air for the winged species, and water for all whose life is spent there; he lavishes the basic supports of living ungrudgingly on all—not putting them under the power of force, or the limits of law, or the divisions of geographical boundaries—but sets them forth as the rich and common possessions of all, not in any way lessened for this reason. Beings of like rank in nature he honors with equal gifts, and so he shows how rich his own generosity is. But human beings, in contrast, bury their gold and silver and their soft, unneeded clothing in the ground, along with their shining jewels and other riches of this kind—all tokens of violence and discord and primeval oppression—and then they raise their eyes in incomprehension, shutting off the stream of mercy from their unfortunate fellow mortals. They do not even wish to use their surplus to help others in

need (what lack of feeling! what foolishness!), nor do they even consider this, as a final argument: that the things we call poverty and riches, freedom and slavery, and other, similar names, are themselves only later acquisitions of the human race, and are like a kind of common disease that attacks us along with sin, and is a symptom of it. "From the beginning," however, as the Lord says, "it was not so."¹⁴² The one who created the human person in the beginning made him free and able to determine his own behavior, subject only to the law he had commanded, and rich in the luxury of Paradise. And God willed to bestow this freedom on the rest of the human race as well, through the single seed of our first ancestor. Freedom and riches consisted simply in observing the commandments, while true poverty and slavery came from their transgression.

26. But ever since envy and quarreling have appeared among us, and the treacherous domination of the serpent, who constantly trips us up with lust for pleasure and sets the more aggressive of us against the weaker, the human family has been shattered into a variety of names, and greed has destroyed the noble beginnings of our nature, making an ally even of law, the surrogate of political power. Yet think, I beg you, of humanity's original equality, not of its later diversity; think not of the conqueror's law, but of the creator's! As far as you can, support nature, honor primeval liberty, show reverence for yourself and cover the shame of your race,¹⁴³ help to resist sickness, offer relief to human need. Let the one with good health or with riches come to the aid of the ailing and the needy; let the one who has never stumbled help the one who has fallen and is being trodden down. Let the one in good spirits comfort the dispirited, the one who flourishes in the best of circumstances support the one who is bowed over beneath the worst. Give some sign of thanks to God, because you are one of those who can do favors for others, rather than one of those who need favors done for them—because your eyes are not fixed on the hands of others, but others' eyes are on yours. Make someone else rich, not only with your surplus but with your piety, not only with your gold but with your virtue—or better still, only with this! Become more eminent than your neighbor by showing yourself more generous; become a god to the unfortunate, by imitating the mercy of God.

27. For a human being has no more godlike ability than that of doing good; and even if God is benefactor on a grander scale, and humans on a lesser, still each does so, I think, to the full extent of his powers. He created us, and restored us again by setting us free; you must not overlook the one who has fallen. He has shown mercy to us in the greatest ways, above all by giving us the law and the prophets, and even before them the unwritten law of nature, the standard of judging all our deeds; he examines us, admonishes us, trains us, and finally he has given himself as ransom for the life of the

world. He has lavished on us apostles, evangelists, teachers, shepherds, healers, wonderful signs, a way that leads to life, the destruction of death, a trophy of victory over the one who had conquered us, a covenant in shadow and a covenant in truth, gifts that let us share in the Holy Spirit, the Mystery of new salvation. As for you, if you are also capable of greater things, do not fail to do good for the needy with the gifts with which your soul is blessed—for God has made you rich in this way, too, if you only wish to be so. Give a share in these things, first and foremost, to the one who asks your help, even before he asks you; all day long, "have mercy and lend" him God's word,¹⁴⁴ and earnestly demand your loan back, with the growth of the one you have helped as your "interest"—for he always adds something to the word you have given by letting the seeds of piety grow a little more within himself.

But if you cannot do this, give the secondary, smaller gifts, as far as is in your power: come to his help, offer him nourishment, offer her a scrap of clothing, provide medicine, bind up his wounds, ask something about her condition, offer sage advice about endurance, give encouragement, be a support. Surely you will not pose any danger to yourself by doing this much! Surely you will not catch the condition, even if skittish people, deceived by foolish rumors, may think so—at least, they offer this excuse for what is either timidity or impiety on their part, and take refuge in cowardice as if it were some great sign of wisdom. Let the scientists, members of the medical profession, and those who live with these poor people and care for them, convince you that no one ever ran any danger by associating with people suffering in this way.¹⁴⁵ And even if the reality is frightening and moves us to take precautions, do not you, O servant of Christ—lover of God and of your fellow men and women—fall into a sordid state yourself! Have confidence in your faith; let your mercy conquer your cowardice, your fear of God overcome your squeamishness; let your piety take precedence over your thoughts for the welfare of your flesh. Do not overlook your brother, do not pass your sister by, do not turn them away as something polluting or unclean, as some alien thing, to be avoided and cursed. This is part of your body, even though it is bowed down by misfortune. The poor man is left to your mercy, as he is to God's.¹⁴⁶ Even if you are hurrying by, full of arrogance, perhaps I can shame you with these words! The opportunity for being generous is before you, even when our Adversary tries to turn your heart against receiving God's gifts.

29. Such things reason teaches, as well as the law; so do people of moderation, for whom good action is more precious than passivity, and mercy more worth pursuing than profit. But what would you say about those considered wise among us? I will not even speak of the pagans, who consider the gods as conspirators in the life of passion, and offer their first-

fruits to Apollo the Money-Maker.¹⁴⁷ Worse still, they believe that there are spirits, active among certain peoples, who encourage manslaughter; cruelty is for such people a part of piety, and they both enjoy performing human sacrifice themselves and think their gods enjoy it, too, for they are wicked priests and initiates of wicked deities. But there are also some among us—although it is enough to make one weep—who are so far from offering compassion and help to the oppressed that they even blame them bitterly, and trample them down. They develop vain and empty theories about them, and speaking really “from the earth,” they shout their words into the wind, not addressing those understanding ears that are used to divine teachings. They dare to say, “The suffering of these people is God’s work, just as prosperity is God’s work in us. Who am I, then, to countermand the judgment of God? Shall I seem kinder than God is? Let them be sick, let them suffer, let them be unfortunate! Such is God’s will!” These people only talk about loving God when they feel the need to guard their pennies, and to make silly speeches against the wretched. They make it crystal-clear from what they say that they do not believe their own prosperity comes from God. For who would think in such a way about the needy, if he recognized God as the source of his own possessions? It is part of the same attitude, after all, to consider what we have a gift from God and to use the things we have according to God’s will.

30. It is not clear whether or not the sufferings of the poor are from God, as long as this material realm is characterized by disorder, as if it were a flowing stream. Who can tell if one person is being punished for his vices, while another is being exalted as a gesture of praise? Could it not be just the opposite: the one is exalted because of wickedness, the other put to the test because of virtue? The one is being raised higher, in order to fall more grievously, allowing all his own viciousness to break out, that he might then be all the more justly punished. The other, contrary to our expectations, is oppressed, so that, being tried like gold in a furnace, he might allow to melt away even whatever little vice remains. No one, as we hear, is completely pure of every stain—no one, at any rate, who is born to share in this nature—even if he should appear quite respectable. I find a mystery of this kind expressed in holy Scripture, although I have no intention to enumerate all the sayings of the Spirit that lead me to this conclusion. But “who could measure the sand of the sea, or the drops of rain, or the depth of the abyss?”¹⁴⁸ Who could trace out in every detail the profundity of God’s Wisdom, from which God made all things and by which he governs it in the way he wills and knows? It is enough for us, with the divine Apostle, simply to contemplate this inexplicable, inconceivable Wisdom and to exclaim in wonder: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, how untraceable his ways!”¹⁴⁹ “Who

has known the mind of the Lord?”¹⁵⁰ “Who has come to the end of his Wisdom?” as Job says.¹⁵¹ “Who is wise, and understands these things?”¹⁵²—and does not rather measure what is beyond measuring by the standard of the unattainable?

31. Let someone else speak rashly and arrogantly about these things—or better still, let no one dare to do so. I, for one, am hesitant to explain all this life’s trials as punishment for vice, or all human comfort as a reward for piety. There are times, rather, when the bad experiences of the wicked serve a useful purpose in checking wickedness, and when the positive experiences of the good open the way to virtue—but not always or in every case. Such universality only belongs to the time to come, when the one group will receive the rewards of virtue, the other the punishment of vice; “for these shall rise,” Scripture says, “to the resurrection that is life, but those to the resurrection of judgment.”¹⁵³ The events of this present life are of a different form and have a different moral purpose, although all lead in the same direction; surely what seems to be unfair to us has its fairness in the plan of God, just as in the physical world there are prominent and lowly features, large and small details, ridges and valleys, by which the beauty of the whole comes into visible existence in their relationship to each other. It is, after all, very much within the skill of the Craftsman if he should adapt the occasional disorder and unevenness of the material realm to achieve the purpose of his creation; and this will be grasped and acknowledged by all of us, when we contemplate the final, perfect beauty of what he has created. But he is never lacking in the skill of his art, as we are, nor is this world ruled by disorder, even when the principle by which it is ordered is not apparent to us.

32. But if we must use some image to describe our situation, it might not be off the mark to speak of nauseous or dizzy people, who think that everything is revolving around them, when in fact it is they who are in a spin: that is what the people are like, of whom I speak. For they do not allow that God may be wiser than they are, if they become confused about some event in their lives. In fact, what they should do is either struggle to find the reason, trusting that the truth will be revealed to earnest labor, or consult seriously with those wiser and more spiritually gifted than themselves—since this, too, is one of the Spirit’s gifts, and knowledge is not shared equally by all—or else pursue this knowledge by purifying their lives, and seek wisdom from Wisdom itself. But they, in their supreme ignorance, turn to easy answers, and falsely complain of the irrationality of the universe, when it is they who do not understand what reason is. They are wise through ignorance; or rather, through their exaggerated claims to wisdom, if I may call it that, they have come to be without both wisdom and understanding. So some of them put forward theories about fate and determinism—ideas which are themselves constructed in a purely accidental and unplanned way;

others speak of a certain irrational, indestructible domination by the stars, which weave our affairs as they will—or rather are also subject to determination in the way they weave it—and of the conjunctions and withdrawals of the planets and fixed stars, and the sovereign movement of the universe. Still others attribute whatever their imagination can contrive to the long-suffering human race, and divide among a variety of theories and titles all the aspects of Providence that they cannot fathom by their contemplative powers. And there are others, too, who detect great poverty on the part of Providence; although they think that the things beyond our senses are governed by it, they shrink from bringing it down to our level, who need it most—as if they feared that by saying God showers blessings on all of us, they should show their benefactor to be too generous, or suspected that God might grow tired by doing good for too many!

33. But let us dismiss these people, as I have said, since Scripture has already well refuted them in the words, "Their foolish heart has been led into vanity; by saying that they are wise, they have been made foolish, and they have traded away the glory of the incorruptible God,"¹⁵⁴ slandering the Providence which works in all things by talking of myths and shadows. As for us, let us not produce such monsters as these, if reason matters at all to us, who claim to be reasonable people and servants of Reason himself;¹⁵⁵ nor let us be receptive towards those who think this way, even if they score some verbal points with fanciful phrases and doctrines, and delight in novelty. Let us, instead, believe that God is the maker and shaper of all that is—for how could the universe exist, unless someone had given it being and arranged it harmoniously? And let us include with our faith belief in God's Providence, containing and connecting this universe, since it is necessary that the one who is creator of all things should also have providential care for them. Otherwise, the universe would be borne along by its own internal forces, like a ship before a whirlwind, soon to be shattered and scattered by the unruliness of matter, and reduced to the disorder of the primal, pre-cosmic confusion. Let us rather accept that our own maker or shaper (whatever you prefer to call him) is fully in charge of our affairs, even if the course of our lives is influenced by opposing forces—forces which remain unknown, perhaps, precisely that we might wonder at the Reason above all things, because it is so difficult to recognize. For what is easily grasped seems utterly despicable; but what is above us is all the more wonderful, the more difficult it is to attain. Everything that lies beyond the reach of our appetite simply stimulates our longing.

34. For this reason, let us not admire every form of health or reject all illness; let us not allow our hearts to become attached to the wealth that passes away, or be devoted to unstable things more than is good for us, and so allow some part of our soul to be consumed along with them. Let us not

struggle against poverty as if it were wholly to be detested and condemned, wholly on the side of things we should hate. Let us rather learn also to despise health without understanding, for its fruit is sin, and to honor the illness that is holy; let us admire those who are victorious through their suffering, recognizing that a Job may be hidden among the sick, far more worthy of our reverence than the healthy, even though he may be scratching his running sores and suffering night and day under the open sky, hard pressed by the plague, and by wife and friends. Just so we should learn to be dismissive of unjust riches, for whose sake Dives rightly suffers in the fire and begs a little drop of water for refreshment, and to praise a grateful and philosophic¹⁵⁶ poverty, in which Lazarus is saved and enjoys the riches of rest in Abraham's bosom.¹⁵⁷

35. For this reason, too, then, kindness towards our fellow human beings and compassion towards the needy seem to me necessary: that we might restrain those who have such an attitude towards them, and might not give in to their foolish arguments, making cruelty into a law turned against our very selves. Rather, let us respect the commandment—and the example—that is greater than all the rest. Which commandment? Just notice how constant and how noble it is! For the instruments of the Spirit have not simply spoken once or twice about the needy and then fallen silent; nor was it simply some of them and not others, or some more and others less, as if they were dealing with no great matter, with nothing of pressing importance. No—all of them laid this command on us, each with the greatest urgency, either as the first of our duties or as one of the first. Sometimes they exhort us, sometimes they threaten, sometimes they rebuke; and there are times, too, when they give recognition to those who have done it well—all as a way of making the command efficacious by keeping it constantly in our memory.

Scripture says, "Because of the wretchedness of the poor and the groaning of the deprived I shall arise, says the Lord."¹⁵⁸ Who does not fear the Lord when he rises? And further: "Rise up, Lord my God, let your hand be raised; do not forget the poor."¹⁵⁹ Let us pray that he may not rise this way, let us not hope to see his hand raised against the disobedient, much less in action against the hard-hearted! And: "He has not forgotten the cry of the poor;"¹⁶⁰ and: "The poor person will not always be forgotten;"¹⁶¹ and: "His eyes gaze on the poor" (a stronger and more important action than simply raising his eyelids!) "and with eyelids raised he examines the race of mortals"¹⁶² (which is, one might say, a lesser, secondary kind of supervision).¹⁶³

36. But perhaps someone may say, "All this concerns the poor and needy who are treated unjustly." I do not disagree—but this, too, should spur you towards active kindness! For if so much is said about them when they are unjustly treated, clearly when these same people are well-treated God will look upon it all the more favorably. If "the one who dishonors

poor people arouses their creator to anger,¹⁶⁴ then the one who treats the creature kindly honors the creator. And again, when you hear, "Poor and rich oppose each other, but the Lord made them both,"¹⁶⁵ do not suppose that he made the one poor and the other rich, so that you may rise up against the poor person all the more readily. For it is not clear that this distinction is from God; the text simply says that both are likewise creatures of God, even if their external circumstances are unequal. Let this shame you into being more compassionate and loving towards your brothers and sisters, so that when you are puffed up by texts like the one we have mentioned, you may be deflated again by this thought, and grow more moderate than you were. What other texts do we have? "The one who has mercy on a poor person lends to God."¹⁶⁶ Who would not take on such a debtor, who will repay our loan in due time with interest? And again, "Through acts of mercy and fidelity sins are purged away."¹⁶⁷

37. Let us be purged, then, by showing mercy! Let us cleanse the filth and stains of our souls by this beneficial herb; and let us make ourselves white—some "white as wool,"¹⁶⁸ others "white as snow,"¹⁶⁹ in proportion to the mercy we show. And I will tell you something to put fear in your hearts: even if there is no lesion or scar, no inflamed wound, no leprosy of the soul, no sign of infection¹⁷⁰ or white spot, which the Law makes clean in a small way but which needs the healing touch of Christ, still you must reverence the one who was wounded and made weak for our sakes. And you will reverence him, if you show yourself kind and generous towards one of Christ's members. But if perhaps the robber who terrorizes our souls has wounded you, as you were "going down from Jerusalem to Jericho"¹⁷¹ or some other place, falling upon you unarmed and unprepared, so that you rightly cry out, "My wounds stink and are putrefying, as a result of my foolishness"¹⁷²—if you are in such a state that you do not even seek a cure or know the way of your healing—then alas! this is truly to be wounded, and to sink into the depth of wretchedness! But if you have not completely despaired of yourself, if you are not in an incurable state, then go up to the healer, speak to him imploringly, heal wounds by wounds, regain likeness by likeness—or rather, be healed of major things by minor things!¹⁷³ Say to your soul, "I am your salvation,"¹⁷⁴ and "Your faith has saved you,"¹⁷⁵ and "See, you have become well again,"¹⁷⁶ and all the phrases that express his kindness, just as long as he can see you showing kindness to those who are suffering.

38. "Blessed are the merciful," Scripture says, "for they shall obtain mercy."¹⁷⁷ Mercy does not come last amid the Beatitudes! And "blessed is the one who is understanding towards the poor and needy,"¹⁷⁸ and "that person is kind, who has pity and lends,"¹⁷⁹ and "all day long the just one is merciful and lends."¹⁸⁰ Let us lay hold of the beatitude for ourselves, let us

be called understanding, let us become kind. Let not even night interrupt your acts of mercy; "Do not say, 'Get up and go home, and tomorrow I will give you something.'"¹⁸¹ Do not let anything come between your inclination and your good deed; only one thing brooks no delay: kindness to others. "Break your bread with the poor person, and bring homeless beggars into your house"¹⁸²—indeed, do it eagerly! "Let the one who is merciful do so gladly," Scripture says,¹⁸³ and your goodness will be doubled by your readiness of heart. For what is done with a sorrowful spirit or under compulsion is done without grace, and bestows no beauty on the doer. Celebrate, then, and do not lament when you do good!¹⁸⁴ "If you do away with the fetter and with selectiveness"¹⁸⁵—with your stinginess, in other words, and with your close scrutiny [of the poor], or perhaps with your hesitancy and your grumbling words¹⁸⁶—what will happen? Something grand and wonderful! How great and how fine the reward of this generosity will be! "Your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will rise up quickly."¹⁸⁷ And who does not yearn for light and for healing?

39. I revere greatly Christ's ointment-box, which invites us to care for the poor,¹⁸⁸ and the agreement of Paul and Peter, who divided up the preaching of the Gospel but made the poor their common concern,¹⁸⁹ and the way of perfection of the young man, which was defined by the law of giving what one has to the poor.¹⁹⁰ Do you think that kindness to others is not a necessity for you, but a matter of choice? That it is not a law, but simply an exhortation? I used to wish this very much myself, and supposed it to be true. But that "left hand" has instilled fear in me, and the "goats," and the rebukes that will come from him who raises them to stand before him:¹⁹¹ condemned to be in this class, not because they have committed theft or sacrilege or adultery, or have done anything else forbidden by the Law, but because they have not cared for Christ through the needy!

40. If you believe me at all, then, servants and brothers and sisters and fellow heirs of Christ, let us take care of Christ while there is still time; let us minister to Christ's needs, let us give Christ nourishment, let us clothe Christ, let us gather Christ in, let us show Christ honor—not just at our tables, as some do, nor just with ointment, like Mary, nor just with a tomb, like Joseph of Arimathea, nor just with the things needed for burial, like that half-hearted lover of Christ, Nicodemus, nor just with gold and frankincense and myrrh, like the Magi who came to him before all the rest. But since the Lord of all things "desires mercy and not sacrifice,"¹⁹² and since "a compassionate heart is worth more than tens of thousands of fat rams,"¹⁹³ let us give this gift to him through the needy, who today are cast down on the ground, so that when we all are released from this place, they may receive us into the eternal tabernacle,¹⁹⁴ in Christ himself, who is our Lord, to whom be glory for all the ages. Amen.

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