

mercifully. And those whom you have separated from one another in the world, unite to you forever in heaven, O you our hope, our portion, our expectation, our consolation, Lord who is blessed world without end. Amen.

Farewell in Christ, bride of Christ, in Christ fare well, and in Christ dwell. Amen.

LETTER 6

HELOISE TO ABELARD

To him who is hers in species, from her who is singularly his.

I do not wish to give you the slightest reason to accuse me of disobedience in anything. So following your command, I have put a rein on the outpouring of my boundless grief, in this way restraining myself, at least in my letters, from writing words against which it is not merely difficult but impossible to guard oneself in speech. For nothing is less in our power than the heart, and we must obey it since we cannot rule it. When its urgings goad us, we are unable to repress it. Nor can we prevent the heart's sudden impulses from breaking out into action, and expressing themselves still more readily in words, which are, it is said, the most spontaneous "signs of the passions."¹ As Matthew writes (12:34): "It is from the heart's overflow that the mouth speaks." I shall, therefore, keep my hand from writing what I cannot keep my tongue from saying. If only the suffering heart were as ready to obey as the writer's hand!

Yet you can give me some consolation in my sorrow, though you cannot altogether banish it. As one nail drives out another,² so a new idea displaces an earlier one; when the mind is concentrating on a single theme, it is forced to turn away from past thoughts, or at least to interrupt them.³ And the more honorable and important the thought to which we turn, the more intensively it occupies the mind and detaches it from other concerns.

All of us who are servants of Christ and your daughters in Christ now make, as supplicants, two requests of your paternal kindness, and we consider the answers to them most essential to us. One of these is that you will please instruct us concerning the origins of women's religious life and the authority for our calling. The other is that you draw up in writing and send us a rule that is

¹ Cf. Aristotle, *De interpretatione* 1.

² Cf. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.35.75; Jerome, *Ep.* 124, *ad Avitum* 14.

³ Heloise here and often works in a different modality than Abelard—for her the base texts are often "classical": rhetorical [Cicero]; poetic [Ovid]; patristic [Jerome]. See Katharina Wilson and Glenda McLeod, "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence," *Listening to Heloise*, pp. 121–42.

suitable for women, setting forth in its entirety the condition and character of our monastic life. This is something, as we know, that none of the fathers has done. Through the lack and the need of such a rule, at present both men and women in monasteries are admitted to the profession of the same rule, and the same yoke of monastic life is imposed on the strong and the weak sex alike. For among the Latins [Western Christians], women as well as men now follow the single rule of St. Benedict. But since it is clear that this rule was composed for men alone, it can be kept only by ordinary monks and their superiors.

Not to mention other chapters of the Rule, how does what is prescribed (c. 55) regarding cowls, underwear, and scapulars apply to women? Or regarding tunics or woolen garments worn next to the skin, since these are made altogether impractical by the monthly flow of superfluous humors? How does the prescription (c. 11) that the abbot should give the Gospel reading, and after that intone a hymn, apply to women? And how can we apply to them the decree (c. 56) about a separate table for the abbots and the guests and pilgrims? Is it proper for us as nuns never to extend hospitality to men? Or, if the abbess takes them in, should she dine with them? Consider how easily the familiar association of men and women leads to the ruin of souls! And this is especially true of their dining together, when gluttony and drunkenness may prevail and wine, in which there is wantonness, is drunk with pleasure. With this in mind, Jerome writes to a mother and daughter, cautioning them that "it is hard to keep chaste at a banquet."⁴ In his book called *The Art of Love*, Ovid, the very poet of wantonness and teacher of lewdness himself, tells us what tempting opportunities for fornication lie, above all, in these convivial occasions:

When wine has sprinkled Cupid's thirsty wings,
He stands stupefied in his chosen place.
Then laughter comes, then the poor man feels exalted.
Then sorrow and care that wrinkle the brow depart.
There girls have snared the hearts of youth,
And Venus in their veins is fire in fire.⁵

Even if we take in women only, and admit them to our table, do you think there is no danger? Surely in the seduction of a woman there is nothing so successful as another woman's pandering. And a woman will not reveal the baseness of her evil mind to anyone so readily as she will to one of her own sex. For this reason, Jerome, whom I mentioned earlier, exhorts women of holy life to be especially careful to avoid the company of ordinary women.⁶ Finally, if we refuse hospitality to men and take in women only, who does not realize how much we shall offend and annoy the men whose assistance is necessary to monasteries of women, especially if we appear to give little or nothing to those from whom we receive most.

⁴ Jerome, *Ep.* 117, *ad matrem et filiam in Gallia conmorentes* 6: PL 22, 957; CSEL 55, I, 2.

⁵ Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 1.233–34; 239–40; 243–44.

⁶ Jerome, *Ep.* 22, *ad Eustochium* 16: PL 22, 403; CSEL 55, I, 1, 163.

If we cannot fulfill the intention of the Rule, then I fear that the censure of the Apostle James stands to condemn us (2:10): "The man who has failed in one point, though he has kept the rest of the law, is liable to all its penalties." This means that he who achieves many things is judged guilty because he does not fulfill all; he becomes a transgressor of the law, which he does not obey unless he keeps all of its precepts. The Apostle carefully explains this when he adds immediately (2:11): "He who forbids adultery has forbidden murder as well. The murderer, though he is no adulterer, has yet transgressed the law." This is as if he were to say expressly that a man becomes guilty if he violates any single precept, because the Lord himself who commands the one, commands the other as well. No matter which precept of the law is violated, he is despised who established the law, not in one commandment but in all alike.

To pass over those points of the Rule which we are completely unable to observe, or cannot observe without danger, where has it ever been customary for the nuns of a monastery to go out and gather the harvest, or to be obliged to work in the fields?⁷ Should a community test the constancy of the postulants in one year or train them by three readings of the Rule, as it enjoins?⁸ What greater folly is there than to embark on an unknown and uncharted path? What could be more presumptuous than to choose and profess a life of which you know nothing, or to make a vow that you cannot keep? But since "discretion is the mother of all virtues"⁹ and reason the moderator of all good, who could regard that as virtuous or good which he sees at variance with discretion and reason? As Jerome declares, virtue itself, when it exceeds its mean and measure, may be regarded as vice.¹⁰

Who does not see that there is no reason or discretion in imposing duties on persons without first considering their strength, so that their work may be adapted to their natural constitution? Who would regard a load fit for an ass that is more suited for an elephant? Who would demand of boys and old men as much as he would exact from men in their prime? Or who would ask as much of the sick as of the healthy, of women as of men, of the weak sex as of the strong? When St. Gregory gives careful consideration to this in the twenty-fourth chapter of his *Pastoral Rule*, where he discusses admonitions and precepts, he makes this distinction: "The same admonitions are not to be given to women as to men, because lighter burdens are to be imposed on women and heavier on men. Let men be disciplined by the hard tasks while women are gently converted by the easier ones."¹¹

It is a fact that those who drew up the rules for monks said nothing about nuns and even ordained duties they knew were utterly unsuitable for them. By so doing, they plainly implied that "the necks of the bullock and the heifer were not to be weighed by the same yoke" of a rule. It is not fitting that those whom nature made unequal in strength should be made equal in work. St. Benedict was

⁷ Cf. *Rule of St. Benedict*, chap. 48.

⁸ Cf. *Rule of St. Benedict*, chap. 58.

⁹ Cf. Cassian, *Collationes* 2.4: PL 49, 528; CSEL 13, II, 44.

¹⁰ Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 130, *ad Demetrium* 11: PL 22, 1116; CSEL 56, I, 3, 191.

¹¹ Gregory, *Regulae Pastoralis Liber* 3.1: PL 77, 51c.

not unmindful of this distinction, for as one filled with the spirit of all justice, he so regulated everything in the Rule according to the character of persons and of seasons that, as he sums it up in one passage (c. 48), everything should be done according to measure.

First of all, beginning with the abbot, he is enjoined to rule over those who are subject to him in such a way that (c. 2, c. 64)

he may conform and adapt his rule to the character and intelligence of each, so that he will not only permit no harm to the flock committed to him, but he will also be able to rejoice in the increase of a good flock. He will always be suspicious of his own frailty and bear in mind that (Isaiah 42:3): "the bruised reed is not to be broken." Let him use discretion and moderation, keeping in mind the prudence of the holy Jacob when he says (Gen. 33:13): "If I cause my flocks to be overdriven, they will all die in one day." Let him then accept these and other testimonies to discretion, the mother of virtues, and observe such moderation in everything that the strong may be eager and the weak will not hang back.

This moderating of discipline includes consideration for boys, the aged, and the infirm in general, the provision of meals to the reader and the weekly shifts of servers in the kitchen ahead of the others, and the supervision of the quality and quantity of food and drink for the community, with provision for the differences in men. There are special directions in the Rule for each of these classes (chs. 35–41). St. Benedict also modifies the stated times for fasting, according to the season and the amount of work to be done, as natural weakness demands (c. 36). Now when he adapts all of his regulations to the character of the seasons and of human nature so that they can be accepted by all without complaint, what provisions, I ask, would he have made for women, if he had been drawing up a rule for them as well as for men? If on some points he felt obliged to mitigate the full rigor of the Rule for boys, the aged, and the sick, in accordance with the weakness or infirmity of their nature, what provision would he have made for the weaker sex, of whose tender and delicate nature he was well aware?

So you should consider carefully how much at variance with all reason and discretion it is that women should be bound by obedience to the same Rule as men, and that the weak should bear the same burden as the strong. In my judgment, it would be enough for our frail nature if in the virtues of continence and abstinence we matched the rulers of the Church and other clerics in holy orders, especially when Truth says (Luke 6:40): "He will be fully perfect if he is as his master is." It should also be considered a great achievement on our part, if we were able to equal in piety the most religious members of the laity. What we consider a small achievement in the strong arouses our admiration in the weak, and according to the Apostle's saying (2 Cor. 12:9): "Strength is made perfect in infirmity."

To prevent our regarding the piety of laymen as insignificant, such as the piety of Abraham, David, and Job, although they were married, Chrysostom in his seventh sermon on the Hebrews confronts us with this statement:

There are numerous things one can do to cast a spell over that beast. What are they? Work, reading, vigils. But what has that to do with us who are not monks,

you ask? You ask me this? Ask Paul, when he says (Ephes. 6:18): "Pray at all times in the spirit; keep awake to that end with all perseverance," and when he says (Rom. 13:14): "Make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences." He did not write this only to monks, but to all who were living in those cities. For a man in the world should enjoy no other privileges than a monk excepting only to live with a wife. On this point he has indulgence, nothing more, and in everything else he should act just as monks do. For the Beatitudes which were proclaimed by Christ are not addressed simply to monks.... Otherwise the whole world will perish... and he has brought what is virtuous into a narrow compass. And how is marriage honorable which is so great a hindrance to us?¹²

In these words it is clearly implied that anyone who adds the virtue of continence to the precepts of the Gospel will achieve monastic perfection.

If only our piety could attain the fulfillment of the Gospel, not seek to rise above it, and we did not strive to be more than Christians! If I am not mistaken, the holy fathers did not intend to impose a general rule, like a new law, upon us women as well as upon men, and to burden our frailty with the heavy weight of vows. They kept in mind the statement of the Apostle (Rom. 4:15): "The effect of the law is only to bring God's displeasure on us; it is only where there is a law that transgression becomes possible," and (Rom. 5:20): "The law intervened, only to amplify our fault." The same great preacher of continence, well aware of our weakness and apparently urging young widows to marry again says (1 Tim. 5:14): "So I would have the younger women marry and bear children, and have households to manage; then they will give enmity no handle for speaking ill of us."

With this very salutary counsel in mind, St. Jerome advised Eustochium against the rash taking of vows by women, saying:

If those who keep themselves virgins should lose their souls for some other sins, what will become of them if they have prostituted the members of Christ and turned the temple of the Holy Spirit into a brothel. It would be better for them to have entered marriage, to have walked the level path, than to press on by a steeper road and fall into the depths of hell.¹³

St. Augustine also advises against such profession of vows in his book *On the Continence of Widows*, writing to Juliana in these words: "Let her persevere who has not yet begun to take thought, and let her who has entered upon it, also persevere. Let no occasion be given to the adversary, let no offering be withdrawn from Christ."¹⁴ So it is that the canons, in consideration of our frailty, have decreed that women should not be ordained deaconesses before forty and then only after careful probation, while men may be ordained deacons from twenty on.

There are also members of communities of men called canons regular of St. Augustine, who follow a rule, as they say, and they claim that they are in

¹² John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Epiad Hebraeos* 7.4: PG 63, 289–90 (Mutianus's translation).

¹³ Jerome, *Ep. 22, ad Eustochium* 6: PL 22, 397; CSEL 54, I, 1, 150ff.

¹⁴ Augustine, *De bono viduitatis* 9.12: PL 40, 437; CSEL 41, 5, 3, 317.

no way inferior to monks, although, as everyone knows, they eat meat and wear linen. Should it be regarded as nothing if we in our weakness succeed in matching their virtue? Nature herself has provided that indulgence in all kinds of food should be granted us more readily and with a greater sense of security, since she has made our sex stronger in the virtue of sobriety. It is clear that women can live less expensively and with less nourishment than men, and natural science maintains that they are not so easily intoxicated. Macrobius Theodosius recalls this in the seventh book of his *Saturnalia* in these words:

Aristotle says that women seldom get drunk, but that old men often do. Woman has a more humid body. The smoothness and gloss of her skin show this, as do also, especially, the repeated flows which rid her body of excessive humours. When wine, therefore, comes in contact with such an amount of moisture, it loses its strength... and thus weakened, does not so readily reach the seat of the brain. He also says: A women's body is so constituted for frequent purgations, being equipped with several openings, that it opens in channels and provides ways for the humor to flow out. Through these outlets, the vapor of wine is soon released. The bodies of old men, on the contrary, are dry, as their roughness and scaly skin show.¹⁵

Consider then, in the light of this statement, how much more safely and justifiably indulgence in any kind of food or drink can be permitted to our frail nature, since our systems cannot be so easily overcome by gluttony or drunkenness. The sparing use of food protects us from the one and the constitution of the female body, as I have said, from the other.

It should be considered sufficient for our weakness and the most that should be expected of us if, by living chastely and without possessions and by devoting ourselves to the divine offices, we match the lives of the princes of the Church or pious lay folk, or those who are called canons regular and who claim that they are in a special way followers of the apostolic life. Finally, it is a mark of great prudence in those who bind themselves to God by vow that they promise to do less, but in fact do more, so that they may always add some free gifts to what they owe. For Truth himself has said in his own person (Luke 17:10): "You, in the same way, when you have done all that was commanded you, are to say, 'We are servants and worthless; it was our duty to do what we have done.'" This is as if he were to tell us explicitly that we are to be considered useless and, so to speak, worthless and devoid of merit, because being satisfied with simply fulfilling our obligations, we have added no free gift of love. With regard to works of supererogation, the Lord spoke elsewhere in a parable, when he said (Luke 10:35): "On my way home I will give you whatever else is owing to you for your pains."

If today many of those who rashly enter the monastic life would consider this very carefully and investigate beforehand the state to which they vow themselves: by earnestly studying the tenor of the Rule, they would offend less through ignorance and sin less through negligence. But nowadays, when so many are

rushing indiscriminately into the monastic life, they are irregularly received and live still more irregularly. Despising the Rule they have not studied as readily as they accepted it, they put customs that please them in the place of law. So we should take care that we women do not presume to take on a burden under which we see almost all men staggering, if they do not fall. We perceive that the world has grown old, and the human race along with everything else in the world has lost the pristine vigor of its nature and, according to the statement of Truth, charity itself has grown cold, not only in most persons but in almost everyone. For these reasons, it is now necessary to change or mitigate according to human character the very rules that were written for it.

St. Benedict himself, bearing in mind the necessity for such discretion, admits that he has so far tempered the rigor of monastic severity as to consider the Rule that he composed, if it is compared with those of former orders, only a foundation of virtue and a beginning, as it were, of monastic life. He says (c. 73):

We have composed this Rule in order that, by observing it, we may show that to some extent we have made a beginning of an upright life. But he who strives for perfection of life has the teachings of the holy fathers, which, if he observes them, will lead him to the pinnacle of perfection. Whoever you may be, if you are hastening to your heavenly country with Christ's help, keep this little Rule which is a beginning, and then afterwards, under God's protection, you will reach the greater heights of doctrine and virtue.

Although we sometimes read, as St. Benedict himself says (c. 18), that formerly the holy fathers used to complete the Psalter in one day, nevertheless he so modified its recitation for the lukewarm that, by spreading the psalms throughout the week, monks may be satisfied with a smaller number of them than the secular clergy.

What is so opposed to monastic piety and peace as that which most fosters wantonness, creates disorder and destroys the very image of God in us—I mean reason, by which we are superior to other creatures? It is wine, which Scripture calls pernicious and admonishes us to avoid above everything else that comes under the heading of victuals. Of wine the greatest of wise men says in Proverbs (23:29–35):

Unhappy son of an unhappy father, who is this, ever brawling, ever falling, scarred but not from battle, bloodshot of eye? Who but the tosspot that sits long over his wine? Look not on the wine's tawny glow, sparkling there in the glass beside you; how insinuating its address! Yet at last adder bites not so fatally, poison it distills like the basilisk's own. Eyes that stray to forbidden charms, a mind uttering thoughts that are none of yours, shall make you helpless as the mariner asleep in mid-ocean, when the tiller drops from the helmsman's drowsy grasp. What! You will say, blows all unfelt, wounds that left no sting! Could I but come to myself, and be back, even now, at my wine!

And also (Prov. 31:4–5): "Wine was never made for kings, Lamuel, never for kings; carouse benefits ill your council-chamber. Not for them to drink deep, and forget the claims of right and misjudge the plea of the friendless." And it is

¹⁵ Macrobius Theodosius, *Saturnalia* 7.6, 16–17.

written in Ecclesiasticus (19:12): "Wine and women, what a trap for the loyalty of the wise."

When he writes to Nepotian on the life of clerics, Jerome becomes almost indignant because the priests of the Law, in refraining from all intoxicating drink, surpass the Christian priesthood in this respect. He says:

Do not smell of wine lest you hear the reproach of the philosopher, 'That is not to give me a kiss, but to give me a drink.' The Apostle condemns priests who are drinkers (1 Tim. 3:3), and the Old Law issues an injunction against them (Lev. 10:9): 'Whoever serves at the altar... drink neither wine nor strong drink.' In Hebrew every strong drink is called '*sicera*,' which means 'intoxicating,' whether it is made by fermentation, or distilled from apple juice or honey into a sweet and barbarous beverage, or made by pressing dates into a mash and when it has been boiled, drawing off the thick liquid. Whatever intoxicates and overthrows mental balance, avoid as you would wine.¹⁶

It is certain that what is forbidden kings to enjoy and altogether denied to priests is considered more dangerous than any other kind of food.

Yet so spiritual a man as St. Benedict feels compelled to grant indulgence by a kind of dispensation to the monks of his time. "Though we read," he says (c. 40): "that wine is not for monks, yet in these times you cannot convince monks of that." Unless I am mistaken, he had read what we find written in the *Lives of the Fathers*: "Some told the father abbot of a certain monk who did not drink wine, and he replied that wine was not at all for monks."¹⁷ Further on we read:

Mass was celebrated one day on the mountain of Abbot Anthony and a jar of wine was found there. And one of the elders, taking a small vessel, brought a cup to Abbot Sisoi and gave it to him. He drank once and a second time also he took it and drank. He was offered it a third time, but he did not take it, and he said: 'Be quiet, brother, do you not know that it is Satan?'¹⁸

We find there another story of Abbot Sisoi: "His disciple Abraham said to him, 'If one meets a person on Saturday and Sunday at the church, and drinks three cups, is that much?' And the old man replied, 'If it were not Satan, it would not be much.'"¹⁹

Now when, I ask, has flesh meat ever been condemned by God or forbidden to monks? Consider this, I ask you, and pay attention to the necessity that compelled Benedict to temper the Rule in that which is even more dangerous for monks and which he knew they should not have, because the monks of his day could not be persuaded to abstain from it. If only the same policy were followed today, and such moderation prevailed in those things which are a mean between good and evil and

¹⁶ Jerome, *Ep. 52, ad Nepotianum* 11: PL 22, 536; CSEL 54, I, 1, 434. The source of the philosopher's words is unidentified.

¹⁷ *Vitae patrum (verba seniorum)* 5.4, 31: PL 73, 868d.

¹⁸ *Vitae patrum (verba seniorum)* 5.4, 36: PL 73, 869d.

¹⁹ *Vitae patrum (verba seniorum)* 5.4, 37: PL 73, 869d.

which are called indifferent, that obedience to the Rule did not require what we cannot be persuaded to do, and that all things which in themselves belong to the mean may be allowed without scandal, and prohibition limited to what is sinful. In this way, the question of food as well as clothing could be dealt with so as to procure what is not too expensive; and in everything necessity, and not excess, would be the guide. We should not pay too much attention to that which does not prepare us for the kingdom of God, and which does not win favor with him.

Such are external acts performed by the wicked and the elect alike, by hypocrites as well as those who are sincerely religious. Nothing so divides Jews and Christians as the distinction between exterior and interior acts, especially since charity alone, which the Apostle calls the fulfillment of the Law, separates the sons of God from the sons of the devil. The same Apostle, therefore, emphatically disparaged this glory in works and placed first the righteousness that springs from faith. He says, addressing the Jew (Rom. 3:27-28): "What has become, then, of your pride? No room has been left for it. On what principle? The principle which depends on observances? No, the principle which depends on faith; our contention is that a man is justified by faith apart from the observances of the law." He also says (4:2, 3): "If it was by observances that Abraham attained his justification, he, to be sure, has something to be proud of. But it was not so in God's sight; what does the Scripture tell us? Abraham put his faith in God, and it was reckoned virtue in him." And again he says (4:5): "When a man's faith is reckoned virtue in him, according to God's gracious plan, it is not because of anything he does; it is because he has faith, faith in the God who makes a just man of the sinner."

In allowing Christians to eat every kind of food and distinguishing this from that which justifies, the same Apostle says (Rom. 14:17, 20, 21):

The Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking this or that; it means rightness of heart, finding our peace and our joy in the Holy Spirit... Nothing is unclean; yet it goes ill with the man who eats to the hurt of his own conscience. You do well if you refuse to eat meat, or to drink wine, or to do anything in which your brother can find an occasion of sin, a cause for scandal or scruple.

In this passage, the eating of no kind of food is forbidden, but rather the offense resulting from eating, by which any of the Jewish converts might be scandalized to see that eaten which was forbidden by the law.

When Peter, also an apostle, sought to avoid this scandal, Paul upbraided him severely and gave him a salutary admonition, as Paul himself recalls when writing to the Galatians (2:11), and again to the Corinthians (1, 8:8): "And it is not what we eat that gives us our standing in God's sight," and again (10:25, 26): "When things are sold in the open market, then you may eat them... this world, as we know, and all that is in it belongs to the Lord." And he writes to the Colossians (2:16): "So no one must be allowed to take you to task over what you eat or drink." And a little further on he says (2:20-22):

If, by dying with Christ, you have parted company with worldly principles, why do you live by these prescriptions, as if the world were still your element?

Prescriptions against touching or tasting, or handling those creatures which vanish altogether as we enjoy them, are all based on the will and the word of men.

What he calls the elements of this world are the first rudiments of the law consisting in carnal observances, in the learning of which, as in learning A B Cs, the world—that is, a people still carnal—was engaged. To these elements, these carnal observances, both Christ and his own have died, since they owe no allegiance to them, living as they do no longer in this world, that is, among carnal men, who have regard to forms, and distinguish or discriminate one kind of food or anything else from another, saying *do not touch this or that*. The things we touch or taste or handle, the Apostle says, make for the ruin of the soul by their very use; when, I mean, we use them for our advantage according to human precepts and doctrines, that is, of those who are worldly and take the Law in a carnal sense, rather than in that of Christ and his own. For when Christ sent his apostles to preach where he wanted to provide especially against their giving any scandal, he allowed them to eat the food of those who gave them hospitality, eating and drinking what was placed before them.²⁰

Enlightened by the Spirit, Paul foresaw long ago that men would depart from the Lord's teaching and his own. What he wrote to Timothy applies to them (1, 4:1–6):

We are expressly told by inspiration that, in later days, there will be some who abandon the faith, listening to false inspirations and doctrines taught by the devils. They will be deceived by the pretensions of impostors. . . . Such teachers bid them abstain from marriage and from certain kinds of foods, although God has made these for the grateful enjoyment of those whom faith has enabled to recognize the truth. All is good that God has made, nothing is to be rejected; only we must be thankful to him when we partake of it, then it is hallowed for our use by God's blessing and the prayer which brings it. Lay down these rules for the brethren, and you will show yourself a true servant of Jesus Christ, thriving on the principles of that faith whose wholesome doctrine you have followed.

Who, I ask, would not put John and his disciples, who tortured themselves with extreme fasting, ahead of Christ and his disciples in piety, if he looked with his bodily eyes on the manifestation of their external work of abstinence? The disciples of John, still acting like the Jews in external matters, murmured against Christ and his followers, and asked the Lord himself (Matt. 9:14; Mark 2:18): "How is it that your disciples do not fast, when we and the Pharisees fast so often?" Augustine noted this carefully and, distinguishing between virtue and the external appearance of virtue, considered the question that works add nothing further to our merit. This is how he puts it in his book *On the Good of Marriage*:

Continence is a virtue not of the body, but of the soul. Virtues of the soul, however, sometimes manifest themselves in acts and sometimes as a habit. They escape notice; as the virtue of the martyrs was manifested in the enduring of their sufferings. . . . Job

²⁰ Luke 10:7.

already possessed patience, as the Lord knew and gave testimony, but it became known to men when it was tested by his trials. . . . in order that it may be seen more clearly how such virtue can exist as a habit even when it does not issue in action, I give an example that no Catholic may doubt. No one who believes in the Gospel has any doubt that the Lord Jesus was hungry and thirsted and that he also ate and drank. Now, is it true that he did not possess the virtue of self-control in regard to food and drink just as much as John the Baptist? When John came, he would neither eat nor drink, and they say of him that he is possessed. When the Son of Man came, he ate and drank with them, and of him they said, 'Here is a glutton; he loves wine; he is a friend of publicans and sinners' (Matt. 11:18–19).

Augustine then goes on:

Christ added, after speaking of John, 'It is by her own children that wisdom is vindicated,' for they see that self-control as a virtue must always be a habit of the soul, and manifest itself in works according to the circumstances of the time, like the patience of the holy martyrs. Therefore, just as the patience of Peter, who suffered martyrdom, merited no more than that of John, who did not, so the continence of John, who never lived in marriage, was no greater than that of Abraham, who begot children. And the celibacy of the former and the married state of the latter, both according to the circumstances of their times, served in the ranks of Christ. But John's continence manifested itself in deeds, whereas in Abraham it was a habit only. So in the period when the Law, which followed the age of the Patriarchs, pronounced him cursed who would not raise up seed in Israel,²¹ he also who was able to, but did not show it, nevertheless also possessed continence. But after the 'fullness of time' came,²² when it could be said (Matt. 19:12): 'Let him accept it who can. . . ' he who possesses this virtue, shows it in action, and he who is unwilling to do so, should not lie and say that he has it.²³

Clearly, from these passages it may be concluded that virtue alone gains merit with God, and that those who are equal in virtue, no matter how much they differ in works, gain equal merit with him. Anyone who is a true Christian is entirely concerned with the inner self, to adorn it with virtues and cleanse it from vices, paying little or no attention to the external. So we read that the Apostles, even when they were in the company of the Lord, behaved in a boorish, and, so to speak, disgraceful fashion, as if forgetful of all reverence and propriety. As they passed through fields of grain, they were not ashamed to pluck off the heads, and, rubbing out the kernels, ate them just as boys would. Nor were they worried about washing their hands before they ate. When some accused them of uncleanness, the Lord excused them, saying (Matt. 15:20): "No one is made unclean by eating without washing his hands."

At once he went on to say that the soul is not defiled by external things in general, but only by what comes from the heart, which, he says, are "evil thoughts,

²¹ Cf. Deut. 25:5–10.

²² Cf. Gal. 4:4.

²³ Augustine, *De bono conjugali* 21.25–26; PL 40, 390–91; CSEL 41, 5, 3, 218–22.

adulteries, murders, and so forth." Unless the soul is first corrupted by an evil will, there can be no sin, no matter what takes place in the body. Quite rightly, then, does he say that adulteries and murders proceed from the heart, for they can be committed without bodily contact, according to the Gospel sayings: "He who casts his eyes on a woman so as to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28), and "A man cannot hate his brother without being a murderer" (1 John 3:15). These sins are not necessarily committed, even though the body is touched or injured, as when a woman is violated by force, or when a judge is compelled in justice to put a criminal to death. "No murderer," it is written, "has part in the kingdom of Christ and of God."²⁴

So we are to consider not so much what is done as the intention with which it is done, if we wish to please him who examines our thoughts and desires, and sees in hidden places,²⁵ who will judge the secrets of men, as Paul says (Rom 2:16): "according to my Gospel," that is, according to the doctrine he preaches. The widow's small offering of two mites, which is a farthing, was placed before the generous offerings of all rich men²⁶ by him to whom it is said (Ps. 15:2): "You have no need of my goods." He is pleased by the character of the giver rather than by the amount of the gift, as it is written (Gen. 4:4): "On Abel, and on his offering, the Lord looked with favor," first considering the holiness of the giver, and regarding the gift as pleasing accordingly.

The less the soul is occupied with external matters, the more its devotion is fixed on God; the less we put our trust in external actions, the more humbly we serve him and the more we think of what we owe him. So the Apostle in his letter to Timothy (1 Tim., 4:7-8), after giving the general permission regarding foods, mentioned above, goes on to speak of the exercise of physical labor. He says: "Train yourself... to grow up in holiness. Training of the body avails but little; holiness is all availing, since it promises well both for this life and for the next," since the mind's fervent devotion to God merits from him what is necessary here, and what is lasting in the life to come. What else do these testimonies teach than that we should pursue Christian wisdom and, like Jacob, prepare a repast for our Father from domestic animals, and not, with Esau, provide wild game, and in externals play the Jew (See Gen. 27:6ff)? The Psalmist puts it this way (Ps. 55:12): "The vows which you claim from me, O God, my sacrifice of praise shall fulfill." You may add to this the words of the poet: "Do not look for yourself outside yourself."²⁷

There are many, almost countless, statements of both secular and ecclesiastical teachers, showing that we should not be much concerned with external works, which are called indifferent. Otherwise the works of the Law, and the insupportable yoke of its servitude, as Peter says,²⁸ are to be preferred to the liberty

²⁴ Cf. 1 John 3:15. In the preceding statements, Heloise clearly identifies a sinful state as a corruption of the will, no matter what takes place in the body.

²⁵ Cf. Prov. 24:12; Ps. 7:10; Jer. 11:20, 17:10, 20:12, etc.

²⁶ Cf. Mark 12:42-44.

²⁷ Persius, *Satires* 1.17.

²⁸ Cf. Acts 15:10.

of the Gospel, and to Christ's sweet yoke and light burden.²⁹ To this sweet yoke and light burden Christ himself invites us when he says (Matt. 11:28): "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened." This explains why the apostle Peter vigorously reproveth some who had been converted to Christ, but thought that the works of the Law should still be kept, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles (15:7, 10-11): "Brethren... how is it, then, that you would now call God in question, by putting a yoke on the necks of the disciples, such as we and our fathers have been too weak to bear? It is by the grace of the Lord that we hope to be saved, and they no less."

Be an imitator not only of Christ, but also of his apostle, in discretion as well as in name, and moderate the rules governing work in accordance with our frail nature, so that we may have as much time as possible for the offices of divine worship. This is the offering that the Lord commands, when he rejects all external sacrifices, saying (Ps. 49:12-15):

If I am hungry, I will not complain of it to you, I who am master of earth, and all that earth contains. Would you have me eat bull's flesh, and drink the blood of goats? The sacrifice you must offer to God is a sacrifice of praise, so will you perform your vows to the Most High. So, when you cry to me in time of trouble, I will deliver you; then you shall honor me as you will.

I do not say this to scorn the works of manual labor when necessity demands them. But we should not overvalue what ministers to the body, and hinders the celebration of the divine office, particularly since a special privilege was granted to holy women by apostolic authority. This made it the duty of others to provide their support, rather than to expect it from their own labors. Thus Paul writes to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:16): "If a believer has any widows depending on him, he should undertake their support, leaving the Church free to support the widows who are truly destitute." He calls those true widows who are consecrated to Christ, not only those who have lost their husbands, but those for whom the world stands crucified, and they to the world.³⁰ It is quite fitting that they should be supported at the expense of the Church, as from funds belonging to their own spouse. So the Lord himself appointed an apostle to look after his own mother, in place of her husband,³¹ and the apostles ordained seven deacons, that is, ministers of the Church, to look after the holy women.³²

Certainly, we know that the Apostle, writing to the Thessalonians (2, 3:10), imposed such restraints on those who were living a life of idleness and curiosity that he commanded: "The man who refuses to work must be left to starve." It was especially to prevent idleness that St. Benedict also prescribed manual labor.³³ But did not Mary sit down to listen to the words of Christ, while Martha worked away both for her and for the Lord, and as though out of envy,

²⁹ Cf. Matt. 11:30.

³⁰ Cf. Gal. 6:14.

³¹ Cf. John 19:26.

³² Cf. Acts 6:5.

³³ Cf. *Rule of St. Benedict*, c. 40.

complained of her sister's idleness on the ground that she alone "bore the day's burden and the heat?"³⁴

So today we often hear complaints from those who work outside the monastery because they are supplying the necessities of life to those who are engaged in the divine service. They frequently begrudge less what tyrants seize than what they themselves are compelled to hand out, as they say, to these "lazy and idle people," even though they see these same people constantly occupied not only in listening to Christ's words, but also in reading and chanting them. Such critics do not reflect that, as the Apostle says, it is no great matter if they provide for the bodily needs of those to whom they look for spiritual assistance,³⁵ and that it is not at all improper that those concerned with worldly affairs should serve those who are occupied with matters of the spirit. It was ordained by the Law that this salutary freedom from work should be granted to the ministers of the Church, when it prescribed that the tribe of Levi should receive no earthly inheritance in order to be freer to serve God and that it should receive tithes and offerings from the labor of the rest.³⁶

If you should decide that anything is to be added to the general law of the Church regarding abstinence during the seasons of fasting—and Christians strive to abstain from vice rather than from food—you should weigh the matter well and ordain what is appropriate for us. Please provide especially for the services of the church and the arrangement of the Psalms, so that in this, at least, you may lighten the burden on our frailty and it may not be necessary to repeat the same Psalms to finish the Psalter in a week. When St. Benedict arranged the recitation of the Psalter, he did so according to his own view, but he recommended that others make their own choice if it should seem advisable to make a different arrangement (cf. c. 18).

He foresaw that, as time went on, the splendor of church services would increase and a magnificent edifice would arise upon the early, crude foundations. Most particularly, we should like you to decide what should be done about the reading of the Gospel at night vigils (cf. c. 11). It seems to me risky to bring priests or deacons into our midst at that time of night to read it. This is the case especially since it is proper for us to be cut off then from all access to men and from the sight of them, in order to devote our attention more whole-heartedly to God, and also to safeguard ourselves more completely against temptation.

While you are still alive, my lord, it is incumbent upon you to provide rules for us to follow for all time. You are, after God, the founder of this place; through God you established our community; together with God you should be the director of our religious life. Perhaps we shall have another guide after you, who will build upon the foundation that you have laid.³⁷ We are very much afraid that he may be less concerned about us or less willing to listen to us. Even if he should be as well disposed as you are, he may not be as capable. Speak to us and we shall listen to you.

Farewell.

³⁴ Matt. 20:12; Luke 10:38ff. for the story of Mary and Martha.

³⁵ Cf. 1 Cor. 9:11.

³⁶ Cf. Num. 18:21.

³⁷ Cf. Rom. 15:20.

LETTER 7

ABELARD TO HELOISE: THE ORIGIN OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF NUNS (CONCERNING THE AUTHORITY AND DIGNITY OF THE ORDER OF NUNS)

To instruct you and your spiritual daughters, I shall reply succinctly and in a few words, if I can, to your charity, which has raised the question of the profession to which you are vowed: that is, concerning the origin of the religious life of nuns. The order of both monks and nuns was given the form of its religious life by our Lord Jesus Christ, although even before the Incarnation some early form of this life had existed among men as well as women. Thus when Jerome writes to Eustochium, he refers to the "Sons of the Prophets, of whom we read in the Old Testament as living like monks," and so on.¹ The Evangelist (Luke 2:25) describes Anna as a widow who devoted herself assiduously to the service of the Temple and to divine worship, and who, with Simeon, was worthy of receiving the Lord in the Temple and being filled with the spirit of prophecy.

Christ, the consummation of justice and the end of all good, came in the fullness of time to perfect the good already begun and to reveal what was hidden. As he had come to call both sexes and to redeem them, so he deigned to unite them in the true monkhood of his congregation. In this way, both men and women might be given authority for this calling and all might be shown the perfect way of life that they should imitate. With his apostles and the other disciples, there was a group of holy women, including his mother, who had renounced the world and given up all possessions in order to possess Christ alone, as it is written (Ps. 15:5): "It is the Lord I claim for my prize." They did devoutly what is required of all who have been converted from the world and they were initiated into the common life, according to the rule given by the Lord (Luke 14:13): "None of you can be my disciple if he does not take leave of all that he possesses."

The sacred Scriptures carefully record how devoutly these holy women and true nuns followed Christ and how gratefully both Christ himself and later the

¹ Jerome, *Ep.* 125, *ad Rusticum* 7: PL 22, 107b; CSEL 56, 1, 3.