

CHRIST

The Ideal of the Monk

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Spiritual Conferences on
the Monastic and Religious Life



COLUMBA MARMION, OSB

Voices from the Monastery



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Preface

CHRI^ST JESUS IS THE SUBLIME IDEAL OF ALL holiness, the divine model presented by God himself for the imitation of his elect. Christian holiness consists in the complete and sincere acceptation of Christ by faith, and in the expansion of this faith by hope and charity. It implies the stable and total hold exercised by Christ upon our activity through the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit. Christ Jesus, the Alpha and Omega of all our works, becomes by the communication of his own life, the very life of our souls: "living is Christ and dying is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

But besides the precepts laid down by Christ to his disciples as condition of salvation and essential holiness, there are found in the Gospels some counsels that Christ proposes to those who wish to make the ascension of the sublime heights of perfection: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21). These are undoubtedly only counsels. "If you wish," said the master.

Still, the magnificent promises made by Christ to those who follow them show the value he attaches to their observance. Such observance has for its aim a more complete and more perfect imitation of the Savior. Once again, Christ is the way and the model, and spiritual perfection is the full acquisition and the entire taking possession of the soul by the teaching and example of the Word Incarnate.

These are the thoughts that I have endeavored to comment upon in the present volume. I have constantly placed the divine figure of Christ before the eyes of privileged souls called to walk in the path of the counsels: nothing is so efficacious as this contemplation to touch and draw souls and to obtain from them the necessary efforts in view of remaining faithful to so high a vocation and one so rich in eternal promises.

May these pages make a great number of souls better understand the nature of this perfection to which God so widely invites Christians, to increase in some of them the esteem of the religious vocation sometimes misunderstood by our age, to help some realize in themselves the call of grace, or to triumph over obstacles that natural affections or the spirit of the world oppose to its call. May these chapters, above all, animate the first fervor of such consecrated souls whose perseverance perhaps is wearied by the length of the way, obtain for those who are faithful to their vows the resolution of applying themselves without relaxing to attain the summit of the virtues, and stimulate the best of ambitions—ever unsatisfied—that of holiness!



CHRIST

The Ideal of the Monk

Chapter One
TO SEEK GOD

WHEN WE EXAMINE THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT, we see very clearly that he presents it only as an abridgement of Christianity, and a means of practicing the Christian life in its fullness and perfection. We find the great patriarch declaring from the first lines of the Prologue of his Rule that he only addresses those who wish to return to God under Christ's leadership. And in ending the monastic code he declares that he proposes the accomplishment of this rule to whomever, through the help of Christ, hastens to the heavenly country.

To his mind, the Rule is but a simple and safe guide for leading to God. In writing it, St. Benedict does not wish to institute anything beyond or beside the Christian life: he does not assign to his monks any special work as a particular end to be pursued. The end is, as he says, "to seek God." This is what he requires, before all, of those who come to knock at the door of the monastery to be received as monks. In this disposition he resumes all the others. It gives, as it were, the key to all his teaching, and determines the mode of life he wishes to see led by his sons. This is the end that he proposes and this is why we ought always to have this end before our eyes, to examine it frequently, and above all, only to act in view of it.

You know that every person, as a free and reasonable creature, acts from some deliberate motive. Let us imagine ourselves in a great city like London. At certain hours of the day the streets are thronged with people; it is like a moving army. It is the ebb and flow of a human sea. People are coming and going, elbowing their way, passing to and fro, and all this rapidly—for "time is money"—almost without exchanging any signs among themselves. Each one of these innumerable beings is independent of the others and has his own particular end in view. What are they seeking, these thousands and thousands of people who are hurrying in the city? Why are they in such a hurry? Some are in search of pleasure, others pursue honors, urged by the fever of ambition or the thirst for gold. The greater number are in quest of daily bread. Out of this immense crowd pursuing created things, only a very small number are working for God alone.



And yet the influence of the motive is predominant in the value of our actions. Consider two men who are embarking together for a far-off destination. Both leave country, friends, family, and landing on a foreign shore they penetrate into the interior of the country. Exposed to the same dangers, they cross the same rivers and the same mountains. The sacrifices they impose upon themselves are the same. But one is a merchant urged on by the greed of gold, while the other is an apostle seeking souls. This is why, although the human eye can scarcely discern the difference, an abyss that God alone can measure separates the lives of these two men. This abyss has been created by the motive. Give a cup of water to a beggar, a coin to a poor man, and if you do so in the name of Jesus Christ, that is to say from a supernatural motive of grace, because in this poor man you see Christ who said: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40), your action is pleasing to God. That cup of water, which is nothing, that small coin, will not remain without a reward.

Never forget this truth: a man is worth that which he seeks, that to which he is attached. Are you seeking God? Are you tending toward him with all the fervor of your soul? A person is worth what he seeks. This is why St. Benedict, who shows us the adepts of the cenobitical life as "the most strong race,"¹ requires so supernatural and perfect a motive from one who wishes to embrace this career: the motive and ambition of possessing God.

But, you may say, what is it to "seek God"? And by what means are we to find Him? For we need to seek in such a way that we may find.

To seek God constitutes the whole program; to find God and remain habitually united to him by the bonds of faith and love, in this lies all perfection.

Let us see what it is *to seek God*—let us consider the conditions of this seeking. For if we truly seek God, nothing will prevent us from finding him, and in him, we will possess all good.



We must seek God. But is God in some place where he must be sought? Isn't he everywhere?

As we know, God is in every being by his presence, by his power, and by his essence. In God the operation is not separated from the active virtue from which it is derived, and the power is identical with the essence. In every being, God operates by sustaining it in existence.² In this manner God is in every creature, for all exist and continue to exist only by an effect of the divine action that supposes God's intimate presence. But reasonable beings can know and love God, and thus possess him in themselves.

However, this kind of immanence was not sufficient for God as regards us. There is a more intimate and elevated degree of union. God is not content with being the object of a natural knowledge and love on our part, but he calls us to share his very life and his own beatitude.

By a movement of infinite love toward us, God wishes to be for our souls not only the sovereign master of all things, but a friend, a Father. It is his will that we should know him as he knows himself, the source of all truth and of all beauty. It is his will that we should possess him, the infinite good, here below in the dimness of faith, and above in the light of glory.

To this end, as you know, he raises our nature above itself by adorning it with sanctifying grace, infused virtues, and the gifts of the Spirit. God wills, by the communication of his infinite and eternal life, to be himself our perfect beatitude. He does not wish us to find our happiness apart from himself. He leaves to no creature the

power of satisfying our heart: "I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Gen. 15:1). And our Lord confirmed his promise when, about to pay the price for it by the sacrifice of his precious blood: "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. . . . I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:24, 26). Such is the unique and supreme end to which we must tend. We have to seek God, not only the God of nature, but the God of revelation. For us Christians, "to seek God" is to tend toward him, not only as simple creatures who move toward the first principle and last end of their being, but supernaturally, as children who wish to remain united to their Father with all their strength of will urged by love, and through that mysterious participation in the very nature of God.

It is to this the psalmist alludes when he exhorts us to "Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually" (Ps. 105:4). That is to say, to seek the friendship of God, to seek his love, as when the bride looking upon the bridegroom seeks to see in his eyes the depth of his soul telling her of his tenderness. God is to us a Father of goodness. He wills that even here below we should find our happiness in him, in his ineffable perfections.

"To attain to God," this is the end that St. Benedict wishes us to have ever before our eyes. This principle, like a life-giving sap, circulates through all the articles of the monastic code.



We have not come to the monastery in order to devote ourselves to science, or the arts, or the work of education. It is true that the great patriarch wishes us at all times to serve God with the good things he has given us. He wishes the house of God to be wisely governed. St. Benedict does not wish the talents given by God to remain hidden. He permits the cultivation of the arts, a constant tradition that we ought to humbly respect, for the common good, for the service of the Church, for the salvation of souls, and for God's glory. But the end does not lie in this. All these works are only means in view of an end; the end is higher: it is in God, it is God sought for himself, as the Supreme Beatitude.

St. Benedict will have us seek God—seek him for his own glory, because we love him above all things. He would have us seek to unite ourselves to God by charity. There is not, for us, any other end, or any other perfection. The worship of God proceeds from the virtue of religion, doubtless the highest of the moral virtues, and it is united to the virtue of justice, but it is not a theological virtue. The infused theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are the specific virtues of our state as children of God. Properly speaking, the supernatural life is based here below on these three virtues. They regard God directly inasmuch as he is the author of the supernatural order. Faith is like the root, hope the stalk, and charity at once the flower and the fruit of the supernatural life. It is this charity, whereby we are and remain truly united to God, that constitutes the end assigned by St. Benedict and the very essence of perfection.

This end establishes the true greatness of the monastic life; it also establishes the true reason of its existence. In the opinion of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, we are given the name of "monks," *μονος*, "alone, one" on account of this life of indivisible unity, whereby, withdrawing our mind from the distraction of manifold things, we hurry toward divine unity and toward the perfection of holy love.³



The ambition of possessing God—such is the primal disposition that St. Benedict requires of the postulant who presents himself at the door of the monastery. He sees in this a proof of a sure vocation. But this disposition must extend to the monk's whole life.

For the abbot, St. Benedict wishes that first and foremost he should seek "the kingdom of God" in charity as Christ commanded, that he should have care, above all to establish this kingdom in the souls entrusted to him. All material activity exerted in the monastery ought to have this one end in view: "that in all things God may be glorified,"⁴ for in all things love refers everything to God's glory.

Let us carefully notice these words: "in all things," *in omnibus*. This is one of the conditions of our seeking God. In order for it to be "true," as St. Benedict requires, our seeking after God must be constant. We must seek his face forever. You may say: but do we not possess God from the time of our baptism, and as long as we are in possession of sanctifying grace? Undoubtedly. Then why seek God, if we possess him already?

"To seek God" is to remain united to him by faith. It is to attach ourselves to him as the object of our love. Now we know that this union of faith and love admits of a vast number of degrees. "God is everywhere present," says St. Ambrose, "but he is nearest to those who love him, he dwells far from those who neglect his service."⁵ When we have found God, we can still seek him, that is to say we can always draw nearer to God, by an ever intenser faith, an ever more fervent love, an ever more faithful accomplishment of his will,

and this is why we can and ought always to seek God, until the day when he will give himself to us in an inamissible manner in the glorious splendor of his indefectible light.

If we do not attain this end, we will remain useless and unprofitable. The psalmist says, and St. Benedict quotes these words in the Prologue in commenting upon them, "The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray" (Ps. 14:2-3). How many people don't understand that God is the source of all good and the supreme end of every creature? They have turned aside from the road that leads to the end. Why is this? What is a useless being? It is one that does not correspond to the end for which it was created. For instance, in order to fulfill the end for which it is purchased, a watch must show the time. It may well be of gold, studded with diamonds, encrusted with precious stones, but unless it keeps time it is useless.

We too become useless if we do not tend unceasingly to the end for which we came to the monastery. This end is to seek God, to refer all to him as to our supreme end, to place in him our sole beatitude. All the rest is vanity.

Let us seek him always, so as to be able unceasingly to put our lips to this source of beatitude. We can always drink from this source, without fear of seeing the waters exhausted, for, says St. Augustine, their abundance surpasses our need. Christ Jesus said they become in the soul "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14).



Another condition of the sincerity of our seeking is that it be *exclusive*. Let us seek God solely. I look upon this condition as capital.

To seek God solely is the same as saying to seek God himself. Notice the term "God," not the gifts of God, although they help us to remain faithful. Not his consolations, although God wills that we taste the sweetness of his service.⁶ We ought not to stop at these gifts nor be attached to these consolations. It is for God himself that we have come to the monastery. Our seeking will then only be "true," as St. Benedict wishes it to be, it will only be pleasing to God if we are attached to nothing apart from God.

There are many souls who have need of something with God, of something *more* than God; God is not all for them; they cannot like St. Francis of Assisi look at God and say with all the truth of their being, "My God and my all." They cannot repeat after St. Paul: "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8).

Never forget this extremely important truth: as long as we experience the need of a creature, and are attached to it, we cannot say that we seek God solely, and God will not give himself entirely to us. If it is our will that our search be sincere, if we want to find God fully, we must detach ourselves from all that is not God and that would shackle in us the operation of his grace.

This is the doctrine of the saints. Listen to what St. Catherine of Siena said on her deathbed. Feeling her end approaching, she gathered her spiritual family around her and gave them her last instructions, which had been collected by her confessor, the Blessed Raymund of Capua: "Her first and fundamental teaching was that he who enters into the service of God, ought necessarily, if he truly wishes to possess God, to root out from his heart all sensible affection, not only for persons but moreover for any creature whatever, and tend towards his divine Creator in the simplicity of an undivided love. For the heart cannot be given entirely to God if it is not free from all other love, and if it does not open itself with a frankness exclusive of all reserve."⁷

St. Teresa, speaking from the same experience, says, "We are so miserly, so slow in giving ourselves to God that we never finish putting ourselves into the necessary dispositions. And yet our Lord will not allow us to enter into the enjoyment of so precious a treasure (the perfect possession of God) without paying a high price for it. There is nothing on earth with which it can be purchased." However, she adds, "if we did all that depended upon us not to cling to anything earthly, if our conversation and all our thoughts were in heaven, I am convinced that such a treasure would be granted to us."⁸

To find God, to please him alone, must always remain our fundamental disposition. It is only at this price that we shall find God. If, on the contrary, forgetting little by little our initial gift, we allow ourselves to turn aside from this supreme aim, if we cling to some person, some employment, responsibility, work, occupation, or some object, let's not be fooled: we will never possess God fully.



The nearer we approach God by faith, confidence, and love, the nearer we approach our perfection. As God is the principal author of our holiness, since it is supernatural to draw near to him, remaining united to him by charity constitutes the very condition of our perfection. The more we set ourselves free from all sin, from all imperfection, all creatures, all human springs of action, in order to think only of him, to seek only his good pleasure, the more too life will abound in us and God will fill us with himself.

There are souls who so sincerely seek God that they are wholly possessed by him, and no longer know how to live without him. "I declare to you," a holy Benedictine nun, the Blessed Bonomo, wrote to her father, "that it is not I that live, but another in me who has entire possession of me. He is my absolute master. O God! I know not how to drive Him from me!"⁹

When the soul is wholly given to God, God also gives himself to the soul. He takes particular care of her. One might at times say that for such a soul God forgets the rest of the universe. Let us, then, seek God always and in all. Let us seek him sincerely, from the depth of our hearts. Let us often say to him like the psalmist, "Your face, LORD, do I seek" (Ps. 27:8). And when created things present themselves to us, let us say inwardly, "Depart from me, for thou art the prey of Death."¹⁰



In finding God, we will come to possess joy.

We were made to be happy. The human heart has a capacity for the infinite and only God can fully satisfy us. "Thou did make us for Thyself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee," wrote St. Augustine in his *Confessions*.¹¹ This is why when we seek anything apart from God or from his will, we don't find stable and perfect happiness.

In any large religious community, different categories of souls are met with. You will see some living in continual gladness. Their inward joy radiates outwardly. I am not now speaking of that sensible joy which often depends upon temperament, state of health, or of circumstances independent of the will, but of joy abiding in the depth of the soul that is like a foretaste of heavenly bliss. Have these souls never seen any trials? Have they no conflicts to sustain or contradictions to undergo? Certainly they have, for each disciple of Christ has to carry his cross, but the fervor of grace and divine unction make them endure these sufferings joyfully.

Other souls don't feel this gladness. Inwardly, and often even outwardly, they are troubled, distressed, unhappy. From where does this difference come?

Well, the first seek God in all things, and seeking him alone they find him everywhere, and with him, supreme good and unchanging bliss. The second are either attached to created things or seek themselves, by egotism, self-love, levity, and it is themselves too that they find—themselves, that is to say, nothingness, and this

cannot content them, for the soul, created for God, thirsts after perfect good.

When the soul seeks God, and seeks him alone, when it tends toward him with all its energies, when it clings to no created thing, God fills it with joy, with that overflowing joy St. Benedict speaks about when he says that as faith, hope, and love increase in the soul of a monk, he runs "with heart enlarged and unspeakable sweetness of love, in the way of God's commandments."¹²

Let us then often repeat like that great monk St. Bernard: "From where have I come?" Why have I left the world? Why have I separated myself from all who were dear to me? Why have I renounced my liberty? Why have I made so many and such great sacrifices? Did I come to give myself up to intellectual labors? To gain knowledge? To occupy myself with the arts, or with teaching? No, we came, never let us forget, for one thing, and one thing only: to seek God. It was to win this one precious pearl of the possession of God that we renounced everything.

We should remain faithful to this sublime vocation. We will not arrive at the realization of our ideal in a day or in a year. We will not arrive at it without difficulty or without sufferings, for that purity of affection, that absolute detachment, full and constant, that God requires of us before giving himself entirely to us, is only gained by much generosity. If we have decided to give ourselves completely to God, without reservation, and never to bargain with him for the least corner of our heart, to admit no attachment, however slight it may be, God will reward our efforts by the perfect possession of himself. "With what mercy God treats a soul," says St. Teresa, "when he bestows upon her grace and courage to devote herself generously

and with all her might to the pursuit of such a good! Let her only persevere, God refuses himself to none: little by little He will increase her courage, and finally she will gain the victory."¹³



In this seeking after God, we cannot find a better model than Christ Jesus Himself.

But, you will quickly object, how is this? Can Christ be our model? How could he "seek God," since he was God himself?

It is true that Jesus is God, true God from true God, Light arising from Uncreated Light, Son of the Living God, equal to the Father. But he is likewise man. He is authentically one of us, through his human nature. And although this human nature is united in an indissoluble way to the divine person of the Word, although the holy soul of Jesus has ceaselessly enjoyed the delights of the Beatific Vision, although it has been drawn into the divine current that necessarily bears the Son toward the Father, it remains true to say that Christ's human activity, which was derived from his human faculties as from its immediate sources, was sovereignly free.

It is in the exercise of this free activity that we can find in Jesus that which we call "seeking after God." What are the innermost aspirations of his soul, those to which he refers all his mission, and in which he sums up his life?

The author of the book of Hebrews tells us. He raises for us a corner of the veil to enable us to penetrate into the holy of holies. He tells us that the first throb of the soul of Jesus on entering into this world was one of infinite intensity toward His Father: "When Christ came into the world, he said . . . 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God'" (Heb. 10:5, 7). And we see Christ Jesus, like a giant, rejoice to run the way, in the pursuit of the glory of his Father. This is his primal disposition. Hear, in the Gospel, how he clearly tells us

so. "I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30). To the Jews, he proves that he comes from God, that his doctrine is divine, because he seeks the glory of him that sent him. He seeks it to such a degree that he has no solicitude for his own. He has ever these words upon his lips: "My Father." His whole life is but the magnificent echo of this cry: Abba.

Nothing held him back in this search. At the age of twelve, he left his mother, the Blessed Virgin, at Jerusalem. Never did child love his mother as Jesus loved the Blessed Virgin. Put together all the love that can animate the heart of a son and it is only a flickering spark beside the furnace of the love of Jesus for his mother. Yet, as soon as it concerns his Father's will, or his glory, one would say that this love no longer counts for anything. Jesus knew into what an abyss of anguish he plunged his mother's heart during those three days, but the interests of his Father required it, and so he did not hesitate: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house" (Lk. 2:49)? These are the first words from the lips of Jesus gathered up by the Gospel. In them, Christ sums up all his person, condenses all his mission.



Run," says St. Benedict, "while you have the light of life,"¹⁴ carried along by the holy desire of reaching the kingdom where our heavenly Father awaits us. Press forward unceasingly in the practice of good deeds; that is the indispensable condition for attaining the goal.

In the same way as Christ Jesus, coming down from heaven, only finished his glorious course when he gained the height of heaven, we shouldn't grow weary as we follow after him in seeking God, in seeking him solely, until we arrive at what St. Benedict calls, at the close of his Rule, the "lofty summits of virtue" and "the heights of perfection." The soul thus "arrived" lives habitually united to God whom she seeks. She has a foretaste of the delights of ineffable union.

O Lord, my God, my one hope,
hear me so that I may never weary of
seeking Thee, but that with unflinching
ardor my soul may ever seek
Thy Countenance.

Grant the strength to seek Thee,
O Thou Who givest the grace to find Thee
after having more and more given the hope
of attaining Thee.¹⁵

