

## St. John Climacus

In the late sixth or early seventh century, the abbot of St. Catherine's Monastery, John, was asked by another John, abbot of Raithu, to compose a manual for the monastic life. Much against his desire, but humbly obedient to his brother abbot, John of St. Catherine's produced the Ladder of Divine Ascent, earning thereby his surname, "Climacus," or "of the Ladder." The sublimity of his writings earned him the prefix "Saint."

Beginning with Renunciation of Life, Detachment, and Exile, the book proceeds through Obedience, Penitence, and Mourning to a systematic analysis of the virtues and vices that beset the serious Christian, that we might attain Stillness, Prayer, and Dispassion, with the end that we might embody Faith, Hope, and Love.

This is a book by a monk for monks. Our Mother the Church offers it to us today, to we who live in the world, as a guide for our own pursuit of the divine life. Read with discernment, the book will direct and protect us. The principles laid down here can mold all of us into the likeness of God. St. John writes in Step 1, "On Renunciation of Life,":

*Some people living carelessly in the world put a question to me: "How can we who are married and living among public cares aspire to the monastic life?"*

*I answered: "Do whatever good you may. Speak evil of no one. Rob no one. Tell no lie. Despise no one and carry no hate. Do not separate yourself from the Church assemblies [i.e., the Eucharist]. Show compassion to the needy. Do not be a cause of scandal to anyone. Stay away from the bed of another, and be satisfied with what your own wives can provide you. If you do all this, you will not be far from the kingdom of heaven."*

If that's what we're capable of doing, that's a good thing, and we should do that and all that we do in faith and hope that God, who sees the struggle and rewards both the struggle and the attainment, will receive us into his heavenly kingdom.

But this was addressed to "some people living carelessly." According to St. John, these traits will result in the practitioner being "not far from the kingdom of heaven." Is that really our highest calling – to live

carelessly and be "not far from" the kingdom of heaven? Isn't there a better way?

Of course, there is. While the exemplary list above is a good starting point for the Christian life, there is much more, even for those not able to enter a monastery and directly live the monastic life.

And that merits a word. Our Mother the Church holds out to us the high and holy calling to the life of all-consuming avid pursuit of that which is most desirable, that which is most beautiful, He who is the lover of our souls. We dare not bracket the monastic life as something for "those people." It is a calling to all of us in one way or another.

Some of us are called to embrace the monastic life for ourselves. Those of us still raising our children are called to take them to visit monasteries, and to bring them up to see that life as fulfilling, desirable, and rewarding. Some of us are called to live the monastic life in the world. All of us are called to pray for and support monasteries and the monks and nuns who have answered that call.

Monks and nuns are different, in the same way that a championship athlete is different. They both have a singleminded dedication to a single goal and have embraced an undeviating and uncompromising devotion to excellence in that pursuit. That sets them apart from the rest of society in a way that sometimes makes those around them uncomfortable.

A champion marathon runner knows exactly how many seconds a candy bar will add to her time in the next race, and weighs whether the indulgence is worth the possible loss. A true monastic knows exactly what the consequence is of even a slight lapse, and knows that it's not worth it. It's no accident that St. John calls monks and nuns "spiritual athletes."

What about the rest of us? Are we willing to be different in pursuit of excellence, even if it makes people around us uncomfortable? Are we comfortable "living carelessly in the world"? Are we confident that if we do, we will be able to "defend ourselves at the great tribunal of judgment"? What does our spiritual athleticism look like?

*But, Father, life these days is so complicated, not like in the seventh century. And how many children was St. John raising, anyway!?! I just can't do one more thing!*

So, don't. Don't do "one more thing." Just be mindful of the things you do. Subject your actions to your mind, and your mind to your *nous*, that part of you that communes with God. Great attainments start with small steps.

You're already praying morning and evening prayers and praying over your meals. Do so thoughtfully, not mechanically. Give yourself wholly over to gratitude to God for his loving and gracious gifts of life, love, the very air we breathe and the mechanical function of our bodies. Ask him for what you need, simply and unreservedly. Glorify him for who he is and worship him because he is worthy.

You're already reading Scripture. Do so meditatively, not hurriedly. Listen to God as he speaks to you. Do what he says and do what he does.

You're already attending the divine services. Be focused, attentive, undistracted. Tend to the needs of your family and to your own body, but don't let it disturb your peace.

You're already giving to the poor and serving those around you. Do so with humility. They are Jesus to you: "inasmuch as you've done it to the least of these, you've done it to me." John the Baptist was not worthy to untie Jesus's sandals. We are not worthy to untie the shoes of the poor.

You're already fasting. Embrace it, not for the sake of fasting, but for the fruit it yields. Trust our Mother the Church that the fast she prescribes will bear good fruit, if the fasting is embraced joyfully and received as a good gift.

Pay attention to what happens in your soul. Learn to hear the voice of God and to distinguish that voice from the voice of the demons. The latter condemn, accuse, harass. They suggest compromise and the coddling of our passions. Don't listen to those voices. Satan is the accuser and a liar, and the father of liars. Stop listening to liars. Purify your mind.

But if you have the passion and drive – and the time and energy – to "lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily besets us" and "run with perseverance," to "fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith,"

to singlemindedly pursue that "one thing needful," then let's run together.

St. John likens those seeking to live the monastic life in the world to someone trying to walk in chains. "Someone caught up in the affairs of the world can make progress, if he is determined. But it is not easy. Those bearing chains can still walk. But they often stumble and are thereby injured."

Because we have grown used to coddling the passions, and because we have an implacable enemy – one who cannot be made peaceable towards us – who mercilessly exploits our weaknesses, who hates us and wants us dead, the life of Christians in the world is hard work, and requires sweat, determination, toil, and travail. But so does everything worthwhile. That's how new life comes into the world. That's how babies are born – their mother labors, sweats, toils and travails, until the child is born. If she stops, there is no new life. Fortunately for the future of the human race, women are courageous, brave and strong. Are we that strong?

Let's examine our lives. What is it that I give myself to that isn't absolutely necessary for my human life and positively contributing to my progress in the spiritual life? While rigor is good, it's not necessary to be strictly rigorous. If I can find just one little thing that I can let go so that I can make just a little time to find more fullness in my calling, then I can take just that one baby-step in faith and desire, and not despise the day of small beginnings.

We're just past the mid-point of the Lenten ascetic discipline – the athletic training of Great Lent. How are we doing? Are we being faithful and obedient to our Mother the Church? Are we embracing this opportunity to strengthen ourselves and refine our repentance? Hopefully we aren't chafing at the rigor of our training regimen – it's for our good and the building-up of our faith, so that we can respond to and receive God's grace.

Grace: God's outpouring of his divine energies into our world.

Faith: our engagement of our human energies with his divine energies.

The divine life: synthesis of the divine life of grace and the human life of faith lived out in our world, for our salvation and the salvation of the world.

This life, according to St. Ephraim the Syrian, is given to us for repentance, the changing of our direction, of our mind, of our priorities. Let's not waste this good gift of God. Let's be good and faithful servants, so that we hear on that last and great glorious day, "Well done! Enter into the joy of your Lord!"