

The Discipline of the Church

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1. The discipline of the Church, the consideration of which has been deferred till now, must be briefly explained, that we may be able to pass to other matters. Now discipline depends in a very great measure on the power of the keys and on spiritual jurisdiction. That this may be more easily understood, let us divide the Church into two principal classes - viz: clergy and people. The term clergy I use in the common acceptation for those who perform a public ministry in the Church. We shall speak first of the common discipline to which all ought to be subject and then proceed to the clergy, who have besides the common discipline one peculiar to themselves. But as some, from hatred of discipline, are averse to the very name, for their sake we observe, - no society, nay, no house with even a moderate family, can be kept in a right state without discipline, more necessary is it in the Church, whose state ought to be the best ordered possible. Hence as the saving doctrine of Christ is the life of the Church, so discipline is, as it were, its sinews; for to it it is owing that the members of the body adhere together, each in its own place. Wherefore, all who either wish that that discipline were abolished, or who impede the restoration of it, whether they do this of design or through thoughtlessness, certainly aim at the complete devastation of the Church. For what will be the result if every one is allowed to do as he pleases? But this must happen if to the preaching of the gospel are not added private admonition, correction, and similar methods of maintaining doctrine; and not allowing it to become lethargic. Discipline, therefore, is a kind of curb to restrain and tame those who war against the doctrine of Christ, or it is a kind of stimulus by which the indifferent are aroused; sometimes, also, it is a kind of fatherly rod, by which those who have made some more grievous lapse are chastised in mercy with the meekness of the spirit of Christ. Since, then, we already see some beginnings of a fearful devastation in the Church from the total want of care and method in managing the people, necessity itself cries aloud that there is need of a remedy. Now the only remedy is this which Christ enjoins, and the pious always had in use.

2. The first foundation of discipline is to provide for private admonition; that is, - if anyone does not do his duty, spontaneously, or behaves insolently, or lives not quite honestly, or commits something worthy of blame, he must

allow himself to be admonished; and every one must study to admonish his brother when the case requires. Here especially is there occasion for the vigilance of pastors and presbyters, whose duty is not only to preach to the people, but to exhort and admonish them from house to house, whenever their hearers have not profited sufficiently by general teaching; as Paul shows, when he relates that he taught "publicly, and from house to house," and testifies that he is "pure from the blood of all men," because he had not shunned to declare "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20: 20, 26, 27). Then does doctrine obtain force and authority, not only when the minister publicly expounds to all what they owe to Christ, but has the right and means of exacting this from those whom he may observe to be sluggish or disobedient to his doctrine. Should anyone either perversely reject such admonitions, or by persisting in his faults, show that he condemns them, the injunction of Christ, is that after he has been a second time admonished before witnesses, he is to be summoned to the bar of the Church, which is the consistory of elders (i.e. Kirk-session), and there admonished more sharply, as by public authority, that if he reverence the church he may submit and obey (Matt. 18: 15, 17). If even in this way he is not subdued, but persists in his iniquity, he is then, as a despiser of the Church, to be debarred from the society of believers.

3. But as our Saviour is not there speaking of secret faults merely, we must attend to the distinction that some sins are private, others public or openly manifest. Of the former, Christ says to every private individual, "go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone" (Matt. 18: 15). Of open sins Paul says to Timothy: "Those that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Tim. 5: 20). Our Saviour had previously used the words: "If thy brother shall trespass against thee." This clause, unless you would be captious, you cannot understand otherwise than, if this happens in a manner known to yourself, others not being privy to it. The injunction which Paul gave to Timothy to rebuke those openly who sin openly, he himself followed with Peter (Gal. 2: 14). For when Peter sinned so as to give public offence, he did not admonish him apart, but brought him forward in the face of the Church. The legitimate course, therefore, will be to proceed in correcting secret faults by the steps mentioned by Christ, and in open sins, accompanied with public scandal, to proceed at once to solemn correction by the Church.

4. Another distinction to be attended to is, that some sins are more delinquencies, others crimes and flagrant iniquities. In correcting the latter, it is necessary to employ not only admonition or rebuke but a sharper remedy, as

Paul shows when he not only verbally rebukes the incestuous Corinthian, but punishes him with excommunication, as soon as he was informed of his crime (I Cor. 5: 4). Now then we begin better to perceive how the spiritual jurisdiction of the Church, which animadverts on sins according to the Word of the Lord, is at once the best help to sound doctrine, the best foundation of order, and the best bond of unity. Therefore, when the Church banishes from its fellowship open adulterers, fornicators, thieves, robbers, the seditious, the perjured, false witnesses, and others of that description; likewise the contumacious, who, when duly admonished for lighter faults, hold God and His tribunal in derision, instead of arrogating to itself anything that is unreasonable, it exercises a jurisdiction which it has received from the Lord. Moreover, lest anyone should despise the judgment of the Church or count it a small matter to be condemned by the suffrages of the faithful, the Lord has declared that it is nothing else than the promulgation of His own sentence, and that that which they do on earth is ratified in heaven. For they act by the Word of the Lord in taking the penitent back into favour (John 20: 23). Those, I say, who trust that churches can long stand without this bond of discipline are mistaken, unless, indeed, we can with impunity dispense with a help which the Lord foresaw would be necessary. And, indeed, the greatness of the necessity will be better perceived by its manifold uses.

5. There are three ends to which the Church has respect in thus correcting and excommunicating. The first is, that God may not be insulted by the name of Christians being given to those who lead shameful and flagitious lives, as if His holy Church were a combination of the wicked and abandoned. For seeing that the Church is the body of Christ, she cannot be defiled by such fetid and putrid members, without bringing some disgrace on her Head. Therefore, that there may be nothing in the Church to bring disgrace on His sacred name, those whose turpitude might throw infamy on the name must be expelled from His family. And here, also, regard, must be had to the Lord's Supper, which might be profaned by a promiscuous admission. For it is most true, that he who is entrusted with the dispensation of it, if he knowingly and willingly admits any unworthy person whom he ought and is able to repel, is as guilty of sacrilege as if he had cast the Lord's body to dogs. Wherefore, Chrysostom bitterly inveighs against priests, who, for fear of the great dare not keep anyone back. "Blood," says he, "will be required at your hands. If you fear man, he will mock you, but if you fear God, you will be respected also by men. Let us not tremble at fasces, purple or diadems; our power here is greater.

Assuredly I will sooner give up my body to death, and allow my blood to be shed than be a partaker of that pollution." Therefore, lest this most sacred mystery should be exposed to ignominy, great selection is required in dispensing it, and this cannot be except by the jurisdiction of the Church. A second end of discipline is, that the good may not, as usually happens, be corrupted by constant communication with the wicked. For such is our proneness to go astray, that nothing is easier than to seduce us from the right course by bad example. To this use of discipline the Apostle referred when he commanded the Corinthians to discard the incestuous man from their society. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (I Cor. 5: 6): And so much danger did he foresee here, that he prohibited them from keeping company with such persons. "If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one, no not to eat" (I Cor. 5: 11). A third end of discipline is, that the sinner may be ashamed, and begin to repent of his turpitude. Hence it is for their interest also that their iniquity should be chastised, that whereas they would have become more obstinate by indulgence, they may be aroused by the rod. This the Apostle intimates when he thus writes: "If any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed" (II Thess. 3: 14). Again, when he says that he had delivered the Corinthian to Satan, "that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 5: 5); that is, as I interpret it, he gave him over to temporal condemnation, that he might be made safe for eternity. And he says that he gave him over to Satan because the devil is without the Church, as Christ is in the Church. Some interpret this of a certain infliction on the flesh, but this interpretation seems to me most improbable.

6. These being the ends proposed, it remains to see what way the Church is to execute this part of discipline, which consists in jurisdiction. And, first, let us remember the division above laid down, that some sins are public, others private or secret. Public are those which are done not before one or two witnesses, but openly, and to the offence of the whole Church. By secret, I mean not such as are altogether concealed from men, such as those of hypocrites (for these fall not under the judgment of the Church) but those of an intermediate description, which are not without witnesses, and yet are not public. The former class requires not the different steps which Christ enumerates; but whenever anything of the kind occurs, the Church ought to do her duty by summoning the offender and correcting him according to his fault.

In the second class, the matter comes not before the Church, unless there is contumacy, according to the rule of Christ. In taking cognisance of offences, it is necessary to attend to the distinction between delinquencies and flagrant iniquities.

In lighter offences there is not so much occasion for severity, but verbal chastisement, is sufficient, and that gentle and fatherly, so as not to exasperate or confound the offender, but to bring him back to himself, so that he may rather rejoice than be grieved at the correction. Flagrant iniquities require a sharper remedy. It is not sufficient verbally to rebuke him who, by some open act of evil example, has grievously offended the Church; but he ought for a time to be denied the communion of the Supper, until he gives proof of repentance. Paul does not merely administer a verbal rebuke to the Corinthian, but discards him from the Church, and reprimands the Corinthians for having borne with him so long (I Cor. 5: 5). This was the method observed by the ancient and purer Church, when legitimate government was in vigour. When anyone was guilty of some flagrant iniquity and thereby caused scandal, he was first ordered to abstain from participation in the sacred Supper, and thereafter to humble himself before God and testify his penitence before the Church. There were, moreover, solemn rites, which, as indications of repentance, were wont to be prescribed to those who had lapsed. When the penitent had thus made satisfaction to the Church, he was received into favour by the laying on of hands. This admission often receives the name of peace from Cyprian, who briefly describes the form. "They act as penitents for a certain time, next they come to confession, and receive the right of communion by the laying of hands of the bishop and clergy." Although the bishop with the clergy thus superintend the restoration of the penitent, the consent of the people was at the same time required, as he elsewhere explains.

7. So far was any one from being exempted from discipline, that even princes submitted to it in common with their subjects; and justly, since it is the discipline of Christ; to whom all sceptres and diadems should be subject. Thus Theodosius, when excommunicated by Ambrose because of the slaughter perpetrated at Thessalonica, laid aside all the royal insignia with which he was surrounded, and publicly in the Church bewailed the sin into which he had been betrayed by the fraud of others, with groans and tears imploring pardon. Great kings should not think it a disgrace to them to prostrate themselves suppliantly before Christ, the King of kings; nor ought they to be displeased at

being judged by the Church. For seeing they seldom hear anything in their courts but mere flattery, the more necessary is it that the Lord should correct them by the mouth of His priests. Nay, they ought rather to wish the priests not to spare them, in order that the Lord may spare. I here say nothing as to those by whom the jurisdiction ought to be exercised because it has been said elsewhere (Chap. 11. Sec. 5,6). I only add, that the legitimate course to be taken in excommunication, as shown by Paul, is not for the elders alone to act apart from others, but with the knowledge and approbation of the Church, so that the body of the people, without regulating the procedure, may, as witnesses and guardians, observe it, and prevent the few from doing anything capriciously. Throughout the whole procedure, in addition to invocation of the name of God, there should be a gravity bespeaking the presence of Christ, and leaving no room to doubt that He is presiding over his own tribunal.

8. It ought not, however, to be omitted, that the Church, in exercising severity, ought to accompany it with the spirit of meekness. For, as Paul enjoins, we must always take care that he on whom discipline is exercised be not "swallowed up with over-much sorrow" (II Cor 2: 7): for in this way, instead of cure there would be destruction. The rule of moderation will be best obtained from the end contemplated. For the object of ex-communication being to bring the sinner to repentance and remove bad examples, in order that the name of Christ may not be evil spoken of, nor others tempted to the same evil courses: if we consider this, we shall easily understand how far severity should be carried, and at what point it ought to cease. Therefore, when the sinner gives the Church evidence of his repentance, and by this evidence does what in him lies to obliterate the offence, he ought not on any account to be urged further. If he is urged, the rigour now exceeds due measure. In this respect it is impossible to excuse the excessive austerity of the ancients, which was altogether at variance with the injunction of the Lord, and strangely perilous. For when they enjoyed a formal repentance, and excluded from communion for three, or four, or seven years, or for life, what would the result be, but either great hypocrisy or very great despair? In like manner, when any one who had again lapsed was not admitted to a second repentance, but ejected from the Church to the end of his life (August. Ep. 54), this was neither useful nor agreeable to reason. Whosoever, therefore, looks at the matter with sound judgment, will here regret a want of prudence. Here, however, I rather disapprove of the public custom, than blame those who complied with it. Some of them certainly disapproved of it, but submitted to

what they were unable to correct. Cyprian, indeed, declares that it was not with his own will he was thus rigorous. "Our patience, facility, and humanity," he says, are ready to all who come. I wish all to be brought back into the Church: I wish all our fellow-soldiers to be contained within the camp of Christ and the mansions of God the Father. I forgive all; I disguise much; from an earnest desire of collecting the brotherhood, I do not minutely scrutinize all the faults which have been committed against God. I myself often err, by for giving offences more than I ought. Those returning in repentance, and those confessing their sins with simple and humble satisfaction, I embrace with prompt and full delight." Chrysostom, who is somewhat more severe, still speaks thus: "If God is so kind, why should his priest wish to appear austere?" We know, moreover, how indulgently Augustine treated the Donatists; not hesitating to admit any who returned from schism to their bishopric, as soon as they declared their repentance. But, as a contrary method had prevailed, they were compelled to follow it, and give up their own judgment.

9. But as the whole body of the Church are required to act thus mildly, and not to carry their rigour against those who have lapsed to an extreme, but rather to act charitably towards them, according to the precept of Paul, so every private individual ought proportionately to accommodate himself to this clemency and humanity. Such as have, therefore, been expelled from the Church, it belongs not to us to expunge from the number of the elect, or to despair of, as if they were already lost. We may lawfully judge them aliens from the Church, and so aliens from Christ, but only during the time of their excommunication. If then, also, they give greater evidence of petulance than humility, still let us commit them to the judgment of the Lord, hoping better of them in the future than we see at present, and not ceasing to pray to God for them. And, to sum up in one word, let us not consign to destruction their person, which is in the hand, and subject to the decision, of the Lord alone; but let us merely estimate the character of each man's acts according to the law of the Lord. In following this rule, we abide by the divine judgement rather than give any judgment of our own. Let us not arrogate to ourselves greater liberty in judging, if we would not limit the power of God, and give the law to His mercy. Whenever it seems good to Him, the worst are changed into the best; aliens are ingrafted, and strangers are adopted into the Church. This the Lord does, that he may disappoint the thoughts of men, and confound their rashness; a rashness which, if not curbed, would usurp a power of judging to which it has no title.

10. For when our Saviour promises that what His servants bound on earth should be bound in heaven (Matt. 18: 18), He confines the power of binding to the censure of the Church, which does not consign those who are excommunicated to perpetual ruin and damnation but assures them, when they hear their life and manners condemned that perpetual damnation will follow if they do not repent. Excommunication differs from anathema in this, that the latter completely excluding pardon, dooms and devotes the individual to eternal destruction, whereas the former rather rebukes and animadverts upon his manners; and although it also punishes, it is to bring him to salvation, by forewarning him of his future doom. If it succeeds, reconciliation and restoration to communion are ready to be given. Moreover, anathema is rarely ever to be used. Hence, though ecclesiastical discipline does not allow us to be on familiar and intimate terms with excommunicated persons, still we ought to strive by all possible means to bring them to a better mind, and recover them to the fellowship and unity of the Church; as the Apostle also says: "Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." (II Thess. 3: 15). If this humanity be not observed in private as well as public, the danger is, that our discipline shall degenerate into destruction.

11. Another special requisite to modernisation of discipline is, as Augustine discourses against the Donatists, that private individuals must not, when they see vices less carefully corrected by the Council of Elders, immediately separate themselves from the Church; nor must pastors themselves, when unable to reform all things which need correction to the extent which they could wish, cast up their ministry, or by unwonted severity throw the whole Church into confusion. What Augustine says is perfectly true: "Whoever corrects what he can, by rebuking it, or without violating the bond of peace, excludes what he cannot correct, or unjustly condemns while he patiently tolerates what he is unable to exclude without violating the bond of peace, is free and exempted from the curse." He elsewhere gives the reason. "Every pious reason and mode of ecclesiastical discipline ought always to have regard to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This the Apostle commands us to keep by bearing mutually with each other. If it is not kept, the medicine of discipline begins to be not only superfluous, but even pernicious, and therefore ceases to be medicine." "He who diligently considers these things, neither in the preservation of unity neglects strictness of discipline, nor by intemperate correction bursts the bond of society." He confesses, indeed, that pastors ought not only to exert themselves in removing every defect from the Church,

but that every individual ought to his utmost do so; nor does he disguise the fact, that he who neglects to admonish, accuse, and correct the bad, although he neither favours them, nor sins with them, is guilty before the Lord; and if he conducts himself so that though he can exclude them from partaking of the Sup- per, he does it not, then the sin is no longer that of other men, but his own. Only he would have the prudence used which our Lord also requires: "lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them" (Matt. 13: 29). Hence he infers from Cyprian: "Let a man then mercifully correct what he can; what he cannot correct, let him bear patiently, and in love bewail and lament."

12. This he says on account of the moroseness of the Donatists, who, when they saw faults in the Church which the bishops indeed rebuked verbally, but did not punish with excommunication (because they did not think that anything would be gained in this way), bitterly inveighed against the bishops as traitors to discipline, and by an impious schism separated themselves from the flock of Christ. Similar, in the present day, is the conduct of the Anabaptists, who acknowledging no assembly of Christ unless conspicuous in all respects for angelic perfection, under pretence of zeal overthrow everything which tends to edification. "Such", says Augustine, "not from hatred of other men's iniquity, but zeal for their own disputes, ensnaring the weak by the credit of their name, attempt to draw them entirely away, or at least to separate them; swollen with pride, raving with petulance, insidious in calumny, turbulent in sedition. That it may not be seen how void they are of the light of truth, they cover themselves with the shadow of a stern severity: the correction of a brother's fault, which in Scripture is enjoined to be done with moderation, without impairing the sincerity of love or breaking the bond of peace, they pervert to sacrilegious schism and purposes of excision. Thus Satan transforms himself into an angel of light (11 Cor. 11: 14) when, under pretext of a just severity, he persuades to savage cruelty, desiring nothing more than to violate and burst the bond of unity and peace, because, when it is maintained, all his power of mischief is feeble, his wily traps are broken, and his schemes of subversion vanish."

13. One thing Augustine specially commends - viz: that if the contagion of sin has seized the multitude, mercy must accompany living discipline. "For counsels of separation are vain, sacrilegious, and pernicious, because impious and proud, and do more to disturb the weak good than to correct the wicked proud" (August. Ep. 64). This which he enjoins on others he himself faithfully

practised. For, writing to Aurelius, Bishop of Carthage, he complains that drunkenness, which is so severely condemned in the Scripture, prevails in Africa with impunity, and advises a council of bishops to be called for the purpose of providing a remedy. He immediately adds: "In my opinion, such things are not removed by rough, harsh, and imperious measures, but more by teaching than commanding, more by admonishing than threatening. For thus ought we to act with a multitude of offenders. Severity is to be exercised against the sins of a few." (August. Ep. 64). He does not mean, however, that the bishops were to wink at or be silent because they are unable to punish public offences severely, as he himself afterwards explains. But he wishes to temper the mode of correction, so as to give soundness to the body rather than cause destruction. And, accordingly, he thus concludes: "Wherefore, we must on no account neglect the injunction of the Apostle, to separate from the wicked, when it can be done without the risk of violating peace, because he did not wish it to be done otherwise (1 Cor. 5: 13); we must also endeavour, by bearing with each other, to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4: 2).