

In Praise of the New Knighthood (Liber ad milites Templi: De laude novae militiae)

St. Bernard of Clairvaux trans. Conrad Greenia

Editors' note: The following passage is taken from a treatise written in the early 12th century by the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, on behalf of the fledgling Knights Templar. It might be viewed as a combination of exhortation to the Knights, and advertisement to the population in general. Officially it is an answer to a letter written to Bernard by his friend Hugh de Payens, one of the founders of the Templars.

Prologue

TO HUGH, KNIGHT OF CHRIST AND MASTER OF CHRIST'S MILITIA: BERNARD, IN NAME ONLY, ABBOT OF CLAIRVAUS, WISHES THAT HE MIGHT FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

IF I AM NOT MISTAKEN, MY DEAR HUGH, you have asked me not once or twice, but three times to write a few words of exhortation for you and your comrades. You say that if I am not permitted to wield the lance, at least I might direct my pen against the tyrannical foe, and that this moral, rather than material support of mine will be of no small help to you. I have put you off now for quite some time, not that I disdain your request, but rather lest I be blamed for taking it lightly and hastily. I feared I might botch a task which could be better done by a more qualified hand, and which would perhaps remain, because of me, just as necessary and all the more difficult.

Having waited thus for quite some time to no purpose, I have now done what I could, lest my inability should be mistaken for unwillingness. It is for the reader to judge the result. If some perhaps find my work unsatisfactory or short of the mark, I shall be nonetheless content, since I have not failed to give you my best.

CHAPTER ONE

A WORD OF EXHORTATION FOR THE KNIGHTS OF THE TEMPLE

IT SEEMS THAT A NEW KNIGHTHOOD has recently appeared on the earth, and precisely in that part of it which the Orient from on high visited in the flesh. As he then troubled the princes of darkness in the strength of his mighty hand, so there he now wipes out their followers, the children of disbelief, scattering them by the hands of his mighty ones. Even now he brings about the redemption of his people raising up again a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

This is, I say, a new kind of knighthood and one unknown to the ages gone by. It ceaselessly wages a twofold war both against flesh and blood and against a spiritual army of evil in the heavens. When someone strongly resists a foe in the flesh, relying solely on the strength of the flesh, I would hardly remark it, since this is common enough. And when war is waged by spiritual strength against vices or demons, this, too, is nothing remarkable, praiseworthy as it is, for the world is full of monks. But when the one sees a man powerfully girding himself with both swords and nobly marking his belt, who would not consider it worthy of all wonder, the more so since it has been hitherto unknown? He is truly a fearless knight and secure on every side, for his soul is protected by the armor of faith just as his body is protected by armor of steel. He is thus doubly armed and need fear neither demons nor men. Not that he fears death--no, he desires it. Why should he fear to live or fear to die when for him to live is Christ, and to die is gain? Gladly and faithfully he stands for Christ, but he would prefer to be dissolved and to be with Christ, by far the better thing.

Go forth confidently then, you knights, and repel the foes of the cross of Christ with a stalwart heart. Know that neither death nor life can separate you from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ, and in every peril repeat, "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." What a glory to return in victory from such a battle! How blessed to die there as a martyr! Rejoice, brave athlete, if you live and conquer in the Lord; but glory and exult even more if you die and join your Lord. Life indeed is a fruitful thing and victory is glorious, but a holy death is more important than either. If they are blessed who die in the Lord, how much more are they who die for the Lord!

2. To be sure, precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his holy ones, whether they die in battle or in bed, but death in battle is more precious as it is the more glorious. How secure is life when the conscience is unsullied! How secure, I say, is life when death is anticipated without fear; or rather when it is desired with feeling and embraced with reverence! How holy and secure this knighthood and how entirely free of the double risk run by those men who fight not for Christ! Whenever you go forth, O worldly warrior, you must fear lest the bodily death of your foe should mean your own spiritual death, or lest perhaps your body and soul together should be slain by him.

Indeed, danger or victory for a Christian depends on the dispositions of his heart and not on the fortunes of war. If he fights for a good reason, the issue of his fight can never be evil; and likewise the results can never be considered good if the reason were evil and the intentions perverse. If you happen to be killed while you are seeking only to kill another, you die a murderer. If you succeed, and by your will to overcome and to conquer you perchance kill a man, you live a murderer. Now it will not do to be a murderer, living or dead, victorious or vanquished. What an unhappy victory--to have conquered a man while yielding to vice, and to indulge in an empty glory at his fall when wrath and pride have gotten the better of you!

But what of those who kill neither in the heat of revenge nor in the swelling of pride, but simply in order to save themselves? Even this sort of victory I would not call good, since bodily death is

really a lesser evil than spiritual death. The soul need not die when the body does. No, it is the soul which sins that shall die.

CHAPTER TWO

ON WORLDLY KNIGHTHOOD

WHAT, THEN IS THE END OR FRUIT of this worldly knighthood, or rather knavery, as I should call it? What if not the mortal sin of the victor and the eternal death of the vanquished? Well then, let me borrow a word from the Apostle and exhort him who plows, to plow in hope, and him who threshes, to do so in view of some fruit.

What then, O knights, is this monstrous error and what this unbearable urge which bids you fight with such pomp and labor, and all to no purpose except death and sin? You cover your horses with silk, and plume your armor with I know not what sort of rags; you paint your shields and your saddles; you adorn your bits and spurs with gold and silver and precious stones, and then in all this glory you rush to your ruin with fearful wrath and fearless folly. Are these the trappings of a warrior or are they not rather the trinkets of a woman? Do you think the swords of your foes will be turned back by your gold, spare your jewels or be unable to pierce your silks?

As you yourselves have often certainly experienced, a warrior especially needs these three things--he must guard his person with strength, shrewdness and care; he must be free in his movements, and he must be quick to draw his sword. Then why do you blind yourselves with effeminate locks and trip yourselves up with long and full tunics, burying your tender, delicate hands in big cumbersome sleeves? Above all, there is that terrible insecurity of conscience, in spite of all your armor, since you have dared to undertake such a dangerous business on such slight and frivolous grounds. What else is the cause of wars and the root of disputes among you, except unreasonable flashes of anger, the thirst for empty glory, or the hankering after some earthly possessions? It certainly is not safe to kill or to be killed for such causes as these.

CHAPTER THREE

ON THE NEW KNIGHTHOOD

BUT THE KNIGHTS OF CHRIST may safely fight the battles of their Lord, fearing neither sin if they smite the enemy, nor danger at their own death; since to inflict death or to die for Christ is no sin, but rather, an abundant claim to glory. In the first case one gains for Christ, and in the second one gains Christ himself. The Lord freely accepts the death of the foe who has offended him, and yet more freely gives himself for the consolation of his fallen knight.

The knight of Christ, I say, may strike with confidence and die yet more confidently, for he serves Christ when he strikes, and serves himself when he falls. Neither does he bear the sword in vain, for he is God's minister, for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of the good.

If he kills an evildoer, he is not a mankiller, but, if I may so put it, a killer of evil. He is evidently the avenger of Christ towards evildoers and he is rightly considered a defender of Christians. Should he be killed himself, we know that he has not perished, but has come safely into port. When he inflicts death it is to Christ's profit, and when he suffers death, it is for his own gain. The Christian glories in the death of the pagan, because Christ is glorified; while the death of the Christian gives occasion for the King to show his liberality in the rewarding of his knight. In the one case the just shall rejoice when he sees justice done, and in the other man shall say, truly there is a reward for the just; truly it is God who judges the earth.

I do not mean to say that the pagans are to be slaughtered when there is any other way to prevent them from harassing and persecuting the faithful, but only that it now seems better to destroy them than that the rod of sinners be lifted over the lot of the just, and the righteous perhaps put forth their hands unto iniquity.

5. What then? If it is never permissible for a Christian to strike with the sword, why did the Savior's precursor bid the soldiers to be content with their pay, and not rather forbid them to follow this calling? But if it is permitted to all those so destined by God, as is indeed the case provided they have not embraced a higher calling, to whom, I ask, may it be allowed more rightly than to those whose hands and hearts hold for us Sion, the city of our strength?

Thus when the transgressors of divine law have been expelled, the righteous nation that keeps the truth may enter in security. Certainly it is proper that the nations who love war should be scattered, that those who trouble us should be cut off, and that all the workers of iniquity should be dispersed from the city of the Lord. They busy themselves to carry away the incalculable riches placed in Jerusalem by the Christian peoples, to profane the holy things and to possess the sanctuary of God as their heritage. Let both swords of the faithful fall upon the necks of the foe, in order to destroy every high thing exalting itself against the knowledge of God, which is the Christian faith, lest the Gentiles should then say, "Where is their God?"

6. Once they have been cast out, he shall return to his heritage and to his house, which aroused his anger in the Gospel, "Behold," he said, "your house is left to you desolate." He had complained through the Prophet: "I have left my house, I have forsaken my heritage," and he will fulfill that other prophecy: "The Lord has ransomed his people and delivered them. They shall come and exult on Mount Sion, and rejoice in the good things of the Lord."

Rejoice Jerusalem, and recognize now the time in which you are visited! Be glad and give praise together, wastes of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people. He has ransomed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm in the sight of all peoples. O virgin of Israel, you were fallen and there was none to raise you up. Arise now and shake off the dust, O virgin, captive daughter of Sion. Arise, I say, and stand on high. See the happiness which comes to you from your God. You will no longer be referred to as the forsaken one, nor your land any more termed a wilderness; for the Lord takes his delight in you, and your land shall be peopled. Raise your eyes, look about you and see; all these are gathered together and come to you. Here is the help sent to you from the Holy One! Through them is already fulfilled the ancient promise, "I

will make you the pride of the ages, a joy from generation to generation. You will suck the milk of the nations and be nourished at the breasts of their sovereignty." And again, "As a mother consoles her children, so will I console you, and in Jerusalem you will be comforted."

Do you not see how frequently these ancient witnesses foreshadowed the new knighthood? Truly, as we have heard, so we have now seen in the city of the Lord of armies. Of course we must not let these literal fulfillments blind us to the spiritual meaning of the texts, for we must live in eternal hope in spite of such temporal realizations of prophetic utterances. Otherwise the tangible would supplant the intangible, material poverty would threaten spiritual wealth and present possessions would forestall future fulfillment. Furthermore, the temporal glory of the earthly city does not eclipse the glory of its heavenly counterpart, but rather prepares for it, at least so long as we remember that the one is the figure of the other, and that it is the heavenly one which is our mother.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THE LIFE STYLE OF THE KNIGHTS OF THE TEMPLE

AND NOW AS A MODEL, or at least for the shame of those knights of ours who are fighting for the devil rather than for God, we will briefly set forth the life and virtues of these cavaliers of Christ. Let us see how they conduct themselves at home as well as in battle, how they appear in public, and in what way the knight of God differs from the knight of the world.

In the first place, discipline is in no way lacking and obedience is never despised. As Scripture testifies, the undisciplined son shall perish and rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, to refuse obedience is like the crime of idolatry. Therefore they come and go at the bidding of their superior. They wear what he gives them, and do not presume to wear or to eat anything from another source. Thus they shun every excess in clothing and food and content themselves with what is necessary. They live as brothers in joyful and sober company, without wives or children. So that their evangelical perfection will lack nothing, they dwell united in one family with no personal property whatever, careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. You may say that the whole multitude has but one heart and one soul to the point that nobody follows his own will, but rather seeks to follow the commander.

They never sit in idleness or wander about aimlessly, but on the rare occasions when they are not on duty, they are always careful to earn their bread by repairing their worn armor and torn clothing, or simply by setting things to order. For the rest, they are guided by the common needs and by the orders of their master.

There is no distinction of persons among them, and deference is shown to merit rather than to noble blood. They rival one another in mutual consideration, and they carry one another's burdens, thus fulfilling the law of Christ. No inappropriate word, idle deed, unrestrained laugh, not even the slightest whisper or murmur is left uncorrected once it has been detected. They foreswear dice and chess, and abhor the chase; they take no delight in the ridiculous cruelty of

falconry, as is the custom. As for jesters, magicians, bards, troubadours and jousts, they despise and reject them as so many vanities and unsound deceptions. Their hair is worn short, in conformity with the Apostle's saying, that it is shameful for a man to cultivate flowing locks. Indeed, they seldom wash and never set their hair--content to appear tousled and dusty, bearing the marks of the sun and of their armor.

8. When the battle is at hand, they arm themselves interiorly with faith and exteriorly with steel rather than decorate themselves with gold, since their business is to strike fear in the enemy rather than to incite his cupidity. They seek out horses which are strong and swift, rather than those which are brilliant and well-plumed, they set their minds on fighting to win rather than on parading for show. They think not of glory and seek to be formidable rather than flamboyant. At the same time, they are not quarrelsome, rash, or unduly hasty, but soberly, prudently and providently drawn up into orderly ranks, as we read of the fathers. Indeed, the true Israelite is a man of peace, even when he goes forth to battle.

Once he finds himself in the thick of battle, this knight sets aside his previous gentleness, as if to say, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord; am I not disgusted with your enemies?" These men at once fall violently upon the foe, regarding them as so many sheep. No matter how outnumbered they are, they never regard these as fierce barbarians or as awe-inspiring hordes. Nor do they presume on their own strength, but trust in the Lord of armies to grant them the victory. They are mindful of the words of Maccabees, "It is simple enough for a multitude to be vanquished by a handful. It makes no difference to the God of heaven whether he grants deliverance by the hands of few or many; for victory in war is not dependent on a big army, and bravery is the gift of heaven." On numerous occasions they had seen one man pursue a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight.

Thus in a wonderful and unique manner they appear gentler than lambs, yet fiercer than lions. I do not know if it would be more appropriate to refer to them as monks or as soldiers, unless perhaps it would be better to recognize them as being both. Indeed they lack neither monastic meekness nor military might. What can we say of this, except that this has been done by the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes. These are the picked troops of God, whom he has recruited from the ends of the earth; the valiant men of Israel chosen to guard well and faithfully that tomb which is the bed of the true Solomon, each man sword in hand, and superbly trained to war.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM

THEIR QUARTERS indeed are in the very temple of Jerusalem, which is not as vast as the ancient masterpiece of Solomon, but is no less glorious. Truly all the magnificence of the first temple lay in perishable gold and silver, in polished stones and precious woods; whereas all the beauty and gracious charming adornment of its present counterpart is the religious fervor of its occupants and by their well-disciplined behavior. In the former, one could contemplate all sorts of

beautiful colors, while in the latter one is able to venerate all sorts of virtues and good works. Indeed holiness is the fitting ornament for God's house. One is able to delight there in splendid merits rather than in shining marble, and to be captivated by pure hearts rather than by gilded paneling.

Of course the facade of this temple is adorned, but with weapons rather than with jewels, and in place of the ancient golden crowns, its walls are hung round about with shields. In place of candlesticks, censers and ewers, this house is well furnished with saddles, bits and lances. By all these signs our knights clearly show that they are animated by the same zeal for the house of God which of old passionately inflamed their leader himself when he armed his most holy hands, not indeed with a sword, but with a whip. Having fashioned this from some lengths of cord, he entered the temple and ejected the merchants, scattered the coins of the money changers, and overturned the chairs of the pigeon venders, considering it most unfitting to defile this house of prayer by such traffic.

Moved therefore by their King's example, his devoted soldiers consider that it is even more shameful and infinitely more intolerable for a holy place to be polluted by pagans than to be crowded with merchants. Once they have installed themselves in this holy house with their horses and their weapons, cleansed it and the other holy places of every un-Christian stain, and cast out the tyrannical horde, they occupy themselves day and night in both pious exercises and practical work. They are especially careful to honor the temple of God with zealous and sincere reverence, offering by their devout service, not the flesh of animals according to the ancient rites, but true peace offerings of brotherly love, devoted obedience and voluntary poverty.

10. These events at Jerusalem have shaken the world. The islands hearken, and the people from afar give ear. They swarm forth from East and West, as a flood stream bringing glory to the nations and a rushing river gladdening the city of God. What could be more profitable and pleasant to behold than seeing such a multitude coming to reinforce the few? What, if not the twofold joy of seeing the conversion of these former impious rogues, sacrilegious thieves, murderers, perjurers and adulterers? A twofold joy and a twofold benefit, since their countrymen are as glad to be rid of them as their new comrades are to receive them. Both sides have profited from this exchange, since the latter are strengthened and the former are now left in peace. Thus Egypt rejoices in their conversion and departure while Mount Sion rejoices and the daughters of Juda are glad to acquire these new protectors. The former glory in being delivered from their hands, while the latter have every reason to expect deliverance by means of these same hands. The former gladly see their cruel despoilers depart, while the latter gladly welcome their faithful defenders; so that the one is agreeably heartened, while the other is profitably abandoned.

This is the revenge which Christ contrives against his enemies, to triumph powerfully and gloriously over them by their own means. Indeed, it is both a happy and fitting thing that those who have so long fought against him should at last fight for him. Thus he recruits his soldiers among his foes, just as he once turned Saul the persecutor into Paul the preacher. Therefore I am not surprised that, as our Savior himself has affirmed, the court of heaven takes more joy in

the conversion of one sinner than in the virtues of many just men who have no need of conversion. Certainly the conversion of so many sinners and evil doers will now do as much good as their former misdeeds did harm.

11. Hail then, holy city, sanctified by the Most High for his own tabernacle in order that such a generation might be saved in and through you! Hail, city of the great King, source of so many joyous and unheard-of marvels! Hail mistress of nations and queen of provinces, heritage of patriarchs, mother of apostles and prophets, source of the faith and glory of the Christian people! If God has permitted you to be so often besieged, it has only been to furnish brave men an occasion for valor and immortality.

Hail promised land, source of milk and honey for your ancient inhabitants, now become the source of healing grace and vital sustenance for the whole earth! Yes, I say, you are that good and excellent soil which received into its fruitful depths the heavenly seed from the heart of the eternal Father. What a rich harvest of martyrs you have produced from that heavenly seed! Your fertile soil has not failed to furnish splendid examples of every Christian virtue for the whole earth--some bearing fruit thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundredfold. Therefore those who have seen you are most happily filled with the great abundance of your sweetness and are well nourished on your munificent bounty. Everywhere they go they publish the fame of your great goodness and relate the splendors of your glory to those who have never seen it, proclaiming the marvels accomplished in you even to the ends of the earth.

Indeed, glorious things are told of you, city of God! Now then we will set forth something of the delights in which you abound, for the praise and glory of your name.

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