

## LECTIO ECCLESIAE



GREGORY THE GREAT

**DIALOGI**

*The Dialogues, with the Life of St Benedict*

Latin text with the English translation edited by Edmund G. Gardner

LECTIO ECCLESIAE PRESS

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## DIALOGORUM LIBER PRIMUS

*The First Book of the Dialogues*

## PRAEFATIO

*Prologue*

<sup>1</sup> Quadam die nimiis quorundam saecularium tumultibus depressus, quibus in suis negotiis plerumque cogimur solvere etiam quod nos certum est non debere, secretum locum petii amicis moeroris, ubi omne quod de mea mihi occupatione displicebat, se patenter ostenderet, et cuncta quae infligere dolorem consueverant, congesta ante oculos licenter venirent. Ibi itaque cum afflicto valde et diu tacito sederem, dilectissimus filius meus Petrus diaconus adfuit, mihi a primaevo iuventutis flore amicitia familiariter obstrictus, atque ad sacri verbi indagationem socius. Qui gravi excoqui cordis languore me intuens, ait: Nunquidnam novi tibi aliquid accidit, quod plus te solito moeror tenet? Cui, inquam: Moeror, Petre, quem quotidie patior, et semper mihi per usum vetus est, et semper per augmentum novus. Infelix quippe animus meus occupationis suae pulsatus vulnere, meminit qualis aliquando in monasterio fuit; quomodo ei labentia cuncta subter erant; quantum rebus omnibus quae volvuntur eminebat; quod nulla nisi coelestia cogitare consueverat; quod etiam retentus corpore, ipsa iam carnis claustra contemplatione transibat; quod mortem quoque, quae pene cunctis poena est, videlicet ut ingressum vitae et laboris sui praemium amabat. At nunc ex occasione curae pastoralis saecularium hominum negotia patitur, et post tam pulchram quietis suae speciem, terreni actus pulvere foedatur. Cumque se pro condescensione multorum ad exteriora sparserit, etiam cum interiora appetit, ad haec procul dubio minor redit. Perpendo itaque quid tolero, perpendo quod amisi. Dumque intueor illud quod perdidici, fit hoc gravius quod porto. Ecce etenim nunc magni maris fluctibus quatior, atque in navi mentis tempestatis valida procellis illidor. Et cum prioris vitae reco, quasi post tergum ductis oculis viso littore suspiro. Quodque adhuc gravius est, dum immensis fluctibus turbatus feror, vix iam portum videre valeo quem reliqui, quia et ita sunt casus mentis, ut prius quidem perdat bonum quod

<sup>1</sup> Being upon a certain day too much over-charged with the troubles of worldly business, in which oftentimes men are enforced to do more than of duty they are bound, I retired myself into a solitary place, very fit for a sad and melancholy disposition; where each discontentment and dislike concerning such secular affairs might plainly show themselves, and all things that usually bring grief, mustered together, might freely be presented before mine eyes. In which place after that I had sat a long while, in much silence and great sorrow of soul, at length Peter, my dear son and deacon, came unto me; a man whom, from his younger years, I had always loved most entirely, and used him for my companion in the study of sacred scripture: who, seeing me drowned in such a dump of sorrow, spake unto me in this manner: "What is the matter? or what bad news have you heard? for certain I am, that some extraordinary sadness doth now afflict your mind." To whom I returned this answer: "O Peter, the grief which continually I endure is unto me both old and new: old through common use, and new by daily increasing. For mine unhappy soul, wounded with worldly business, doth now call to mind in what state it was, when I lived in mine Abbey, and how then it was superior to all earthly matters, far above all transitory and corruptible self, how it did usually think upon nothing but heavenly things; and though it was enclosed in mortal body, yet did it by contemplation pass far beyond earthly bounds, and penetrate to the very height of heaven; and as for death, the memory whereof is almost to all men grievous, that it did love and desire, as the end of all misery, the reward of her labours, and the very entrance to an everlasting and blessed life. But now, by reason of my pastoral charge, my poor soul is enforced to endure the burden of secular men's business, and after so excellent and sweet a kind of rest, defiled it is with the dust of worldly conversation: and when it doth, at the request of others, attend to outward

tenet, si tamen se perdidisse meminerit; cumque longius recesserit, etiam boni ipsius quod perdiderat obliviscatur; fitque ut post neque per memoriam videat, quod prius per actionem tenebat. Unde hoc agitur quod praemisi, quia cum navigamus longius, iam nec portum quietis quem reliquimus videmus. Nonnunquam vero in augmentum mei doloris adiungitur, quod quorundam vita qui praesens saeculum tota mente reliquerunt, mihi ad memoriam revocatur. Quorum dum culmen aspicio, quantum ipse in infimis iaceam agnosco; quorum plurimi Conditori suo in secretiori vita placuerunt, qui ne per humanos actus a novitate mentis veterascerent, eos omnipotens Deus huius mundi laboribus noluit occupari. Sed iam quae prolata sunt, melius insinuo, si ea quae per inquisitionem ac responsionem dicta sunt, sola nominum praenotatione distinguo.

<sup>2</sup> PETR. Non valde in Italia aliquorum vitam virtutibus fulsisse cognovi; ex quorum igitur comparatione accenderis ignoro. Et quidem bonos viros in hac terra

affairs, no question but it returneth back, far less fit to think upon those that be inward, spiritual, and heavenly. Wherefore, at this present, do I meditate what I suffer, and consider what my soul hath lost: and the memory of my former loss doth make that more grievous which I do now endure. For do you not behold at this present, how I am tossed with the waves of this wicked world, and see the ship of my soul beaten with the storms of a terrible tempest? and therefore, when I remember my former state of life, I cannot but sigh to look back, and cast mine eyes upon the forsaken shore.

“And that which doth yet grieve me more is because I see myself so carried away amain with the boisterous blasts of this troublesome world, that I cannot now scarce behold the port from whence I did first hoist sail;<sup>17</sup> for such be the downfalls of our soul, that first it loseth that goodness and virtue which before it possessed; yet so that it doth still remember what it hath lost; but afterwards, carried away more and more, and straying further from the path of virtue, it cometh at length to that pass, that it doth not so much as keep in mind what before it did daily practise: and so in conclusion, it falleth out as I said before, that sailing farther on, we go at length so far, that we do not so much as once behold the sweet harbour of quiet and peace from whence we first set forth. Sometime also my sorrow is increased, by remembering the lives of certain notable men, who with their whole soul did utterly forsake and abandon this wicked world: whose high perfection when I behold, I cannot also but see mine own infirmities and imperfection: very many of whom did, in a contemplative and retired kind of life, much please God: and lest by dealing with transitory business they might have decayed in virtue, God’s goodness vouchsafed to free them from the troubles and affairs of this wretched world. But that which I have now said will be far more plain, and the better perceived, if the residue of my speech be dialogue wise distinguished, by setting down each of our names, you asking what you shall think convenient, and I by answer, giving satisfaction to such questions as you shall demand at my hands.”

<sup>2</sup> Peter. I do not remember any in Italy, that have been very famous for virtue; and therefore ignorant I am who they be, that, comparing your life to theirs, you should

<sup>17</sup> Similarly in the letter addressed to Leander of Seville, prefixed to the *Moralia*, or *Exposition of the Book of Job* (composed before his elevation to the papacy), St. Gregory had written: “Now that the times are disturbed through multiplied evils, the end of the world being at hand, we ourselves, who are believed to be devoted to the inner mysteries, are involved in external cares.” Cf. below, Bk. III. chap. 38; Bk. IV. chap. 41.

fuisse non dubito, signa tamen atque virtutes aut ab eis nequaquam facta existimo, aut ita sunt hactenus silentio suppressa, ut utrumne sint facta nesciamus.

<sup>3</sup> GREGOR. Si sola, Petre, referam, quae de perfectis probatisque viris unus ego homuncio, vel bonis ac fidelibus viris attestantibus, agnovi, vel per memetipsum didici; dies, ut opinor, ante quam sermo, cessabit.

<sup>4</sup> PETR. Vellem quaerenti mihi de eis aliqua narrares. Neque pro hac re interrumpere expositionis studium grave videatur, quia non dispar aedificatio oritur ex memoria virtutum. In expositione quippe qualiter invenienda atque tenenda sit virtus, agnoscitur; in narratione vero signorum cognoscimus inventa ac retenta qualiter declaretur. Et sunt nonnulli, quos ad amorem patriae coelestis plus exempla, quam praedicamenta succendunt. Fit vero plerumque audientis animo duplex adiutorium in exemplis Patrum, quia si ad amorem venturae vitae ex praecedentium comparatione accenditur, etiam si se esse aliquid existimat, dum meliora de aliis cognoverit, humiliatur (Eadem leg., hom. 38 et 39 in Evang.).

<sup>5</sup> GREGOR. Ea quae mihi sunt virorum venerabilium narratione comperta, incunctanter narro sacrae auctoritatis exemplo, cum mihi luce clarius constet quia Marcus et Lucas Evangelium quod scripserunt, non visu, sed auditu didicerunt. Sed ut dubitationis occasionem legentibus subtraham, per singula quae describo, quibus haec auctoribus mihi comperta sint manifesto. Hoc vero scire te cupio, quia in quibusdam sensum solummodo, in quibusdam vero et verba cum sensu teneo; quia si de personis omnibus ipsa specialiter verba tenere volvissem, haec rusticano usu prolata stylus scribentis non apte susciperet. Seniorum valde venerabilium didici relatione quod narro.

be so much inflamed to imitate their steps; for although I make no doubt but that there have been many good men, yet do I verily think that none of them wrought any miracles, or at least they have been hitherto so buried in silence that, whether any such thing hath been done or no, not any one man can tell.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory. If I should, Peter, but report only those things which myself alone have understood by the relation of virtuous and credible persons, or else learned by myself, concerning the life and miracles of perfect and holy men, I should sooner in mine opinion lack day to talk in, than matter to speak of.

<sup>4</sup> Peter. Desirous I am that you would vouchsafe to make me partaker of some of them: and not to think much, if, upon so good an occasion, you interrupt your other study of interpreting the scripture, because no less edification doth grow by the relation of miracles. For as by the exposition of that, we learn how virtue is to be found and kept: so by recounting the miracles of holy men, we know how that which is found out and possessed, is declared and made manifest to the world. And some there are that be sooner moved to the love of God by virtuous examples than by godly sermons: and oftentimes, by the lives of holy fathers, the heart doth reap a double commodity; for if, by comparing of his own life with theirs, he findeth himself inflamed with the love of heaven, although before he had haply a good opinion of himself, yet seeing now how far others do excel him, he becometh also more humble, and is brought to have a more lowly conceit of his own actions and virtue.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory. Such things as venerable and holy men have told me, I will now, without any further delay, make you partaker of, and that following the example of sacred scripture: for sure I am that St. Luke and St. Mark learned that gospel which they wrote, not by sight but by the relation of others: yet lest any in reading should have occasion to doubt whether such things as I write be true or no, I will set down by what means and of whom I have learned them: yet in some of them you have to know that I remember not all the particulars, but only the matter: in other some, both the matter and also the words. And besides, if I should have been so curious as to have kept in mind each man's particular words, many, uttered after the country manner, would have made the

style of my discourse nothing handsome nor seemly. That story which I mean first to begin with, I had by the report of passing reverent men and of great years.

## I

*Of Honoratus, abbot of the Monastery of Funda.*

<sup>1</sup> Venantii quondam patricii in Samnii partibus villa fuit, in qua colonus eius filium Honoratum nomine habuit (Martyrolog., 16 Ian.), qui ab annis puerilibus ad amorem coelestis patriae per abstinentiam exarsit. Cumque magna conversatione polleret, seque iam ab otioso quoque sermone restringeret, multumque, ut praefatus sum, per abstinentiam carnem domaret, die quadam parentes eius vicinis suis convivium fecerunt, in quo ad vescendum carnes paratae sunt: quas dum ille ad esum contingere pro abstinentiae amore recusaret, coeperunt eum parentes eius irridere, ac dicere: Comede; nunquid piscem in his montibus tibi allaturi sumus? Illa vero in loco pisces audiri consueverant, non videri. Sed cum his sermonibus Honoratus irrideretur, repente in convivio aqua ad ministerium defuit; et cum situla lignea, sicut illic moris est, mancipium ad fontem perrexit.

<sup>2</sup> Dumque hauriret aquam, piscis situlam intravit. Reversumque mancipium ante ora discumbentium piscem cum aqua fudit, qui ad totius diei victum potuisset Honorato sufficere. Mirati omnes, totaque illa parentum irrisio cessavit. Coepere namque in Honorato venerari abstinentiam, quam ante deridebant; sicque a Dei homine irrisiois deterrent opprobria piscis de monte. Qui cum magnis virtutibus cresceret, a praedicto domino suo libertate donatus est, atque in eo loco qui Fundis dicitur, monasterium construxit, in quo ducentorum ferme monachorum Pater exstitit, ibique vita illius circumquaque exempla eximiae conversationis dedit. Nam quadam die ex eo monte qui eius monasterio in excelso prominet ingentis saxi moles erupta est, quae per devexum montis latus veniens, totius ruinam cellae, omniumque fratrum interitum minabatur. Quam cum venientem desuper vir sanctus vidisset, frequenti voce nomen Christi invocans, extensa mox dextera signum ei crucis opposuit, eamque in

<sup>1</sup> In times past one Venantius, a noble man, had a living in the country of Samnium; the farmer whereof had a son called Honoratus, who from his very childhood by the virtue of abstinence did thirst after the joys of heaven: and as in other things he led an holy life, and refrained from all idle talk, so did he much, as I said before, subdue his body by means of abstinence. His parents, upon a certain day, had invited their neighbours to a banquet which consisted altogether of flesh, whereof because for the love of mortification he refused to eat, his father and mother began to laugh at him, willing him to fall to that which they had: "For can we," quoth they, "get you any fish here in these mountains?" (for in that place they used sometimes to hear of fish, but seldom to see any.) But while they were thus jesting, and mocking at their son, suddenly they lacked water: whereupon a servant with a wooden bucket (as the manner is there) went to the well to fetch some: into which, as he was a drawing, a fish entered in, which upon his return, together with the water, he poured forth before them all.

<sup>2</sup> And the fish was so great, that it served Honoratus very well for all that day. At this strange chance all were stricken in admiration, and his parents abstained now from further scoffing at his virtue, and began to have him in reverence for his abstinence, whom before for that very cause they did mock and scorn: and by this means, the fish, brought miraculously from the well, discharged God's servant from that shame, which he had endured through their uncivil jesting. Honoratus, proceeding forward in virtue, at length was made free by the foresaid Lord Venantius: and afterward, in that place which is called Funda,<sup>18</sup> he built an Abbey, wherein he was the father almost of two hundred monks: and he lived in so great holiness that he gave good example to all the country round about. Upon a certain day, it fell so out, that a stone of an huge greatness, which was digged out of the mountain that hung over the top of his Abbey, tumbled down by the side of the hill, threatening both

<sup>18</sup> Funda, more correctly *Fundi* (the translator is somewhat casual in his rendering of the Latin names of places), is the modern Fondi, in the province of Caserta, between Terracina and Formia. Cf. Horace, *Sat.* I. 5, 34–36. Honoratus is celebrated in the Roman Martyrology on January 16.

ipso devexi montis latere cadentem fixit, sicut religiosus vir Laurentius perhibet. Et quia locus ei non fuerat quo inhaerere potuisset, aspicitur ita ut hucusque montem cernentibus, casura pendere videatur.

**3** PETR. Putamus, hic tam egregius vir, ut post magister discipulorum fieret, prius habuit magistrum?

**4** GREGOR. Nequaquam hunc fuisse cuiusquam discipulum audiui, sed lege non constringitur sancti Spiritus donum. Usus quidem rectae conversationis est, ut praeesse non audeat, qui subesse non didicerit; nec obedientiam subiectis imperet, quam praelatis non novit exhibere. Sed tamen sunt nonnulli qui ita per magisterium Spiritus intrinsecus docentur, ut etsi eis exterius humani magisterii disciplina desit, magistri intimi censura non desit. Quorum tamen libertas vitae ab infirmis in exemplum non est trahenda, ne dum se quisque similiter sancto Spiritu impletum praesumit, discipulus hominis esse despiciat, et magister erroris fiat. Mens autem quae divino spiritu impletur, habet evidentissime signa sua; virtutes scilicet et humilitatem, quae si utraque perfecte in una mente conveniunt, liquet quod de praesentia sancti Spiritus testimonium ferunt. Sic quippe etiam Ioannes Baptista magistrum habuisse non legitur, neque ipsa Veritas quae corporali praesentia apostolos docuit, eum corporaliter inter discipulos aggregavit; sed quem intrinsecus docebat, extrinsecus quasi in sua libertate reliquerat. Sic Moyses in eremo edoctus mandatum ab angelo didicit (Exod. xxiii), quod per hominem non cognovit. Sed haec, ut praediximus, infirmis veneranda sunt, non imitanda.

the ruin of the house and the death of all the monks within: which danger the holy man seeing ready to come upon them, called often upon the name of Christ, and, putting forth his right hand, made against it the sign of the cross, and by that means did he stay it, and pin it fast to the side of that steep hill: which thing Lawrence, a religious man, affirmed to be most true. And because it found not there any place upon which it might rest, it hangeth at this time in such sort, that all which now look upon it do verily think that it would continually fall.

**3** Peter. I suppose so notable a man as he was, and who afterward became master to so many scholars, had himself some excellent teacher of whom he was instructed.

**4** Gregory. I never heard that he was scholar to any: but the grace of the Holy Ghost is not tied to any law. The usual custom of virtuous men is, that none should take upon him to rule, who first hath not learned to obey: nor to command that obedience to his subjects, which before he hath not given to his own superiors. Yet some there be which are so inwardly taught by the doctrine of God's holy spirit, that although they have no man to instruct them outwardly, yet do they not want the direction of an inward teacher: which liberty of life notwithstanding is not to be taken for an example by such as be weak and infirm, lest, whiles each one doth in like manner presume to be full of the Holy Ghost, and contemn to learn of any, they become themselves erroneous masters. But that soul which is full of God's holy spirit, hath for proof thereof most evident signs, to wit, the other virtues, and especially humility, both which if they do perfectly meet in one soul, apparent it is that they be testimonies of the presence of heavenly grace. And so we read not that John Baptist had any master, nor yet that Christ, who by his corporal presence taught his Apostles, took him in amongst the number of his other disciples, but vouchsafed to instruct him inwardly, and left him, as it were, in the sight of the world to his own liberty. So Moses, likewise, was taught in the wilderness, and learned by the Angel what God gave him in charge, which by means of any mortal man he knew not: but these things, as before hath been said, are of weaklings to be revered, and not by any means to be followed.

5 PETR. Placet quod dicis; sed peto ut mihi dicas si tantus hic Pater aliquem sui imitorem discipulum reliquit.

5 Peter. I like very well of your opinion: yet I beseech you to tell me, whether so notable a father as he was, left not some scholar behind him, that did imitate his master's steps.

## II

*Of Libertinus, Prior of the same Abbey.*

1 GREGORIUS. Vir reverentissimus Libertinus, qui tempore Totilae regis Gothorum eiusdem Fundensis monasterii praepositus fuit, in discipulatu illius conversatus atque eruditus est. De quo quamvis virtutes multas plurimorum narratio certa vulgaverit, praedictus tamen Laurentius religiosus vir, qui nunc superest, et ei ipso in tempore familiarissimus fuit, multa mihi dicere de illo consuevit, ex quibus quae recolo, pauca narrabo.

1 Gregory. The reverent man, Libertinus, who, in the time of Totilas,<sup>19</sup> king of the Goths, was Prior of the same Abbey of Funda, was brought up and taught by him: of whom, albeit the certain report of passing many hath made his sundry virtues known to the world, yet the foresaid religious man, Lawrence, who still liveth and that time had very familiar acquaintance with him, hath often told me many things, whereof some few, which now come to my mind, I will here set down.

2 In eadem provincia Samnii, quam supra memoravi, idem vir pro utilitate monasterii carpebat iter. Dumque Darida Gothorum dux cum exercitu in loco eodem venisset, Dei servus ex caballo in quo sedebat, ab hominibus eius proiectus est. Qui iumentum perditum damnum libenter ferens, etiam flagellum quod tenebat, diripientibus obtulit, dicens: Tollite, ut habeatis qualiter hoc iumentum minare possitis; quibus dictis protinus se in orationem dedit. Cursu autem rapido praedicti ducis exercitus pervenit ad fluvium, nomine Vulturnum, ibique equos suos coeperunt singuli hastis tundere, et calcaribus cruentare; sed tamen equi verberibus caesi, calcaribus cruentati, fatigari poterant, moveri non poterant; sicque aquam fluminis tangere quasi mortale praecipitium pertimescebant. Cumque diu caedendo sessorum singuli fatigarentur, unus eorum intulit, quia ex culpa quam servo Dei in via fecerant, illa sui itineris dispendia tolerabant. Qui statim reversi, post se Libertinum reperiunt in oratione prostratum. Cui cum dicerent: Surge, tolle caballum tuum; ille respondit: Ite cum bono, ego caballo opus non habeo. Descendentes vero, invitum eum in caballum de quo deposuerant, levaverunt, et protinus abscesserunt. Quorum equi tanto cursu illud quod prius non poterant transire flumen, transierunt, ac si ille fluminis alveus aquam minime haberet. Sicque factum est ut cum servo Dei unus caballus suus reddatur, omnes a singulis reciperentur.

2 In the same province of Samnium, as Libertinus was in his journey about business of the Abbey, it so fell out that Darida, captain of the Goths, with his army, met him, by whose soldiers the man of God was thrown from his horse; which injury he taking very patiently, offered them also his whip, saying: "Take this, that you may make him the better to go"; and having said so, he betook himself to his prayers. The army marched on very fast, and quickly came to the river called Vulturnus, where they began to beat their horses both with their lances and also to spur them, till the blood came, and all this to make them take the water; but yet no beating nor spurring could enforce them forward: for they were as much afraid to enter the river as though it had been some deep downfall. At length, when they were all wearied with beating, one amongst the rest said, that the reason why they were thus punished was for taking away the horse from God's servant: whereupon returning straightways back, they found Libertinus prostrate at his prayers; and calling upon him to rise and take his horse, he bade them go on a God's name, saying that he needed him not; but for all that they alighted and set him perforce upon his own beast, and so in all haste departed, and returning back to the river they passed over so quickly as though in the channel there had been no water at all; and so it fell out that God's servant having restitution made him of his one horse, that all the soldiers came likewise to enjoy the use of their own.

<sup>19</sup> For Totila, see below, Bk. II. chap. 14. He was king of the Ostrogoths in Italy from 541 to 552.