

## PROLOGUE TO THE LONGER RULE

BY

ST BASIL THE GREAT

Translated by Dom John Higgins, Monk of Quarr.

[The authenticity of St Basil's Longer Rule (*Regulae fusius tractatae*) need not be questioned; both external and internal evidence are strong in its support. It consists of 'Conferences' given to his monks, probably, though not quite certainly, between 363 and 365, when he was living a monastic life in Pontus. The text here followed is that of the Maurist edition, edited by Dom Julien Garnier, and reprinted at Paris, 1839; t. ii. pars i, pp. 457-463. It is reproduced in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*, t. xxxi, col. 889-901. —J.H.]



WE have come together, by the grace of God, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we who have set before us one and the same end of religious life. And it is plain that you on your part are longing to learn something of that which concerns salvation. I therefore for my part am bound to declare God's righteous acts, since night and day there runs in my mind what the Apostle says: 'For three years by night and day I did not cease to admonish every one of you with tears' (Acts 20, 31). Since also the present time is very favourable, and this place provides quiet and complete freedom from the tumults without, let us unite our prayers, that while we give to our fellow-servants their measure of corn in season, you, like good ground, receiving the word, may, as Scripture says (Matt. 13, 23), yield a hundred-fold a perfect fruit in righteousness. So then, I beseech you, by the charity of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, now at least let us begin to consider our souls, to lament the vanity of our former life, and strive for the things to come, to the glory of God and of his Christ and of the adorable and holy Spirit. Let us not continue in our present carelessness and relaxation, for ever through our negligence letting the present slip by, and putting off the beginning of good works 'until tomorrow—until some other other day!' If he who demands our souls back again shall find us unprepared with good works, we shall be turned away from the joy of the bridechamber, we shall weep for our unprofitable and foolish deeds, lamenting then the wasted days of our former life, when regrets no longer profit us. 'Now is the acceptable time', says the Apostle, 'now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6, 2). This is the season of repentance, that of

reward; this of labour, that of recompense; this of endurance, that of consolation. Now, God is the help of those who turn from their evil way; then, he is the examiner, terrible and not to be deceived, of the actions, words and thoughts of man. Now we benefit by his long-suffering, then we shall know his righteous judgment, when we shall rise again, some to eternal punishment, some to eternal life, and every one will be repaid according to his deeds. How long do we delay obedience to Christ, who has called us to his heavenly kingdom? Shall we never come to our senses? never be recalled from our habitual ways to the discipline of the Gospel? Are we never to set before our eyes that fearful and manifest day of the Lord?—when the kingdom of heaven will welcome those who by their good deeds draw near to our Lord's right hand, but the hell of fire and eternal darkness will cover those who, for lack of good works, are put away upon the left; 'there', he says, 'will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 25, 30).

2. But as for us, we say we desire the kingdom of heaven, yet take no thought for the means to attain it; why, though having suffered no hardship for the sake of our Lord's command, yet, in the vanity of our mind, we look to gain the same rewards as those who even unto death have resisted sin. Who that at seed-time sat at home or slept, fills his bosom with sheaves when harvest comes? Who gathers grapes from a vineyard he did not plant or tend? Whose the labour, theirs the fruit; rewards and crowns are for the conquerors. Who is ever crowned, who does not even strip to meet his opponent?—since we must not only conquer, but 'have striven lawfully', as the Apostle tells us (2 Tim. 2, 5). While this means that we must not neglect even the least commandment, it means also that we must carry out each one in the way laid down for us. For it was said, 'Blessed is that servant whom his lord, when he comes, shall find' not, doing as it may chance, but, 'so doing' (Luke 12, 43). And, 'If thou hast rightly offered, but not rightly divided, thou hast sinned' (Gen. 4, 7, *Septuagint*). But we, when we consider ourselves to have fulfilled some one of the commandments (I would not say 'we have in fact fulfilled', since they all so hold together, according to the sound sense of Scripture, that if one is broken, all the rest must needs be broken also); we, I say, do not then expect God's anger on account of those left undone, but apparently look for the rewards of virtue. He who keeps back a mere one or two of the talents entrusted to him, though he repays the rest, is not reckoned an honest man for repaying the greater part, but is accused of dishonesty and avarice for embezzling the smaller sum. Why call it embezzling? Because he who is entrusted

with a single talent, though he returns it whole and untouched, is condemned because he has made no profit of the gift. One who for ten years has honoured his father, and at length deals him a single blow, is not honoured as a well-doer, but is convicted as one who has struck his father. 'Go, make disciples of all nations', says our Lord, 'teaching them' not, to observe some things and neglect others, but 'to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you' (Matt. 28, 19-20). And accordingly the Apostle writes, 'Giving no offence in anything, that the ministry may not be blamed; but in everything commending ourselves as ministers of God' (2 Cor. 6, 3-4). For if 'all things' had not been necessary to our salvation, then not all the commandments would have been written, and it would not have been declared that they all must of necessity be kept. What will the rest of my good deeds profit me, if for having called my brother a fool, I am sentenced to hell? What help is it to be free as regards the majority if I am reduced to slavery by one? For 'he who commits sin', he says, 'is the slave of sin' (John 8, 34). And what advantage is it to be untouched by many passions, if the body is defiled by one?

3. 'Well, then', someone objects, 'for the great mass of Christians who do not keep all the commandments, is there no object in their keeping any?' Here it is well to remember St Peter, who after so many good deeds and so many blessings, for one thing only heard it said to him, 'If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me' (John 13, 8). Yet I need not say, that this very matter had been no evidence of his indifference and contempt, but rather had signified honour and respect. Again, someone will surely object that it is written, 'Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Joel 2, 32); that is, the simple calling on the name of the Lord is enough to save him. But this objector should listen to the Apostle, who says, 'How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?' (Rom. 10, 14). But if thou believest, hear the words of our Lord: 'Not everyone that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matt. 7, 21). For assuredly he who carries out our Lord's will, yet not doing it in the manner God requires, nor in a state of charity towards God, will have his pains for nothing; as our Lord Jesus Christ himself has said, 'They do it to be seen of men: verily I say to you, they receive their reward' (Matt. 6, 5). From this the Apostle Paul had learnt to say, 'Even if I give all my goods to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profits me nothing' (1 Cor. 13, 3). And as regards this inexorable necessity of obedience, I distinguish in

general the three following states of mind. For either we avoid evil from fear of punishment, and are in the condition of slaves; or we are seeking to gain a reward, and we carry out the commandments for our own profit, and then are no better than hirelings; or it is for virtue's own sake, and out of charity towards him who gave us the law, being glad that we are held worthy to serve a God who is so glorious and so good, and then we are in the condition of sons. Not even he, then, who fulfils the commandments because he is afraid, he who has always in view the punishment due to negligence, will merely carry out certain orders and disregard the remainder. On the contrary, he will consider the punishment of every disobedience alike as something to be feared. And for this reason that man is accounted blessed 'who has a reverent dread of all things' (Prov. 28, 14); he stands firm in the truth, since he is able to say, 'I had the Lord always before my eyes; for he is at my right hand that I may not be moved' (Ps. 15 (16), 8); such a man will not choose to make light of any part of his duty. And also, 'Blessed is the man that fears the Lord' (Ps. 111 (112), 1). Why is this? because 'he shall take great delight in his commandments' (id.). So it is not the fearful who will neglect any of the commandments, or fulfil them carelessly. But neither will the hireling want to transgress anything he is ordered. Is he going to get his wages for working in the vineyard, if he has not carried out all that was agreed upon? For if he leaves out anything at all of what is necessary, he renders the vineyard valueless to its owner. And besides, who will pay the culprit a reward for his damage? In the third place there was service done out of charity. Surely no son who aims to please his father will want to delight him in great matters and grieve him in trifles; and all the more, if he remembers the saying of the Apostle: 'And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, in whom you are sealed' (Ephes. 4, 30).

4. So then, as regards those who neglect the greater part of the commandments, to what class do they think they should be assigned?—they neither serve God as Father, nor obey him as one who promises great things, nor submit to him as Master. 'For if I am Father', he says, 'where is the honour that is mine? And if I am Lord, where is the fear that is my due?' (Mal. 1, 6). Because 'he that fears the Lord, will take great delight in his commandments' (Ps. 111 (112), 1). But, 'through transgression of the law', he says, 'thou dost dishonour God' (Rom. 2, 23). If, therefore, we prefer the pursuit of pleasure to the following of God's commands, we must not promise ourselves the life of the blessed, or fellow-citizenship with the saints, or feasting with angels in the sight of Christ.

To fancy such things indeed shows a childish mind. How am I to share Job's company, when I do not accept with thanksgiving even the least affliction? or David's, when I do not treat my enemy with forbearance? Daniel's, when I do not seek God with unceasing abstinence and diligent prayer? that of any of the saints, when I do not walk in their steps? Surely no judge of the games would be so undiscerning as to award crowns alike to the winner and to him who has not so much as competed for a prize. No commander would summon to share equally in the spoils the conquerors and those who were not even seen in the fight. God is good, but also is just; and one who is just gives every man his due: as the Scripture says, 'Do good, O Lord, to those that are good, and to the upright of heart; but to those who turn aside into crooked ways (*lit.* snares), the Lord will lead them away with the workers of iniquity' (Ps. 124 (125) 4-5). He is merciful, but he is a judge as well. For the Lord, says the psalmist, 'loves mercy and judgment' (Ps. 32 (33), 5). And so he declares, 'of mercy and judgment I will sing to thee, O Lord' (Ps. 100 (101), 1). We know who are those that receive mercy for 'Blessed', says he, 'are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' (Matt. 5, 7). You observe with what judgment he employs mercy; neither showing mercy without judgment, nor passing judgment without mercy. For 'the Lord is merciful and just' (Ps. 114 (115), 5). We must not be only half acquainted with God, nor make his benevolence an excuse for our negligence. His thunders, his lightning-strokes, are for this: that men may not despise his goodness. He who makes the sun to rise, also condemns a man to blindness; he who gives the shower, rains down fire as well. The former is evidence of his kindness, the latter of his severity. Let us either love him for the one, or fear him for the other; lest it be said to us, 'Dost thou despise the riches of his kindness, and forbearance, and long-suffering; not knowing that the kindness of God is leading thee to repentance? But according to thy hardness and impenitent heart, thou dost lay up for thyself wrath in the day of wrath' (Rom. 2, 4-5).

Salvation, therefore, is impossible for those who fail to do the works which God commands; while the least indifference to what has been ordained is perilous (for it would be wonderful presumption in us to sit in judgment on the lawgiver, approving some of his laws and rejecting others). Come, then; we are the champions of godliness; we prize this life of quiet and freedom from affairs as our aid in keeping the precepts of the Gospel; come, let us take thought and counsel together how not one of the commandments may escape us. For if 'the man of God must be perfect' (2 Tim. 3, 17)—as Scripture says and as the teaching already given has made clear—

it is most necessary that, by keeping every commandment, he should be made whole and complete 'to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (Ephes. 4, 13); since, according to divine law, a mutilated offering, even though it was clean, was unacceptable to God. Therefore, if one of us thinks he falls short in any matter, let him put it forward for the rest to examine. For a hidden thing is more readily brought to light when looked for carefully by many; since God, I need hardly say, grants us, as our Lord Jesus Christ has promised, to find what we seek, through the instruction and prompting of the Holy Ghost. So then, just as 'necessity is laid upon me, and woe is me if I preach not the Gospel' (1 Cor. 9, 16), so you for your part run an equal risk if you are inactive in the search, or slack and remiss in keeping what is delivered and in fulfilling it in deed. That is why our Lord has said, 'The word which I have spoken, it shall judge him in the last day' (John 12, 48); and, 'The servant who knew not his master's will, and did things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes; but he that knew his will, and neither did it, nor made ready to obey, shall be beaten with many stripes' (Luke 12, 47, 48). Let us therefore pray: for me, that my stewardship of the word may be blameless; and for you, that this teaching may bear fruit. And since we know that the words of inspired Scripture will stand to confront us at Christ's judgment-seat—for he says, 'I will reprove thee and set thy sins before thy face' (Ps. 49 (50), 21)—so let us give vigilant heed to what is said, and heartily set ourselves to carry out God's teachings; because we do not know on what day or at what hour our Lord will come.



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C.P.