

Selected sayings from The Ladder of Divine Ascent

Step 1 - On Renunciation of Life

A Christian is one who imitates Christ in thought, word and deed - as far as this is humanly possible. He believes rightly and blamelessly in the Holy Trinity. The lover of God is the one who lives in communion with all that is natural and sinless and who neglects nothing good. The self-controlled man strives with all his might in the midst of the trials, snares, and noise of the world, to be like someone who rises above them.

Withdrawal from the world is a voluntary hatred of all that is materially prized, a denial of nature for the sake of what is above nature. All this is done by those who willingly turn from the things of this life, either for the sake of the coming kingdom, or because of the number of their sins, or on account of their love of God. Without such objectives the denial of the world would make no sense.

Those who have given themselves up to God but imagine that they can go forward without a director are surely deceiving themselves. . . . We must have someone very skilled, a doctor, for our wounds.

Violence and continual suffering are the lot of those who aim to ascend to heaven with the body, and this especially at the early stages of the enterprise, when our pleasure-loving disposition and our unfeeling hearts must travel through overwhelming grief toward the love of God and holiness. It is hard, truly hard. There has to be an abundance of unseen suffering, especially for the careless, until our mind, that dog sniffing around the meat market and reveling in the uproar, is brought through simplicity, deep freedom from anger and diligence to a love of holiness and watchfulness.

Some people living carelessly in the world put a question to me: "How can we who are married and living amid public cares aspire to the monastic life?" I answered: "Do all the good you can. Speak evil of no one. Rob no one. Tell no lie. Despise no one and carry no hate. Be sure to go to church. Show compassion to the needy. Do not offend anyone. Stay away from the bed of another, and be satisfied with what your own wife can provide you. If you do all this, you will not be far from the kingdom of heaven.

Step 2 - On Detachment

The one who really loves the Lord, who has made a real effort to find the coming Kingdom ... will not love, care or worry about money, or possessions, or anything at all on earth.

[Speaking of those live in the world and practice fake and spurious asceticism]: I have seen many different plants of the virtues planted by them in the world, watered by vainglory as if from an underground sewage pipe, made to shoot up by love of show, manured by praise, and yet they quickly withered when transplanted to desert soil, to where the world did not walk, that is, to where they were not manured with the foul-smelling water of vainglory. The things that grow in water cannot bear fruit in dry and arid fields.

Let us pay close attention to ourselves, so that we are are not deceived. While talking of journeying along the narrow and hard road we may actually wander onto the broad and wide highway. Mortification of the appetite, nightlong toil, a ration of water, a short measure of bread, the bitter cup of dishonor – these will show you the narrow way. Derided, mocked, jeered, you must accept the denial of your will.

Step 3 - On Exile

Exile is separation from everything in order to keep the mind inseparable from God.

Step 4 - On Obedience

Obedience is the burial place of the will and the resurrection of humility.

Obedience is self-mistrust up to one's dying day.

Drink down ridicule by the hour, as if it were living water.

He who refuses to accept criticism, righteous or not, renounces his own salvation.

Step 5 - On Penitence

Repentance is the renewal of baptism. It is a contract with God for a second life. Repentance goes shopping for humility and continually distrusts bodily comfort. Repentance is critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself. . . . Repentance is reconciliation with the Lord by the practice of good deeds contrary to the sins. Repentance is purification of conscience.

Do not be surprised that you fall every day; do not give up, but stand your ground courageously. . . . A fresh, warm wound is easier to heal than those that are old, neglected, and festering, and that need extensive treatment, surgery, bandaging, and cauterization.

Step 6 - On Remembrance of Death

Every word is preceded by thought. And the remembrance of death and of sin precedes weeping and mourning.

Just as bread is the most necessary of all foods, so the thought of death is the most essential of all works.

Someone has said that you cannot pass a day devoutly unless you think of it as your last.

Step 7 - On Mourning

Repentance is a cheerful renunciation of every creature comfort.

Just as wax melts in the presence of fire, mourning can easily be dissolved by noise, worldly cares, and luxury, but, in particular, by talkativeness and levity.

Hold fast to the blessed and joyful sorrow of holy remorse and do not cease laboring for it until it lifts you high above the things of the world to present you, a cleansed offering, to Christ.

The man who mourns at one time and then goes in for high living on another occasion is like someone who stones the dog of sensuality with bread. It looks as if he is driving him off when in fact he is actually encouraging him to stay by him.

If you are unable to mourn, then lament that very fact.

Regarding our tears, as in everything else about us, the good and just Judge will certainly make allowances for our natural attributes.

The person wearing blessed, God-given mourning like a wedding garment gets to know the spiritual laughter of the soul.

And remember that never in your life can you see the same day twice.

A condemned man, who has heard the death sentence, will not worry about how theaters are run. Similarly, a man who is truly mourning will never go back to high living, glory, anger, or irritability.

When we die, we will not be blamed for having failed to work miracles. We will not be accused of having failed to be theologians or contemplatives. But we will certainly have some explanation to offer to God for not having mourned unceasingly.

Step 8 - On Tranquility and Meekness

Freedom from anger is an endless wish for dishonor, whereas among the vainglorious there is a limitless thirst for praise.

Meekness is an immovable state of soul which remains unaffected by whether or not it is spoken well of, whether or not it is honored or praised.

The first step toward freedom from anger is to keep the lips silent when the heart is agitated; the next, to keep thoughts silent when the soul is upset; the last, to be totally calm when unclean winds are blowing.

If it is true that the Holy Spirit is peace of soul . . . then there is no greater obstacle to the presence of the Spirit in us than anger.

And this is how anger replies: "I come from many sources and I have more than one father. My mothers are vainglory, love of money, greed, and lust. My father is named conceit.

Step 9 - On Malice

Remembrance of wrongs is the consummation of anger. It is a keeper of sins.

The person who has put a stop to anger has also wiped out remembrance of wrongs, since offspring can come only from a living parent.

Let your malice and your spite be turned against the devils.

Step 10 - On Slander

Do not regard the feelings of a person who slanders his neighbor, but rather say to him: "Stop, brother! I do worse things every day, so how can I criticize him?" You accomplish two things when you say this. You heal yourself and you heal your neighbor with the one bandage.

To pass judgment on another is to usurp shamelessly a prerogative of God. To condemn is the ruin of one's soul.

A grape picker chooses to eat ripe grapes and does not pluck what is unripe. A charitable and sensible mind takes careful note of the virtues it observes in another, while the fool goes looking for faults and defects. . . . Do not condemn.

Step 11 - On Talkativeness & Silence

Talkativeness is the throne of vainglory on which it loves to preen itself and show off.

Deliberate silence is the mother of prayer.

The lover of silence draws close to God.

Someone who had asked me once about stillness told me that talkativeness invariably results from one of the following causes: from a bad, lax lifestyle ("the tongue," he said, "is a member of the body, like the rest, and therefore needs to be trained in its habits"); or it comes from vainglory, a particular problem with ascetics; or it comes from gluttony, which is why many who keep a hard check on the stomach can more easily restrain the blathering tongue.

It is hard to keep water in without a dike. But it is harder still to hold in one's tongue.

Step 12 - On Falsehood

Hypocrisy is the mother of lying and often its cause.

The man gifted with the fear of the Lord has given up lying, for within him he has conscience, that incorruptible judge.

A person drunk on wine unwittingly tells the truth about everything. And a person drunk with contrition cannot lie.

Step 13 - On Despondency

Despondency is a paralysis of the soul, a slackness of the mind, a neglect of asceticism, a hostility to vows taken. It is an approval of worldly things.... It is a laziness in the singing of the psalms, a weakness in prayer.

Despondency reminds those at prayer of necessary duties.

This tyrant should be overcome by the remembrance of past sins, battered by hard manual labor and brought to book by the thought of the blessings to come.

Step 14 - On Gluttony

A full stomach produces fornication, while a mortified stomach leads to purity.

Control your appetites before they control you.. . . So let us restrain our appetites with the thought of the fire to come.

Fasting prevents lust, roots out bad thoughts, frees one from evil dreams. Fasting makes for purity of prayer, an enlightened soul, a watchful mind, a deliverance from blindness. Fasting is the door of contrition, humble sighing, joyful contrition, and brings a lull to chatter.

Step 15 - On Chastity

A chaste person is someone who has driven out bodily love by means of divine love, who has used heavenly fire to quench the fires of passion.

So as long as you live, never trust the clay of which you are made, and never depend on it until the time you stand before Christ himself.

Do not imagine that you will overcome the demon of fornication by entering into an argument with him. Nature is on his side and he has the best of the argument. So the person who decides to struggle against the flesh and to overcome it by his own arguments is fighting in vain. The truth is that unless the Lord overturns the house of the flesh and builds the house of the soul, the person wishing to overcome it has watched and fasted for nothing. Offer up to the Lord the weakness of your nature.

The mother of chastity is stillness and obedience.

The man who imagines he can conquer the demon of fornication by gluttony and by stuffing himself is quite like someone who quenches fire with oil. And the person who tries to put an end to this struggle by means of temperance only is like someone trying to escape from the sea by swimming with just one hand. Instead, join humility to temperance, for the one is useless without the other.

Always let the remembrance of death and the Jesus Prayer said as a monologue go to sleep with you and get up with you; for you will find nothing to equal these aids during sleep.

Step 16 - On Love of Money

The lover of money sneers at the gospel and is a deliberate transgressor. The man of charity spreads his money about him.

A generous man met a miser, and the miser said the other man was without discernment.

The person who has conquered this vice has cut out care, but the person trapped by it can never pray freely to God.

Step 17 - On Poverty

Poverty is the resignation of cares. It is life without anxiety and travels light, far from sorrow and faithful to the commandments.

The person who has tasted heavenly things easily thinks nothing of what is below, but the one who has had no taste of heaven finds pleasure in possessions.

The person who thinks nothing of goods is free from quarrels and disputes. But the lover of possessions will fight to the death for a needle.

Step 18 - On Insensitivity

Insensitivity is a deadened feeling in the body and in the spirit.

I have seen many people like this hear about death and the terrible judgment and shed tears, and with the tears still in their eyes they eagerly rush off to a meal. And I was amazed how this stinking tyrant, by complete indifference, could manage to overpower mourning.

This tyrant and evildoer said this to me: "Those who are under my sway laugh when they see corpses. At prayer they are stony, hard, and blinded. In front of the holy altar they feel nothing. They receive the Holy Gift as if it were ordinary bread.

Be constant in vigil, meditating on the eternal judgment; then perhaps I shall to some extent relax my hold on you. Find out what caused me to be born in you, and then battle against my mother; for she is not in all cases the same. Pray often where the dead are laid out, and engrave an indelible image of them in your heart. For unless you inscribe it there with the brush of fasting, you will never conquer

Step 19 - On Sleep, Prayer & the Singing in Church of Psalms

Just as excessive drinking comes from habit, so too from habit comes overindulgence in sleep. For this reason one has to struggle against it especially at the start of one's religious life, because a longstanding habit is very difficult to correct.

When chanting hymns with others it may be impossible to pray with the wordless prayer of the spirit. But your mind should meditate on the words being chanted or read. Or else you should have a set prayer to say while you are waiting for the alternate verse of the chant. But no one should undertake any additional task, or rather, distraction during the time of prayer.

Step 20 - On Alertness

Alertness keeps the mind pure.

The vigilant monk is a fisher of thoughts, and in the stillness of the night he can easily observe and catch them.

The bell rings for prayer. The monk who loves God says, "Good! Good!" The lazy monk says, "What a nuisance!"

Excessive sleep is a bad companion. It robs the lazy of half their lifetime, and even more.

Step 21 - On Unmanly Fears

Cowardice . . . is a falling away from faith that comes from anticipating the unexpected.

Fear is a rehearsing of danger in advance, a quiver as the heart takes fright before unknown misfortunes. Fear is a loss of assurance.

A proud soul is the slave of cowardice. Trusting only itself, it is frightened by a sound or shadow.

Do not hesitate to go in the dark of the night to those places where you usually feel afraid. The slightest concession to this weakness means that this childish and absurd infirmity will grow old with you. So as you go on your way, put on the armor of prayer, and when you reach the spot, stretch out your hands. Flog your enemies with the name of Jesus, since there is no stronger weapon in heaven or on earth. And when you drive the fear away, give praise to the God Who has delivered you, and He will protect you for all eternity, provided you remain thankful.

The servant of the Lord will be afraid only of his Master, while the person who does not yet fear Him is often scared by his own shadow.

Step 22 - On Vainglory

The sun shines on all alike, and vainglory beams on all activities. What I mean is this. I fast, and turn vainglorious. I stop fasting so that I will draw no attention to myself, and I become vainglorious over my prudence. . . . No matter how I shed this prickly thing, a spike remains to stand up against me.

A vainglorious man is a believing idolater. Apparently honoring God, he actually is out to please not God but people. To be a showoff is to be vainglorious, and the fast of such a man is unrewarded and his prayer futile, since he is practicing both to win praise. A vainglorious ascetic doubly cheats himself, exhausting his body and getting no reward.

If we really desire to please the Heavenly King, we should be eager to taste the glory that is above. The one who has tasted this glory will despise all earthly glory.

The Lord often humbles the vainglorious by causing some dishonor to fall on them. And indeed the first step in overcoming vainglory is to remain silent and to accept dishonor gladly. The middle stage is to check every act of vainglory while it is still in thought. The end - insofar as one may talk of an end to abyss - is to be able to accept humiliation before others without actually feeling it.

If ever we seek glory, if it comes our way uninvited, or if we plan some course of action because of our vainglory, we should think of our mourning and of the blessed fear on us as we stood alone in prayer before God. If we do this we will assuredly outflank shameless vainglory, that is if we are really concerned to attain true prayer. If this is insufficient, then let us briefly remember that we must die. Should this also prove ineffective, let us at least go in fear of the shame that always comes after honor, for certainly he who exalts himself will be humbled not only there but here also.

When those who praise us, or rather seduce us, begin to exalt us, we should briefly remember the multitude of our sins and in this way we will discover that we do not deserve whatever is said or done in our honor.

Step 23 - On Pride

Pride is a denial of God, an invention of the devil, contempt for people.

The beginning of pride is the consummation of vainglory. Its midpoint comes with the humiliation of our neighbor, the shameless parading of our achievements, complacency, and unwillingness to be found out. It ends with the denial of God's help, the exalting of one's own efforts and a devilish disposition.

A proud monk contradicts others, but the humble monk is loath to contradict them.

The proud person wants to be in charge of things.

A help to the proud is submissiveness, a more rigorous and humble mode of life, and the reading of the supernatural feats of the Fathers.

It is sheer madness to imagine that one has deserved the gifts of God. You may be proud only of the achievements you had before the time of your birth. But anything after that, indeed the birth itself, is a gift from God.

Pride makes us forget our sins, for the remembrance of them leads to humility.

Step 24 - On Meekness, Simplicity, Guilelessness & Wickedness

Meekness is an unchangeable state of mind, which remains the same in honor and dishonor.

Meekness consists in praying calmly and sincerely for a neighbor, even if they are troublesome.

Simplicity is a constant habit of soul that has become immune to evil thoughts.

Guilelessness is the joyous condition of soul far removed from all ulterior motive.

Honesty is innocent thought, a sincere character, speech that is neither artificial nor premeditated.

Fight to escape from your own cleverness.

Step 25 - On Humility

As soon as the cluster of holy humility begins to blossom within us, we at once begin, though with an effort, to hate all human glory and praise. We rid ourselves of all irritation and anger. In proportion as this queen of virtues makes progress in our soul by spiritual growth, so we regard all the good deeds accomplished by us as nothing, in fact as loathsome.

The first and paramount property of this excellent and admirable triad is the acceptance of indignity with the greatest pleasure, when the soul receives it with outstretched hands and welcomes it as something that relieves and cauterizes diseases of the soul and great sins. The second property is the wiping out of anger, and modesty at its appeasement. The third and highest degree is a true distrust of one's good qualities and a constant desire to learn more.

Where there is humility there will be no sign of hatred, no kind of quarrelsomeness, no whiff of disobedience - unless of course some question of faith arises.

A humble monk will not meddle with mysteries, but a proud one will pry into the hidden ways of God.

Where there is no light, everything is dark. Where there is no humility, everything is rotten.

Birds fear the sight of a hawk. Those who practice humility fear the sound of an argument.

Many have received salvation without the aid of prophecies, illuminations, signs and wonders. But without humility no one will enter the marriage chamber.

The Lord, knowing that the virtue of the soul is shaped by outward behavior, took a towel and showed us how to walk the road of humility (cf. John 13:4).

For the soul becomes like its bodily occupations. It conforms itself to its activities and takes its shape from them.

The ever-memorable Fathers proclaimed physical labor to be the way to and the foundation of humility. To this I would add obedience and honesty of heart, since these are by nature opposed to self-aggrandizement.

Step 26 - On Discernment

Discernment in beginners is true self-knowledge. Among those midway along the road to perfection, it is a

spiritual capacity to distinguish unfailingly between what is truly good and what in nature is opposed to the good; among the perfect it is the knowledge which they possess by divine illumination, and which can enlighten with its lamp what is dark in others

One person's medicine can be another person's poison, and something can be a medicine to the same person at one time and a poison at another.

When confronted by evils, we should choose the least. For instance, it often happens that we are standing at prayer, and brothers come to us, and we have to do one of two things: either to stop praying, or to upset the brother by ignoring him. Love is greater than prayer, because prayer is a particular virtue but love embraces all virtues.

Take care that you are not mastered by foreign thoughts, those thoughts which urge you to be inquisitive about the unspeakable judgments of Divine Providence or those visions that by coming to others give rise to the notion that the Lord shows favoritism. Such thoughts are the offspring of pride.

Devote the first fruits of your day to the Lord, for it will determine the rest of the day. An excellent servant of the Lord once said to me something well worth hearing. "I can tell from my morning how the rest of the day will go."

There are many roads to holiness - and to hell. A path that is wrong for one may suit another.

Those who wish to learn the will of the Lord must first mortify their own will. Then, having prayed in faith and simplicity, they should turn humbly and in confidence to the fathers or even the brothers and they should accept their counsel, as though from God Himself, even when that counsel goes against the grain, even when the advice comes from those who do not seem very spiritual, God, after all, is not unjust. He will not lead astray the souls who, trusting guileless, yield in lowliness to the advice and decision of their neighbor. Even if those consulted are stupid, God immaterially and invisibly speaks through them and anyone who faithfully submits to this norm will be filled with great humility.

Step 27 - On Stillness

Stillness of the body is the accurate knowledge and management of one's own feelings and perceptions. Stillness of soul is the accurate knowledge of one's thoughts and is an unassailable mind. A friend of solitude is a courageous and unrelenting power of thought which keeps constant vigil at the doors of the heart and kills or repels invading thoughts..

It is unsafe to swim in one's clothes. A slave of passion should not dabble in theology.

It is difficult to overcome the midday nap, especially in the summer time; then, and perhaps only then, is manual work permitted.

When you come out of solitude, guard what you have gathered. When the cage is opened, the birds fly out. And then we shall find no further profit in solitude.

Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath.

Reading the Scriptures enlightens the mind considerably, and helps it concentrate. . . . Let what you read lead you to action, for you are a doer. Putting these words into practice makes further reading superfluous. Try to be enlightened by the words of salvation through your labors, and not merely from books.

Stay away from what does not concern you, for curiosity can defile stillness as nothing else can.

Step 28 - On Prayer

Prayer is by nature a conversation and a union of man with God.

Let your prayer be simple. The publican and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single phrase.

Sincere thanksgiving should have first place in our book of prayer. Next should be confession and genuine contrition of soul. After that should come our request to the King of all.

Do not be over-sophisticated in the words you use in prayer, because the simple and unadorned lisping of children has often won the heart of their heavenly Father.

Try not to talk much when you pray, lest your mind be distracted by searching for words. One word from the publican suffered to placate God, and a single utterance saved the thief. Talkative prayer frequently distracts the mind and deludes it, whereas repetition of a single word or sentence makes for concentration.

Try to lift up, or rather, to enclose your mind within the words of your prayer, and if in its infant state it wearies and falls, lift it up again.

The beginning of prayer consists in banishing the thoughts that come to us by a single thought the very moment that they appear; the middle stage consists in confining our minds to what is being said and thought; and its conclusion is rapture in the Lord.

Because of our imperfection, we need not only quality but a considerable time for our prayer, because the latter paves the way for the former.

Do not go into detail when confessing your carnal acts, since you might become a traitor to yourself.

The time of prayer is no time for thinking over necessities, nor even spiritual tasks, because you may lose the better part (cf. Luke 10:42).

We do not all have the same needs, either in body or soul. Some profit from singing the psalms briskly, others from doing so slowly, the one fighting distraction, the others coping with ignorance.

It is impossible to discover the beauty of prayer from others. Prayer has a teacher all its own - God.

Step 29 - On Dispassion

By dispassion I mean the interior heaven of the mind, which regards the tricks of demons as mere toys.. A man is truly dispassionate - and is known to be such - when he has cleansed his flesh of all corruption; when he has lifted his mind above everything created, and has made it master of all the senses; when he keeps his soul continually in the presence of the Lord and reaches beyond the borderline of strength to Him. . . . Its effect is to sanctify the mind and to detach it from immaterial things, and it does so in such a way that, after entering this heavenly harbor, a man, for most of his earthly life, is enraptured, like someone already in heaven, and he is lifted up to the contemplation of God.

Step 30 - On Faith, Hope, and Love

And now at last, after all that has been said, there remains these three that bind the union of all - faith, hope, and love. "But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13), since that is the very name of God Himself (cf. 1 John 4:8).

This queen [love] . . . as if appearing to me from heaven and as if speaking in the ear of my soul, said: Unless, beloved, you renounce your gross flesh, you cannot know my beauty. May this ladder teach you the spiritual combination of the virtues. At the summit I have established myself, as my great man said: And now there remain faith, hope, love—these three; but the greatest of all is love (1 Cor. 13:13).

Ascend, my brothers, ascend eagerly. Let your hearts' resolve be to climb. Listen to the voice of the one who says: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of our God" (Isa. 2:3) . . . Run, I beg you, run with him who said, "Let us hurry until we all arrive at the unity of faith and of the knowledge of God, at mature manhood, at the measure of the stature of Christ's fullness" (Eph. 4:13). . . . In Him is the cause all goodness throughout infinite ages. Amen.

These Satings are adapted from several translations listed below:

The Ladder of Divine Ascent. Translated by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore (Harper & Brothers, 1959). Available [here](#).

John Climacus:: The Ladder of Divine Ascent. Translated by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell. (Paulist Press, 1982).