5. THE MONK IS PREY TO THE DEMON OF AVARICE

1. OUR third conflict is against covetousness which we can describe as the love of money; a foreign warfare, and one outside of our nature, and in the case of a monk originating only from the state of a corrupt and sluggish mind, and often from the beginning of his renunciation being unsatisfactory, and his love towards God being lukewarm at its foundation. [...] 

7. WHEN then this vice has got hold of the slack and lukewarm soul of some monk, it begins by tempting him in regard of a small sum of money, giving him excellent and almost reasonable excuses why he ought to retain some money for himself. For he complains that what is provided in the monastery is not sufficient, and can scarcely be endured by a sound and sturdy body. What is he to do if ill health comes on, and he has no special store of his own to support him in his weakness? He says that the allowance of the monastery is but meagre, and that there is the greatest carelessness about the sick: and if he has not something of his own so that he can look after the wants of his body, he will perish miserably. The dress which is allowed him is insufficient, unless he has provided something with which to procure another. Lastly, he says that he cannot possibly remain for long in the same place and monastery, and that unless he has secured the money for his journey, and the cost of his removal over the sea, he cannot move when he wants to, and, detained by the compulsion of want, will henceforth drag out a wretched and wearisome existence without making the slightest advance: that he cannot without indignity be supported by another’s substance, as a pauper and one in want. And so when he has bamboozled himself with such thoughts as these, he racks his brains to think how he can acquire at least one penny. Then he anxiously searches for some special work which he can do without the Abbot knowing anything about it. And selling it secretly, and so securing the coveted coin, he torments himself worse and worse in thinking how he can double it: puzzled as to where to deposit it, or to whom to entrust it. Then he is oppressed with a still weightier care as to what to buy with it, or by what transaction he can double it. And when this has turned out as he wished, a still more greedy craving for gold springs up, and is more and more keenly excited, as his store of money grows larger and larger. For with the increase of wealth the mania of covetousness increases. Then next he has forebodings of a long life, and an enfeebled old age, and infirmities of all sorts, and long drawn out, which will be insupportable in old age, unless a large store of money has been laid by in youth. And so the wretched soul is agitated, and held fast, as it were, in a serpent’s toils, while it endeavours to add to that heap which it has unlawfully secured, by still more unlawful care, and itself gives birth to plagues which inflame it more sorely, and being entirely absorbed in the quest of gain, pays attention to nothing but how to get money with which to fly as quickly as possible from the discipline of the monastery, never keeping faith where there is a gleam of hope of money to be got. For this it shrinks not from the crime of lying, perjury, and theft, of breaking a promise, of giving way to injurious bursts of passion. If the man has dropped away at all from the hope of gain, he has no scruples about transgressing the bounds of humility, and through it all gold and the love of
gain become to him his God, as the belly does to others. Wherefore the blessed Apostle, looking out on the deadly poison of this pest, not only says that it is a root of all kinds of evil, but also calls it the worship of idols, saying “And covetousness […] which is the worship of idols.” You see then to what a downfall this madness step by step leads, so that by the voice of the Apostle it is actually declared to be the worship of idols and false gods, because passing over the image and likeness of God (which one who serves God with devotion ought to preserve undefiled in himself), it chooses to love and care for images stamped on gold instead of God. […]

27. If then through the desire of perfection you have forsaken all things and followed Christ who says to you, “Go sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven: and come follow me,” why, having put your hand to the plough, do you look back, so that you will be declared by the voice of the same Lord not to be fit for the kingdom of heaven? When secure on the top of the gospel roof, why do you descend to carry away something from the house, from those things, namely, which earlier you despised? When you are out in the field and working at the virtues, why do you run back and try to clothe yourself again with what belongs to this world, which you stripped off when you renounced it? But if you were hindered by poverty from having anything to give up, still less ought you to amass what you never had before. For by the grace of the Lord you were for this purpose made ready that you might hasten to him the more readily, being hampered by no snares of wealth. But let no one who is wanting in this be disappointed; for there is no one who has not something to give up. He has renounced all the possessions of this world, whoever has thoroughly eradicated the desire to possess them.

28. This then is the perfect victory over covetousness: not to allow a gleam from the very smallest scrap of it to remain in our heart, as we know that we shall have no further power of quenching it, if we cherish even the tiniest bit of a spark of it in us.

29. And we can only preserve this virtue unimpaired if we remain in a monastery, and as the Apostle says, having food and clothing, are therewith content.

30. […] Above all, considering the state of our weak and shifty nature, let us beware lest the day of the Lord come upon us as a thief in the night, and find our conscience defiled even by a single penny; for this would make void all the fruits of our renunciation of the world, and cause that which was said to the rich man in the gospel to be directed towards us also by the voice of the Lord: “You fool, this very night your soul will be required of you: then whose shall those things be which you have prepared?” And taking no thought for the morrow, let us never allow ourselves to be enticed away from the rule of the Coenobium.  

31. But we shall certainly not be suffered to do this, nor even to remain under the rule of a system, unless the virtue of patience, which can only spring from humility as its source, is first securely fixed and established in us. For the one teaches us not to trouble any one else; the other, to endure with magnanimity wrongs offered to us.