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## **Philip Rousseau. 'Cassian, Contemplation, and the Coenobitic Life', Journal of Ecclesiastical History 26. [photocopie]**

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## CASSIAN, CONTEMPLATION AND THE COENOBITIC LIFE

regnum paramus in corde'.<sup>1</sup> 'Scopos', on the other hand, is clearly a means to an end, and represents to that extent an ascetic programme, rather than a permanent achievement: indeed, Evagrius had spoken of the *σκοπός τῆς μὲν πρακτικῆς*.<sup>2</sup> To use, in addition, the translation 'destinatio' makes this act of concentration and this search for purity of heart seem more extended in time, if not more visible in effect. Cassian develops his argument along precisely these lines. Since a complete union with God is impossible 'homini ista carnis fragilitate circumdato', the monk will be more concerned in this life with establishing a sense of direction, coming to terms with a feeling of dissatisfaction, an absence of fulfilment.<sup>3</sup> Cassian insists, further, that to acquire purity of heart involves considerable effort, and should not be confused with a passive opening of the self to the influence of God: 'quidquid ergo nos ad hunc scopon, id est puritatem cordis potest dirigere, tota virtute sectandum est, quidquid autem ab hac retrahit, ut perniciosum ac noxiū devitandum'.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the link between visible practice and the purity of heart for which prayer strives is emphasised further by Cassian's avowal that the normal exercises of professional asceticism constitute a preparation of the heart, and help to preserve it from harm. They also represent stages by which the monk mounts ever higher 'ad perfectionem caritatis'.<sup>5</sup>

When, in the discourse of the abbot Isaac, Cassian fulfills his promise in the *Institutes* to provide an exhaustive treatment of prayer, these earlier points are recalled; and, as in previous passages, it is the analysis of prayer that provides a bridge between terms of contrast. Isaac brings to mind again the 'finis' of monasticism, and the desire for 'cordis perfectio', both of which, he says, must be directed 'ad iugem atque indisruptam orationis perseverantiam'.<sup>6</sup> There is a passive note in his description of prayer—the ascetic will strive to achieve an 'inmobilem tranquillitatem mentis'; but this is heavily qualified by the accompanying phrase, 'quantum humanae fragilitati conceditur'.<sup>7</sup> It is not a quality of mind that one should expect to possess to perfection in this life. Not even its partial attainment need be regarded as predominantly interior, but calls for a continuous striving on the part of the whole man. Inspired by desire for this perfection, 'omnem tam labore corporis quam contritionem spiritus indefesse quaerimus et iugiter exercemus'.<sup>8</sup>

When Cassian presents the fullest possible picture of his spirituality in action, many contrasts reappear. The coenobite lives a practical life.

<sup>1</sup> *Con.*, i. 13. Evagrius made more precise distinctions between *βασιλεῖα τῶν δυρανῶν* and *βασιλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ*: see Marsili, *Giovanni Cassiano*, 108.

<sup>2</sup> See Marsili, 38–40; and, for Evagrius, 93. I am less convinced by his assertion of Stoic parallels, 38 n.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Con.*, i. 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Con.*, i. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Con.*, i. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Con.*, ix. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



