

Ælfric's Pastoral Epistle to Wulfstan, Archbishop of York

Ælfric of Eynsham

Imperial · Early Medieval · Letter

STROMATA 205

Downloaded from The Stromata (thestromata.com). Free for personal, educational, and ministry use.

INTRODUCTION

Around the turn of the eleventh century, Aelfric of Eynsham - England's foremost vernacular teacher - wrote this pastoral letter for Wulfstan, Archbishop of York, to be read aloud to parish priests who knew no Latin. It is less a treatise than a working manual: why clergy keep the seven canonical hours, what the seven church orders mean, why chastity binds the altar's ministers, and how four early councils shaped the Church's discipline. Aelfric moves easily between Old Testament precedent and apostolic example, plainly worried that ill-trained priests will mislead the very people they are meant to guide. Translated by Benjamin Thorpe in 1840, the voice is blunt, pastoral, and occasionally exasperated - a bishop's-eye view of parish life a thousand years gone, still recognizably concerned with the same question every clergy handbook asks: how do the ordained live up to what they've been given?

To Men in Orders,

- It behoves us bishops, that we disclose to you priests in the English tongue, the divine doctrine, which our canon prescribes to us, and which also the book of Christ teaches us; because ye cannot all understand the Latin, and yet we dare not silently refrain from telling you our Lord's commandments, lest we should be guilty, if we silently refrained therefrom; but we desire to guard ourselves: see ye to what ye may do afterwards.
- I know, however, for certain, that this our admonition will displease a good many of you; because to many men is unrighteousness too dear.
- I trust, however, that one or other will be stimulated by God, so that he desire to hear the holy doctrine, and will correct himself to his own benefit.
- The good will willingly hear God's commandments, but the evil will not, of their own will; but they shall, nevertheless, one day certainly be ashamed of their unrighteousness, and thereby, at least, desist from evil.
-

Ye priests should religiously observe your order, und always adorn it with good habits, and with pure mind minister to Christ, at his holy altar, so as is befitting your order; because verily ye are placed as guides, and as teachers over God's people, that ye may gain them to God.

- Three periods are reckoned in this world. One period as before God's law, in the time of the patriarchs, who were of yore. The second, under God's law, in the time of Moses and the prophets. The third under Christ's own grace, in the Christian time, after Christ's advent
- First, in the earliest time after Adam, it was, that meti lived in fleshly lusts, and in enormous sins; and some heed' lessly lived in heathenism, and foredid themselves, by worship of the devil, and despised the Creator, who had formed them to men; and that they did through the devil's lore, who awhile before had misled Adam.
- Then the Almighty God, in the time of Moses, the great leader, established, as a guide to mankind, tle five jbooks, in which is God's law; and Moses wrote them, and commanded mankind, that they should not have any heathenism, but should ever worship the true God, who alone is the Almighty Creator. And the law likewise forbade mankind to perpetrate sins, and also lawfully punished those who perversely sinned.
- Then at last, verily, the righteous Christ himself; the Son of Almighty God, who created all things, came into this world, with real humanity, because he would redeem the sinful from the thraldom of the devil, and lost men bring into the way of life; and established Christianity in chastity; himself giving example, and teaching the chastity which he loves in his poor ministers, who have ever to serve him in chastity; that is in monks and mynchens, and especially in mass-priests. And the same Son of God chose him for mother the chaste maiden St. Mary. And he is himself the source of all chastity; and he lived alone in this world in perfect chastity, so as no other man. John also, the Baptist, who baptized him continued ever in celibacy, in great abstinence, and in chastity. And John the Evangelist, our Lord's kinsman, continued in celibacy and in chastity, till his life's end.
- Also the twelve Apostles, who followed the Saviour, when here in the world he dwelt with men; and the seventy two men, who continued with him during his teachership, these are named his disciples in books; all these forsook their worldly possessions, and wives, and continued in chastity, following Christ, so as Peter did, who to Christ himself thus spake: 'Ecce nos reliquimus omnia,' &c., that is in English: Behold, we have forsaken all our worldly things, and we follow thee now, and ever so will.
- Ye ought to know, if ye love wisdom, what difference there is between the two testaments; the old law, before Christ's advent, and the new testament, under Christ's grace; for before the law of Moses, men might live variously, and also under the law of Moses, mankind lived in another manner: it is our duty now to do otherwise, according to our Lord's doctrine.
- In ancient days, before Christ's advent, men lived too much after their own lusts; but he said, that we should, witli strong mind, live more rigidly, and strive against sins, and despise evil lusts, that we, in return therefore, may possess the kingdom of heaven.
-

And he also spake of the martyrs, who, he knew, were to be after his passion, who suffered afterwards for his love and faitli: Fear ye not,' said he, those who slay your body, for they cannot slay the soul; but fear those who can sink the soul and also the body into hell' Through this admonition, and through many others, many thousands were martyred widely over the world, both men and women, for Christ's faith, and they so, with their constancy and firmness, merited the kingdom of heaven. Again spake our Lord of his holy confessors, whom, in holy books, we call confessores : 'Sint lumbi vestri prsecincti, et lucemae ardentes in manibus vestris,' Be your loins,' he said, 'girded about, and lamps burning in your hands.'

- By the loins is signified, as we learn in books, foul libidinousness, and we ought to bind and control it, for our chastity, and have our lamps in hand; these are holy works constantly, in alms, and in all good deeds, for example to men.
- John the Evangelist, in his ghostly vision, saw our Lord, after he was ascended to heaven, clad in a white garment, and it was wide, down to the ankles, and his breast was confined with a golden girdle.
- He bade us begird our loins, so that we may despise foul libidinousness; and he himself was begirt with a golden girdle at his holy breast; therefore we also ought to have our mind's chastity always in our hearts; we especially who minister to Christ in his ministry.
- Again, Daniel the prophet wrote in his prophecy, that he saw God in his ghostly vision; and he said: He was clad in linen, and his loins were girded around.' John saw, as we before said, the Saviour girded about his holy breast; and Daniel saw the loins girded.
- Now is it truly thereby manifested to us, both in the old law, and also in the new, that God will have, in his spiritual service holy ministers male and female, who, with chastity of body and mind, may offer to him the holy housel, so as he himself taught, before his passion.
- Of this were mindful the great confessors, whom we call 'confessores,' and the holy maidens, who lived their lives ever in chastity.
- It happened, after the passion of our Lord, and after his ascension, that the Holy Ghost came from heaven to earth, as a burning fire, with broad flame, over Christ's apostles, as Christ before had promised to them, and filled them all, without peril, so that they all knew the languages of all nations, and all the lore, which we learn, they wrote in books, and established by God's own direction. They wrought also many miracles through Christ, and the same miracles which he himself had before wrought. And then, in those days, Peter preached in the city of Jerusalem to the Jewish people; and then it happened, that three thousand men submitted to baptism in one day; and again, at another preaching, yet more men, and were so greatly stimulated, that they sold all their possessions, and brought the worth to the feet of the apostles: and none of them had afterwards anything separate, but made all in common, each according to his need. And James, the righteous apostle, directed them all for thirty years.
- Here was established, through this holy company, the life of those monks, who live according to rule, under their abbot, and have all their things in common, as the abbot directs them. And then afterwards, the apostles went apart, far away, over all this world, working miracles, and

preaching true faith; and the faithful they baptized, and raised churches and established bishops, and ordained mass-priests, and distributed many servants of God into the seven orders, as the canon tells us: and God's faith waxed afterwards, and heathenship waned.

- What then? After that it happened that there sprang up a boundless persecution against the Christians, far and wide, and they were martyred with manifold torments, and almost every one slain, who believed in Christ But God constantly wrought miracles among them through these; so that the heathens thereby the sooner believed in Christ. Oft even a thousand men together believed, where one martyr was slain, through the great miracles that the saint performed. And Christianity might not thenceforth be ever quenched; and God also gave afterwards peace and remission in the world, and the faith waxed far and wide.
- Then the emperor Constantino succeeded to the empire, in the city of Rome, and he swayed empire over all the world and he was the first emperor who believed in Christ, the son of Saint Helena, the blessed queen: and he then bade assemble a synod of bishops; he would hear the holy doctrine, and the true faith in the righteous God, in whom he believed. Then there came together, in the city of Nice, three hundred and eighteen bishops, assembled from afar; and the emperor came to meet them, and with all reverence welcomed them, and commanded abundant provision to be made for them all, and listened to their doctrine with faithful mind: and there were many of them who could openly work miracles through God; and they long continued there together.
- There was also then an impious priest, who was called Arius, from the city of Alexandria: and he was blinded in his mind, and the greatest heretic that had come of mankind. He would lessen the living Lord, and said, that in true godhead he was not equal to his father, but was less, in might.
- Then the bishops excommunicated the wicked heretic; but nevertheless, he would not cease from his heresy, ere he totally perished.
- A second synod was afterwards, of a hundred and fifty bishops, assembled from afar, in the time of Theodosius, the noble emperor; and they there condemned the heretical bishop, who was called Macedonius, and excommunicated him, because he denied, and said in his heresy, that the Holy Ghost was in no godhead with the heavenly Father, and the Saviour Christ But they there taught manifestly, that he is true God, ever dwelling in one godhead with the Almighty Father, and his begotten Son.
- The third synod was of two hundred bishops, under the younger Theodosius, and they there condemned Nestorius the heretic, who audaciously said, that in Christ were two persons; and they there totally extinguished his heresy; because verily our Lord is ever continuing in one person.
- The fourth synod was of six hundred bishops, and thirty priests, assembled from very far, in the time of Martian the great emperor. The synod condemned the diabolical abbot, who said in his heresy that our Lord's body and his godhead were of one nature. Then was he excommunicated from the great synod, because Christ is, as ye have often heard, true man and true God, ever continuing.

- Afterwards there were very often other synods of wise bishops widely throughout the world, but these were the principal, who with full doctrine confirmed the faith, and excommunicated the heretics, who with their heresy would turn wrong to right, and seduce mankind from their Lord.
- These four synods then also appointed all the services which we have in God's ministry, at mass, and at matins, and at all the canonical hours: and they forbade all marriages ever to ministers of the altar, and especially to masspriests.
- Seven canonical hours they appointed for us to sing daily to the praise of our Lord; as the prophet David said in his prophecy: 'Septies in die,' &c. 'Seven times, my Lord,' said he, 'I have said thy praise in one day, for the righteousness of thy judgments.' The first canonical hour is matins, with the after song appertaining thereto, prime, tierce, sext, none, vespers, compline. These seven canonical hours ye should sing with great attention, to the praise of your Lord, daily in church, always at the appointed hour; and, in like manner, celebrate mass at the appointed time. And it is much that mass may be celebrated once in one day, though it be not celebrated oftener; because our Lord suffered once, and redeemed us all; and now is the mass, which men celebrate, a memorial of his great passion; and much can it effect for all mankind, both living and departed, so as we learn in holy books; and therefore should mass also be fervently celebrated, with great chastity, so as those holy men did, whom we call confessors. Some of these ever continued without wife, some of them forsook that unallowed thing, and served Christ in chastity, so as the canons inform us, and openly command: that is, that no bishop nor priest have in his monastery, or in his house, any woman, unless it be his mother, or his sister, father's sister, or mother's sister, or a relation of them, from whom no evil report may spring up: and if he do otherwise, the canon says, that he should forfeit his order.
- This to you priests will seem grievous, because ye have your misdeeds in custom, so that it seems to yourselves, that ye have no sin in so living in female intercourse, as laymen; and say that Peter the apostle had a wife and children; and we also say that he had so; and some others, who followed our Lord, had also wives and children, before their conversion, but they abstained therefrom after they came to Christ's teaching, and forsook their possessions and wives, and all their worldly things.
- Beloved, we cannot now forcibly compel you to chastity, but we admonish you, nevertheless, that ye observe chastity, so as Christ's ministers ought, in good reputation, to the pleasure of God; as those saints did, whom we before mentioned, who all their lives lived in chastity.
- Beloved, seven orders are appointed in books for God's ministries in Christ's church. One is ostiarius, the second is lector, the third exorcista, the fourth acoluthus, the fifth subdiaconus, the sixth diaconus, the seventh presbyter or episcopus. Ostiarius is the doorkeeper, who holds the keys of the church. Lector is the reader who reads in church. Exorcista is an adjuror, who reads over men diseased in mind, and the infirm. Acoluthus is he who bears the light at God's ministries. Subdiaconus is the under deacon, who bears the chalice and the dish at the mass, and ministers to the deacon. Diaconus the minister is called, who ministers to the mass-priest, or to the bishop at the mass, and reads the gospel: he may also give the bread, and baptize children, if need be.
-

Beloved, understand that both are of one order, the bishop and the mass-priest, that is, of the seventh church-order, as holy books tell us; and both celebrate mass, and preach to men, and both ought alike to observe chastity, and preach righteousness to other men, and set good example: and no order is reckoned for the holy ministry, except the seven orders which we have before mentioned.

- The bishop is, however, appointed, in some degree, for greater benediction than is the mass-priest; that is, to hallow churches, and to ordain priests, to confirm men, and to bless the oil; because it were too multifarious, if all mass-priests must do this.
- It is proper, for priests, however, on account of that seniority, to be humbly subordinate to their bishop, and live by his direction and wisdom; and that he superintend them, and heed their courses, so as his name expresses: his name is called episcopus, that [is] in English, overseeing because he constantly oversees his subordinates, and directs them to proper manners, ever as he can most earnestly.
- The first bishop, whom God himself anointed in the old law, was called Aaron, he was the brother of Moses the great leader; but he never celebrated mass, because no mass was established, before Christ himself, in the new covenant hallowed housel, and commanded us afterwards so to do in remembrance of him.
- Now was the mass established by our Lord Christ; and the holy apostle Peter appointed the canon thereto which we call 'Te igitur.' Aaron, and the old bishops, who were of yore, offered, it is said, to God, in the old manner, bulls and rams, and cattle of every kind, so as no man in these days may do; because all those offerings betokened the slaying of our Lord, who was slain for us, and fastened on a rood, for our redemption; and he then so ended the old covenant And then, in those days, must Aaron, and his successors afterwards take to them for mate, according to the law of Moses, a pure maiden; because no one of any other race might come to the degree of bishop, except of Aaron's race; nor might they marry with any widow, nor with a repudiated wife, with leave of God, but with a pure maiden; and they should, nevertheless, preserve their chastity, always as often as they offered the sacrificial offerings which were then usual. They must then of necessity have wives in those days, that, at all events, the great episcopal race, which came of Aaron, might not be extinguished; because no race might come to that degree, except that one race which came of Aaron; and thus it ever stood in the old covenant.
- Now is the old law ended after Christ's advent; and men now, under this Christian law, do not choose' another bishop of any episcopal race, but of any race, provided he be chaste, and grown up in manners for God's ministries, whether from monkhood or from priesthood. Martin was a monk, and he was afterwards a famous bishop; Gregory was a monk, and he was a famous bishop; Cuthbert was a monk, and a famous bishop; and many others were bishops from monkhood, as we read in books. And also from the priesthood living in chastity were many bishops and mass-priests, in great renown, very holy men, whom we call confessors. But ye priests will some be, as we think and greatly fear, of that evil crew of men in orders, of whom our Lord spake, in his holy gospel: 'Multi dicunt mihi in illo die, hoc est in die iudicii, Domine, Domine,' &c. He said: 'Many will say to me in that great day of judgment. Lord, beloved Lord, in our lives we

wrought in thy honour many miracles in thy great name, and we also prophesied for thy honour.' Then said our Lord unto them: 'I know ye not, nor reck I of you; but depart quickly from me ye unrighteous doers, and dwell ever henceforth there, where there is eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

- Christ knoweth all things, but he will not then, however, acknowledge with any kindness those unchaste ministers of the altar, who did not ere please him here in life with the chastity which they ought to have preserved; nor also shall they then have any thing pleasing to them, nor may they so foul enter into his fair heavenly hall, but shall be shut out into the eternal pains of hell's torments. And yet the evil priest cannot with his evil, although he be wicked and sinful in deeds, he cannot ever defile God's ministry, nor the baptism, nor the mass; but all shall come to his own harm, that he has done unrighteously. Now ye have heard concerning men in orders, both in the old law, and in the new covenant, how it was constituted: be heedful for yourselves as ye will.
- Beloved: the canons teach us how we should regulate our lives. Canons the right rules are called which direct us, and they ordain, that he who of the lay order takes a widow to wife or a repudiated wife, be never afterwards deacon or mass-priest; and they direct, that the man in orders, who commits foul fornication forfeit his order.
- We dare not silently refrain from reciting to you the holy ordinances which ye ought to observe: we shall be guiltless, if we recite them to you; know ye, whether yourselves will secure your souls, and direct yourselves. Ye have not lawfully intercourse with woman at any time; but laymen may marry and justly hold their lawful wives; and the layman, after his wife's decease, may, if needful, marry a second time; and a young widow may marry again after her husband's decease; but, nevertheless, the bridal benediction may not be given them, unless she be a maiden, but they should do penance for their incontinence.
- Beloved: ye priests should be provided with books, and with vestments, so as is befitting your order. A mass-priest should, at least, have a mass-book, books of canticles, and reading books, psalter and manual, penitential, and numeral; and these shall be sufficiently correct; and he should have clean mass-vestments, for Christ's ministries. And ye should sing sunrise matins, and mass-matins, always nine intervals with nine readings.
- And know, that every chalice be wrought of molten material, of gold or of silver, of glass or of tin; let it not be of horn, especially not of wood. No man may celebrate mass with any other vessel save with the chalice which is hallowed to Christ; and let his altar be clean, and always well covered, and not befouled with dung; and let no man ever celebrate mass without wine.
- Be careful also now, I pray, that ye be better and wiser in your ghostly craft for Christ's ministries, so as is rightly befitting you that ye should be, than the secular men are in their worldly crafts. Long should he learn who has to teach; and if he will not learn to be a teacher of right wisdom, he shall afterwards be a teacher of great error, as Christ himself said in his gospel: 'Caecus si cceco ducatum praestat, ambo in foveam cadent:' 'If the blind man be the guide of the blind, then will they both fall into one pit.' Blind is the guide, who has to teach God's folk, if he neither have learning, nor be willing to learn, but misleads himself, and his parishioners along with him.

- The mass-priest shall rightly preach the true faith to men, and recite sermons to them; and visit sick men, and baptize children, as speedily as they most speedily can be prepared for baptism. And if the sick layman desire to receive unction, let him then confess him, and forgive every grudge, before the unction: and if he recover, and, after the unction, become hale, he may, unless he have vowed the contrary, enjoy the society of woman, and flesh, if he himself will.
- In the unction there is healing and forgiveness of sins; and it is no ordination, as some men imagine. And if the man be again sick, let him again receive unction, when it be needful; and if it happen that he dies, let the corpse be wisely buried and the soul earnestly committed to God.

- But some priests, however, misdo altogether too much; they rejoice when men depart hence, and unbidden gather about the corpse, like greedy ravens, wherever they see a dead carcase; but it properly becomes them to bury those men who belong to their minster: and no one ought to go in another's following to any corpse, unless he be bidden. And know also, that no priest may rightfully be a rapacious monger, nor a public spoiler in 'gerefa'-ship, nor drink altogether too frequently in wine houses, nor be too given to drinking, nor too proud, nor too boastful, nor too showy in his garments, nor adorned with gold, but with good habits do honour to himself.
- He shall not be litigious, nor stir up strife, but he shall pacify the litigious always, if he can. And he may not, who is God's soldier, lawfully wear weapons, nor go to battle; because the canon teUs us, if he be slain in a national fight, or on account of some dispute, which he himself has made, that no man may, on any account, celebrate mass for him, nor openly pray for him, but, nevertheless, he may be buried in a clean grave; and so leave afterwards all to God's judgment.
- Now some priests say, that they, in case of need, may wear a weapon and say that Peter was armed, when he would defend his Lord; that was when he hacked off the sinful one's ear, who was in that gang, where Christ was bound: but we soothly say, that the righteous Son of God, and those who followed him, did not go armed, nor came thither with any worldly warfare; although among them, when the Jews were binding him, two swords [were] at hand, so as it is said: 'Domine ecce duo gladii hie,' 'Beloved Lord,' said those who followed him, 'here are two swords:' but if they had been there before, they would not have said so. And if Peter might have slain the man outright, then Christ would not have commanded him to desist from the work; but he said to him: 'Put the sword into the sheath quickly, and desist from the fight;' and he forthwith healed him whom Peter had wounded. He might, had he willed it, have instantly had warlike force abundant, but he suffered all for our need what he then suffered. And the same Peter, who was then fighting, was afterwards hanged on a rood, for our Lord's true faith, and he then strove against nothing, neither with word nor with deed, but suffered patiently, for his Lord's love, and for the true faith, all that was done to him, and therefore he has for reward heavenly mirth. By this God's servants may know, that they ought not to go anywhere with war or with secular contest, but with ghostly weapons fight against the devil. Neither wife nor secular warfare are in anywise befitting them, if they will rightly obey God, and hold God's law, as is properly becoming their order.

Sit nomen Domini benedictum (In the Name of God).

Amen.

Source: Translated by Benjamin Thorpe, in *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England* (London: Record Commission, 1840).

Previously prepared for an earlier version of *The Stromata*. Accessed July 2026.

Translation: Author (Aelfric of Eynsham) died c. 1010. Thorpe's 1840 translation is public domain (translator died 1870). The extracted text itself contained an archive.org URL pointing directly at Thorpe's 1840 volume, confirming the edition.

<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/canons-of-aelfric-pastoral-epistle>