

# John Cassian

On Going Formation 4-4

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## On Going Formation – John Cassian

John Cassian was a monk who lived in the fifth century, from whom St. Dominic drew many insights on religious life. In this session we are looking at the connection between the Order of Preachers and the

“Conferences of John Cassian”



Bl. Jordan of Saxony, the successor of St. Dominic, in his **Libellus on the Beginnings of the Order of Preachers** singles out the Conferences of John Cassian as a book loved by St. Dominic and **critical for developing his spiritual life**. There is also a tradition in the Order that throughout his life **St. Dominic carried around three books with him: St. Matthew’s Gospel, the Epistles of St. Paul, and the Conferences**. This latter spiritual masterpiece, also a major source for the Rule of St. Benedict and thus influencing most of Western monasticism, remains relevant for us today. **Religious are frequently prone to become excessively troubled over little things.**

“The Conferences” is a large longer work, containing twenty-four extended dialogues between Cassian, Germanus, and the desert fathers of Egypt. These conversations deal primarily with the interior struggle of a person coming closer to God. The Conferences explore the interrelation of virtues and vices within our lives. The conference on friendship deals with the vice of anger, while the conference on the different types of monks discusses the virtues of patience and humility at great length. **Furthermore, the desert fathers regularly emphasize that as one grows in the spiritual life, hospitality and charity always trump the ascetical discipline.** Cassian’s works do not stand solely on their own authority, but like all the sayings of the desert fathers whom he studied, they are infused with Scripture.

The first of Cassian’s Conferences explains this unfortunate irony with respect to religious poverty:

“We see some people who disdain very great riches in the world—and not only large sums of gold and silver but also magnificent properties—being disturbed over a penknife, a stylus, a needle, or a pen. If they paid close attention to their purity of heart they would never allow this to happen with respect to

small things...And often some people hold on to a book so tightly that in fact they do not easily permit another person to read or touch it, and hence they bring upon themselves occasions of impatience and death precisely when they are being urged to acquire the rewards of patience and love" (I.VI.1).

In contemporary language, it would be better for a millionaire to be overly fond of his Ferrari and his yacht, than for a monk or friar to be overly attached to a book, his place in the chapel, or the fabric of his habit. The millionaire's weakness makes at least some sense since he is attached to things that have great objective monetary value. A religious who is overly possessive of the small things given for his use is in some way missing the point of his state of life.

Why bring this point up? It is not to rebuke worldly religious, but to illustrate an important truth about religious life: Religious perfection does not happen immediately. Although religious are in "a state of perfection," it is important to understand this as a state of being perfected. Religious poverty is one evident dimension of this:

"It is clearly proved that perfection is not immediately arrived at by being stripped and deprived of all one's wealth or by giving up one's honors, unless there is that love whose elements the Apostle describes, which consists in purity of heart alone" (I.VI.1).

Selling one's car, closing one's bank account, and divesting oneself of other personal goods is not a magical recipe for becoming poor in spirit or pure in heart. Poverty of fact is geared towards poverty of spirit. The former is a help towards the latter, but does not produce it automatically.

For this reason, someone who has given up all of his worldly possessions can be tempted to fill the void left by these possessions with another material thing, even something very small and trivial, whether it be a book, a pen, or a holy card. But the void created by poverty is meant to be filled with God alone. By giving up one's possessions, space is cleared in one's heart and this space is reserved for a deeper influx of grace, a deeper possession of God.

For the Dominican friar in particular, poverty is considered an instrumental means. By living poverty the friar will have more desire to possess, and be possessed by the things of God, and to pour himself out in preaching. Also, his poverty will be an effective witness to the same Gospel he preaches, an authentication that God Himself is of the highest importance. Further, his voluntary poverty is meant to give him solidarity with those who suffer involuntary poverty.

Similar things could be said for the other two vows, chastity and obedience. Through chastity, the space in one's heart that would ordinarily be devoted to a spouse is reserved for God and thus disposes one to a greater intimacy with God. Likewise, surrendering one's will in obedience disposes one to the movements of the divine will for one's life. The evangelical counsels, rather than giving the religious an undue burden, give the religious the privilege of being disposed towards greater purity of heart, which is the goal.

"What else have I in heaven but you?  
Apart from you I want nothing on earth.  
My body and my heart faint for joy;  
God is my possession for ever" (Ps 73:25-26)

Presenter Notes:

Why would St Dominic only carry three books?

One must be selective since they were heavy. The printing press was not invented until 1440, so these were on vellum (animal skin).

Did the books encourage him? Challenge Him, Inspire Him?