

Erasmus: In Praise of Folly

The Praise of Folly is one of the most famous pieces of literature of the sixteenth century. Written in a short period of time during a visit to the home of Thomas More, Erasmus considered it a "little diversion" from his "serious work." Yet both contemporaries and later generations have appreciated "this laughing parody of every form and rank of human life." In this selection, Erasmus belittles one of his favorite objects of scorn—the monks.

Erasmus, The Praise of Folly

Those who are the closest to these [the theologians] in happiness are generally called "the religious" or "monks," both of which are deceiving names, since for the most part they stay as far away from religion as possible and frequent every sort of place. I cannot, however, see how ally life could be more gloomy than the life of these monks if I [Folly] did not assist them in many ways. Though most people detest these men so much that accidentally meeting one is considered to be bad luck, the monks themselves believe that they are magnificent creatures. One of their chief beliefs is that to be illiterate is to be of a high state of sanctity, and so they make sure that they are not able to read. Another is that when braying out their gospels in church they are making themselves very pleasing and satisfying to God, when in fact they are uttering these psalms as a matter of repetition rather than from their hearts....

Moreover, it is amusing to find that they insist that everything be done in fastidious detail, as if employing the orderliness of mathematics, a small mistake in which would be a great crime. Just so many knots must be on each shoe and the shoelace may be of only one specified color; just so much lace is allowed on each habit; the girdle must be of just the right material and width; the hood of a certain shape and capacity; their hair of just so many fingers' length; and finally they can sleep only the specified number of hours per day. Can they not understand that, because of a variety of bodies and temperaments, all this equality of restrictions is in fact very unequal? Nevertheless, because of all this detail that they employ they think that they are superior to all other people. And what is more, amid all their pretense of Apostolic charity, the members of one order will denounce the members of another order clamorously because of the way in which the habit has been belted or the slightly darker color of it....

Many of them work so hard at protocol and at traditional fastidiousness that they think one heaven hardly a suitable reward for their labors; never recalling, however, that the time will come when Christ will demand a reckoning of that which he had prescribed, namely charity, and that he will hold their deeds of little account. One monk will then exhibit his belly filled with every kind of fish; another will profess a knowledge of over a hundred hymns. Still another will reveal a countless number of fasts that he has made, and will account for his large belly by explaining that his fasts have always been broken by a single large meal. Another will show a list of church ceremonies over which he has officiated so large that it would fill seven ships.

Thomas à Kempis *Imitation of Christ* (excerpts)

1. Meditation

"The kingdom of God is within you," says the Lord. [Luke 17:21] Turn to him with all your heart, then. Forsake this wretched world and your soul shall find rest. Learn to despise external things, to devote yourself to what is within, and you will see the kingdom of God come to you — a kingdom of peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Such gifts are not given to the impious.

Christ will come to you offering his consolation, if you prepare a fit dwelling for him in your heart. The beauty and glory that he delights in, are on the inside. His visits to the inner person are frequent, his company sweet and full of consolation, his peace great, and his intimacy wonderful indeed.

So, faithful soul, prepare your heart for this Bridegroom that he may come and dwell within you. He himself says, "If anyone who loves me, will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and will make our home with him."

Give Christ his place then, but deny entrance to all others. For when you have Christ you are rich and he is sufficient for you. He will provide for you and supply your every need, so that you will not have to trust in frail, changeable people. Christ remains forever, standing firmly with us to the end.

Do not place much confidence in weak and mortal people, even if they are helpful and friendly. Do not grieve too much if they sometimes oppose and contradict you. Those who are with us today may be against us tomorrow, and vice versa, for men change with the wind. Place all your trust in God. Let him be your fear and your love. He will answer for you. He will do what is best for you.

You have no lasting home here. You are a stranger and a pilgrim wherever you may be, and you shall have no rest until you are wholly united with Christ.

Why do you look about here when this is not your resting place? Dwell rather upon heaven and give but a passing glance to all earthly things. They all pass away, and you together with them. Take care that you do not cling to them or you will be trapped and perish. Fix your mind on the Most High, and pray unceasingly to Christ.

If you do not know how to meditate on heavenly things, direct your thoughts to Christ's passion and willingly look on his sacred wounds. If you turn devoutly to the wounds and precious stigmata of Christ, you will find great comfort in suffering, you will care little for the scorn of men, and you will bear their slanderous talk easily.

When Christ was in the world, he was despised by men. In the hour of need he was forsaken by acquaintances and left by friends to the depths of scorn. He was willing to suffer and to be despised. Do you dare to complain of anything? He had enemies and defamers; do you want everyone to be your friend, your benefactor? How can your patience be rewarded if no adversity tests it? How can you be a friend of Christ if you are not willing to suffer any hardship? Suffer with Christ and for Christ if you wish to reign with Him.

Had you but once entered into perfect communion with Jesus or tasted a little of his ardent love, you would care nothing at all for your own comfort or discomfort but would rejoice in the reproach you suffer, for love of him makes a man despise himself.

One who is a lover of Jesus and of truth, a truly inward person who is free from uncontrolled feelings, can turn to God at will and rise above himself to enjoy spiritual peace.

He who tastes life as it really is, not as men say or think it is, is indeed wise with the wisdom of God rather than of men.

He who learns to live the inward life and to take little account of outward things, does not seek special places or times to perform devout exercises. A spiritual man quickly recollects himself because he has never wasted his attention upon externals. No outside work, no business that cannot wait stands in his way. He adjusts himself to things as they happen. He whose temperament is well—ordered cares nothing about the strange, perverse behavior of others, for a man is upset and distracted only to the same degree that he engrosses himself in external things.

If all was well with you, and if you were purified from all sin, everything would tend to your good and be to your profit. But because you are as yet neither entirely dead to self nor free from all earthly affection, there is much that often displeases and disturbs you. Nothing so mars and defiles the heart of man as impure attachment to created things. But if you refuse external consolation, you will be able to contemplate heavenly things and often to experience interior joy.

2. Humility

Do not be troubled about those who are with you or against you, but make sure that God is with you in everything you do. Keep your conscience clear and God will protect you, for the malice of man cannot harm one whom God wishes to help. If you know how to suffer in silence, you will undoubtedly experience God's help. He knows when and how to deliver you, so place yourself in his hands, for it is God's right to help men and free them from all distress.

It is often good for us to have others know our faults and rebuke them, for it gives us greater humility. When a man humbles himself because of his faults, he easily placates those about him and readily appeases those who are angry with him.

It is the humble whom God protects and liberates; it is the humble whom he loves and consoles. To the humble he turns and gives great grace, so that after their humiliation he may raise them up to glory. He reveals his secrets to the humble, and with kind invitation bids them come to him. Thus, the humble man enjoys peace in the midst of many vexations, because his trust is in God, not in the world. Hence, you must not think that you have made any progress until you look upon yourself as inferior to all others.

3. Goodness and Peace in Man

First keep peace with yourself, then you will be able to bring peace to others. The peaceful do more good than the learned. While the passionate turn even good to evil and are quick to believe evil, the peaceful, being good themselves, turn all things to good.

The man who is at perfect ease is never suspicious, but the disturbed and discontented spirit is upset by many suspicions. He neither rests himself nor permits others to do so. He often says what ought not to be said and leaves undone what ought to be done. He is concerned with the duties of others but neglects his own.

So, direct your zeal firstly towards yourself, then you may with justice direct it to those about you. You are well versed in coloring your own actions with excuses which you will not accept from others, though it would be more just to accuse yourself and excuse your brother. If you wish men to bear with you, you must bear with them. See how far you are from true charity and humility which do not know how to be angry or indignant with anyone.

Now, all our peace in this miserable life is found in humbly enduring suffering, rather than in being free from it. He who knows best how to suffer will enjoy the greater peace, because he is the conqueror of himself, the master of the world, a friend of Christ, and an heir of heaven.

11. Loving The Cross of Jesus

Jesus always has many who love his heavenly kingdom, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire consolation, but few who care for trial. He finds many to share his table, but few to take part in his fasting. All desire to be happy with him, but few wish to suffer anything for him. Many follow him to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many revere his miracles, but few approach the shame of the Cross. Many love him as long as they encounter no hardship, many praise and bless him as long as they receive some comfort from him. But if Jesus hides himself and leaves them for a while, they fall either into complaints or into deep dejection.

Those, on the other hand, who love him for his own sake and not for any comfort of their own, bless him in all trial and anguish as well as in the bliss of consolation. Even if he should never give them consolation, yet they would continue to praise him and wish always to give him thanks. What power there is in pure love for Jesus, love that is free from all self—interest and self—love!

Do not those who always seek consolation deserve to be called mercenaries? Do not those who always think of their own profit and gain prove that they love themselves rather than Christ? Where can a man be found who desires to serve God for nothing? Rarely indeed is a man so spiritual as to strip himself of all things. And who shall find a man so truly poor in spirit as to be free from every created thing? His value is as great as things brought from the most distant lands.

If a man gives all his wealth, it is nothing. If he does great penance, it is little. If he gains all knowledge, he is still far from the goal. If he has great virtue and ardent devotion, he still lacks a great deal, including the one thing that is most necessary to him. What is this one thing? Leaving all, to forsake himself, completely renounce himself, and give up all private attachments. Then, when he has done all that he knows ought to be done, let him consider it as nothing, let him make little of what may be considered great; let him in all honesty call himself an unprofitable servant. For Truth itself has said, “When you have done all these things that are commanded you, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants.’” [Luke 17:10]

Then he will be truly poor and stripped in spirit, and with the prophet may say: "I am alone and poor." [Ps. 24:16] But in fact no one is more wealthy than such a man. No one is more powerful and no one freer than he who knows how to leave all things and think of himself as the least of all.