

*A Dispute Between a Monk and a Cleric concerning Whether a Monk is Allowed to Preach*

Written by  
Lord Rupert, Abbot of Deutz

Translated by W.L. North from the edition in J.P. Migne (ed.) *Patrologia Latina* 170, cols. 537C-542C.

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**Monk:** You act unjustly when you oppose me to my face and stop my mouth so that I dare not open it in the middle of the Church and proclaim the word of God. Tell me, then, by what authority do you think that you can shut my mouth?

**Cleric:** Let me speak and convince you by reason of equity that I am not acting unjustly. First, [I am not acting unjustly] because when you professed that you were a monk, you confessed that you were dead. For someone who is not dead to the world is not a monk. But how can he be dead if his voice is heard out and about? Therefore, the person who is proved by the very noise of his preaching to live in the world, is not a monk.

**Monk:** That's a strong argument and you have struck me, or so it seems to you. But now let me turn right back at you this dart that you first cast at me. For I say: You, too, are dead. For the Apostle says to you as well as to me: *You have died and your life has been hidden with Christ in God.*<sup>1</sup> Or do you suppose that this is said to monks alone? Were all the Colossians and the others to whom this was written monks? Or does he say this about the mortification of the monastic profession and not rather about the mortification of baptism? For he says in the Letter to Romans: *Whichever of us have been baptized in Christ Jesus, we have been baptized in his death.*<sup>2</sup> And so, if you, too, are dead in this way, remain silent about the word of life or allow me to be dead with the dead to mortify those who still live in the world.

**Cleric:** No way. I will never grant that this is allowed. The sacred canons prohibit it, the authoritative writers deny it. For Pope Pius decrees that a monk may not dare to preach, regardless of how much knowledge he has. And Jerome says that a monk does not have the duty to teach but to mourn.

**Monk:** O cleric, you read the Scripture of the Law with your mouth open and your eyes shut. For if these statements of Jerome were understood in the way you suppose, it follows that Jerome himself is in grave self-contradiction and you cast that Pious man against his own opinion that a monk dare not preach, however great his knowledge may be, since the Apostolic See has admitted the blessed Gregory, while he was gleaming in his monastic habit, and many others of this order to the office of the apostolic fastigium and it does not cease doing so to this day. And Jerome who says: *It is not the monk's role to teach but to mourn*, is a monk when he says this very thing in his role as teacher and when *teta vita* deserves to be ranked among the greatest doctors for not only his teaching but his composing of enduring doctrine. Didn't you know that Jerome, whose opinion you have as your patron, was a monk? I'm not surprised at what you blather so ineptly against monks, when you are so inexperienced with sacred letters that you stand there gaping open-mouthed when you hear that Gregory, Jerome, and other stars of the heavenly palace were monks.

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<sup>1</sup> Col. 3: 3.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 4: 3.

**Cleric:** How is it then that one of them does not contradict himself when he himself does what he says is alien from the office of monks? Tell me in what way I am reading Scripture with my eyes closed, what else have you discovered in such clear opinions with which you can correct my view, as long you do not do violence to Scripture through your presumption.

**Monk:** I shall, if you will first answer my questions one by one.

**Cleric:** Ask away.

**Monk:** You who are such a vigorous advocate of clerics and such vehement opponent of monks, you who glory in your clerical status and who have been puffed up and elated by this profession, do you why are called a cleric and what the clergy is?

**Cleric:** Are you asking for the etymology of the word “clericus”?

**Monk:** That is very easy to explain. For the word “cleric” comes from “sorte electus” [elected by lot]. I want something more. What I want from you is to know what is meant by the term “clericatus”. What will you inherit? Either speak or, what is less, listen.

**Cleric:** I’ll listen.

**Monk:** The status of cleric does not depend on the knowledge of letters, not on tonsure, not on your manner of dress (habit) but is the office of the altar. And it is given such a name because when, in the Old Law, the Lord was dividing the land among the tribes of Israel by lot with the cord of distribution (Ps. 77), the tribe of Levi, which had to serve in the sanctuary, received no other lot than the Lord himself, that is the altar of the Lord, namely so that he who serves the altar, might live off the altar. Therefore clerics are whoever serve the altar, and “clerical status” means nothing but the office of the altar.

**Cleric:** I agree.

**Monk:** And so you must rightly grant that you may be called or be a cleric for no other reason than that you exercise the orders of the altar.

**Cleric:** I’ll grant you that.

**Monk:** But I, too, exercise these very same orders. Of course, I have exercised the priesthood with the authorization of my Rule. Indeed, perhaps while you are still just reading the Gospel, I am already celebrating Mass.

**Cleric:** I can’t deny it.

**Monk:** Therefore I am a cleric.

**Cleric:** Therefore you are not a monk.

**Monk:** I am nonetheless. You think these things are opposed, namely the monastic and clerical state, and cannot exist together but your eye, which does not look upon monks fairly, is dreaming. These things are different, of course, and this is why each can exist without the other, such that in you or in that fellow there is the clerical state without the monastic state. Likewise, in any lay convert there is the monastic state without the clerical state. That you are equal to this fellow, I do not deny with the authority of the canons which prescribe the same kind of penance for the monk who has no

clerical grades, if he should have fallen into sin, which they prescribe for the cleric who belongs to the order of Levi. But I can in no way allow that you seem equal to me who exercise the honor of the priestly and levitical order with the splendor of the monastic order. For just as someone says most truthfully: *Maria was a virgin, and John was a virgin. Yet Maria has the greater share because John was only a virgin. Maria, however, was both mother and virgin*; so clearly there is a greater share in me than in you. For you are only a cleric, but I am both a monk and a cleric. But as I had started to say, these states are different but they are not contrary; indeed, they are in the same person at the same time. So there you have what has been concluded: namely that I, who am a monk, am also a cleric because I have exercised the orders of the sacred altar.

**Cleric:** I can't deny it.

**Monk:** But you, you claim for yourself the authority to preach because of the fact that you are a cleric.

**Cleric:** That's right.

**Monk:** This very same right to preach, therefore, you cannot take from me without wronging me.

**Cleric:** Truly I would like to do so, but I am boxed in and unless I shall break the fetters of this conclusion, I shall be unable to do anything.

**Monk:** Now then, in the meantime, we must discuss the purpose.

**Cleric:** What purpose is that?

**Monk:** The purpose on account of which these things have come to pass.

**Cleric:** What is it?

**Monk:** Namely, in order that it may become clear how the doctor Jerome, although he was a monk, does not contradict himself when he says that the monk has the office not of teaching but of lamenting, etc.<sup>3</sup>

**Cleric:** Go on, argue away.

**Monk:** First, you should know that he said these things to oppose the blasphemies of Vigilantius and to defend those who, after leaving the world and giving all their property to the poor, were embracing the solitary life. Concerning these people he says a bit before: *And these monks should not be frightened out of their zeal by you and by the viperous tongues and savage bites with which you argue and say: If all withdraw and live in solitude, who shall perform the celebrations in churches, who shall profit secular people?* And a little later: *A monk does not have the office of a teacher but of one who mourns.* But these words were said, in fact, about the life of monks alone. Elsewhere, he writes to Nepotianum about the life of monks and clerics, that is to say, of men who are both monks and clerics.

**Cleric:** Wait a second! You are twisting the meaning of this passage to suit your own sense.

**Monk:** What have I perverted?

**Cleric:** The text should not be understood in that way.

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<sup>3</sup> Jerome, Letter to Nepotianus (find #).

**Monk:** How then should it be understood? Do you suppose that he intended to write a rule for monks in one place, a rule for clerics in another? Read what follows with eyes that are not drowsing and you will find it just as I have said. For the Nepotianus to whom and for the sake of whom he writes is at one and the same time a monk and a cleric. For he saus to him after a while: *I know that you have learned and daily learn from your uncle, the blessed Heliodorus, who is now a priest of Christ, what things are holy and have the norm of his life as an exemplar of virtue. But accept our words, whatever they may be, and this booklet together with his booklet so that while that work instructs you as a monk, this one may teach you to be a perfect cleric.*<sup>4</sup> After beginning thus, in this booklet to Nepotianus he instructs them as to how those who are of both orders, that is the clerical and the monastic, should behave, as, for example, when he says in what follows that it is on account of the duty of the clerical state that a widow or virgin is visited. Therefore that letter is entitled *On the life of clerics or monks*, whose priesthood, as he himself says in the same letter, is adorned by their way of life (*propositum*) and whose way of life (*propositum*) is adorned by their priesthood. To the man who is only a monk and has lost even this status was written that letter which Jerome wrote to Heliodorus.<sup>5</sup>

**Cleric:** From what do you conclude that?

**Monk:** From the words of the letter itself!! For when he rebuked him because he was part of the crowd on account of his affection for his family and his hope of inheritance and said to him: *What are you doing amidst the crowd, you who are alone?*, he added after a bit: *If the pious blandishments of your brethren call you to the clerical order, I shall rejoice in your ascent but I shall fear for your fall.* Indeed, when he says there: *I am not permitted to sit in front of a priest*, he is not in fact speaking in his own person—since he, too, was a priest—but in the person of the one to whom he writes, namely one who, since he was only a monk, did not yet deserve to attain that order of clerics in which, as he says right there, they confect the body of Christ with their sacred mouths, following in the footsteps of the apostles. Likewise, that letter to Paulinus indicates that Paulinus was only a monk and therefore he had nothing to do in cities. Indeed, he says to him: *If you want to hold the office of priest, if the work or honor of the episcopate perchance delights you, live in cities and fortresses and make the salvation of others your own soul's gain.* And so it is that Jerome does not contradict himself. because he gave the authority to teach not only to himself but to all those whose priesthood is adorned with a monastic vow and whose monastic vow is adorned with the priesthood. Nor does the Apostolic See act against his view because, while it does forbid monks to preach, it nevertheless admits them to the office of the apostolic dignity. So when you open your mouth to speak, please first open your eyes to read.

**Cleric:** Are you speaking in anger?

**Monk:** To the contrary, I am filled with the zeal for the house of the Lord. You, however, have grown angry because you have been beaten, but since you lack arguments, you resort to abuse. But bear with me a bit more, I entreat you. There is still one thing that I cannot allow you not to know.

**Cleric:** What is that?

**Monk:** Why do both the authority of the Apostolic See and the aforementioned judgment of Jerome restrain from the office of preaching those monks who are without clerical status?

**Cleric:** Say as much as you wish to say, because you are beginning to say some wonderful and unexpected things.

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<sup>4</sup> Find specific Jerome Letter

<sup>5</sup> Ditto

**Monk:** Truly wondrous and great. Yet the person to whom they seem great or wondrous is neither great nor deserving of admiration, since he serves as his own witness that he has made little progress in Scripture.

**Cleric:** Say what it is, for heaven's sake!

**Monk:** When the Apostle was talking about preachers, he says: *How shall they preach, unless they are sent?*<sup>6</sup> This means that the preacher should not assume the office of preaching by himself. Rather, as Christ says, *"just as my Father sent me, so I am sending you."*<sup>7</sup> The Father sends Christ, Christ the apostles, the apostles the archbishops, the archbishops the bishops, and the bishops the priests, namely when they ordain them. From this act of sending, the monk is ineligible when he has not yet exercised sacred orders. How then shall he preach?

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<sup>6</sup> Rom. 10:15.

<sup>7</sup> Jn. 20:21.