

Pseudo-Athanasius

Discourse on Salvation to a Virgin

Teresa M. Shaw

The Greek treatise translated here is devoted to the praise of and practical instruction in Christian female virginity. The various manuscripts bear two different titles: *Discourse on Salvation to a Virgin* and *On Virginity or On Asceticism* (Von der Goltz 1905, 60–65). The treatise belongs to a sizable body of fourth- and fifth-century texts sharing its genre, themes, and topics. It was in the fourth century that the various institutional forms of Christian asceticism and monasticism began to appear most distinctly against the landscape of what was already a broader cultural and religious phenomenon, as many of the texts collected in this volume testify. From this period we have a wealth and variety of sources related to the disciplined religious life—which was by no means uniform—of individuals and communities. These include: hagiographical treatments of extraordinary persons, instructions and rules, theological or theoretical treatments of ascetic themes such as sexual chastity or fasting, arguments for or against a particular type of discipline (for example, spiritual marriage), collections of anecdotes about and sayings of holy persons, and sermons or letters offering advice or encouragement. In many cases, of course, a particular text might incorporate elements from several of these.

The treatise *On Virginity*, often referred to by the common Latin title *de virginitate*, is one of the more distinctive genres among this literature. In the texts produced by the dozen or more authors that are usually counted after the beginning of the fourth century (Camelot 1952; Aubineau 1966, 23–213), we find both a striking consistency of thematic elements and a dramatic assertion of individual concerns and controversies as well as expressions of particular ascetic practices. The most common elements of the *de virginitate* include praise of virginity as angelic or above nature; identification of the virgin as the bride of Christ; comparison of the virtue or freedom of virginity to the lower achievement and troubles associated with marriage; use of good and bad examples from scripture and history; warnings against going out in public; warnings against associating

with men or with married women; warnings against certain wicked people, heretics, or false virgins or monks; advice on ascetic practices (fasting, chastity, prayer, etc.); advice on care of the body; instructions for proper appearance, clothing, and demeanor; and reflections on the meaning of female virtue, female nature, and female sin.

These features do not necessarily appear in all texts of the type, and they receive more or less emphasis and elaboration depending on the author. For example, one treatise might focus on the practical aspects of the virgin's daily life while giving less attention to the ideology of virginity, while another might concentrate heavily on the relationship of the virgin to Christ, her bridegroom, embellishing the discussion with sensual descriptions of the virgin's longing for Christ or Christ's jealousy over his virgin bride. Some authors seem especially concerned to blunt the influence of rival teachers and ascetic leaders, who are labeled heretics, deceivers, and frauds, while others offer few clues to their personal concerns and particular situations.

The *Discourse on Salvation to a Virgin* translated here contains all of the features listed above. But there are some surprising and curious elements that have fueled the scholarly debate over authorship. The work opens with a statement of Trinitarian faith and an account of creation (1), and continues with a call to imitate Christ by taking on a life of hardship and sacrifice in this world in order to inherit the kingdom. The author returns several times to the idea that suffering and endurance of trials in this world lead to eternal rest, comfort, and the "imperishable crown" of the kingdom, while relaxation and the pursuit of worldly comfort lead not only to evils in this life but also to eternal punishment in Hades (3, 15–19, 23–25). Practical details of the virgin's life are the subject of advice and exhortation: she should fast regularly and practice almsgiving (6–8, 12, 24); she should avoid eating with worldly women and "buffoons" (13) and should not go out except when absolutely necessary (22); her clothing should cover her from head to toe and be inexpensive and plain (11); and she is to avoid the baths and be silent in church (11, 23). While the virgin takes no thought of the flesh and mortifies her body, nevertheless the author insists that she ease her regimen if she becomes ill (6–8, 12). While she should not raise her face toward anyone she sees, nevertheless she should greet a holy person who comes into her home by prostrating herself before him and washing his feet (11, 22). The virgin should live under a rule and under the authority of an elder woman and is instructed to seek the counsel of her elders in everything she does (14, 23).

Much of the short text focuses on prayer and the liturgical life of the Christian virgin and the virgins who are with her as her "soul mates." Valuable information about the hours of prayer, the practice of psalmody, and prayer before meals colors the text (12–14, 16, 20). Keeping watch over her daily routine, diet, associations, and activities is not enough, for the virgin must be especially vigilant concerning idle, strange, or even evil thoughts (*logismoi*), which, according to the author, are really suggestions from the enemy meant to thwart and deceive. Thus the enemy will whisper praises leading to pride or suggest that the virgin need

not work so hard to be saved, which leads to negligence (8, 23). The virgin is represented as the bride of Christ (2, 23), the true widow (10), the wise virgin with oil in her lamp ready to greet the bridegroom (23), the servant of Christ and dancer in his chorus (2, 7, 8, 16, 22, 25), and the manly and virtuous one who has cast off “womanish” ways (10).

The most prominent features of the *Discourse on Salvation*, then, are the detailed instructions on the hours of prayer and the recitation of psalms, the emphasis on suffering in the world and rewards in heaven, the danger of thoughts, and the value of regular fasting. Other topics that might be treated elaborately in another text receive only slight attention here, including the heavenly bridegroom motif, the contrast between marriage and virginity, and the danger of associating with men. (Indeed, the virgin greets the male holy visitor as if he were Christ and washes his feet). Finally, there is no real theological argument for the origin and value of virginity in the scheme of creation and salvation of the type that one finds, for example, in the treatises of Basil of Ancyra and Gregory of Nyssa. Neither is there any reference to heretics or theological opponents such as one finds in other ascetic works attributed to Athanasius, or in the writings on virginity by Jerome, Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, and others. The closest our author comes is his very general warnings against “worldly,” “vain,” or “foolish” people and those who through either praise or criticism of her askesis might cause the virgin to turn away from her discipline and lose her crown.

Scholars continue to comb through the treatise’s content, style, and manuscript evidence in order to prove or refute its claim of Athanasian authorship. Athanasius was the bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373 C.E., a prominent leader and a key witness to a crucial period in Egyptian asceticism. While many ascetic texts bear his name as author, a significant number of these are regarded as unauthentic (Brakke 1994, 1995; Aubineau 1955). Scholars have long debated the authenticity of the *Discourse on Salvation*, with the majority expressing doubt. In modern scholarship, Pierre Batiffol, for example, argued against Athanasian authorship in 1893 and again in 1906, basing his conclusions on the writer’s style, theological formulas, and ascetic inclinations. Others have since concurred with Batiffol’s assessment (Burch 1906; Delehaye 1906; Lebon 1925; Puech 1930, 3:116–18; Bardy 1935; Aubineau 1955; Brakke 1994). Batiffol noted that the Trinitarian formula of chapter one, “three hypostases, one divinity,” is not otherwise characteristic of Athanasius, but is rather more Cappadocian. He gives most weight, however, to the type of asceticism found in the treatise, with its emphasis on fasting, fulfilling all commandments, and choosing the road to salvation by rejecting the world. Specifically, he argues that the rigorous lifestyle advocated by the treatise suggests that it should be associated with the “enthusiastic” asceticism of the Eustathians, who were condemned at the Council of Gangra in the mid-fourth century for their elitist and rigorous asceticism. For example, he interprets the author’s advice to “fast for the entire period” (for one’s whole life), and his recommendation that all food is pure “as long as it is non-animal” (8, 12) to suggest that the treatise advocates an absolutely vegetarian diet and fasting every single day, including traditional non-fasting days such as Sunday. And the fact

that the treatise gives so much attention to private or small group prayers, synaxes, and psalmody—and mentions the virgin's presence in church only once—indicates to Batiffol the same kind of arrogant scorn for the institutional church that those condemned at Gangra supposedly exhibited.

The fullest argument in support of the authenticity of the treatise was made by Eduard von der Goltz, who published an edition and lengthy commentary in 1905. Perhaps most importantly for our purposes, von der Goltz sought to locate the ascetic practice evidenced in the text firmly in the Egyptian context of the fourth century and to demonstrate that the behaviors singled out by Batiffol as suspicious were in fact common to most ascetic groups at the time (von der Goltz 1905, 119–20). Whatever arguments can be made about the author's style and authenticity, I agree with von der Goltz that the disciplines advocated in this treatise are far from extreme, particularly when compared to other texts of its type. The so-called “vegetarian rule” is not explicitly ordered for every single day of the year; even if it were, this does not set our author apart from many other advocates of fasting who regularly warned against eating meat. And the emphasis on private prayer and chanting of psalms proves only that the setting of the text is monastic—the author does mention the virgin's behavior in church, with no hint of criticism. Even the discussion of earthly marriage and heavenly marriage to Christ seems rather mild compared to the vehemently scornful descriptions of the problems of marriage in, for example, Jerome or John Chrysostom. In one puzzling passage, it should be noted, however, the author observes that just as woman's body is “defiled” by a man so a virgin is “defiled” by worldly habits. Unfortunately the author does not elaborate, and it is difficult to know how to interpret this defilement.

In sum, the *Discourse on Salvation* fits squarely within the genre of the *de virginitate*, and its contents are consistent with a fourth-century date. The text makes clear that the virgin lives under a rule and (ideally) under the authority of an elder female monastic. It is not clear whether the women live together in a family home or in a separately designated monastic dwelling. The virgin has occasion to meet catechumens, wealthy women, and poor women and to receive visits from a male “saint” or a “just man” who, apparently, offers some type of instruction or lesson. The author mentions other virginal “soul mates” with whom she shares meals and joins in prayer and chanting.

In the translation below I have followed von der Goltz's text with corrections by Lake and Casey (1926). I have chosen to leave the word *askesis* untranslated, but it may be read as “training,” or “discipline,” with the athletic sense of physical effort. For the generic personal pronoun I have opted to use “she,” as the treatise is concerned with female virginity.

On Virginité, or On Asceticism

[1] First of all, believe in one God the Father, ruler of all, and maker of all things visible and invisible, and in his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who is

from the substance of the Father and in respect to all things of equal power with the Father, and before the ages; and in the Holy Spirit who is in the Father and Son, sent from the Father and given through the Son. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three hypostases, one divinity, one power, one baptism. For our God himself, the Father of all, in six days made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them. He adorned the heavens with the sun and moon and very beautiful stars, and founded the earth attractively above the waters, adorning it with plants and trees of every kind. And by his command go forth rivers flowing like honey and streams everlasting. He commanded the earth and it brought forth flesh, and he made all the beasts of the earth according to their species and the birds of the air according to their species. He commanded the waters and they brought forth fish, and he created the huge sea monsters. After everything else, he created the human and granted everything to him for the purpose of stewardship. And the Lord God said to his Son: "Let us make human according to our image and likeness." And the Lord God formed the human, taking dust from the earth and he put him in the paradise of delight. Then the Lord God put a trance on Adam and he slept and he took one of his ribs and filled in flesh in its place. And he fashioned the rib that he took into a woman and he led her to Adam and Adam said: "Now she is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones; she shall be called woman because she was taken from her man. For this a man shall leave his father and his mother and will cling to his wife and the two will be one flesh" [Gen. 1:26; 2:7–8; 21–24].

[2] Listen, you servant of Christ and all who desire to be saved, and pay attention to my words; let your ears receive divinely inspired sayings. "This mystery is great" [Eph. 5:32] as the blessed Paul says, because when anyone one clings to his wife the two become one body. Thus in turn every man or woman who clings to the Lord is one spirit with him [1 Cor. 6:17]. If those joined to the world leave father and mother and are joined to mortal persons, how much more so should the abstinent virgin leave all earthly things and cling to the Lord alone. And the apostle himself testifies for me when he says: "The unmarried woman concerns herself with the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and in soul; but the one who marries concerns herself with the things of the world—how she will please her husband—and she has divided interests" [1 Cor. 7:34]. Consequently I say this, that every virgin or widow who practices abstinence, if she has her concern in this world, this concern is her husband. Even if she has possessions or property, this preoccupation contaminates her thoughts. For just as the body is defiled by a man, so also worldly habits defile the soul and the body of the one who keeps abstinence, and she is not holy in body and in spirit. But the one who concerns herself with the work of God, Christ is her bridegroom. For she who is betrothed to a perishable husband does the will of her husband; thus it is said that "the woman does not have authority over her own body, but her husband does" [1 Cor. 7:4], and further: "just as the church is subordinate to the Lord, so also wives are completely subordinate to their husbands" [Eph. 5:24]. Now

based on these worldly affairs, if we desire, we understand also that which is above. But the one who is joined to the heavenly bridegroom carries out the will of her bridegroom.

[3] For this is the will of Christ, that the one who is joined to him carries around nothing whatsoever of this age, gives thought to nothing of earthly matters but only takes up the cross of the one crucified for her sake, and has thought and concern night and day to sing unceasing hymns and doxologies; that she keeps the eye of understanding illuminated, knows his will and does it, and keeps her heart simple and mind pure; that she is merciful, so that just as he [Christ] is compassionate and merciful, so also we follow him; that she is gentle and quiet, long suffering, not returning evil for evil, enduring many injuries just as he [Christ] was injured by the Jews and endured; that she submit to beatings and trials, for he [Christ] also suffered these things. When he was beaten by the servants of the high priest, he did nothing, but said only: "If I spoke wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I spoke well, why do you beat me" [John 18:23]? Was he not able, he who commanded the earth so that it swallowed Dathan and Abiron alive [Deut. 11:6], also to command the earth to swallow the one who extends his hand and strikes his own creator? But he endured patiently, leaving behind a model for us, so that we might follow in his footsteps. But you, human, do you not bear to be mistreated by a fellow human being? Imitate your master. For if that one who is God suffered to be beaten by a sinful person for your sake, are you vexed because your fellow human abuses you, and do you seek to take vengeance? O great folly and mighty thoughtlessness! For this reason indeed chastisement was prepared by us, and by ourselves we kindle the fire. Because indeed although we are rational we liken ourselves to irrational beasts. He came to this world in great humility, and although he was rich he became poor for our sake, so that we might be enriched by that poverty. And although he was God he became human for our sake, and was born from Mary the Theotokos [the Godbearer], so that he might set us free from the power of the devil.

[4] For which reason the one desiring to be saved makes herself a fool in this world in order to be called wise in the presence of God. For those people who know how to give and take and buy and sell and to engage in business and to withhold the goods of their neighbor and to take advantage and to lend money and to make one obol two, these people are called wise, but God calls such people foolish and witless and sinful. Listen to what God himself has said through the prophet Jeremiah: "The people, they are foolish children, [skilled] in doing evil, but of doing good they have no knowledge" [Jer. 4:22]. And the blessed Paul: "The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, and the one wishing to be wise should become foolish in order to be made wise" [1 Cor. 3:18–19]. And again the same one says, "Brothers, do not be infants in intellect, but be childlike in regard to evil" [1 Cor. 14:20]. For God wants us to be foolish in regard to worldly things but wise in regard to heavenly things; for even our opponent the devil himself is wise in evil things, and we must work

wisely against him with a view to prevailing over his deceitful schemes. For the savior says in the Gospels, “Be as wise as the serpents and as pure as the doves” [Matt. 10:16]. But the one who is called wise by him, this is the one who contrives to do the will of God and keep his commandments.

[5] Humility is a great salvific remedy, for Satan did not fall down from heaven on account of lust or adultery or theft, but pride cast him down into the bottom of the abyss. For thus he said: “I will raise myself up, and I will place my throne face to face with God, and I will be like the most high” [Isa. 14:13–14], and on account of this saying he was cast down, and his inheritance became the everlasting fire. Therefore pride is of the devil, but humility is of Christ; for the Lord himself says, “Let the one among you who wants to be great become the servant of all” [Matt. 20:26]. For God is the God of the humble.

[6] We love fasting earnestly; fasting is a great protection, along with prayer and almsgiving, for it delivers a person from death. Just as on account of food and disobedience Adam was thrown out of paradise, so in turn through fasting and obedience the one who desires enters into paradise. Adorn your body with this virtue, O virgin, and you will please the heavenly bridegroom. Those who are attached to the world and who beautify their bodies with perfume, incense, and sweet smells, and in extravagant cloth and gold in order to please men are unable to please God. But Christ does not expect any of these things from you, but only a pure heart and an undefiled body mortified by fasting. But if some people should come and say to you, “do not fast often, lest you become weaker,” you shall not believe them, nor even listen to them, for the enemy is provoking them. Remember what is written [Dan. 1:3–16], when the three youths who were with Daniel were led captive by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and other young ones along with them, and he ordered them to eat from his table and drink from his wine. Daniel and the three youths did not want to be polluted from the king’s table, but said to the eunuch in charge of them, “Bring us [food] from the seeds of the earth, and we will eat.” And the eunuch said to them “I am afraid of the king who has ordered your food and drink himself, lest your faces seem gloomy to the king, especially compared to the young ones who eat from the king’s table, and he will punish me.” But they said to him, “Test your servants for about ten days, and give us [what we ask].” And he gave them vegetables to eat and water to drink, and their appearance seemed excellent in comparison to the youths who ate from the king’s table.

[7] See what fasting does: it heals diseases, dries up the bodily fluids, casts out demons, chases away wicked thoughts, makes the mind clearer, the heart pure, and the body sanctified, and places the person before the throne of God. And lest you think that these things are said lightly, you have the testimony in the Gospels, spoken by the savior. His disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us, by what method are unclean spirits banished?” And the Lord said, “This type are not cast out except by fasting and prayers” [Mark 9:29; Matt. 17:18–20]. Whoever, then, is troubled by an unclean spirit, if she decides to make use of

this remedy—I speak of fasting of course—the constrained wicked spirit flees right away because it fears fasting. For demons delight fully in drunkenness and the relaxation of the body. Fasting is a mighty force and mighty are the virtuous actions accomplished through it. Otherwise, from where do people discharge great power, and from where are wonders accomplished through them, and from where does God give healing to the sick through them, if not surely from askesis and humility and a good way of life? For fasting is the life of the angels, and the one who makes use of it has angelic status. And do not suppose, beloved one, that fasting is just superficial; for the one who fasts from food alone does not succeed, but the one who abstains from all evil things, by this is fasting accounted. For if you fast and do not keep your mouth from saying an evil, hot-tempered, false or perjurious word, or if you rail against your neighbor—if these things come out of the mouth of one who is fasting, it will be of no benefit, but even all of her effort is lost. You, therefore, servant of Christ, and all who want to be saved, if you fast, purify yourself from all love of money; for whoever loves money is not able to love God. “For the love of money is the root of all evils” [1 Tim. 6:10].

[8] Earnestly flee vainglory and haughtiness. If a thought should whisper to you that because you have advanced in virtue you have become great and distinguished, do not believe it; for the enemy is the one who thwarts and the one who suggests vainglory. Do not endure the thought that praises you. And if the thought whispers to you saying, “You should not want to work so hard, you have the power to be saved,” do not listen to it. For it is the enemy who suggests slackening and negligence, in order to throw you off from your virtuous way of life. Many are the devices coming from the enemy against the servants of God; he provokes people to come and give praise with words so that their hearts will be self-exalted. But you, do not accept human praise. And if someone says to you, “you are blessed,” say to that one, “if I leave this body by dying nobly, then I will be blessed, but at present I do not believe that I am blessed.” We humans shift like the wind. Often [the enemy] suggests to you that you have contempt for those who eat; do not give heed to him, for he is a stranger. Consider yourself to be the least of all, so that you might lead many into the kingdom of heaven, and you will be lifted up in the presence of God. But the enemy also suggests great askesis, in order to make your body weak and useless. So let your fast have due measure. Fast for the entire period, except in case of necessity. But at the ninth hour of the day, continuing in hymns and prayers, take your bread and vegetables prepared with oil. Everything is pure as long as it is non-animal.

[9] You, O virgin, let no one observe your askesis, not even one of your own relatives. But if you do something, do it in secret and your heavenly Father, who sees what is secret, will give you your due [Matt. 6:4]. If you reveal your life, vainglory is generated in you and you are penalized. But if you should discover a harmonious soul suffering for God like you, reveal yourself secretly to this one only—there is no vainglory there. For you speak in order that a

soul might be saved; you will receive a high reward if a soul is saved through you. Speak of profitable things to those who have the desire to hear. But if one should hear and not act, do not speak at all. For the Lord says, "Do not give holy things to dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine" [Matt. 7:6]. God calls those who lead dishonorable lives dogs and swine; but the words of God are precious pearls given only to the worthy.

[10] O blessed soul that hears these words written in this book and practices them! I declare to everyone who hears these words and practices them that her name will be written in the book of life and that she will be found in the third rank of the angels. If you should pray or sing psalms or read, sit by yourself; let no one hear except you alone and one or two virgins, if you have soul mates. For Christ says, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them" [Matt. 18:20]. Put away the womanish mentality and take up courage and manliness. For in the kingdom of heaven there is no male and female [Gal. 3:28], but all well-pleasing women take on the rank of men. Disregard youthful appearances, so that you might take on the dignity of the noble widow. The blessed Paul says, "Honor the widows, the true widows; the one who is a true widow and is left all alone has placed her hope in God and abides in supplications and prayers night and day. But the one who lives indulgently has died while she lives. Let her be counted as a widow who is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, if she has raised children, practiced hospitality, washed the feet of saints, relieved the afflicted, if she pursues every good. But refuse younger widows, for when they behave wantonly toward Christ they want to marry, receiving condemnation because they violated their first pledge" [1 Tim. 5:3–12].

[11] But you, if you do not put on youthful airs, you are not called younger, but you are even called aged and have honor like an elder. Let the material of your clothing not be high-priced. Your outer garment should be black, not dipped in dye, but its own natural color or the color of onyx; and your veil should be without fringe, likewise its own color, and your sleeves wool, covering your arms up to the fingers. The hairs on your head [should be] cut all around and your little headband should be woolen, with the head bound tight and the hood and cape without fringe. If you should by chance meet someone, let your face be veiled, covered up, bent down, and do not lift your face toward a person, but only toward your God. When you stand for prayer keep your feet hidden by your shoes, for this is seemly for a sacred person. Do not strip naked, but night and day let your outer garment cover your flesh. Not even another female should see your naked body except in absolute necessity; but neither shall you see yourself with your body uncovered. For from whatever time you agree to practice abstinence for God, your body is sanctified and a temple of God. There is therefore no need for the temple of God to be uncovered in front of someone. If you are healthy you shall not go to the bath except in absolute necessity, and do not immerse your whole body into the water, because you are sanctified for the Lord God. And you shall not defile your

flesh with any worldly thing, but wash only your face, hands, and feet. When you wash your face, do not wash with both hands, nor rub the cheeks, nor add any herbs or salts or things like these, for worldly women do these things. But wash in pure water.

[12] You shall not anoint your body with costly ointments nor put expensive perfumes onto your outer garment. If your body should become weaker, take a little wine for your stomach [1 Tim. 5:23]. But if, God forbid, you should fall ill, take care of yourself; do not give an occasion for people to say “this illness befell her because of asceticism.” But lest someone says this to you, be considerate of yourself, so that you might recover quickly and assume your rule again. Continue all the years of your life in fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Blessed is the one who hears these things. Night and day let the word of God not be far from your mouth. Let the practice of the Holy Scriptures continually be your work. Have a Psalter and learn the psalms. Let the rising sun see the book in your hand, and after the third hour complete the synaxis, because the wood of the cross was joined together in this same hour; in the sixth hour complete your prayers with psalms and weeping and supplications, because in this very hour the Son of God was hung on the cross; in the ninth hour, again in hymns and doxologies confessing your transgressions with tears, beseech God because in this same hour the Lord hanging on the cross gave up his spirit. And after the synaxis of the ninth hour eat your bread, giving thanks to God at your table in this way: “Blessed be God who nourishes me from my youth, ‘who gives nourishment to all flesh’ [Ps. 136:25]. My heart is full with joy and glad thoughts, that ‘having enough of everything at all times we might abound in every good work’ [2 Cor. 9:8] in Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom to you be glory, honor, and power together with the Holy Spirit unto the ages of ages. Amen.”

[13] And when you sit at the table and start to break bread, while crossing yourself three times, giving thanks in this way, say: “We give thanks to you our Father for your Holy resurrection, for through Jesus your Son you have made it known to us; and just as this bread, which is at first scattered, becomes one when it is gathered together on this table, in this way may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom, for yours is the power and the glory unto ages of ages. Amen.” If two or three virgins are present with you, let them give thanks for the bread lying before you and join you in prayer. But if a catechumen should happen to be at the table, let her not pray with the faithful, and do not sit to eat your bread with her. Nor further will you sit to eat your morsel with careless women and buffoons, except when necessary. For you are sanctified for the Lord God; your food and drink are also sanctified, for they are sanctified through prayer and holy words. Pious and God-fearing virgins shall eat with you. You shall not take a meal with vain women, nor shall you keep a pretentious woman as a friend. For the Holy Scripture says, “Whoever touches pitch will be stained, and whoever keeps company with a vain person will become like that one” [Sir. 13:1]. When a

wealthy woman sits down with you at the table, if you should see a poor woman, you shall invite her to eat and you shall not be ashamed in front of the wealthy woman. Do not love the glory of people more than the glory of God. For God is the God of the poor and the contemptible. Blessed is the soul that keeps these things.

[14] It is not good for a young [virgin] to live with another young [virgin]; at any rate they accomplish no good, for the one disobeys the other and the other one despises the other. But a young [virgin] under the authority of an elder woman is good. For the elder will not submit to the will of the young [virgin]. Woe to the virgin who is not under a rule. For she is like a ship that has no captain. With the steering handles broken off and having no guide, it is cast here and there by the waves, until it collides with the rocks and is straightaway demolished. Every virgin who does not have someone she respects is like this. Blessed is the virgin who is under a rule. For she is like a fertile vine in paradise, and when the gardener comes he prunes her branches and he irrigates and chops away the rotten weeds around her. So she who has someone taking care of her renders her valuable fruit in the proper season. Observe [these things] and offer doxologies at the table, and the food and drink will be sanctified for you. Then when you get up from the table, again giving thanks, say three times: "The merciful and compassionate Lord gives nourishment to those who fear him [Ps. 111:4–5]. Glory to the Father and Son and Holy Spirit." And after the doxology again complete your prayer by saying thus: "O God, ruler of all, and our Lord Jesus Christ, the name above all names, we give thanks to you and praise you, because you consider us worthy to partake of your goods, of fleshly nourishment. We beg you and ask you, Lord, that you might give us heavenly nourishment as well, and grant that we might tremble at and fear your awesome and honorable name, and not disobey your commandments. May you store your law and your ordinances in our hearts, and sanctify our spirits, our souls, and our bodies through your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to you be glory, honor, and power unto the ages of ages. Amen."

[15] There are many people who are mindless and nourish themselves like wild beasts, getting up in the morning and searching for someone to take advantage of, someone to oppress, in order to fill their shameful bellies. They do not know how to praise God at the table. Regarding them the divine Paul says: "These ones are the enemies of the cross of Christ, whose goal is destruction, whose god is the stomach; and their glory is in their shame, with minds set on earthly things; but our citizenship is in heaven" [Phil. 3:18–20]. These people are worse than even the beasts and the brute animals; for the brutes and the beasts know the God who created them and they praise him. But these humans, formed by his hands and bearing his image, do not know the one who created them. They acknowledge him with their mouths, but they deny him by their deeds. "Do you believe that there is a God? You do well; even the demons believe and shudder. Faith without works is dead" [James 2:17–19].

For what does a person profit from acknowledging that there is one God, if her worthless deeds deny him? How can someone claim to have a master, and not serve him? For by this [service] one obeys one's Lord. Even slaves know who purchased them and they honor them. We also owe honor to him, not only in word but also in deeds. Our Lord Jesus Christ testifies to this in the Gospel when he says: "Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter into the kingdom of heaven" [Matt. 7:21]. And further: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" [Exod. 20:7]. And again he enjoins us by saying: "Let everyone who invokes the name of the Lord abstain from injustice" [2 Tim. 2:19]. But do you want to be convinced that the beasts and brute animals know God and praise him? Listen to the Holy Spirit commanding them in the hymn: "Praise the lord, you beasts and all brutes" [Dan. 3:81, LXX]. If they did not praise him, the Spirit would not have commanded them. And it is not only these who praise God, but also every creature that is apparent and visible to the eye; all confess him together without ceasing.

[16] And you then, servant of God, whether you stand up or sit down, whether you perform some task, whether you eat, whether you go to your bed to sleep, whether you get up, let the hymn to God not be absent from your lips. Blessed are the ears that receive these words. If the twelfth hour arrives, you shall celebrate a greater and longer synaxis, with your virgin soul mates. But if you have no soul mates with you, complete it by yourself, with God who is with you and hears you. It is good to pour forth tears before God. Remember the twelfth hour, because in this hour our Lord descended to Hades. And seeing him, [Hades] shuddered and was astonished, saying: "Who is this, who descends in authority and great power? Who is this, who shatters the bronze gates of Hades and crushes the steel bars [Ps. 107:16]? Who is this, who descends from heaven and is crucified and yet is not subject to me, Death? Who is this, who loosens the chains of those under my power? Who is this, who by his own death destroys me, Death?"

[17] For this reason we ought ourselves to be attentive in that hour and to entreat the Lord with tears in the night; for the tear is a great virtue, a mighty action; great sins and crimes are erased by means of tears. Even the Holy Gospel testifies for me, for when the savior was handed over to the Jews, Peter denied him with an oath three times before the crowing of the cock. Turning, the Lord gazed at Peter, and Peter remembered the words of the Lord, how he said to him: " 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times;' and he went out, and wept bitterly" [Luke 22:61; Matt. 26:72–75]. You see the remedy of tears, you have observed what sort of crime it wipes away. For what is worse than this evil, that he denied his own master with an oath three times, and he wiped away such a great crime by means of tears. You see what great power tears have. Now, that was written for our admonition, so that we might acquire eternal life by imitating it. Most people do not have the gift of tears, but all who keep their minds above, who disregard earthly matters, who do not take precautions for the flesh, those who do not know if there is a world at all,

those who mortify their bodily members that are upon the earth—to these ones alone is given the grief of tears. For because they have a pure mind and sharp sight in their intellect, while still being upon the earth they see the punishments in Hades and the eternal torments in which sinners are punished, and they see the eternal fire and “the outer darkness, the weeping and gnashing of teeth” [Matt. 25:30]. But they also see the heavenly gifts, which God gives to the saints, and the glories, the crowns, the holy robes, the royal garments, the radiant chambers, the indescribable luxuries, and eternal life. And what do I say still? The most wondrous thing of all: the one who has a pure mind discerns even God himself with their interior eyes. How, then, would the one seeing these things not wish to weep and mourn? For she weeps and laments so that she might be delivered from such punishments, while at the same time she weeps and prays while beseeching, so that she might be deemed worthy of those heavenly goods.

[18] For this reason the saints despise this world, because they know what good things they are about to inherit. So therefore the one who has rest in the world should not hope to receive eternal rest, since the kingdom of heaven is not for those who find rest in this world. It is rather for those who pass through this life in great affliction and constraint. They do not receive it as a gift, but those who are accounted worthy receive it after much labor and intense sweat. Whatsoever they suffer here, it does not concern them; for when they enter that place they forget the pain and the distress that they endured in this vain world, because of the wondrous and indescribable rest given to them. What do you say, human? Look, there are two roads set before you, life and death. Go whichever way you wish. And look, [here are] fire and water. Stretch out your hand for whichever you want [Sir. 15:16–17]. It is up to you if you wish to gain life and it is up to you if you wish to gain death. Now death is the world, and life is justice. And the world is as far from justice as death is from life. If you walk in this world, you walk in death and you are, according to the Holy Scripture, far from God [James 4:4]. If you walk in justice, you walk in life, and death does not touch you. With the just there is no death, but [rather] translation. [The just one] is transferred from this world into eternal rest. And just as someone might leave a prison, so the saints exit this wretched life into the good things that have been prepared for them. “What the eye has not seen nor the ear heard, nor sprung up in the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him” [1 Cor. 2:9]. Sinners not only labor wickedly here, but also in turn the fire awaits them there; and for such ones there is double reason to cry. For not only are they in constraint here, but even there they do not receive freedom. For this reason the Holy Scripture said, “When the sinner is turned around, they disappear” [Prov. 12:7]. There are constraints on all sides for this one, both grief there, and trials here. There is no human being who does not work hard in this wearisome life; both the poor and the rich, both the slave and the free, both the sinner and the just, all struggle in a similar manner. And one encounter will befall all, whether sinner or just here in this world.

[19] But there [in the next world] it is not the same, but [there are] different ranks. For one is the effort of the just in this world, and the other that of the sinner. Now the just person works hard, not in order to fill the stomach—for the just one does not take care of the flesh at all, or even think that she bears flesh—but she works night and day searching for God, not getting her fill of sleep, with bread and water not satiating her soul, wandering in the desert, mortifying the body with great suffering, until she receives the imperishable crown, which is reserved for her. But the sinner works and wears himself out not for the purpose of righteousness, but for his miserable flesh, for a shameful woman. He struggles this way and that, not satisfied with what he has, passing his time in evil and envy. But foolish people understand nothing of these things; for the matters and many concerns of the world blind them and they go astray, until the stern warrior is sent to them [Wis. 18:15], who does not marvel at any person nor accept any bribe [Deut. 10:17]. Their souls will be unmercifully carried away by the angels with force and they will receive their sentence from God. Because they are vain, they also struggle in vain in this world. They occupy themselves with the things of this world and for this reason they head for eternal ruin. For they did not give heed to God when they were on earth, nor was it a concern for them to consider the fear of God; for this reason God does not have concern for them either. For God is just and just is his judgment [Ps. 119:137]. When he comes to judge the world, then he will render to each according to their works. Blessed is the heart that receives these things.

[20] In the middle of the night you shall awaken and sing hymns to the Lord your God, because in this hour our Lord arose from the dead and sang hymns to his Father. For this reason we are commanded to sing hymns to God. When you rise up, recite this verse before everything else: “In the middle of the night I rose up to sing praise to you regarding the execution of your justice” [Ps. 119:62]. And you should pray, and begin to recite the entire fiftieth psalm, until you finish. And let these things be prescribed for you each day. Recite as many psalms as you are able to recite while standing, and with the psalm let a prayer and genuflection be completed, with tears confessing your sins to the Lord and asking that they be forgiven. Then after three psalms, recite the alleluia. But if there are also virgins with you, let them sing psalms as well, and one after the other carry out their prayers. Just before dawn say this psalm: “O God, my God, I rise early for you, my soul thirsts for you” [Ps. 63:1]. Then at daybreak: “Bless all the works of the Lord, sing praise to the Lord” [Dan. 3:57, LXX], “Glory to God in the highest” [Luke 2:14], and so on.

[21] But let us preserve love, the greatest of all. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and your neighbor as yourself. Upon these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” [Matt. 22:37–40]. God is love, and he first loved humans; and he delivered himself for us, so that we might be delivered from all lawlessness. If, therefore, our Lord himself died for us, we also ought to lay down our souls for each other [1 John 3:16]. God is love, and the one who has love has God [1 John 4:16]. For he himself said: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if

you love one another" [John 13:35]. For however much a person struggles, if she does not have love for the neighbor, she struggles in vain. Thus you shall show love to your neighbor, not in word only but also in deed. You shall not keep someone's offense in your heart, otherwise your prayer does not ascend pure. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" [Eph. 4:26]. Have gentleness, have patient endurance, forbearance, and a childlike [simplicity]. For the Lord says, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven" [Matt. 18:3].

[22] You shall not be sad when some trial befalls you, nor will you be sad over loss, nor over an outrage, for "the sadness of this world produces death" [2 Cor. 7:10]. You shall be sad only over your sins, but over other little matters you shall not be sad. Do not raise your voice when you are angry at someone, for the servant of the Lord has no need to quarrel [2 Tim. 2:24]. Cursing shall not escape from your mouth, not insolence, nor abuse. For your mouth is sanctified by hymns and praises to God. It is not good for you to go out, except in great necessity. Love silence as much as you are able. Do not forget the servants of God, nor let them be left out of your heart. If a saint should come to your home, receive him in such a way as the Son of God. For our Lord Jesus Christ says, "The one who receives you, receives me" [Matt. 10:40]. If a just man should come into your house, you shall face him with fear and trembling, and you shall prostrate yourself on the ground at his feet. For you do not prostrate yourself to him, but to God who sent him. You shall take water and wash his feet and you shall listen to his words with all reverence. Do not feel confident in your self-control, lest you fall. But be fearful, for to the extent that you are fearful, you do not fall. It is best for the abstinent one to eat her bread in private. If you should sit at table with [other] virgins, eat with them everything that they have set out; for if you do not eat, you appear as if you are judging them. And if they are drinking wine, and you do not [normally], drink a little for their sakes. But if they are eminent elder women and they urge you to drink more, do not listen to them, but say to them: "You have spent your youth in great askesis, but I have not yet advanced even to the first degree." You have no need to be admonished concerning hospitality and almsgiving, for you will do these things on your own.

[23] Keep silent in church, and do not laugh at all, but pay attention only to the reading. If the thought should arise in your heart that you should do something, do not do it hastily, lest the enemy deceive you. Do everything with the counsel of your elders. When you sing psalms or when you pray, do not allow strange thoughts to enter into your heart. I entreat you, beloved one, pay attention to and heed these commandments written in this book; and observe what is written not only with your exterior eyes, but also with your interior eyes. And attend to each one of the commandments, and fulfill it. For if you keep these commandments, you will be found worthy of the royal bridal chamber. Do not utter in your heart, "How can I fulfill all of these?" Let your thoughts not lay hold of cowardice, but rather observe these commandments

with all eagerness. For God's commandments are not burdensome to those who fear God. At all times let oil not be lacking in your lamp, lest the bridegroom should ever come and find it extinguished. For you do not know when he comes, whether at first watch of the night or in the morning. So be ready, in order that when he comes you will meet him along with the wise ones, having oil in your lamp, that is, your good works [Matt. 25:1–13]. At all times remember your end; each day keep death before your eyes. Remember before whom you must stand.

[24] Askesis is burdensome and abstinence grievous, but nothing is sweeter than the heavenly bridegroom. Here we suffer a little, but there we will receive eternal life. For holy Paul says, "The sufferings of the present time are not comparable to the future glory to be revealed to us" [Rom. 8:18]. It is good to flee from the crowd and withdraw in solitude. Abstinence is a great virtue, purity a great glory, wondrous panegyrics of virginity. O virginity, incomprehensible riches! O virginity, imperishable crown! O virginity, temple of God and dwelling place of the Holy Spirit! O virginity, precious pearl hidden from many, and discovered by only a few! O abstinence, beloved by God and praised by the saints! O abstinence, hated by many, but commended by those worthy of you! O abstinence, fleeing from death and Hades and held in the grasp of immortality! O abstinence, joy of the prophets and glory of the apostles! O abstinence, life of the angels, and crown of holy persons! Blessed is she who possesses you, blessed is she who persists in you with endurance; because by laboring a little, she will greatly delight in you. Blessed is she who fasts for all of this time, because when she dwells in the Jerusalem above she will dance with the angels and have rest with the holy prophets and apostles.

[25] I have written these things to you, beloved sister, choral dancer of Christ, for the support and profit of your soul. Therefore do not deviate from these instructions either to the right or to the left. For if one hears these words and disregards them, there is a great judgment against her. But you, most precious sister who possesses this book, may God grant that you keep these words, that you live by them, that you abide in them, with an enlightened intelligence, a pure mind, and with the eyes of your understanding illuminated, so that you may receive the imperishable crown that God has prepared for those who love him. Through our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory unto ages of ages. Amen.

Bibliography

- Athanasius. [On Virginity]. "Athanasiana Syriaca I: 'Ἦν Λόγος περὶ παρθενίας attribué à saint Athanase d'Alexandrie.'" Ed. and trans. J. Lebon. *Le Muséon* 40 (1927): 205–48. English translation in Brakke 1995, 303–9.
- . [Letter to Virgins]. In S. Athanase. *Lettres festales et pastorales en copte*. Ed. and trans. L.-Th. Lefort, 150: 73–99, 151: 55–80. *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Or-*

- ientialium 150–51. Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1955. English translation in Brakke 1995, 274–91.
- . [Letter to Virgins Who Went to Pray at Jerusalem and Returned]. “Athanasiana Syriaca II: Une lettre attribuée à Saint Athanase d’Alexandrie.” Ed. and trans. J. Lebon. *Le Muséon* 41 (1928): 169–216. English translation in Brakke 1995, 292–302.
- Aubineau, Michel. 1955. “Les Ecrits de saint Athanase sur la virginité.” *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique* 31: 140–73.
- . 1966. Introduction to *Grégoire de Nyse: Traité de la virginité*. Sources chrétiennes 119. Paris: Editions du Cerf.
- Bardy, G. 1935. “Athanase.” *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire* 1.2: 1047–52.
- Basil of Ancyra. *De vera virginitatis integritate*. *Patrologia Graeca* 30, 669–809.
- Batiffol, Pierre. 1893. “Le περί παρθενίας du pseudo-Athanase.” *Römische Quartalschrift* 7: 275–86.
- . “Recension.” 1906. *Revue biblique* 3: 295–99.
- Bouvet, Chanoine J., trans. 1972. “Discours de salut à une vierge.” *Spiritualité orientale*, no. 9. Begrolles-en-Mauge: Abbaye Notre Dame de Bellefontaine.
- Brakke, David. 1994. “The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana.” *Orientalia* 63: 17–56.
- . 1995. *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Brown, Peter. 1988. *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Lectures on the History of Religions 13. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1985. “The Notion of Virginité in the Early Church.” In *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, 427–43. World Spirituality 16. New York: Crossroad.
- Burch, H. Hacher. 1906. “An Early Witness to Christian Monachism.” *American Journal of Theology* 10: 738–43.
- Camelot, P. Thomas. 1952. “Les Traités ‘de virginitate’ au IV^e siècle.” In *Mystique et continence: Travaux scientifiques du VII^e Congrès international d’Avon*, 273–92. Etudes Carmelitaines. Brugges: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Cameron, Averil. 1989. “Virginité as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity.” In *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History*, ed. Averil Cameron, 184–205. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Cooper, Kate. 1996. *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Delehaye, H. 1906. Review of Von der Goltz, ed., *De virginitate*. *Analecta Bollandiana* 25: 180–81.
- Elm, Susanna. 1994. “Virgins of God”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*. Oxford Classical Monographs. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Gregory of Nyssa. 1966. *De virginitate*. Ed. Michel Aubineau, *Grégoire de Nyse: Traité de la virginité*. Sources chrétiennes 119. Paris: Editions du Cerf.
- Jerome. 1910–1918. *Epistula* 22. In *Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, ed. Isidorus Hilberg, 54: 143–211. Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 54–56. Vienna: Tempsky.
- John Chrysostom. 1966. *De virginitate*. Ed. Herbert Musurillo and Bernard Grillet. *Jean Chrysostome: La virginité*. Sources chrétiennes 125. Paris: Editions du Cerf.
- Lake, Kirsopp, and Robert P. Casey. 1926. “The Text of the *De Virginitate* of Athanasius.” *Harvard Theological Review* 19: 173–90.

- Lebon, J. 1925. "Pour une édition critique des oeuvres d'Athanase." *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 21: 524–30.
- Migne, J. *Patrologia Graeca* 28.252A–282B.
- Puech, Aimé. 1930. *Histoire de la littérature grecque chrétienne*. 3 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Shaw, Teresa M. 1998. *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Van Eijk, Ton H. C. 1972. "Marriage and Virginité, Death and Immortality." In *Epektasis: Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal Jean Daniélou*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser, 209–35. Paris: Beauchesne.
- von der Goltz, Eduard F., ed. 1905. Pseudo-Athanasius. *De virginitate. Λόγος σωτηρίας πρὸς τὴν παρθένον (De virginitate): Eine echte Schrift des Athanasius*. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 29,2a. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs.