

Erasmus,  
*The Sileni of Alcibiades*



“Prince of the Humanists,” Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1469-1536), the greatest star of the northern Renaissance, had difficult origins: illegitimate son of a priest, he lost his parents to the plague. An orphan’s lack of options compelled him to join the Augustinians, and he was ordained a priest in 1492.

Eventually dispensed from the requirements of monastic life, Erasmus maintained his liberty as an independent scholar and traveled throughout Europe. Saint Thomas More was among his lifelong friends. He campaigned vigorously against Church corruption, though he never broke with the Catholic Church. His program of Christian humanism still beckons as a way forward. He sought to renew European society through education in Greek and classical Latin and appreciation of the literature written in those languages, as well as recourse to patristic theology. He privileged rhetoric over dialectic and ethics over logic. His *De ratione studii* would determine the contours of European classical education for centuries. The goal was *docta pietas*: a learned piety. Erasmus prepared the first scholarly treatment of the New Testament, revising Saint Jerome’s Vulgate and presenting the first Greek edition to appear in print. This was a bombshell: it would be essential for Luther’s insights. The Greek would be the basis of the *Textus Receptus*, which stands behind the King James Version. “The Sileni of Alcibiades” is an essay from his massive collection of *Adages* from classical sources.

### The Sileni of Alcibiades

“The Sileni of Alcibiades” seems to have turned into a proverb among the learned; certainly it appears as a proverb in the Greek collections. It can be used about something which on the surface and at first sight (as the saying goes) seems worthless and ridiculous, but which on closer and inward consideration proves admirable, or about someone whose clothes and physical appearance are much less promising than what they hide in their heart. It seems the Sileni were statuettes divided in half and put together so that they could be opened up and the interior displayed. When closed they portrayed some ridiculous and monstrous flute player, but when opened all of a sudden they displayed a god. The amusing deception was designed to show off the skill of the carver. The exterior subject of these figures was taken from that ridiculous character Silenus, the schoolteacher of Bacchus, and the jester of the gods as portrayed in poetry, for they have their buffoons like the princes of our own day. Thus, in Plato’s Symposium, Alcibiades begins his speech in praise of Socrates by comparing him with these Sileni, on the grounds that like them he was quite different when you got to know him properly from what one would imagine from his outward appearance and manner.

Anyone who took him at face value, as they say, would not have paid a nickel for him. He had the face of a country bumpkin, a bit like that of an ox, and a snub nose always running with snot. You would have thought he was dull and stupid, good only at pulling faces. His appearance was scruffy, and his speech was plain, elementary, and working-class, for he was always talking about carters and cobblers, clothmakers and blacksmiths. It was from them that he drew his examples. He had hardly any money, and his wife was someone that a charcoal burner—and you can’t sink lower than that—would have turned away from. He seemed to admire the bodies of young men, and to be susceptible to love and jealousy, though even Alcibiades eventually realized that he was a long way from having such emotions. He was always cracking jokes, which meant that he seemed to be something of a clown. In those days it was the height of fashion among the stupid to appear to be an intellectual, and Gorgias was not unique in claiming that there was nothing he did not know. Pompous asses of this sort were to be found at every turn. Socrates alone said that there was only one thing he knew, and that was that he knew nothing. He seemed unsuited to any position of responsibility, so much so that once when he stood up to make a speech in public there was too much laughter for him to be heard.

But if you open up this Silenus, who is outwardly so ridiculous, you find

within someone who is closer to being a god than a man, a great and lofty spirit, the epitome of a true philosopher. He despised all those things for which other mortals strive and sail the seas, sweat and go to court, even go to war. He was untouched by insults, and neither good fortune nor bad had any impact on him. He feared nothing, not even death, which scares everybody. He had the same look on his face when he drank the hemlock as when sipping a glass of wine at dinner, and as he lay dying he was telling a joke to his friend Phaedo, telling him to sacrifice a cock to Aesculapius, as he owed him one as a result of a vow he had taken, “for now I have taken my medicine I begin at last to feel truly healthy.” For he was leaving the body, in which all the diseases of the soul pullulate like maggots. So it was perfectly fair that, at a time when people who called themselves philosophers were thick on the ground, this buffoon was the only person whom the oracle declared wise. He who said he knew nothing was judged to know more than those who proudly claimed to know everything. Indeed, that was the very reason why he was judged to know more than they did—because he alone admitted he knew nothing.

Another Silenus of this sort was Antisthenes. He may only have had a staff, a pack, and a cloak, but he was richer than an emperor. Another Silenus was Diogenes, who was thought by most people to have the manners of a dog, yet Alexander the Great, whom one would think the first and foremost of all princes, seems to have recognized something divine in this dog, since he so admired his nobility of mind that he said that if he couldn't be Alexander he would want to be Diogenes—though the fact that he was indeed Alexander should have made him all the keener to have the spirit of Diogenes. Epictetus was yet another Silenus. He was a slave, poverty-stricken and crippled, as we learn from his epitaph. He was also—and one can't have better luck than this—loved by the gods. But then he had earned his good fortune in the only way one can, by integrity of life, and by wisdom as well.

This is the nature of things truly worth having: what is most valuable about them is hidden away and concealed, while what is visible on the surface appears beneath contempt. They hide their treasure beneath a coarse and worthless shell, and do not let the uninitiated catch even a glimpse of it. Vulgar and trivial things have a quite different character. They please at first sight, and their best qualities are immediately visible to any passerby. But if you look more closely, you will find that they are the opposite of what you would think from their appearance and reputation.

And was not Christ, too, a marvelous Silenus—if I may be permitted to speak of him in such terms? I cannot see why all those who take pride in calling themselves Christians do not feel an obligation to make their best efforts to copy this aspect of his nature. If you look at the outside of this Silenus, what, judging by normal standards, could be more contemptible or despicable? His parents were insignificant and penniless. His home was a shack. He was poor himself, and his disciples were few in number and equally insignificant, drawn from the tax collector's office and the fisherman's nets. Then think of his life—a life without pleasure, during which he endured hunger and exhaustion, insults and mockery, that finally ended on the cross. The mystical prophet was looking at him from this perspective when he gave us this description of him: “He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men”—and much more to the same effect, which follows this passage.

But if you have the opportunity to look at the inside of this Silenus, if Christ deigns to show himself, our immortal God, to the purified eyes of your soul, what an indescribable treasure you will find; in this muck, what a pearl; in this humility, what grandeur; in this poverty, what wealth; in this weakness, what immeasurable strength; in this disgrace, what glory; in these labors, what perfect peace; and finally in that bitter death, the never-failing source of everlasting life. Why are the very people who take such pride in bearing his name so revolted by this way of seeing him? Nothing would have been easier for Christ than to make himself the ruler of the whole world. He could have achieved what the rulers of ancient Rome tried and failed to do. He could have had more soldiers than Xerxes, more gold than Croesus. He could have silenced all the prattling philosophers and exposed the stupidity of the sophists. But instead he chose to be a Silenus, and it is this example that he wanted his disciples and friends, that is, all Christians, to imitate. He chose a philosophy which was worlds away from the teaching of the philosophers and from the judgments of the world, but which is the only philosophy to offer the one thing that all the others, each in its different way, is after—happiness.

Once upon a time the prophets were Sileni of this sort: exiles, wanderers, living in the wilderness in the company of wild beasts. They ate grasses and wore the skins of sheep and goats. But he who said “the world was not worthy of them” had looked right inside these Silenus images. John the Baptist was a Silenus of this sort. He was clothed in camel hair, with a leather belt knotted around his waist; yet he outshone the purple gowns and bejeweled girdles of kings. He dined

on locusts; yet his meals were more delicious than those of princes. The treasure that lay hidden beneath that peasant's cloak was recognized by one person, who summarized all the praise he was due in this marvelous phrase, "Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist." Such Sileni were the apostles: poor, unsophisticated, uneducated, base-born, powerless, rejected, spared no insult, ridiculed, hated, cursed, the public laughingstock, and the abomination of the world. But open the Silenus, and what tyrant has had powers to equal theirs? Devils obeyed their slightest word; they raised a hand, and the raging seas quieted; they spoke, and the dead returned to life. Even Croesus would seem poor compared to them, for by the touch of a shadow they make healthy the sick, and by the touch of a hand they impart the Holy Spirit. Even Aristotle would seem stupid, ignorant, irrelevant compared with them, who draw heavenly wisdom from its very source, wisdom compared with which all human wisdom is pure stupidity. In those days the kingdom of heaven really was symbolized by a grain of mustard seed, minuscule and insignificant in appearance, but immensely powerful. And, as I have said, in this it differs utterly, diametrically, as the saying is, from the mindset of this world.

A Silenus of this sort was Martin, who was mocked and treated with contempt. Such were the early bishops, exalted in their humility, rich in their poverty, and famous because they thought nothing of fame. Even today you can find Sileni if you look for them, but unfortunately they are very rare. The majority of men are Sileni turned inside out. Anyone who looked carefully at the underlying motives and true nature of men would find that none are further from true wisdom than those whose grand titles, professorial robes, richly worked belts, and bejeweled rings advertise their claim to perfect wisdom. Indeed, you will often find more true and authentic wisdom in one insignificant individual, who most people think is simpleminded and half-mad, who has been taught what they know not by the subtle (as he is commonly called) Scotus, but by the heavenly spirit of Christ, than in many people who play the part of theologians and claim to be able to teach us. They are windbags blown up with Aristotle, sausages stuffed with a mass of theoretical definitions, conclusions, and propositions. Similarly, there is nowhere you will find less true nobility than in those Thrasos who, with their ancient pedigrees, golden chains, and splendid titles, boast that they are the acme of nobility. You won't find anyone who is further from having true courage than those who are thought to be supremely strong and totally unconquerable because they are foolhardy and brutal. No one is more abject and servile than someone who thinks himself (as the saying is) a companion of the gods, and

lord of all they survey. No one is in as much trouble as someone who seems most completely successful. Those who are truly impoverished are the very people whom public opinion worships for their wealth. Those who are the least bishops hold the best dioceses. If only this were not the truth; very often the people who are furthest from true religion are those who are sticklers that the correct forms of address be used, the right vestments be worn, the ceremonies be exactly performed, and who believe that this proves that it is they who are truly religious.

Wherever you look you will find it is always true that the most significant part of something is the least conspicuous. Take trees: the flowers and leaves charm the eye, and their spreading branches can't be missed. But their seed, which contains the whole life force, how tiny it is, how hidden away! There is nothing about it that entices the eye, nothing that draws attention to itself. Similarly, nature hides gold and jewels in the deepest recesses of the earth. Among the elements, as they are called, the more important they are, the more they escape our senses, like air and fire. In living creatures, the organs that are crucial and that do the most work are hidden away on the inside. In human beings, the part that is most divine and is immortal is the only one that is invisible. In every kind of thing, the material of which it is made is the baser part and at the same time the most accessible to the senses. The principle that underlies its construction and its function can be discovered from the role it plays, but this is not something that is immediately apparent from sense perception. Thus in the makeup of our bodies, we often encounter blood and phlegm because they are palpable; but the most important thing in keeping the body alive is least apparent—I mean the breath. In the cosmos, the most important entities escape our vision, such as what are termed the separate substances. And the most important of all of these is the furthest removed from our senses. God, the unique source of all things, can be neither imagined nor understood.

One can even see some similarity to the Sileni in the sacraments of the Church. You see the water, you see the salt and the oil, you hear the words of consecration; these are like the outward image of the Silenus. The heavenly power you neither hear nor see, yet in its absence everything else would be completely ridiculous. The Holy Scriptures also have their Sileni. If you stay on the surface, much of it seems absurd. If you penetrate to the spiritual meaning, you will be full of admiration for God's wisdom. Let us take the Old Testament as an example. If you pay attention to nothing but the literal meaning, and you hear that Adam was made out of clay, and his little wife was



taken secretly out of his side while he was sleeping; that the serpent tempted the woman using an apple as his bait; that God went for a walk in the cool of the day; that a great sword guarded the gates of Paradise lest the exiles should return—would you not think that this was an imaginary tale, produced by some apprentice Homer? If you read about the incest of Lot; the adultery of David, and the girl who slept in his arms when he was old and cold; about Hosea's marriage to a prostitute—would not anyone who was reasonably easy to shock turn away, thinking this was an obscene story? And yet under these veils, goodness me, what splendid wisdom lies hidden! The parables of the Gospel, if you judge them by their outward shell, surely anyone would agree, must have been written by someone hopelessly unsophisticated. But if you crack open the shell, you will find within hidden wisdom, a wisdom truly divine and very like Christ himself. I don't want to become boring by giving you too many examples. It is the same in both the natural and the supernatural realms: the more significant something is, the deeper it is hidden, the more effectively it is concealed from prying eyes.

It is the same with questions of knowledge. The real truth always lies deeply hidden, so that it cannot be easily attained, nor by most people. Most people are stupid and have a distorted vision of the world. They judge everything according to the first impression made on their senses. Over and over again they make mistakes, they go astray, they are misled by false images of the good and the bad. It is the inside-out Sileni that they admire and respect. I am speaking here of the bad; I mean no harm to the good, nor for that matter to the bad. I am engaged in a general discussion of moral failings, not in the criticism of any individual. But it's a shame there aren't fewer people who match my description. When you see the scepter, the badges of office, the bodyguards, when you hear the titles, do you not revere your ruler like a god on earth, do you not think that you have the privilege of seeing someone more than human? But open up this inside-out Silenus and you find a tyrant, even an enemy of his people, a thief, someone who commits sacrilege and incest, a gambler, or, in summary, what the Greek proverb calls "an Iliad of evils." There are those who are officially magistrates and guardians of the public good, and who if you take them at face value appear to correspond to their titles; but really they are wolves and pirates who prey upon the community. There are some who, having caught sight of their shaven heads, you would respect as priests; but if you look inside the Silenus they are worse than laymen. You may even find some bishops—if you saw their solemn consecrations, if you caught sight of their new vestments, the miter shining with gold and jewels, the crozier encrusted with jewels,

the whole mystic panoply that covers them from their head to their feet, you would think they were heavenly beings and certainly not mere mortals. But turn the Silenus inside out and you will find you have in front of you nothing but a man of war, a man of business, even a tyrant. You will realize that all those splendid symbols of holiness were props for a theatrical effect. There are some men—I only wish one didn't run into them everywhere one goes—who, judging by their unkempt beards, their pallor, the fact that they go about hooded and belted, with supercilious and cantankerous expressions on their faces, you would think to be new Serapios or Pauls.'s But if you look inside you will find they are mere buffoons, and the treasure, as the proverb has it, turns out to be a lump of coal. Again, I must stress that no one need be offended by what I have to say, since I don't identify anyone by name. If you don't fit the description, then you are free to think it has nothing to do with you. But if you recognize your own faults, then consider yourself to have a lesson to learn. If you're of the first sort, then congratulate yourself; if of the second, then you owe me your thanks.

Finally, everywhere, among all kinds of human beings, there are those of whom you would think, judging by their physical appearance, that they are not only people, but fine examples of humankind. But if you open the Sileni you will find that on the inside they are perhaps a pig, or a lion, or a bear, or a donkey. In their case the opposite has happened to that which happened, according to the poets' stories, with Circe's spells. Her victims had the bodies of beasts and the minds of men, but these have the appearance of being human while concealing their true natures, which are worse than those of the beasts. Their opposites are those I have already discussed, who from their appearance you would think were scarcely human, while deep inside they are inhabited by the spirits of angels.

This then is the difference between a worldly person and a Christian. The first bases their responses and opinions on what is most obvious to the eye, on what is most coarsely material. The other aspects of reality they either completely ignore or else attribute the least importance to them. The second, contrariwise, is only drawn to those things hardest to perceive, which are at the greatest distance from material reality. The rest they either pay no attention to or else regard with contempt, basing their judgment of all things on their hidden characteristics. Among the good things, as they are termed by Aristotle, which are not intrinsically part of a person's own nature, wealth is the least worth having. But among the common people—indeed, among almost everybody—those who have wealth are the most highly thought of, no

matter how they obtained it. Everybody is after wealth and will walk on coals to get it. Next after wealth comes noble birth, though birth on its own amounts to nothing, a ridiculous and empty name. Someone who can trace their descent from Codrus, King of Athens, or from Brutus the Trojan (personally I'm not sure he ever really existed), or from the mythical Hercules is regarded as semidivine; while someone who has become famous for their learning and their virtue is dismissed as being of humble birth. One person is called illustrious because their distant ancestor proved himself a particularly bloody murderer on the field of battle, and another is a plebeian because they have no famous ancestors to point to, though their intellectual gifts have benefited the whole world. In the third place is physical well-being. Anyone who happens to be tall, strong, handsome, and robust is held to be one of the lucky ones, though of course not nearly as lucky as someone who is rich, nor as lucky as someone who is of noble birth. The well-being of the spirit is their last concern.

But if, following St. Paul, you divide human beings into three parts, the body, the soul, and the spirit (for I am using his terminology), the lowest part, condemned by the apostle but most accessible to the senses, is the part the common people value most. The middle part, which he approves of only if it is linked to the spirit, is considered valuable by many. But the spirit, the best part of us, from which, as from a fountain, all our happiness flows, the part by which we are joined to God, they are so far from considering precious that they do not even ask whether it exists or what it is, although Paul emphasizes its importance so often. And so ordinary people end up with a scale of values that is upside down. What we should particularly honor is regarded as being of no account, an also-ran, and what we should strive after with might and main is regarded as being absolutely worthless. Gold is valued more than learning, blue blood more than integrity, physical strength more than intellectual ability, religious ceremonies more than true piety, man-made law more than God's decrees. The mask is preferred to the face, the shadow to the reality, the artificial to the natural, the fleeting to the substantial, the momentary to the eternal.

Upside-down values mean that the meanings of words have to be displaced. The lofty they now call lowly; the bitter is sweet; the precious is worthless; life is called death. Let me give you one or two examples in passing. Someone is said to love someone else if they seek to corrupt them by indulging them, or if they set out to destroy their reputation and their sense of shame. If this is love, what would hostility be like? They call it justice when evil is deterred by evil, a crime is repaid with

a crime, and any injury you have received is paid back at an exorbitant rate of interest. People are said to be hostile to marriage if they attack adultery and maintain that married life should have more in common with celibacy than with the goings-on in a brothel. They call a man a traitor and an enemy of his ruler if he thinks the ruler should be prevented from acting outside the law and contrary to justice—that is, if he wants him to act like a true ruler and in no way to resemble a tyrant, the foulest of all wild beasts. They call someone a counselor, a friend, a supporter of government if he corrupts the ruler with an inappropriate education, inculcates him with idiotic ideas, deludes him with flattery, gives him bad advice so that he ends up being hated by his subjects, and involves him in wars and violent upheavals. They say the majesty of the ruler is enhanced if he shows himself to be a bit of a tyrant—that is to say, if he to a significant degree becomes the worst species of human being. They accuse anyone who wishes to reduce the taxes extorted from the public of robbing the public purse.

Goodness, wisdom, and power are the three most important qualities a ruler should have, and through them he represents God, the only true king. Can someone properly be called the ruler's friend if he robs him of two of these qualities, goodness and wisdom, leaving him only with power—or rather with the appearance of power, power that in any case isn't truly his own? For power, if it is not combined with goodness and wisdom, is not power, but tyranny. And just as the ruler's power comes from the consent of the people, so the people can take it away. But if he should be deprived of his throne, he will retain goodness and wisdom as his personal attributes. Death is the punishment for attacking the symbols of the king's authority; and are men to be rewarded for corrupting his character and turning him from a good ruler into a cruel one, from a wise man into a cunning one, from a legitimate prince into a tyrant? One death is not punishment enough for someone who tries to poison the prince's drink; and is there to be a reward for those who corrupt and poison his mind with false opinions? Their actions are comparable to poisoning the public water supply, thereby inflicting the greatest harm on the whole community. They talk about a ruler's position as if it were his personal property, when in fact the sum total of being a ruler consists in administering what belongs to the community. Dynastic marriages and the constantly changing alliances between rulers, they say, serve to cement peace between Christians, when in fact we see that these are the source of nearly all wars and most of the great upheavals in our lives. By their way of calculating, a ruler's dominions are enlarged when he acquires the title to one or two little towns, no matter how high the price that has been paid, no matter how many citizens have

been pillaged, how much blood has been shed, how many wives have been made into widows and children into orphans. In just the same way they call the priests, bishops, and popes “the Church,” when in principle they are only the servants of the Church. The Christian people are the Church. Christ himself said the Church is superior to its servants, so the bishops should wait on the people while they sit at the table, treating them with deference, even though from another point of view they could establish their superiority if they were to take on in their turn the office he fulfilled, and reform their morals and way of life in imitation of him. Although he was in every possible respect the lord and master of all things, yet he took on the role of a servant, not a master. The full force of a thunderbolt is hurled at those who steal small change from the priests’ collection; they are called enemies of the Church and are nearly branded as heretics. Now, I am no supporter of those who cheat and steal, don’t misunderstand me. But I ask this: If we should hate the Church’s enemies, could the Church have an enemy more destructive and more deadly than a godless pope? If there has been some slight reduction in the assets or income of the priesthood, the cry goes up on all sides that the Church of Christ is being oppressed. But now, when the world is on the brink of war, when the unconcealed immorality of the clergy threatens to bring about the destruction of so many thousands of souls, no one bewails the fate of the Church, though it is now that the Church is really suffering. They talk about the Church being honored and adorned, not when piety is increasing among the people, when vice is less prevalent and good behavior is on the increase, when Christian learning is flourishing, but when the altars glisten with gold and jewels; worse, when the altars are neglected, and landed wealth, servants, luxury, mules, horses, the construction of costly buildings (palaces would be a better word), and the rest of the bustle of life have made the priests indistinguishable from satraps. I don’t want even to mention those who spend the Church’s wealth on immoral activities, to the outrage of ordinary people. If they become wealthier, we congratulate them and say the Church of Christ is better off; when the only respect in which the Church can be better off is if more people are living a Christian life.

They call it blasphemy if someone speaks of Christopher or George with insufficient reverence, and fails to treat all the stories about all the saints as if they were equal in authority to the Gospel. But Paul uses the term “blasphemy” for occasions when the ungodly behavior of Christians causes the name of Christ to be discredited among the Gentiles. What can one expect the enemies of the Christian religion to say when they have seen Christ in the Gospels urging us to have contempt for riches, to turn away from the pursuit of pleasure, and to

stop being concerned about reputation, and then they see the leaders and representatives of the Christian faith live according to principles that appear to be diametrically opposed to those of Christ, so that they outdo the Gentiles in their efforts to accumulate wealth, in their love of pleasures, in their splendor of life, in the ferocity of their wars, and in almost every other vice. The perceptive reader will understand how much I am passing over in silence out of respect for the honor of the name of Christian, and how deeply I sigh within myself.

They call it heresy if anyone says or writes something that disagrees in any way—even over a question of grammar—with the pettifogging propositions of those who instruct us in theology. But is it not heresy for someone to claim that a principal part of human happiness lies in pleasures which Christ himself repeatedly says are worthless? Or to promote a way of life that is clearly at odds with the teaching of the Gospels and the practice of the apostles? Or, directly contrary to the intention of Christ, who sent the apostles out to preach the Gospel armed only with the sword of the spirit (which alone, by cutting out all earthly attachments, can make it possible to do without the sword), arms their successors with steel, so that they can defend themselves against persecution? (There’s no doubt that the word “sword” was intended to include crossbows and cannon, siege engines, and the rest of the apparatus of war.) And then weighs them down with a wallet in which they can carry money, presumably so that they will never have to go without? (And the word “wallet” was intended to refer to anything that is used to ensure a supply of material goods.) Yet this is how the words of Luke are distorted by the great Lyranus, whom many respect more than Jerome.

It is regarded as an unforgivable sacrilege if someone steals something from a church; but it seems to be a minor offense to plunder, cheat, and oppress the poverty-stricken and the widowed, although they are the living temple of God. It is profanity to pollute the sacred building by fighting or by an emission of semen; but we do not curse the man who uses endearments, gifts, promises, and flattery to violate, corrupt, and profane that temple of the Holy Spirit, a pure and chaste virgin. As I’ve already said, I’m not coming to the defense of wrongdoing. My point is that ordinary people pay much more attention to what they see with their eyes than to those things which are all the more real for being less exposed to view. You can see the consecration of a physical building; because you cannot see the dedication of a soul, you pay no attention to it. You will fight to the death to protect its ornaments, but no one will pick up the sword of the spirit to protect the integrity of morals, though Christ ordered each one of us to sell the shirt on

his back in order to buy such a sword. It is called the height of piety to take up arms to defend or increase the dominion and wealth of the priesthood and to throw things sacred and profane together into the maelstrom of war. But while the priest's money—something of no spiritual significance at all—is being defended, war, like a vast flood, sweeps away all religious feeling. For what sort of evil is there that war does not bring in its wake?

But perhaps at this point my reader's unspoken thoughts will break in. "What's the purpose of all this foul-smelling stuff?" you ask. "Do you want every ruler to have the exceptional qualities that Plato attributed in his Republic to the guardians? Do you want to equip priests with only the wallet and staff of the apostles, wresting from them their power, dignity, status, and riches?" Good questions. I am not wresting their possessions from them, but enriching them with more valuable ones; I am not depriving them of their status, but challenging them to set their sights higher. I ask you, which of us has a more exalted view of kingship? You, who want your king to be free to do whatever he likes, to choose to be a tyrant, not a legitimate ruler; who stuff him with pleasures, abandon him to luxury, make him the captive and slave of his appetites; who weigh him down with the things that even the Gentiles always thought it was noble to despise? Or I, who want him to be as similar as possible to God, whose representative in some measure he is? I want him to be wiser than everyone else, for wisdom is the true glory of a king. I want him to be far removed from all base passions and diseases of the soul, which corrupt the stupid and vulgar masses. I want him to set his sights above the commonplace, to rise above the pursuit of wealth, to be, in short, to the state what the soul is to the body and God to the universe.

Which of us has a more accurate assessment of the dignity of a bishop? You, who weigh him down with worldly wealth, entangle him in base and sordid cares, embroil him in the violence of war? Or I, who want him, as the vicar of Christ and the guardian of his heavenly spouse, to be completely uncontaminated by earthly contagion, and to resemble, as closely as possible, him whose place he occupies and whose job he does? The Stoics say that one cannot be a good person unless one is free of all diseases of the spirit. By diseases of the spirit they mean desires or emotions. Christians have a much greater obligation to free themselves of them, and the ruler a greater obligation than anyone else. And the ruler and father of the Church, of a heavenly community, has an even greater obligation. I want the priest to rule, but in my view mere earthly power is too sordid for someone who exercises a heavenly authority to be burdened with it. I want to see the pope

triumphant, but not riding in those bloody triumphs that were held by evil Marius and godless Julius, which were so ostentatious that the satirists mocked them. If Democritus had been present I do believe he would have died laughing. Rather in truly magnificent and apostolic triumphs, of the sort that Paul (a warrior and general far more glorious than Alexander the Great) describes and even boasts about:

In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths often. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not?

Again, a little earlier, there is this:

In all things proving ourselves the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings; by pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

Here you can see his battle honors, his victory, his apostolic triumph. This is the glory by which Paul sometimes swears, as if it were sacred. These are the heroic deeds for which he believed a crown of immortality had already been set aside as his reward. Surely those who lay claim to the status and authority of the apostles will find it no hardship to follow in their footsteps. I want the popes to be as rich as possible, but rich with the pearl of the Gospel, rich with heavenly treasure. Then they will find that the more of their wealth they give away, the richer



they will be. Then there will be no danger that generosity now will be at the expense of their capacity to be generous in future. I would wish them to be defended against all attacks, but with the armor of the apostles, with the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness, and the sword of salvation (which is the word of God). I want them keen to fight, but against the true enemies of the Church: simony, pride, lust, ambition, anger, godlessness. These are the undying enemy, the Turks, against whom Christians must always stand on guard, against whom they must always be planning their next attack. This is the battlefield on which a bishop should prove himself a resourceful general and an inspiring leader. I would like priests to be the people to whom everyone else defers, but not on account of their noisy bullying; rather on account of their excellent knowledge of the doctrines of Christianity and their outstanding virtues. I would like them to be revered, but on account of their integrity and their ascetic lives, rather than on account of their titles or their fancy outfits. I would like them to be feared, but as fathers, not tyrants. Finally, I would like them to luxuriate in delights, but rare delights, delights much sweeter than most people will ever experience.

Would you like to know what the true riches of the papacy are? Then listen now to the prince of popes: "Gold and silver have I none, but such as I have I give thee: In the name of Jesus arise and walk." Do you want to hear the splendor of the name "apostle," which is worth more than any title, any monument or statue? Listen to Paul, the truly illustrious: "For we are to God a sweet savor of Christ in every place." Do you want to hear of a power that is greater than any king's? "I can do all things," he says, "through Christ who strengtheneth me." Do you want to hear of true glory? "You are my joy and crown in the Lord." Do you want to hear the titles that are worthy of a bishop, the terms in which one should honor a true pope? Paul describes such a person for you: "sober, blameless, prudent, modest, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, but patient, not a brawler, not greedy of filthy lucre, not a novice; moreover he must have a good report of them that are without, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." Look at the ways in which Moses does honor to Aaron, the high priest: the wealth with which he presents him, the many-colored embroideries in which he envelopes him, the jewels shining like stars with which he adorns him, the gleam of gold with which he embellishes him. If you know the interpretation of Origen and of Jerome, then you will know the meaning of all this, and you will know how a bishop should be fitted out.

Who should the popes imitate in their lives, if not those whom they portray on their seals, whom they recall in their titles, whose places they occupy? Can it be more appropriate for the vicar of Christ to model himself on Julius or Alexander, Croesus or Xerxes, who were nothing but very successful bandits, than on Christ himself? Who could the successors of the apostles imitate better than the prince of the apostles? Christ directly denied that his kingdom was of this world, and do you think it right that Christ's successor should not only agree to be an earthly ruler, but should use political skills to acquire power and should, as the saying goes, leave no stone unturned in his quest for it?

In this world there are really two worlds, in conflict with each other in every possible way. One is gross and physical, the other heavenly and already straining every nerve to practice being what it one day will become. In the first world the most successful person is held to be someone who has least to do with all that is truly good and is most heavily burdened with fictitious goods. A pagan king, for example, may outdo everyone else in lust and luxury, pomp and pride, greed and wealth, and in violence, and is thus regarded as more successful than anyone else, since he has sunk deeper in this filth than anyone else and has been least touched by wisdom, temperance, sobriety, justice, and the other qualities that are truly valuable. In the second, by contrast, the most successful is the person who is least befouled by these coarse and commonplace goods, and has accumulated the largest stock of those true and spiritual riches. So why do you want a Christian ruler to be the sort of person whom even the pagan philosophers have always condemned and despised? Why should you maintain that his authority is enhanced by precisely those qualities that it has always been most admirable to despise? Why burden an angel of God (for this is what bishops are called in Holy Scripture) with things that are unworthy of any man who can be called good? Why assess him according to the amount of wealth he has, just because gold makes robbers rich and tyrants powerful? There is supposed to be something heavenly about a priest, something more than human. There is nothing worthy of someone in his elevated position except what is heavenly. Why do you undermine his dignity by associating him with commonplace things? Why pollute his purity with the filth of this world? Why do you not let him be powerful by exercising his own kind of command? Why not allow him to be admired for his own fine qualities, respected for his own authority, wealthy with his own riches? This man was chosen out of a heavenly body, for that is what the Church is, by the Holy Spirit to serve the highest purposes. Why do you drag him down into the petty conflicts and vicious rivalries of court life? Paul glories

in the fact that he has been separated from the world; why do you drown my church leader in the sewer, making him take after the lowest specimens of humanity? Why expose him to the anxieties suffered by someone behind on his payments to a moneylender? Why drag a man of God into business that would be degrading for any human being? Why measure the true happiness of Christian priests by whether they have those things which Democritus laughed at as completely ridiculous, which Heraclitus wept over as entirely pathetic, which Diogenes scorned as frivolous, and Crates spurned as burdensome, while the saints have always fled from them as if one could catch plague from them? Why judge Peter's successor by how much wealth he has, when Peter took pride in having nothing? Why do you want the successors to the apostles as rulers of the Church to seem important by surrounding themselves with those marks of worldly distinction that the apostles trampled underfoot—which is precisely why they are important? Why do you call “the patrimony of St. Peter” something that Peter took pride in not having? Why do you think the vicars of Christ should be entangled in riches, when Christ himself called them thorns? The immediate responsibility and chief duty of a priest is to sow the seed of the word of God; why then bury him in worldly possessions, which, more than anything else, stifle the seed once it is sown? The priest should teach equity and define it for others; why then do you want him to be enslaved to riches, which embody unfairness? He dispenses the holy sacraments; why do you want to make him responsible for managing the vilest things? The Christian world looks to him to feed it with sound doctrine, to advise it on how to seek salvation, to provide consolation like a father, and to represent an example of how to live. Why would you imprison someone destined and devoted to such noble tasks on a treadmill of commonplace concerns? Thereby you both rob the bishop of his dignity and deprive the people of their bishop.

Christ has his own kingdom, one too fine to be contaminated by the kingdoms of the Gentiles, or rather, to speak more accurately, by their tyrannies. He has his own magnificence, his own wealth, his own delights. Why do we mix together things that are so at odds with each other? Earthly and heavenly, highest and lowest, pagan and Christian, profane and sacred: why do we confuse one with the other? The Spirit is both immensely wealthy and immensely generous, and its gifts are both numerous and valuable: gifts of languages, gifts of prophecy, gifts of healing, gifts of knowledge, gifts of wisdom, gifts of learning, the discerning of spirits, exhortation, consolation? Why do you “bind together” these sacred offerings with the profane gifts of the world (I resist the temptation to say “strangle”)? Why do

you try to tie Christ to Mammon, and the spirit of Christ to Belial? Why should a miter be associated with a helmet, a sacred vestment with a martial breastplate, blessings with cannonballs, the shepherd with armed robbers? Why should priests wage war? Should someone who has the keys to the kingdom of heaven be busy knocking down town walls with cannon fire? How can it be right for the same person who keeps the people safe with the symbol of peace to declare war? How will he have the face to teach Christians in the streets and the marketplaces that wealth is to be despised, when money is the a to z of his own life? How can he have the cheek to teach what Christ both taught and showed by example, what all the apostles insisted upon, that evil is not to be resisted, that we must defeat the wickedness of evil men with goodness, that we must repay an injury with kindness, and overwhelm our enemies with generosity, when, in order to secure control of a market town, or to levy a tax on salt, he is prepared to have a tidal wave of war break over the whole world? How can he lead us towards the kingdom of heaven (for this is the function Christ assigns to his Church), when he is entirely preoccupied with the kingdom of this world?

But perhaps you are excessively pious. You want to adorn the Church by adding worldly riches to her spiritual ones. I would approve, were it not for the fact that such a strategy has few benefits and enormous disadvantages. When you give a clergyman secular authority you give him at the same time the problems associated with accumulating money, you give him a tyrant's bodyguard, regiments of soldiers, spies, horses, mules, trumpets, warfare, slaughter, triumph, riots, treaties, disputes, in short all those things that are inextricably associated with government. Even if he has good intentions, when will he have the free time to fulfil his apostolic responsibilities, when he is swept away by so many thousands of different concerns; for the names of the men who have joined the army are being recorded; treaties are being negotiated and abrogated; those who undermine your authority are being brought under control, and those who would like to see a change of government are being persuaded to stay loyal; enemies are being crushed and garrisons reinforced; counselors are being listened to and secular ambassadors received; friends are being promoted to high office; and a whole host of other things are being done, far too many to remember, and yet each absolutely essential? Does it seem to you to indicate a proper understanding of the elevated status of the pope and of the cardinals to think that they should be dragged away to deal with these squalid matters, away from their prayers, during which they talk with God, from holy contemplation, which they perform in the company of angels, from the verdant meadows of Holy Scripture, in which they

stroll in perfect happiness, from the apostolic task of spreading the Gospel, in which they most resemble Christ? Do you think anyone who really wishes them well would want to drag them away from the delightful and peaceful life they were enjoying in order to embroil them in these tempests and force them to bear these heavy burdens?

Moreover, not only is governing a state deeply unpleasant because of the unending hard work involved, but the results are much less satisfactory with the clergy than with the laity in charge. There are two reasons, I think, for this. In the first place, when it comes to politics, ordinary people are more willing to obey laymen than ecclesiastics. Second, secular rulers, since they expect their territories to be inherited by their children, do their best to make them as prosperous as possible. By contrast, ecclesiastics come to power late in life, and often when they are already old men. And they rule for their own benefit, not that of their heirs. Thus they are more interested in plundering their territories than in improving them; they behave more like an invading army than an established administration. Moreover, when a secular ruler comes to power he probably only has to fight once to secure his lands for himself and his heirs, and once he has promoted and enriched those he favors that task is done. With ecclesiastics, however, new struggles are always breaking out. Those promoted by the previous ruler have to be thrown out, and over and over again new men have to be enriched at the expense of those who are ruled. It is also not without significance that subjects are much more inclined to obey someone to whose rule they have become accustomed, even if his rule is harsh. And then, when he dies, he still seems to live on in his son and heir, so that the populace pretend to themselves that they have not exchanged one ruler for another but have retained the old in a new guise. Indeed, children are liable to take after their parents, not only in their looks but also in their behavior, especially if they have been trained by them. But it is very different when government is entrusted to men who are dedicated to the service of God: when the ruler changes there is a sudden and complete change in every aspect of government. Let me add that a lay ruler comes to the exercise of power having had some practice and after being trained for rule from the cradle; but a clergyman often finds himself occupying the supreme office contrary to all expectations, so that a man born by nature to pull on an oar is, against all odds, elevated to sit on a throne. Last of all, it is scarcely possible for one man to be equally good at dealing with two quite different but extremely difficult types of management, for even Hercules could not take on two monsters at a time. Nothing could be harder than to succeed at being a good prince. But it is much finer, and also much more difficult, to be a good priest. How can it be

feasible to be both? These are the reasons why, if I am not mistaken, we see towns ruled by secular monarchs thriving as day by day they increase their wealth, their buildings, and their population, while the towns ruled by priests decline and fall into ruins.

What then was the point of linking together these two things, when their union results in so many disadvantages? Are you afraid that Christ, if he relies on his own resources, will have too little power, and that it is therefore necessary for a secular tyrant to share some of his strength with him? Do you think he will look in need of embellishment unless some worldly soldier makes him a present of some gold and a Phrygian embroiderer,” some French white horses, and a guard of honor—in other words, spatters him with some of his own pomp? Do you think he won’t seem magnificent enough unless he is able to use those insignia that Julius Caesar, the most ambitious man the world has seen, rejected for fear of the hostility they would provoke? Do you think him insignificant unless he is weighed down with secular authority, which, if he uses it to further his own interests, will make him into a tyrant, while if he uses it to serve the public good, there will be no end to his labors? Let men of the world concern themselves with worldly things; the lowest aspect of episcopacy is higher than the most exalted aspect of secular government. The more worldly goods you grant to the Church, the less of his own goods will Christ bestow upon it. The more completely her bishops are cleansed of the former, the more lavishly will they be enriched with the latter.

I believe you are now able to see how everything is transformed if you turn the Silenus inside out. Those who seemed to have the interests of Christian rulers closest to their hearts now seem the chief betrayers and enemies of such rulers. Those who you would have said were concerned to defend the dignity of the papacy you now discover were trying to defile it. I am not saying this because I think that any power or wealth that has come to the priesthood by any means whatsoever should be stripped from them, but I want them to remember and bear in mind their true greatness. Let them reject these commonplace, not to say unchristian, concerns and leave them to their inferiors; or at least, if they retain power and wealth, may it be while despising them, and, as Paul puts it, may they have them as if they did not have them at all.” Finally, I want them to be so adorned with the riches of Christ that whatever glory they acquire from this world will either be put in the shade by the light of higher things, or even seem sordid in proximity to them. The result will be that they will take more delight in what they possess and will feel less anxiety. Fear will not gnaw at them, as they worry that someone may rob them. They will not have

to fight, facing uncertainty and danger, to hold on to transitory and base possessions. They will not be deprived of what is rightly theirs while they rejoice as they grow rich at the expense of others. They will not lose the pearl of the Gospel while they hunt after the fake jewels of the world.

Meanwhile I make no mention of the fact that those things I wish they would despise will be theirs more abundantly if they have contempt for them. There is more honor in acquiring wealth while aspiring to have none than in chasing after it and snatching it up. What is the source of the Church's wealth, if not its contempt of wealth? What makes the Church glorious, if not its indifference to glory? The laity will be much more willing to give away their wealth, if they see that wealth is rejected by those whom they believe to be wiser than themselves. Perhaps evil rulers should sometimes be tolerated. We owe some respect to the memory of those whose places we think of them as occupying. Their titles have some claim on us. We should not seek to put matters right if there is a real possibility that the cure may prove worse than the disease. But human affairs are really in a terrible state if those whose whole life ought to be a continuing miracle live such lives that the worst sort of men cheer them on, while the good sigh and groan over them. Their prestige is entirely dependent on the support they receive from the wicked, or (if you prefer) on the reluctance of ordinary people to abandon convention, or on the inexperience of those who are not worldly-wise, or on the tolerance they meet with from those who are good.

But my words have run away with me. I claim to be a mere compiler of proverbs, and I am turning into a preacher. It was that drunkard Alcibiades and his Sileni that drew me into this very sober discussion. But I will not feel too guilty for my mistake, if whatever has been out of place in a discussion of proverbs has been relevant in persuading people to amend their lives; if whatever contributed nothing to the advancement of learning served to incite people to piety; if whatever may seem beside the point, "nothing to do with Dionysius," in relation to the task I have undertaken may seem very much to the point in relation to the task we all face, that of living.

