323 To Return (*Reuerti*)

Augustine in his little book *De nouo cantico*,[[1]](#endnote-1) says that among pilgrims there are three kinds of persons whom God hates: those staying behind, those going back, and those wandering out of the way. Of whom the first are aroused that they may betray. The second are recalled so that they may turn back. The third are led to the way so that they may know rightly. He remains on the way who does not make headway, he who goes backwards, and he who forsakes a better proposal. And for that which he leaves behind, he returns that he may wander, who will abandon the faith.

Again, note that a return is double: in evil and in good. Concerning a return in evil it is said in Prov. 26[:11]: “As a dog that returns to his vomit, so is the fool that repeats his folly.” The backslider does this who renewed himself through confession resumes after his penance. About which says Peter in 2 canonical [:21] that “It had been better for them not to have known the way of justice, than after they have known it, to turn back from” seeking those things, that ancient proverb of the dog returning to his vomit, and the sow washed in the wallow of mud, where Augustine[[2]](#endnote-2) says that the sow thus washed is more filthy than it was before. And the dog returning to its vomit is more burdened. Wherefore such ones are like the viper about which Ambrose narrated in his *Hexameron*,[[3]](#endnote-3) concerning the work of the fifth day, c. 4, this one seeks to mate with her husband with a hiss, and where she has arrived covers him, she emits her poison, bearing reverence to her husband, but by this act of exchange she resumes to supply her venom. So, a woman who is a sinner sometimes inflamed with the venom of sin, lays down through confession before God, she is joined to the communion through the sacraments, but quickly resumes what they sowed. Such things are figured through the wife of Lot who having been freed from Sodom was turned into a statue of salt, Gen. 19[:26]. Because of that case occurring, it was established lest they slide back to old ways. Wherefore it is said in Luke 9[:62]: “No man putting his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of heaven.” And Christ said in Luke 17[:32]: “Remember Lot's wife.” And Isidore, *De summo bono*, book 2, c. 13,[[4]](#endnote-4) whoever weeps for sin, and commits it again, as if one washes a mud brick, who however much more he washes it, the dirtier he makes it. Concerning such things, it is said in Jer. 2[:36]: “How exceeding base are you become, going the same ways over again!”

¶ Again, such ones sliding back are figured by the sons of Israel who wished to return to the servitude of Egypt, Num. 14[:3], wherefore the murmuring ones said, “Is it not better to return into Egypt?” etc. Wherefore none of them entered the promised land, against whom it is said, Can. 5[:3]: “I have washed my feet, how shall I defile them?”

Again, whoever once breaks the yoke, if he returns, he will be constrained forcefully. Therefore, the Apostle counsels, Gal. 5[:1]: “Stand fast and be not held again under the yoke of bondage.” Wherefore according to the Philosopher,[[5]](#endnote-5) an elephant, if after a fall he were raised up, he always goes about with a tremor lest he might fall again, so ought a man if he rises after a fall. But in Osee 7[:16] it is said, “They returned, that they might be without the yoke.” A dog who does not go after the prey for which the other dogs run, but only runs because he sees other dogs run, when he is fatigued, he returns. Thus, they who do not run in the service of God, except they see others run, being fatigued they return, because they do not see what they run for.

Wherefore John 7[:52-53] the Jews dissenting over Christ whether he was a prophet or not, “every man returned to his own house.” But those holy animals having eyes before and behind by which they might see God “they turned not when they went,” Ezech. first chapter [1:12]. Wherefore Chrysostom, *Homilia* 12,[[6]](#endnote-6) the Magi after they found Christ, they did not return to Herod. Because he who perfectly seeks Christ does not return to the devil, although on the contrary he can return from the devil to Christ. But among these terrifying prospects is the return of the evil spirits to man when once they have deserted him, according to that of Luke [11:24]: “When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walks through places without water, seeking rest; and not finding, he says: I will return into my house whence I came out,” etc.

Where concerning the act of this spirit three things are noted: the going out, the advancing, and the return. The going out from a man, the advancing for places, and the return to the house. The going out is always good, the advancing is doubtful, the return home is always bad. Therefore, one always procures his going out and because our house should be cleaned and ornamented. Let us beware prudently his advancing lest not finding rest he returns to us. Let us fear also his returning lest our last states be worse than those before when he exited. Therefore [Luke 11:24]: “When the unclean spirit (is gone out of a man),” through penance which entered through fault, “he walks through places without water,” etc., places without water are lustful bodies about which Job [40:16]: “He sleeps in moist places.” Places without water are arid hearts by abstinence and penance. For Behemoth has faith that he inflates the Jews in their mouth, “goes about seeking whom he may devour,” [1 Pet. 5:8], but not finding rest says [Luc. 11:24]: “I will return into my house.” Nor is it a marvel if the spirit devises defects, but the spirit of presumption presumes in saying that his house is our conscience. Wherefore he has gone out of this house. With the going out of the demon sometimes the house is cleaned of vices by brooms and ornamented by virtues introduced. However, there is a triple broom: contrition in the heart, confession in mouth, and satisfaction in work. However, it is ornamented by virtuous gifts and good works, but when the evil spirit cannot break into a house alone, “he takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself,” [Luke 11:26], because if per chance the spirit of lust is thrown out, upon returning he finds a chaste castle, he does not return with similar spirits, hypocrisy, vain glory, ambition, pride, ostentation, and thus the unclean spirit enters, thus he is fortified. But not then is anything to be despaired of, because it is read that Jesus cast out seven demons [Luke 8:2], that is, seven principle vices which are designated by the seven peoples ejected from the promised land.

¶ About the return into the good, it is to be known that he who loses something along the way, if he wants to find it, it is required that he return by the same way to seek it. So, ought the sinner who lost God along the way, if he wants to find him it is required that he go back along the same way to seek him. So, ought the sinner who lost God. Wherefore it is read, Gen. 13[:3] that Abraham returned out of Egypt along the same way by which he had come, Isai. 55[:7]: “Let the wicked forsake his way,” namely, and return. For the rock which falls from the apex of a church, not easily does it return except with labor and costs. So, a person falling from the state of the Church does not return unless with the labor of penance and costs of alms. However, there are many things warning us that we be converted to the Lord.

First, it is because one is prompted to be recalled, Can. 6[:12]: “Return, return, that we may behold thee.”

Second, because one is led to be expected, 2 Pet. 3[:9]: “The Lord deals patiently for your sake, not willing that any should perish, but that all should return to penance.”

¶ Third, because it is easy to be sent back, Isai. 55[:7]: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unjust man his thoughts,” namely, “and let him return to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, for he is bountiful to forgive.” But alas there are many who do not want to return, such as the raven sent out from the ark, Gen. 8[:6-7]. Even it is permitted often to the one who has been called out of the law, Deut. 32[:15]: “The beloved grew fat and kicked.” Jer. 5[:3]: “They have made their faces harder than the rock, and they have refused to return.”

1. Augustine, *De cantico novo* 4.4 (PL 40:681): Excitandi sunt ergo remanentes, retro redeuntes revocandi, errantes in viam ducendi, tardi exhortandi, celeres imitandi. Qui non proficit, remansit in via: qui forte a meliore proposito declinat ad id quod deterius reliquerat, reversus est retro: qui fidem deserit, a via erravit. Cum tardis sit nobis et cum celerioribus ratio, cum ambulantibus tamen. Quis est qui non proficit? Qui se putaverit esse sapientem; qui dixerit, Sufficit mihi quod sum; [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Augustine, *De Epistola II Petri* (PL 34:1033): Melius enim erat illis non cognoscere viam justitiae, quam post agnitionem, retrorsum converti ab eo, quod illis traditum est, sancto mandato. Contigit enim illis illud veri proverbii: Canis reversus ad vomitum suum; et, Sus lota in volutabro luti. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ambrose, *Hexameron* 5.7.18 (PL 14:214): Vipera absentem requirit, absentem vocat, et blando proclamat sibilo; atque ubi adventare comparem senserit, venenum evomit reverentiam marito deferens, verecundata nuptialem gratiam: tu, mulier, advenientem de longinquo maritum contumeliis repellis. Vipera mare prospectat, explorat iter conjugis: tu injuriis viam viro obstruis: tu litium moves venenum, non rejicis: tu conjugalis amplexus tempore dirum virus exaestuas; nec erubescis nuptias, nec revereris maritum. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Isidore, *Sententiae* 2.13.7 (PL 83:615): Nam qui plangit peccatum, et iterum admittit peccatum, quasi si quis lavet laterem crudum, quem quanto magis eluerit, tanto amplius lutum fecit. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Aristotle, cf. Bestiary: Elephants have no knee joints, so if they fall down they cannot get up again. To avoid falling, the elephant leans against a tree while it sleeps. To capture an elephant, a hunter can cut part way through a tree; when the elephant leans against it, the tree breaks and the elephant falls. Unable to rise, the beast cries out, and a large elephant tries to lift it up, but fails. In some accounts, twelve elephants next attempt to lift it, and also fail. Finally a small elephant comes and succeeds in raising the fallen one.

… The big elephant represents the law, which could not raise up mankind from sin, nor could the twelve elephants, which represent the prophets. Christ is the small elephant who succeeded to raising the fallen. The burning skin and bones of the elephant represent the commandments of God, which allow nothing evil to enter the pure soul.

Julius Caesar (Commentaries on the Gallic and Civil Wars, Book 6.27): There are also [animals] which are called elks [alces]. The shape of these, and the varied color of their skins, is much like roes, but in size they surpass them a little and are destitute of horns, and have legs without joints and ligatures; nor do they lie down for the purpose of rest, nor, if they have been thrown down by any accident, can they raise or lift themselves up. Trees serve as beds to them; they lean themselves against them, and thus reclining only slightly, they take their rest; when the huntsmen have discovered from the footsteps of these animals whither they are accustomed to betake themselves, they either undermine all the trees at the roots, or cut into them so far that the upper part of the trees may appear to be left standing. When they have leant upon them, according to their habit, they knock down by their weight the unsupported trees, and fall down themselves along with them. [The account following this one (6.28) compares the size of another beast to the elephant; this may be the source of the confusion of the elk and elephant.]

<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast77.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. (Pseudo-)Chrysostom, *Opus imperfectum in Mattheum* homilia 2 ex cap. 2 (PG 56:644): Certe magi invenerunt puerum illlum, quem regnaturum dicebant, et aut aurum acceperunt a parentibus ejus, aut largis promissionibus sunt placati; ideo ad me reversi non sunt. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)