Dhuoda, Manual for her Son (841)


Dhuoda (803-843)
Dhuoda, also called Dhuodana, was an educated laywoman of the ninth century. Unusual for her time, she left a record as a lay writer in an age of clerical domination. What we know of her comes from her Manual, which provides insight not only into her own heart and mind, but into the spiritual life of her age as well. In this writing, we learn that she was married on June 29, 824, to Bernhard of Septimania, and that she gave birth to a son in 826. She lived most of her married life in semi-abandonment at her husband's castle, bearing a second son in March 841. The following summer her husband sent their eldest son, William, to Charles the Bald as a hostage of sorts to serve his own political interests. Further, he ordered their second son removed from the castle before baptism so that two years later, at the end of the writing of the Manual, Dhuoda did not yet know her second son’s name.

Dhuoda’s Manual
The tragedies in Dhuoda’s life set the stage for her writing during Advent 841. Her intention was to provide a moral handbook for her son William as she and her sons faced a Christmas apart. She understood it to be her responsibility to guide him intellectually and spiritually. In eleven books or chapters she covers such diverse topics as the Trinity, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, how to overcome bad habits, and the composition of verse. One writer has suggested that "to understand Dhuoda, read her as if it were your own mother giving you advice."

Manual

Here Begins the Manual of Dhuoda Which She Sent to Her Son, William.

Having noticed that most women in this world are able to live with and enjoy their children, but seeing myself, Dhuoda, living far away from you, my dear son William, filled with anxiety because of this, and with the desire to be of aid to you, I am sending you this little manual, written by me, for your scrutiny and education, rejoicing in the fact that, though I am absent in body, this little book will recall to your mind, as you read it, the things you are required to do for my sake.

Moral Lesson
And what shall I say, fragile vessel that I am? I shall turn to others as a friend. To be sure, if the heavens and the earth were spread through the air like a parchment, and if all the various gulfs of the sea were transformed into ink, and if all the inhabitants of the earth born into this world from the beginning of humankind up to now were scribes, which is an impossible thing contrary to nature, they would not be able to comprehend (in writing) the greatness, the breadth, the height, the sublimity, the profundity of the Almighty or tell the divinity, wisdom, piety, and clemency of Him Who is called God. Since He is thus and so great that no one can comprehend His essence, I beg you to fear Him and to love Him with all your heart, all your mind, all your understanding, to bless Him in all your ways and deeds and to sing, "For He is good, for His mercy endureth forever!"

And believe Him to be above, below, inside, and outside, for He is superior, inferior, interior, and exterior.

Admonition
I also admonish you, O my handsome and lovable son William, that amid the mundane cares of this world you not neglect the acquisition of many books, in which you may understand and learn something greater and better than is written here concerning God, your Creator, through the teaching of the most blessed doctors. Beseech Him, cherish Him, love Him; if you do so, He
will be a Keeper, a Leader, a Companion, and a Fatherland for you, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, granting you generous prosperity in the world, and He will turn your enemies to peace.

What more can I say? Your admonisher, Dhuoda, is always with you, son, and if I be absent because of death, which must come, you will have this little book of moral teaching as a memorial; and in it you will be able to see me as the reflection in a mirror, reading and praying to God in mind and body, and you will find fully set down the duties you must perform for me. Son, you will have teachers who will teach you other documents of greater utility, but not under the same conditions, not with a soul burning in their breasts as I, your mother, have, O firstborn son.

On Reverence in Prayer
Prayer is called *oratio,* `prayer,' sort of *oris ratio,* `reason of the mouth.'

But I, Dhuoda, lukewarm and lazy, weak and always tending toward that which is low, neither a long nor a short prayer pleases me. But I place my hope in Him, Who offers to His faithful the freedom to pray. And you, son William, keep watch, ask of Him and pray in a short, firm, and pure speech. Say, not only in the church, but wherever the opportunity presents itself, pray and say, "Mercy-giving and Merciful, Just and Pious, Clement and True, have pity on Your creation, whom You created and redeemed with Your blood; have pity on me, and grant that I may walk in Your paths and Your justice; give me memory and sense that I may understand, believe, love, fear, praise, and thank You and be perfect in every good work through proper faith and goodwill, O Lord, my God. Amen."

That You Must Be Kind to Great and Small
It is not necessary for me to tell you this, that the example of the greatest, oldest, and best leaders must be followed in dealing with inferiors, for, though far from me, you will have noticed it yourself, also do not doubt that the lesser ones may rise to the heights of offering models for prelates. Therefore, I urge you not to be slow in joining yourself to them, in greater and lesser services.

God is the shaper of the good and the bad in heaven and on earth. For the sake of His lesser ones, He deigned to reveal His presence here below, for, as the Fathers say, although He was the Supreme Creator of all, He was willing to take on the form of a slave. He raises the powerful in order to plunge them into the depths, and He exalts the humble, that they may rise to the heights.... And if He, great as He is, comports Himself thus toward the lesser ones, what should we, small as we are, do toward those who are worse off? Those who are able ought to help them, and, according to the urgings and words of the Apostle Paul, bear one another's burdens.

Love all that you may be loved by all, cherish that you be cherished; if you love all, all will love you; if you individually, they plurally. It is written in the Grammar of the poet Donatus, "I love you and I am loved by you, I kiss you and am kissed by you. . . "

You, therefore, my son William, cherish and befriend those by whom you wish to be befriended; love, venerate, frequent, and honor all, so that you may be worthy to receive of all reciprocal retribution and due honor. For example, a certain learned man, making a comparison with a dumb animal for our edification, offered a great and clear sermon in a few words. He said in elucidating Psalm 41, "As the hart . . .": "Harts have this custom: when several of them wish to cross a sea or a large river of swirling waters, one after the other they place their horned heads on the back of their companions and hold up each other's necks, so that, by taking a little rest, they can make a more rapid crossing. There is in them such intelligence and such wisdom that, when they perceive the first to be tiring, they change places one after the other, and they let the second be first, now upholding and comforting the others. Thus, changing one by one, they
each have pass through them the compassion of brotherly love, always taking care that the head with the horns be shown and held up, lest they be submerged in the waters."

What meaning is hidden here is not hidden from the learned. Everything is immediately clear to their eyes. In this upholding, you see, and in this changing of place is shown the love which is to be kept by all in the human race, both to the great and to the small through brotherly love.

In the upholding or the erection of the heads and the horns is shown that the faithful in Christ must always keep their hearts and minds on Him. ...

On the Reconciliation of Sin
If it should happen, my son, that you do something bad, or even if you perceive that your soul is afflicted, hasten as soon as you can to make amends in all things. Turn to Him Who sees everything; always bear witness, externally as well as internally, of your guilt and worthlessness until you have given complete satisfaction, saying, "The sins of my youth and my ignorances, do not remember. I beg You, Lord, do not destroy me with my iniquities, and do not keep my faults to the end in Thy wrath. But, in accord with Thy ancient clemency and Thy great goodness, come to my aid, for Thou art merciful."

Remember, my son, the words of the publican: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner, for I am not worthy, miserable and unclean as I am, to raise my worthless eyes to Thee, the perfect pure One."

How You Can Be Perfect with the Aid of God
For He has said: "1. He who walketh without blemish, 2. who worketh justice, 3. who speaketh the truth, 4. who doth not use deceit in his tongue, 5. who doeth not evil to his neighbor, 6. who sweareth not to his neighbor to deceive him, 7. who putteth not out his money to usury, 8. who taketh not up a reproach against his neighbor, 9. who taketh not bribes against the innocent, 10. who patiently tolerates injuries, 11. who is pure in heart and chaste in body, 12. who is innocent in hands, 13. who is able to transgress and transgresseth not, 14. who can do evil things and doeth them not, 15. who reacheth out his hand to the poor as often as he can."...

Finis
Have frequent recourse to this little book. Always be, noble child, strong and brave in Christ!

This book was begun during the second year after the death of the former emperor, Louis, the 30th of November, Saint Andrew's Day, at the beginning of Advent. It was finished, by the aid of God, on the second of February, the Feast of the Purification of the blessed ever-virgin Mary, under the propitious reign of Christ, awaiting the king whom God will designate.

Reader, pray for Dhuoda, if you wish to have the merit of seeing Christ in eternal happiness. Here ends, thanks be to God, the Manual of William, according to the word of the Gospel: "It is finished."