Gregory the Great:
The Book of Pastoral Rule, c. 590

[Ogg Introduction]: The most famous of Pope Gregory the Great's writings, and justly so, is the Liber Regulae Pastoralis, known commonly as the "Pastoral Care," or the "Pastoral Rule." This book was written soon after its author became pope (590), and was addressed to John, Bishop of Ravenna, in reply to inquiries received from him respecting the duties and obligations of the clergy. Though thus put into form for a special purpose, there can be no doubt that it was the product of long thought. Everywhere throughout Europe the work was received with the favor it deserved, and in Spain, Gaul, and Italy its influence upon the life and manners of the clergy was beyond estimate. Even in Britain it was a real power for good. The work is in four parts: (1) on the selection of men for the work of the Church; (2) on the sort of life the pastor ought to live; (3) on the best methods of dealing with the various types of people which every pastor will be likely to encounter; and (4) on the necessity that the pastor guard himself against egotism and personal ambition. The passages below are taken from the second and third parts.

The conduct of a prelate ought so far to be superior to the conduct of the people as the life of a shepherd is accustomed to exalt him above the flock. For one whose position is such that the people are called his flock ought anxiously to consider how great a necessity is laid upon him to maintain uprightness. It is necessary, then, that in thought he should be pure, in action firm; discreet in keeping silence; profitable in speech; a near neighbor to every one in sympathy; exalted above all in contemplation; a familiar friend of good livers through humility, unbending against the vices of evil-doers through zeal for righteousness; not relaxing in his care for what is inward by reason of being occupied in outward things, nor neglecting to provide for outward things in his anxiety for what is inward.

The pastor should always be pure in thought, inasmuch as no impurity ought to pollute him who has undertaken the office of wiping away the stains of pollution in the hearts of others also; for the hand that would cleanse from dirt must needs be clean, lest, being itself sordid with clinging mire, it soil all the more whatever it touches. The pastor should always be a leader in action, that by his living he may point out the way of life to those who are put under him, and that the flock, which follows the voice and manners of the shepherd, may learn how to walk rather through example than through words. For he who is required by the necessity of his position to speak the highest things is compelled by the same necessity to do the highest things. For that voice more readily penetrates the hearer's heart, which the speaker's life commends, since what he commands by speaking he helps the doing by showing.

The pastor should be discreet in keeping silence, profitable in speech; lest he either utter what ought to be suppressed or suppress what he ought to utter. For, as incautious speaking leads into error, so indiscreet silence leaves in error those who might have been instructed. The pastor ought also to understand how commonly vices pass themselves off as virtues. For often
stinginess excuses itself under the name of frugality, and on the other hand extravagance conceals itself under the name of liberality. Often inordinate carelessness is believed to be loving-kindness, and unbridled wrath is accounted the virtue of spiritual zeal. Often hasty action is taken for promptness, and tardiness for the deliberation of seriousness. Whence it is necessary for the pastor of souls to distinguish with vigilant care and vices between virtues and vices, lest stinginess get possession of his heart while he exults in seeming frugality in expenditure; or, while anything is recklessly wasted, he glory in being, as it were, compassionately liberal; or, in overlooking what he ought to have smitten, he draw on those that are under him to eternal punishment; or, in mercilessly smiting an offense, he himself offend more grievously; or, by rashly anticipating, mar what might have been done properly and gravely; or, by putting off the merit of a good action, change it to something worse.

Since, then, we have shown what manner of man the pastor ought to be, let us now set forth after what manner he should teach. For, as long before us Gregory Nazianzen, of reverend memory, has taught, one and the same exhortation does not suit all, inasmuch as all are not bound together by similarity of character. For the things that profit some often hurt others; seeing that also, for the most part, herbs which nourish some animals are fatal to others; and the gentle hissing that quiets horses incites whelps; and the medicine which abates one disease aggravates another; and the food which invigorates the life of the strong kills little children. Therefore, according to the quality of the hearers ought the discourse of teachers to be fashioned, so as to suit all and each for their several needs, and yet never deviate from the art of common edification. For what are the intent minds of hearers but, so to speak, a kind of harp, which the skillful player, in order to produce a tune possessing harmony, strikes in various ways? And for this reason the strings render back a melodious sound, because they are struck indeed with one quill, but not with one kind of stroke. Whence every teacher also, that he may edify all in the one virtue of charity, ought to touch the hearts of his hearers out of one doctrine, but not with one and the same exhortation.

Differently to be admonished are these that follow:

- Men and women.
- The poor and the rich.
- The joyful and the sad.
- Prelates and subordinates.
- Servants and masters.
- The wise of this world and the dull.
- The impudent and the bashful.
- The forward and the faint-hearted.
- The impatient and the patient.
- The kindly disposed and the envious.
- The simple and the insincere.
- The whole and the sick.
- Those who fear scourges, and therefore live innocently; and those who have grown so hard in iniquity as not to be corrected even by scourges.
The too silent, and those who spend time in much speaking.

The slothful and the hasty.

The meek and the passionate.

The humble and the haughty.

The obstinate and the fickle.

The gluttonous and the abstinent.

Those who mercifully give of their own, and those who would fain seize what belongs to others.

Those who neither seize the things of others nor are bountiful with their own; and those who both give away the things they have, and yet cease not to seize the things of others.

Those who are at variance, and those who are at peace.

Lovers of strife and peacemakers.

Those who understand not aright the words of sacred law; and those who understand them indeed aright, but speak them without humility.

Those who, though able to preach worthily, are afraid through excessive humility; and those whom imperfection or age debars from preaching, and yet rashness impels to it....

Differently to be admonished are the wise of this world and the dull. For the wise are to be admonished that they leave off knowing what they know; the dull also are to be admonished that they seek to know what they know not. In the former this thing first, that they think themselves wise, is to be overcome; in the latter, whatsoever is already known of heavenly wisdom is to be built up; since, being in no wise proud, they have, as it were, prepared their hearts for supporting a building. With those we should labor that they become more wisely foolish, leave foolish wisdom, and learn the wise foolishness of God: to these we should preach that from what is accounted foolishness they should pass, as from a nearer neighborhood, to true wisdom.

But in the midst of these things we are brought back by the earnest desire of charity to what we have already said above; that every preacher should give forth a sound more by his deeds than by his words, and rather by good living imprint footsteps for men to follow than by speaking show them the way to walk in. For that cock, too, whom the Lord in his manner of speech takes to represent a good preacher, when he is now preparing to crow, first shakes his wings, and by smiting himself makes himself more awake; since it is surely necessary that those who give utterance to words of holy preaching should first be well awake in earnestness of good living, lest they arouse others with their voice while themselves torpid in performance; that they should first shake themselves up by lofty deeds, and then make others solicitous for good living; that they should first smite themselves with the wings of their thoughts; that whatsoever in themselves is unprofitably torpid they should discover by anxious investigation, and correct by strict self-discipline, and then at length set in order the life of others by speaking; that they should take heed to punish their own faults by bewailings, and then denounce what calls for punishment in others; and that, before they give voice to words of exhortation, they should proclaim in their deeds all that they are about to speak.

Source.