

Romanesque economics II

1. Introduction

Near the middle of the thirteenth century in France a letter appears, written by a Bertrand or a Bernard, of whom we do not know anything, but who formulates a set of pragmatic not to say cynical recommendations about the management of the family good. At a certain moment in time it became ascribed to Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who was the famous founder of the Cistercensian order and canonized Saint of the Catholic Church and this must have helped the distribution of this letter over the Cistercensian and other libraries all over Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth century tremendously, although one does not read in the letter any references to a belief in God.

The medieval scholars were aware of the Roman ring of this letter, because some critical copyists at the end of the Middle Ages thought that the letter originally was written by Seneca (4 BC-65 AD), the Roman neo-Stoic. Interesting is the play of question and answer to help the addressee to remember the content of the letter.

My reasons to add this letter to the history of original economics, despite that it hardly deals with the government of the family and only with the management of goods, are three. In the first place a few of the translators will add comments, of which they take some from the *Oikonomikos* of Ps. Aristotle.. A second reason is that in the fifteenth century some authors combine the Ps. Aristotelian material with this letter. These authors at least have meant that this letter is an integral part of original economics. Finally it might be possible that the reader finds traces of this letter in the books on original economics that still will follow.

The letter of Bernard about the care of the family good will become read in the 13th, 14th and 15th century in ever more places in Europe. This happens because one supposes this Bernard or Bertrand to be Bernard of Clairvaux, the saint who had founded the order of Cistercensian monks and this order becomes established all over Europe. It will become exceptionally popular in the second half of fourteenth century, when it will not only be copied in Latin frequently all over Europe but also translated in many vernaculars. Examples are German (the southern and northern variantⁱ), Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Czech, French, Italian dialects, Iberian languages, Irish and English. This letter even will be rewritten. It will several times become printed as well in Latin as in most of the mentioned mother tongues.

In the 16th century versions, finally, its tenor will change. The author now is shown more concerned that the father behaves himself in a Christian way rather than that the lord manages his house properly.ⁱⁱ Only in the seventeenth century the letter of Ps. Bernard will lose its attractiveness.

2. Translation of the *Epistola de cura rei familiaris* (Letter about the care for the family good) by Ps. Bernard of Clairvaux

Letter of St Bernard to the gentleman Raymond, about the care for the family good and the way to govern it in a useful way

Gracious and fortunate gentleman, Raymond, lord of the fortress of St Ambrose, Bernardus, in his old age, greets you!

You have asked me to teach you about the care for the family good and the way to govern it in a useful way; how patres familias should behave. To which we answer, that despite the fact that the status of all worldly matters and the result in business enterprises depends on fortune, one nevertheless should not omit the rule for living. Listen therefore and look out that if in your house the expenditures and the income are equal, a not well thought out decision will easily be able to destroy

its situation. The situation of a house of a negligent man is ruinous. What is negligence of the governor of the house? A powerful fire in the house which is set into fire!

About ministerialsⁱⁱⁱ

Break the ambition and jalousie of them who manage for you. For him, staggering and not yet falling, who has the powers it is less shameful to abstain than to fall. It is great foresight to look regularly at what are your things and how they are.

About animals

Ascertain therefore with regard to the food and drink of your animals that they are not finished with the food and disappear hungrily and thirsty, because they do not ask.

About expenditures

Expensive weddings without honor bring danger. To do an expense on warfare is honorable. Any expense for helping friends is given with reason. Any expense to help spendthrifts is lost.

About gluttony

You are feeding the family with heavy and non-delicate food. Who is gluttonous will hardly else change his habits than by death. Gluttony of the vile and negligent man is putrefication. Gluttony of the concerned and diligent man is solace. Feed your family abundantly with the Easter days be it not with delicate food. Make the throat fight with the purse and watch out whose advocate you are or which verdict you issue in the cases between throat and purse. Often but not always give a verdict in favor of the purse for the throat brings up evidence of biased witnesses who have not taken an oath, the purse however evidently brings evidence when the money-box and cellars have become empty or will be empty shortly. You issue then a bad verdict against the throat, when avarice is coupled with the purse. Avarice will never issue a proper verdict in the case between throat and purse. What is the miser? The murderer of what is his! What is avarice? Fear of poverty and of always having to live in poverty. The avaricious lives rightly if he does not spend the riches on himself but by reserving them for others, for it is better to set apart for others than to spend on oneself. (p. 126)

About an excess of corn

If you have an excess of cereals, don't wish for high prices, because who appreciates the highest value desires to be a killer of the poor. Sell the corn when it still has enough value, not when it cannot be bought by a poor man. Sell it to your neighbors for a cheaper price and also to your enemies, because an enemy is not always defeated by a sword but always by a service. Arrogance towards an enemy is a poison, and waits upon thunder and lightning.

About enemies

Do you have an important enemy? You are incarcerated! Do you have an enemy? Keep your eye open! If you have an enemy, do not engage in a conversation with people that you do not know. Keep in mind that the enemy is smart and is always devising hostile approaches. The weakness of an enemy is not in a place of peace but in an armistice of a certain period¹. If you feel secure and imagine that he is not the enemy, you expose yourself to danger.

About women

Look for ignorance not for knowledge about your women, who you suspect to carry something in their shield, because after you will have known the crime of a bad wife, you will not be healed by any doctor. You will soften the pain of a bad wife only when you hear the things done by the wives of others. A noble and high heart does not inquire into the activities of women. You punish a bad wife less with a laugh than with a stick. A young and adulterous wife, if she wants that, will destroy all riches; an old and adulterous wife, if the law would permit this, should be buried alive.

About clothing

About clothing you really should keep in mind that an expensive garment is a proof of little sense. Clothing, which too much stands out, soon causes hate amongst the neighbors. Try to please with goodness, not by clothing. That a wife, who has clothes, still asks for clothes is not a sign of mental strength.

About friends

About friends you keep in mind that the friend who gives his things is larger than the one who offers himself, because the amount of friends in words is large. Do not esteem the friend who praises you in

¹ If you yourself feel the weakest party, do not go for a peace treaty but for an armistice.

your face. If you advise a friend, do not try to please him but please reason. And say to your friend when you advise him: 'So seems to me' and not specifically: 'It should be done so', because from a bad outcome of the advice follows easier a refutation than praise about a good outcome.

About jesters

I have heard that jesters visit you. Listen what things come from this. The man who is focused on jesters will soon have a wife, whose name is 'Poverty', and next will be born their son, whose name will be 'Derision'. Do the words of the jester please you? Feign not to hear them and to think at something else, because already laughing about and enjoying the words of a jester give him self-confidence. Jestors who reproach bad things are worth to be hanged. What is a jester who reproaches bad things? He is somebody who brings along the spirit of murder! The instruments of jesters will not please God.

About slaves

Hear about slaves. Reject a haughtily slave as a future enemy. Do not keep a slave who says to like your habits. Contradict a slave and a neighbor who praise you, because otherwise they will think that they can deceive you. Love as a son the slave who easily stays modest.

About a building

If you want to build a house, let necessity and not your will direct you. The desire to build does not get extinguished by the actual building.² A too large and unorganized desire for building loses itself and awaits the sale of the buildings. The wise man makes sure that the money box is only empty when the tower is finished.

About selling

If you want to sell something, take care that you do not sell a part of your heritage to someone who is more powerful than you, but for a bit lesser price to a less powerful person than you; the whole, however, you sell to him who gives most for it. It is better to suffer a severe hunger than the sale of the patrimony; but it is better to sell a part than to subject oneself to loans against interest. What is a loan against interest (mutuum)? The poison of the patrimony, with which the legal bandit announces in advance what he intends!

About buying

Do not buy anything as a member of a consortium with somebody who is more powerful. Sustain a small partner patiently to prevent that a more powerful person associates with you.

About the use of wine

You have asked after the use of wine. Who with a diversity of wines and an affluence of dishes stays sober, he is an earthly god. Drunkenness does nothing sensible, unless when it causes you to vomit. You smell wine? Flee from the company! You smell wine? Look for sleep instead of conversation! Who with words excuses himself to be drunk, better had to accuse his drunkenness openly.

About the doctor

Flee from a doctor, who is full of theory, but has not proved himself in practice. Flee from the drunken doctor. Watch out for the doctor who wants to experiment on you, look how he will cure others from the same disease.

About dogs

Send very small little dogs to the priests or queens. Dogs are useful as guards. Dogs to hunt cost more than they bring in.

About managers

Do you have son? Do not make him the manager of your goods!

But you say: 'If fortune turns around, what is the benefit of the doctrine of living. Listen what I have to say about these matters. I have seen stupid people, who refuse to follow the rule of living but at the end excuse themselves with fortune. Sometimes it happens indeed, that fortune turns things to the bad. For the person that follows the doctrine seldom will accuse fortune. Seldom, indeed, you will bring together diligence with bad luck, but even more seldom you will separate having bad luck from inertia. The indolent person expects that he will be helped by God, Who prescribes to pay attention.

About lying awake at night

² Once you start to build a house your desire for extensions and embellishments will augment.

So lay awake at night and compensate your lightness in spending with the weight of profit making. Does old age approach? I advise that you rather surrender yourself to God than to your son.

About wills

You want to make legacies? I advise you to command that the obligations to the servants and the creditors are met before those to the priests.

About entrustment of the soul

Do not entrust your soul to those who love the world or your person, but entrust your soul to those who love your soul.

About disposal of the goods before death

Dispose about your goods before your death. For everything what is done in infirmity is done as a slave and a slave cannot leave a will. So make a will before you become a slave.³ Now is sufficiently said about you.

About division amongst the sons

Hear about the sons. When a father has died they look for a division amongst them. If they are nobles, better is always their dispersion over the world than the division of the legacy, because a division of this legacy is always a hard to bear dissolution. If they are workers, they do as they want. If they are merchants, a division amongst them is more secure than that a cooperation forces to charge the bad luck of one of them to the others.

About their mother

Maybe the mother wants to remarry and acts stupidly; but so that she deplores her sins, she, herself old, accepts a young man who has not wanted her but her goods. Once he has them, she drinks with him the cup of sorrows which she has always desired. Let the merits of her disgraceful old age bring her to this.

ⁱ In Germany it got the title: *The doctrine of having a house* (Ge: *Die Lehre vom Haushaben*).

ⁱⁱ Irrmintraut Richarz, *Oikos, Haus und Haushalt Ursprung und Geschichte der Haushaltsökonomik* (Oikos, house and household. The origin and history of house economics). Gottingen (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht) 1991

ⁱⁱⁱ Ministerials at the time are slave-servants, who gradually might get more important functions in the house. Some of them in the 14th century will have become as powerful as their former masters.

³ That is: before you become too weak to take the right decisions, because you are dying