

Excerpts from the *Praise of Folly*,
by Erasmus¹

Erasmus satirically derides the Apostles because they did not have the theological understanding of the Roman Catholic theologians of Erasmus' day.

In the same way the apostles teach grace, and yet they never determined the difference between a grace freely given and one that makes one deserving. They urge us to do good works, but they don't separate work in general, work being done, and work that is already finished. At all times they incite us to charity, but they don't distinguish infused charity from that which is acquired, or state whether charity is an accident or a substance, created or uncreated. They abhor sin, but may I be shot if they could define sin scientifically as we know it, unless they were fortunate enough to have been instructed by the Scotists. You could never persuade me to believe that Paul, upon whose learning others can be judged, would have condemned so many questions, disputes, genealogies, and what he called "strifes for words," if he had really been a master of those subtle topics....

Erasmus then goes after the monks.

Those who are the closest to these [the theologians whom Erasmus has just finished lampooning] in happiness are generally called "the religious" or "monks," both of which are deceiving names, since for the most part they stay as far away from religion as possible and frequent every sort of place. I cannot, however, see how any life could be more gloomy than the life of these monks if I did not assist them in many ways. Though most people detest these men so much that accidentally meeting one is considered to be bad luck, the monks themselves believe that they are magnificent creatures. One of their chief beliefs is that to be illiterate is to be of a high state of holiness, and so they make sure that they are not able to read. Another is that when they bray like donkeys in church they are making themselves very pleasing and satisfying to God, when in fact they are uttering these psalms as a matter of repetition rather than from their hearts.. Many of them too make a good living out of their squalor and beggary, bellowing for bread from door to door, and indeed making a nuisance of themselves in every inn, carriage or boat, to the great loss of all the other beggars.

Of course, you knew he was going to go after the Popes.

As to the Popes, if they would recall that they take the place of Christ and would attempt to imitate His poverty, tasks, doctrines, crosses, and disregard of safety; if they were even to contemplate the meaning of the name Pope—that is, Father—or of the title of Supreme Holiness, then they would become the most humble and mortified of men.

¹ Most of this excerpt is taken from the John Dolan translation.

How many would then be willing to spend all their wealth and efforts in order to purchase this position? If someone were foolish enough to purchase it in this manner, would they further be willing to defend their position by the shedding of blood, by the use of poison, or by any other necessary means? Oh, how wisdom would upset their nefarious plans if it were to inflict them! Wisdom, did I say? Nay! Even a grain of salt, that salt spoken of by Christ, would be sufficient to upset their plans. It would lose them all their wealth, their honor, their belongings, their powers won by victories, their offices, dispensations, tributes, and indulgences. They would lose a great many horses, mules, and carts. And finally, they would lose a great many pleasures (see how I have comprehended in a few words many marketsful, a great harvest, a wide ocean, of goods). These forfeitures would be replaced by vigils, fasts, sorrows, prayers, sermons, education, weariness, and a thousand other bothersome tasks of the sort. We should also mention that a great many copyists, notaries, lobbyists, promoters, secretaries, muleteers, grooms, bankers, and pimps—I was about to add something more tender, though rougher on the ears, I am afraid—would be out of jobs. In other words, that large group of men that burdens—I be your pardon, I meant to say adorns—the Holy Roman See would be done away with and would have to, as a result, resort to begging as a means of making a living....

Thus, they proceed with pomp and with such titles and Beatitude, Reverence, and Holiness--- between blessings and curses—to execute the role of a bishop. To work miracles is old and antiquated, and not in fashion now; to instruct the people, troublesome; to interpret the Scripture, pedantic; to pray, a sign one has little else to do; to shed tears, silly and womanish; to be poor, base; to be vanquished, dishonorable and little becoming him that scarce admits even kings to kiss his slipper; and lastly, to die, uncouth; and to be stretched on a cross, dishonor.

The only remaining powers invested with the pontiffs are the sacred benedictions of which Paul speaks. The popes are certainly liberal enough with these interdictions; excommunication; re-excommunication; anathemas; edicts, vivaciously depicting damnation; and the terrific lighting bolt of the bull [a papal decree], which by merely flickering, submerges the souls of men below the floor of hell. And these powers are launched against no one with more vigor than against those who, under the devil's tutorship, dispute and deny the heritage of Peter's throne. Although Peter has been recorded as saying in the gospels, "We have left all and followed You," the Popes of our time still insist on profanely attaching Peter's name to territories, cities, taxes, wages, and all money. These are the things they fight to uphold with fire, sword, and blood—inflamed by a zeal for Christ, of course. Having thus fought, they believe in themselves to be justly called defenders of Christ, bragging that they have routed the enemies of the Church—as if the Church had any greater enemies than these charlatan popes who encourage the disregard of Christ, who depict Him as mercenary, who corrupt His teachings by forced interpretations, and who scandalize Him by their infamous lives.