

# *Texts and Documents*

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## DE VIRGINUM VESTALIIUM VALETUDINE TUENDA DISSERTATIO

*Introduced by*

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BERNADINO RAMAZZINI (1633–1714) in his classic *De Morbis Artificum Diatriba*—Diseases of Tradesmen—devotes chapter 19 to the diseases of midwives and the succeeding chapter 20 to the diseases of nurses. This, as emerges, is a natural sequence as nurse is defined as the wet nurse and the nursing mother. In Ramazzini's era, and as now in Roman Catholic communities, nurses in charge of the sick were usually nuns belonging to one of the religious Orders. In the 1713 (Padua) edition of his great book appeared for the first time an essay in which he described some of the hazards of nuns with the title 'De virginum vestalium valetudine tuenda, dissertatio' (On the conservation of the health of vestal virgins). It was published in a French translation by Etienne Coulet in 1724, but after extensive searches in library catalogues of many countries we have been unable to trace an English translation. Through the scholarly assistance of a Roman Catholic priest, who wishes to remain anonymous, we present the following translation of the original Latin version.

### BERNARDINO RAMAZZINI:

#### A Dissertation on the Care of the Health of Nuns

If we describe monks and other religious bodies in different countries as a sacred army upon earth we may also call the life of cloistered nuns a type of military service in which they encamp and know how to fight steadfastly and overcome the foes of mankind. A force such as this was unknown to and not even envisaged by either pagans or Jews, set as they were solely on human fecundity. Only in the eyes of the Christian religion with Christ as its head, the only Son of a Virgin and glory of virgins, was this great glory to be preserved. Rome, it is true, did at one time have Virgins who were termed sacred and Vestal, after their goddess, to supervise the sacred rites of Vesta and guard her undying fire. They were four in number originally, eventually six, living in the shrine of the goddess into which all might come by day but no man by night. There we have a foreshadowing of our virgins but something very remote from them. The Vestals' virginity was for a set time, since on reaching the age of thirty in the service of Vesta, tending her fire, they were free to marry and, as Prudentius says, betake themselves wrinkled and past their prime to wedlock. Our virgins, or rather viragoes, in different cities in very many regiments keep their virginity that they have vowed to God, for ever unstained.

Now just as forces of men setting forth on an expedition have their own doctors, since the well-being and proper treatment of soldiers is of considerable importance, so it is fitting that nuns should have learned and skilled physicians to care as much as may be for their good health. It was my intention to discuss the ailments of nuns and their treatment, but have thought it better to write this treatise on the care of their health first, judging it to be far more praiseworthy to prevent disease than cure it.

The doctor whose task it is should be skilled, prudent and of good character and should first take note of the atmosphere where the monastery is situated. If it is in a healthy district he will have little trouble in maintaining the good health of the nuns, whereas the opposite will obtain if the district is unhealthy. The reason is that the air in which we live and which we

breathe has a great influence on our bodies, for it often happens that while monasteries are well constructed to provide spacious gardens for recreation, they are badly situated close to city walls and drains where filth of all kinds tends to accumulate. So it is possible to observe that those who live nearer the walls suffer every year a greater proportion of illness and more serious illness than those who live more in the centre. This is just what Hippocrates remarked in his *Books on Epidemics* in the story of the man who slept by the walls, and I have observed the same in monasteries; if they are in the more populous districts of the city, in spite of having no gardens or spacious walks, the health in them is better than in those which have these amenities but whose situation is too unhealthy. The doctor should be careful to take precautions so far as possible against anything that might pollute the air, warning the nuns to beware of winds that blow from where drains are situated, to avoid accumulating great heaps of manure in their gardens, and to buy it instead, not fresh but old, so as not to pollute the air in their eagerness to fertilise their gardens. Hesiod, as I remarked in an earlier discussion on the Diseases of Farmers, condemned the manuring of fields, preferring to sacrifice the interests of soil fertility to those of health. They ought to be careful of walking in their gardens in the morning or evening to avoid afflictions of the head and in fine should keep the whole monastery clean, to maintain the purity of the air to the utmost.

I have noticed that in practically all monasteries four or five pigs are kept to provide salt-meat, hams, sausages and bacon and many other products. Although these animals are kept in an enclosure, it is impossible to prevent their assailing the purity of the air. While it is necessary to clean the styes repeatedly, especially in summer, a great smell pervades the whole monastery and nuns cannot be persuaded to abandon the practice though they do not make as much profit as they think if one considers the cost of feeding these animals. But when they decide to keep them they should take the greatest care that the air be polluted as little as possible.

Regarding human food, bread is the chief item and I have nothing to say under this head. All monasteries have very good bread, generally fresh and carefully made so that nothing is wanting here. The same cannot be said about what is drunk, i.e. the wine. The wines used by nuns do not weather the summer well for when they experience the heat of Procyon and fierce Leo they become weak and unstable. I have noticed this happening year by year for when they are diluted with much water to weaken them, and to fill every jar there is in the monastery, they cannot long withstand the summer heat. It also happens that fresh wines are made with the greatest speed from unripe grapes, harsh and bitter, and used after a few days' fermentation, giving rise to stomach trouble and flatulence. To avoid this the nuns should make wines from raisins and water, fermented in the sun, for raisins are called concentrated wine. If they do not like this sort of wine they should obtain old wine from their relatives and friends, for fresh wine of any kind is always harmful to the stomach and no new wine should be used when there is a sufficiency of old. As our Lord said, in St. Luke's Gospel (chapter V, 39 inserted), no one with old wine wants new. Further, I usually advise the Superior to have fresh wines strained for the community's use, but not diluted with much water and set aside for use when so strained. Wine that has been properly strained and purified from tartar and impurities has the property of never fermenting in jars, whereas all other wines generally ferment in jars for whole months. Moreover they never weaken and become unstable, becoming sour only in excessive heat. However, I am inclined to think it better for the health of the nuns and the well-being of the whole monastery if the cellarers make their wines undiluted at the proper time for the summer months, diluting them later as they are used, as is the practice in many places. This would ensure the better health of the nuns and less revenue for the monastery chemist. I am well aware that in some monasteries alum is used to preserve wines, a measure being mixed with each quantity of wine, but I cannot approve of this for health, since such wines are astringent and constipating.

As regards the other foods, since the rules of nuns vary, some eating fish while others eat meat and all the foods that are used outside a monastery, and since they differ in age, constitution and temperament, only general guidance can be given, but in all things 'due moderation', the rule of Polycletus, will be paramount. The health of those who abstain from meat and live on fish and vegetables only is inclined to be precarious; 'weaker foods have a shorter life', as

Hippocrates says, meaning foods that undernourish and are more perishable. Marsilius Ficinus in his treatise on 'Students' Health' says that four times the amount of bread is required with fish and vegetables. All vegetables cause flatulence and produce only black bile secretions, which by their nature are detrimental to health. Hippocrates mentions vegetables in his treatise on *Diet in Crises*, saying that all vegetables, other than green vegetables, are indigestible, be they raw, boiled, or roasted. Martian explains why soaked and green vegetables are less harmful than dry vegetables, which is contrary to the general view that green vegetables are less good than dry. Wherever dry prevails over damp, windy matter is generated, but not when damp is greater than dry, as in green or soaked vegetables. To make vegetables less harmful, they should be soaked as far as possible in water and lye. In addition to flatulence they are wont to cause troubled sleep and excite amorous ideas in the mind, whence arises the Pythagorean dictum, 'thou shalt abstain from kidney beans'. For this reason the monks who chastised their bodies to preserve chastity were warned by St. Jerome to abstain as much as possible from eating vegetables and to prefer green vegetables. He repeats the same counsel in his letter to Furia *On Preserving Widowhood*, and in another letter to Demetrias *On Preserving Virginity*.

If the nuns are of a less rigorous way of life and eat meat, mutton has most to commend it because it has an open texture, as Sanctorius records in his book on *Medicine*. Next for preference are veal and poultry, pigeons, wild fowl, if they can afford them. Beef, pork and hare are hard to cook and generate thick secretions. There is a fine monastery of nuns at Modena, Salesians they are called after St. Francis de Sales (Visitation Nuns), which was built through the beneficence of the Duchess Laura and endowed with much land. The only meat its nuns eat is veal, so that they may keep as healthy as possible and serve God gladly. It is good for nuns to have lively blood, always flowing easily through their veins, especially at the time of life when it should do so.

I am well aware that they are bound by their rule and customs to chastise their bodies by frequent fasts, but in this too the celebrated maxim, 'nothing in excess' has its place. Often many nuns, eager for a sterner way of life, do themselves permanent harm; their blood and strength are worn out in the best years of their lives and they become not only impaired in health but positively ill and an annoyance to the other nuns and to the doctors from whom they demand an immediate remedy. Here I should like to quote what St. Jerome has to say about the fasts of virgins in the letter to Demetrias previously referred to: 'You ought not to fast to such an extent as to cause palpitations and be scarce able to breathe, and have to be carried or supported by your companions, but so to curb the bodily appetite as to take your normal share in reading, Office and vigils. Fasting is not the height of virtue, but the basis for all other virtues, whereas sanctification and purity are. Meagre food and an ever-hungry stomach is better than three-day fasts.'

Nothing weakens the health of nuns more than failure to enjoy the benefits of regular natural sleep. Although nuns usually sleep in a long spacious room, the dormitory, each one in her own cubicle, and have a regular time allotted by the monastery rule for sleep, they cannot give the whole time to sleep. Since they are all in the same place together and some cough, some sigh, some snore loudly, some dream and talk in their sleep, they frequently suffer severe loss of sleep, and, when they are sleeping more peacefully in the early hours, they have to rise at the sound of the bell and go to church. In addition to loss of sleep there is the additional hardship that where so many nuns are sleeping in one place there is a rather unpleasant odour that assails one's nose immediately on entering. The nuns although accustomed to it dislike it and call it the dormitory smell. Hippocrates in his books on Epidemics praises sleep in a cool-covered place, a large room, with adequate blankets to prevent cold from disturbing sleep. For the air breathed in through the mouth is purer, as we have said elsewhere. Nuns in separate rooms enjoy a much more peaceful sleep, in winter especially, for they sleep more soundly during the allotted time, though not so much in summer. Further they cannot but breathe in through mouth and nostrils air tainted by continual breathing. To avoid this, so far as may be, I advise them to leave the doors of the sleeping quarters slightly open in winter and summer alike, to freshen the air by creating a flow of air between the outside and inside. If it appears that some do not have enough sleep at night especially in summer when nights are shorter, the time should be made up by some period for sleep during the day, before food, as Celsus advises,

'It is useful to have a siesta when the days are long, preferably before food, or else to rest the whole night after food, especially in winter.'

However, if these holy virgins cannot enjoy with such ease the benefits of sleep, they can very easily reap the fruits of praiseworthy physical exercise. A consideration of the life nuns lead shows us that it is mainly sedentary. They spend most of the day in their workrooms, on the finer arts of Minerva, embroidery and such-like, or singing in their church, or meditating. These activities do not permit of continued good health. They will claim that singing and psalmody is a form of exercise they were unaccustomed to when at home with their parents. While I should not be ready to deny that singing and psalmody count as exercise, I maintain that they do not suffice if they do not exercise the whole body also with some suitable physical activity. Plato says that true exercise lies in internal and external movement together. Mere reading and singing exercise the lungs but not the whole body. The nuns will urge that they exercise the whole body daily, in ringing the church bells, in the early hours, in the morning and in the evening, a type of exercise heavy enough to warm the whole body and frequently induce perspiration. I dare not call such an exercise in question unless the noise provokes the inhabitants in the neighbourhood to curse the nuns heartily. I can recall frequently treating several young nuns laid up with heavy colds from pulling on the bells for many hours on end in the belfry on a mid-winter's night to announce a feast, especially when a novice was to take the veil. I am lost in admiration at how all nuns practically everywhere delight in this aural torture. There are many other exercises in which the body and all its parts are exercised, hands and feet for instance in weaving, though I have never seen a weaving-shop in monasteries. If there is one thing that keeps the body free of constipation, and removes it if present, it is weaving in which the whole body is kept exercised. One seldom sees women stronger or with better colour than weavers. Who shall find the brave woman, who has sought flax and wool and worked with dexterous hands, as recorded in Holy Writ? In former times nuns were frequently allowed to go out of their monasteries, not alone but in procession through the city for solemn services, like other religious bodies, and from this they derived considerable benefit in regular bodily exercise. Since Boniface VIII (1230-1303) saw fit to enclose them that they might present a spectacle rather to heaven than the world, they must now replace this exercise by some strenuous tasks and not leave the more laborious tasks to the lay-sisters, whom they call their fellow-servants, most of them from the country, so that they may have no cause later to envy them their stronger appearance and better colour. I have noticed that in some cities there are monasteries that do not have lay-sisters, and all the nuns are of the same degree, each doing for herself what is needful.

It is better for nuns to be busy, not only with their hands in light weaving but with their whole body, if they value their health. So what doctors everywhere say about excretion and retention grows from bodily exercise as fruit from the root, for when the appropriate matter is excreted nature more readily retains what is necessary for bodily nourishment. If movement of the body contributes so much to health, no less a contribution will be made by the good order of the movements of the mind. For mind and body are so united that they share both good and bad with one another. What serious upsets are occasioned in the human body, chiefly in the blood, by passions of the mind, like anger, fear, joy and other immoderate emotions was once clearly shown by the learned Chambræus in his book on emotional characteristics. In it he describes the marks and colours that each passion leaves on the face itself, whence one can gather what serious movements they cause within, especially in the female sex. I have often had cause to notice that a sudden fit of anger, especially in women, causes such an inner contraction that what was in full flow was suppressed. Accordingly nuns should beware of emotions, especially anger, and stifle the snake, as the saying is, in the egg. I should not want them to strive for freedom from emotion as did some philosophers. That ill befits noble virgins. The emotions have their place if one is prepared to use them aright. Let it suffice for nuns to learn to control them. 'Control your mind which will rule you if it does not serve you, curb and chain it.'

It may be asked whether principles for a way of life are sufficient to safeguard the health of nuns or if remedies may also be used. My answer would be that since health can vary considerably treatment may be used at the proper times. Hippocrates used to say, 'Those who will

profit thereby should be purged or have their blood let.' One must note the disjunctive particle. Hippocrates did not prescribe that both of these remedies should always be used, as is the practice with some who consider it a crime to let blood without a previous purge. There are some women for whom blood-letting alone is beneficial, when they are rather plump, others who will derive advantage from purging, when their system is out of order, others again from both. These remedies can be used in Autumn as well as in Spring, especially purging to right the wrongs of the Summer, such as the voracious eating of fruit that ripens under Ora and Opora (late summer).

It has given me great pleasure to propose these few medical cautions—many could be given—to nuns, for their good health, that they may go on with greater zest in the way of life they have nobly undertaken. It is assuredly a great task, comparable to any martyrdom, that a maid should vow perpetual chastity, for, St. Jerome puts it well, 'It is not only against nature but beyond nature to refrain from what one was born to, to do to death one's own root and pluck only the fruits of Virginity.'

## A MEDIEVAL TREATISE ON MAN (*DE HOMINE*)

LYNN THORNDIKE

ESSENTIALLY the same text in differing stages of completeness is preserved in three different Latin manuscripts: Vatican Palatine 1892, 15th century, fols. 79r–98v, of which I gave some account in *Annals of Medical History*, 1936, 8, 99, and which opens, 'Homo quoniam sit secundum Ysidorum animal forma dei . . .'; Vienna Nationalbibliothek 1629, 14th century, fols. 1r–98r, opening, 'Homo secundum Ysidor. est dei forme . . .'; and Vatican Palatine 1190, paper, 15th century, fols. 1r–84rb, which opens, 'Homo secundum ysidorem est animal dei forme . . .'. The briefest text is that of Vatican Palatine 1892, the most complete that of Vatican Palatine 1190.

In the Vienna printed manuscript catalogue of 1864 our text is described as 'Tractatus hominis de descriptione hominis.' The following chapter headings from the Vienna manuscript are found partly in the margins of the leaves indicated, partly in the text itself:

fol.	cap.	
2r–	5	de anima
5r	6	de sensu
5v–	7	de visu
8r	8	de auditu
8v	9	de olfactu
9r	10	de gustu
9v	11	de tactu
10r	12	de spiritu
11r	13	de pulsu
12r	14	de humidi (humani?) corporis et partium eius proprietatibus