

St. Mary  
of Egypt

APRIL 2  
A.D. 421

In the reign of Theodosius the Younger, there lived in Palestine a holy monk and priest named Zosimus, famed for the reputation of his sanctity, and resorted to as an oracle for the direction of souls in the most perfect rules of a religious life. He had served God from his youth with great fervor, in the same house, for the space of three-and-fifty years, when he was tempted to think that he had attained to a state of perfection, and that no one could teach him any thing more in regard to a monastic life God, to discover the delusion and danger of this suggestion of the proud spirit, and to convince him that we may always advance in perfection, directed him by revelation to quit his monastery for one near the Jordan, where he might learn lessons of virtue he yet was unacquainted with. Being admitted among them, it was not long before he was undeceived, and convinced, from what he saw practiced there, how much he had been mistaken in the judgment he had formed of himself and his advancement in virtue. The members of this community had no more communication with the rest of mankind than if they had belonged to another world. The whole employment of their lives was manual labor, which they accompanied with prayer, and the singing of psalms, (in which heavenly exercise they spent the whole night, relieving each other by turns,) and their chief subsistence was on bread and water. It was their yearly custom, after having assisted at the divine mysteries, and received the blessed Eucharist on the first Sunday in Lent, to cross the river, and disperse themselves over the vast deserts which lie towards Arabia, to pass in perfect solitude the interval

between that and Palm-Sunday; against which time they all returned again to the monastery to join in celebrating the passion and resurrection of our Lord. Some subsisted during this time on a small parcel of provision they took with them, while others lived on the herbs which grew wild; but when they came back, they never communicated to each other what they did during that time.

About the year 430, the holy man Zosimus passed over the Jordan with the rest at the usual time, endeavoring to penetrate as far as he could into the wilderness, in hopes of meeting with some hermit of still greater perfection than he had hitherto seen or conversed with, praying with great fervor as he traveled. Having advanced thus for twenty days, as he one day stopped at noon to rest himself and recite a certain number of psalms, according to custom, he saw as it were the figure of a human body. He was at first seized with fright and astonishment; and imagining it might be an illusion of the enemy, he armed himself with the sign of the cross and continued in prayer. Having finished his devotions, he plainly perceived, on turning his eyes that way, that it was somebody that appeared naked, extremely sunburnt, and with short white hair, who walked very quick, and fled from him. Zosimus, judging it was some holy anchoret, ran that way with all his speed to overtake him. He drew nearer by degrees, and when he was within hearing, he cried out to the person to stop and bless him who answered: "abbot Zosimus, I am a woman; throw me your mantle to cover me, that you may come near me." He, surprised to hear her call him by his name, which he was convinced she could have known only by revelation, readily complied with her request. Having covered herself with his garment she approached him, and they entered into conversation after mutual prayer: and on the holy man's conjuring her by Jesus Christ to tell him who she was, and how long, and in what manner she had lived in that desert, she said: "I ought to die

with confusion and shame in telling you what I am; so horrible is the very mention of it, that you will fly from me as from a serpent: your ears will not be able to bear the recital of the crimes of which I have been guilty. I will however relate to you my ignominy begging of you to pray for me that God may show me mercy in the day of his terrible judgment.

"My country is Egypt. When my father and mother were still living, at twelve years of age I went without their consent to Alexandria: I cannot think, without trembling, on the first steps by which I fell into sin, nor my disorders which followed." She then described how she lived a public prostitute seventeen years, not for interest, but to gratify an unbridled lust: she added: "I continued my wicked course till the twenty-ninth year of my age, when, perceiving several persons making towards the sea, I inquired whither they were going, and was told they were about to embark for the holy land, to celebrate at Jerusalem the feast of the Exaltation of the glorious Cross of our Savior. I embarked with them, looking only for fresh opportunities to continue my debauches, which I repeated both during the voyage and after my arrival at Jerusalem. On the day appointed for the festival, all going to church, I mixed with the crowd to get into the church where the holy cross was shown and exposed to the veneration of the faithful; but found myself withheld from entering the place by some secret but invisible force. This happening to me three or four times, I retired into a corner of the court, and began to consider with myself what this might proceed from; and seriously reflecting that my criminal life might be the cause, I melted into tears. Beating therefore my sinful breast, with sighs and groans, I perceived above me a picture of the mother of God. Fixing my eyes upon it, I addressed myself to that holy virgin, begging of her, by her incomparable purity, to succor me, defiled with such a load of abominations, and to render my repentance the more

acceptable to God. I besought her I might be suffered to enter the church doors to behold the sacred wood of my redemption; promising from that moment to consecrate myself to God by a life of penance, taking her for my surety in this change of my heart. After this ardent prayer, I perceived in my soul a secret consolation under my grief; and attempting again to enter the church, I went up with ease into the very middle of it, and had the comfort to venerate the precious wood of the glorious cross which brings life to man. Considering therefore the incomprehensible mercy of God, and his readiness to receive sinners to repentance, I cast myself on the ground, and after having kissed the pavement with tears, I arose and went to the picture of the mother of God, whom I had made the witness and surety of my engagements and resolutions. Falling there on my knees before her image, I addressed my prayers to her begging her intercession, and that she would be my guide. After my prayer, I seemed to hear this voice: 'If thou goest beyond the Jordan, thou shalt there find rest and comfort.' Then weeping, and looking on the image, I begged of the holy queen of the world that she would never abandon me. After these words, I went out in haste, bought three loaves, and asking the baker which was the gate of the city which led to the Jordan, I immediately took that road, and walked all the rest of the day, and at night arrived at the church of St. John Baptist, on the banks of the river. There I paid my devotions to God, and received the precious body of our Savior Jesus Christ. Having ate the half of one of my loaves, I slept all night on the ground. Next morning, recommending myself to the holy Virgin, I passed the Jordan, and from that time I have carefully shunned the meeting of any human creature."

Zosimus asked how long she had lived in that desert. "It is," said she, "as near as I can judge, forty-seven years." "And what have you subsisted upon all that time?" replied Zosimus. "The loaves I took

with me," answered she, "lasted me some time: since that I have had no other food other than what this wild and uncultivated solitude afforded me. My clothes being worn out, I suffered severely from the heat and the cold, with which I was often so afflicted that I was not able to stand." "And have you passed so many years," said the holy man, "without suffering much in your soul?"

She answered: "Your question makes me tremble, by the very remembrance of my past dangers and conflicts, through the perverseness of my heart. Seventeen years I passed in most violent temptations, and almost perpetual conflicts with try inordinate desires. I was tempted to regret the flesh and fish of Egypt, and the wines which I drank in the world to express whereas here I often could not come at a drop of water to quench my thirst. Other desires made assaults on my mind, but, weeping and striking my breast on those occasions, I called to mind the vows I had made under the protection of the Blessed Virgin, and begged her to obtain my deliverance from the affliction and danger of such thoughts. After long weeping and bruising my body with blows, I found myself suddenly enlightened and my mind restored to a perfect calm. Often the tyranny of my old passions seemed ready to drag me out of my desert: at those times I threw myself on the ground and watered it with my tears, raising my heart continually to the Blessed Virgin till she procured me comfort: and she has never failed to show herself my faithful protectress." Zosimus taking notice that in her discourse with him she from time to time made use of scripture phrases, asked her if she had ever applied herself to the study of the sacred books. Her answer was that she could not even read, neither had she conversed nor seen any human creature since she came into the desert till that day, that could teach her to read the holy scripture or read it to her, but "it is God," said she, "that teacheth man knowledge. Thus have I given you a full

account of myself: keep what I have told you as an inviolable secret during my life, and allow me, the most miserable of sinners, a share in your prayers." She concluded with desiring him not to pass over the Jordan next Lent, according to the custom of his monastery, but to bring with him on Maunday-Thursday the body and blood of our Lord, and wait for her on the banks of the river on the side which is inhabited. Having spoken thus, and once more entreated him to pray for her, she left him. Zosimus hereupon fell on his knees, thanked God for what he had seen and heard, kissed the ground whereon she had stood, and returned by the usual time to his monastery.

The year following, on the first Sunday in Lent, he was detained at home on account of sickness, as indeed she had foretold him. On Maunday-Thursday, taking the sacred body and blood of our Lord in a small chalice, and also a little basket of figs, dates, and lentils, he went to the banks of the Jordan. At night she appeared on the other side, and making the sign of the cross over the river she went forward, walking upon the surface of the water, as if it had been dry land, till she reached the opposite shore. Being now together, she craved his blessing, and desired him to recite the Creed and the Lord's prayer. After which she received from his hands the holy sacrament. Then lifting up her hands to heaven, she said aloud with tears: Now thou canst dismiss thy servant, O Lord, according to thy word, in peace; because my eyes have seen my Savior. She begged Zosimus to pardon the trouble she had given him, and desired him to return the following Lent, to the place where he first saw her. He begged of her on his side to accept the sustenance he had brought her. But she took only a few of the lentils; and conjuring him never to forget her miseries, left him, and then went over the river as she came. Zosimus returned home, and at the very time fixed by the saint, set out in quest of her, with the view of being still further edified

by her holy conversation, and of learning also her name, which he had forgot to ask. But on his arrival at the place where he had first seen her, he found her corpse stretched out on the ground, with an inscription declaring her name, Mary and the time of her death. Zosimus, being miraculously assisted by a lion, dug a grave, and buried her. And having recommended both himself and the whole church to the saint's intercession, he returned to his monastery, where he recounted all that he had seen and heard of this holy penitent, and continued there to serve God till his happy death, which happened in the hundredth year of his age: and it is from a relation of the monks of that community, that an author of the same century wrote her life as above related: which history is mentioned soon after by many authors, both of the Eastern and Western church. Papeboke broke place; her conversion in 383, and her death in 421.

In the example of this holy woman, we admire the wonderful goodness and mercy of God, who raised her from the sink of the most criminal habits and the most abandoned state to the most sublime and heroic virtue. While we consider her severe penance, let us blush at the manner in which we pretend to do penance. Let her example rouse our sloth. The kingdom of heaven is only for those who do violence to themselves. Let us tremble with her at the remembrance of our baseness and sins, as often as we enter the sanctuary of the Lord, or venerate his holy cross, the instrument of our redemption. We insult him when we pretend exteriorly to pay him our homages, and at the same time dishonor him by our sloth and sinful life. God, by the miraculous visible repulse of this sinner, shows us what he does invisibly with regard to all obstinate and willful sinners. We join the crowd of adorers at the foot of his altar; but he abhors our treacherous kisses like those of Judas. We honor his cross with our lips, but he sees our heart, and condemns its irregularities and its opposition to his

holy spirit of perfect humility, meekness, self-denial, and charity. Shall we then so much fear to provoke his indignation by our unworthiness, as to keep at a distance from his holy places or mysteries? By no means. This would be irrecoverably to perish by cutting off the most essential means of salvation. Invited by the infinite goodness and mercy of God, and pressed by our own necessities and dangers, the more grievous these are, with so much greater earnestness and assiduity must we sue for pardon and grace, provided we do this in the most profound sentiments of compunction, fear, and confidence. It will be expedient often to pray with the publican at a distance from the altar, in a feeling sentiment that we ought to be treated as persons excommunicate before God and men. Sometimes we may in public prayers pronounce the words with a lower voice, as unworthy to unite our praises with others, as base sinners, whose homages ought rather to be offensive to God, who hates the sight of a heart filled with iniquity and self-love. We must at least never present ourselves before God without purifying our hearts by compunction, and trembling, to say to ourselves, that God ought to drive us out of his holy presence with a voice of thunder: Let the wicked man be taken away, and let him not see the glory of God. But in these dispositions of fear and humility, we must not fail assiduously to pour forth our supplications, and sound the divine praises with our whole hearts.

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