

PRAYER.

CATHOLIC ANECDOTES

CHAPTER II.

ON PRAYER.

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478. *Abraham's Prayer for Sodom.* -

The most affecting story I know, dear friends, on the efficacy of prayer, is that of Abraham interceding for the guilty cities of the Plain. The abominations of Sodom and Gomorrha had reached such a point, that God had resolved to destroy those two cities. He disclosed His intention to Abraham on the way to Sodom, and the holy patriarch being come to within a short distance of that city began to pray for it:

"Lord! will You destroy the just with the wicked? If there are fifty just men in the city, shall they perish with the others? Or rather, if fifty just men be found therein, will You not pardon it because of them? Surely You will not destroy the just with the wicked. That is not in accordance with Your mercy."

-- "If I find fifty just men in Sodom," the Lord replied, "I will forgive the whole city for their sake."

-- "As I have once commenced to speak, I will speak again, Lord! although I am but dust and ashes. If there be five less than fifty, will You destroy the city because those five are wanting?"

-- "No, I will

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not destroy it," the Lord answered, "if I find forty-five."

-- "But if there be only forty, what will You then do?"

-- "I will forgive the whole city because of the forty," the Lord again answered.

"I beseech You, Lord," then said Abraham, "be not angry if I speak again. What if there be only thirty?"

And be it observed in passing, my friends, that Abraham at first only diminished by fives, but the favourable disposition which he finds in the mind of God to grant him what he asks, makes him afterwards diminish by tens. He goes down, then, to thirty, then to twenty, then at last to ten, and, each time, the Lord graciously replied:

I would forgive the whole guilty city.

Unhappily, he did not even find ten just men therein, and the city was consumed by fire from heaven. But the holy patriarch's prayer remains none the less as the model of ours.

- *Genesis*, Chapter. 19.

479. *Sublime Prayer of Moses for His People.* -

The most sublime devotion of which history makes mention, my friends, is that of Moses in behalf of the Jewish people. God would destroy the children of Israel, because they had worshipped the golden calf; Moses then interceded for them and said to God:

"Why, O Lord, is Your wrath enkindled against Your people, whom You have drawn out of the land of Egypt by the power of Your hand? I beseech You let not the Egyptians say: 'He has taken them out from here to kill them in the mountains and efface them from the earth.' Let Your anger cease, and be not mindful of the sins of Your people. Remember

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Your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to whom You did swear by Your own self that you would multiply their seed even as the stars of heaven, and that all the land whereof You have spoken You would give to their posterity to possess forever."

-- "Let Me alone," said the Lord, "I will destroy them."

- "But why, O Lord!" exclaims St. Augustine, "why say: '*Let Me alone*'? Who is it, then, that prevents You, or can prevent You, from acting thus? who can tie up Your hands? who can resist Your will?"

"Why, then, say: '*Let Me alone*'? Here you see, my brethren," continues this learned Doctor, "what the force of prayer is; it prevents the effect of God's wrath, and that is what He meant to make us understand by the words: *Let Me alone*. It was not an express commandment, because if it had been, Moses would have done wrong not to obey it; neither was it a prayer, for God does not pray to His creatures; but they clearly point out to us that the prayers of the just are able to arrest the anger of God and to suspend His vengeance."

- RODRIGUEZ, *Christian Perfection*, V., 84.

480. *The Thundering Legion*. -

At the time when Marcus Aurelius was making war on the Sarmatians in northern Europe, his army got entangled in a country full of woods and mountains. The Romans suffered exceedingly from hunger and thirst, and yet could not make their way out, for the barbarians, who were in greater number, occupied all the posts in the vicinity, and kept them, as it were, besieged. The army was on the point of

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perishing, in the extremity to which it found itself reduced.

There was in that army a great number of Christian soldiers; they all knelt down and prayed fervently to God. The enemy were astonished, but they were much more so by what happened next; great clouds suddenly gathered in the firmament, then an extraordinary rain began to fall. At first the Romans, dying with thirst, as I have said, held up their heads and received this miraculous water in their mouths, but afterwards they filled their helmets with it, drank abundantly themselves, and then gave their horses to drink. The barbarians seized this moment to attack them, so that they drank fighting; some of the wounded even drank their blood with the water; but that did not last long. In fact, there came down on their opponents a terrific hail, accompanied by thunder and lightning; fire and water seemed to fall from heaven in the same place; but either the fire did not touch the Romans or was immediately extinguished. On the contrary, the rain was of no use to the barbarians, it burned them like oil, so that wet as they were, they sought water, and wounded each other to extinguish the fire with their own blood. Several went over to the side of the Romans, seeing that the water was only good for them; Marcus Aurelius had compassion on them and willingly received them. It was then that the army gave him, for the seventh time, the name of *Imperator*; he received it as coming from heaven, for every one regarded that event as miraculous. The troops of

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Christians who had drawn down this miracle by their prayers almost all belonged to the *Thundering Legion*.

A monument of this prodigy may still be seen in Rome, in the *bas reliefs* of the column of Antoninus, erected at that time. The Romans are there represented with arms in their hands near the barbarians, who, with their horses, are seen extended on the ground, a fiery rain falling on them.

On this occasion, Marcus Aurelius wrote letters in which he testified that his army, when ready to perish, was saved by the prayers of the Christians; at the same time he suspended the execution of an edict which he had issued against them some time before. This prodigious event took place in the year 174 of the Christian era, in the mountains of Bohemia.

- FLEURY, *Hist. Eccles. (Ecclesiastical History.)*

481. *Miracles Wrought by Labour.* -

By prayer, dear children, everything can be accomplished; ecclesiastical history and the lives of the saints are full of examples of this kind. Here is one which, I think, you do not all know. St. Auxentius, whilst yet a layman, was one day passing through a back street in Constantinople, inhabited chiefly by tradesmen.

One of these, I think a shoemaker, standing before his house, lamented aloud that for several weeks he had had no work.

"If it goes on so," said he, "it will be all over with myself and my family, and my business, too!" Auxentius drew near this poor man and asked if he would not take him for some time into his service as an assistant or journeyman.

"I pledge

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myself," said he, "to work several hours in the day, and I ask nothing from you, neither board, wages, nor food; I want only three oboles a day."

The shoemaker, to whom this accommodating applicant for work was unknown, was soon prevailed upon by the mild persuasion that seemed to flow from his lips; he accepted his offer, declaring, however, that he had no work, even for himself. Auxentius, nevertheless, entered his miserable stall, and modestly withdrew into a corner, to raise his heart in silence to heaven. A few hours had only passed, when people were seen coming in from all sides to order work. Next day the concourse was still greater, and on the third day, things came to such a point that the employer was obliged to engage several other workmen. Finally, at the end of some weeks, Auxentius left off going to the shop; but the blessing his prayers had drawn down on the owner's house never left it. So that he might well have put on his sign the words:

TO PRAYER.

- SCHMID et BELET, *Cat. Hist.*, I., 293.

482. *A Doctor Who Does Not Know How to Pray.* -

To pray, dear friends, there is no need of being a great doctor or scholar; on the contrary, there are sometimes learned men who understand nothing at all about it. The celebrated Lanfranc was wholly given up to the study of human science, and had thereby acquired a great reputation. He was, indeed one of the most learned men in the study of natural philosophy in the eleventh century. But he had neglected the affair of his salvation. Passing one day through a forest on his way to Rouen, in northern France, he was stopped by robbers, who having

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taken from him all he had, tied his hands behind his back, bandaged his eyes, and left him in some thick bushes, at a great distance from the road.

In this extremity, not knowing what was to become of him, Lanfranc abandoned himself to profound sadness, and bewailed his unhappy fate. Night being come, he entered still more seriously into himself, and would have prayed to God, but knew not how, because he had never learned. Then he said:

"Lord, I have employed so much time in study that I have wasted away both mind and body, and yet I know not how to pray to you. Deliver me from this danger, and, with your assistance, I will so regulate my life that I may serve you, and attach myself only to you." When I tell you, my friends, that he did not know how to pray, I mistake; he made an excellent prayer; but he was so ignorant in regard to religion, that he appeared to think that, to pray to God and sing His praises, particular forms were required. He knew not, then, that it is the heart that prays; and, in fact, the prayer he then addressed to God was, on his part, a lively desire to be delivered from the extremity to which he found himself reduced, and, therefore, as I have just told you, it was a true prayer; as such God heard it. Some travellers passing by unbound him and brought him back to the right way. He besought them to show him the poorest monastery they knew of in those parts. They told him of the Abbey of Bec, founded by the Venerable Hellouin, regarded by all as a saint. When Lanfranc arrived, he found the

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Saint engaged building an oven, at which he was working with his own hands.

"What do you want?" said Hellouin to him.

"I want to be a monk," Lanfranc answered.

The Abbot gave him the book of the rule, told him to read it, as St. Benedict orders to be done with postulants. The new-comer having read it all through very attentively, said that with God's help he would observe all it prescribed. The Abbot knowing who he was and whence he came, willingly received him into the monastery. It was thus that his prayer was granted, and that he put into execution the promise he had made to God. Lanfranc afterwards became Archbishop of Canterbury, in England, and was one of the most illustrious men of the eleventh century.

- NOEL, *Cat. de Rodez*, III., 45.

483. *The Horse and Bridle.* -

My dear friends, you have, I am sure, some distractions in your prayers. For a high degree of sanctity must be attained before one can bear that consoling testimony to themselves that they never have any. Some may flatter themselves with being exempt from them, whose prayer is, perhaps, but one continual distraction.

St. Bernard being one day on a journey, was joined on the road by a worthy peasant; he entered into conversation with him, and soon contrived to make it fall on a religious subject, for the instruction of his fellow traveller. Whilst chatting together he asked him, amongst other things, if he loved God. Whereupon the other answered simply:

-- "Oh, as for that, father, I think I love Him with my whole heart."

-- "Do you

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often pray to Him? above all, do you pray to Him with attention?"

-- "Oh yes, Father, I never have any distractions." St. Bernard saw well that the man did not know what it was to be distracted; compassionating his ignorance, he made use of a singular stratagem to enlighten him.

-- "Well," said he, "my friend, let us make a bargain: if you are able to say the *Our Father* all through without distraction, I will give you the horse I ride."

-- "Agreed. - Father, the horse is as good as won."

And our man begins his *Our Father*, full sure that the horse was going to be his. But he had scarce got half through when he stopped, and addressing the Saint, said:

"But, Father, will you give me the bridle, too?"

-- "Neither one nor the other, my friend," answered St. Bernard laughing; "there, you see, you are distracted." The man opened his eyes, and understood that he had hitherto been wholly ignorant of what it was to pray attentively.

- NOEL, *Cat. de Rodez*, III., 79.

484. *The Name of Jesus Invoked by an Arab.* -

Doubtless you have not forgotten, my very dear friends, what Our Lord said:

"Whatever you ask of My Father in My name He will give unto you." Here is an interesting story about that. The celebrated commentator, Benedict Fernandez, a Spaniard by birth, relates himself this remarkable example of the fidelity with which the Lord fulfils the promise He made to those who should pray to Him in the name of Jesus. A Moslem (or Mohammedan), from the heart of Barbary in Northern Africa, had left that country to retire to a Portuguese

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castle on the coast, with the vague intention of one day embracing Christianity. It was a long journey across a volcanic landscape. The sun was shedding his most fervid rays on the earth; alone in the midst of an immense desert, walking over the burning sand, without water to slake his thirst, the last oasis having proved dry, this poor young man, devoured by a thirst impossible to describe, stretched himself on the ground and quietly waited till death should come to end his torments. All at once he remembers having often heard it said by a Christian slave that the invocation of the name of Jesus was a means of succour in the greatest difficulties.

Scarcely had he strove to pronounce that name as distinctly as his strength permitted when he felt his tongue and palate refreshed. He was completely delivered from the burning thirst that tormented him; his strength returned little by little, so that he was able to continue his journey with new courage. From that moment he had always at his disposal a sure and simple means of safety, for as often as he invoked the name of Jesus, he found it of the same efficacy. Thus it was that he arrived safe and sound at the Portuguese fort, whence he repaired to Lisbon, to receive baptism.

- SCHMID et BELET, *Cat. Hist.*, I., 396.

485. *A Miracle Related by Jean Jacques Rousseau.* -

I am happy, dear friends, when I can tell you anything that was witnessed by an infidel philosopher. The testimony of such persons no one can dispute, Listen; it is Jean Jacques Rousseau that speaks:

"Madame de Warens lived at Annecy, in the house of M. Borge; one day a fire broke out in the bake-house

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of the Franciscan Convent connected with the court of that house, and with such violence that the bake-house, a pretty large building, filled with twigs and dry wood, was soon in a blaze. The flames, carried along by an impetuous wind, reached the roof of the house, and penetrated through the windows to the apartments.

Madame de Warens first gave her orders, to endeavour to arrest the progress of the fire, and to have her furniture conveyed to the garden. She was thus engaged when she learned that the Bishop, hearing of the misfortune wherewith she was threatened, was coming with all speed. She went immediately to meet him; they entered the garden together; he knelt down with her and all the others who were present, and I myself was of the number; he then began to pray with his wonted fervour. The effect was sensible. The wind which was carrying the fire over the house to the garden suddenly changed its course, and so removed the flames from the house that the adjoining bake-house was entirely consumed, whilst the house was not otherwise injured than by the damage it had previously sustained. This is a fact that was known to all Annecy, and which I saw with my own eyes."

Signed ROUSSEAU.

- What further proof do you require, dear friends, to convince you of the efficacy of a prayer made in a fitting manner?

- GUILLOIS, *Nouv. Explic. du Cat.*, 435.