

ON HOLY ORDERS.

CATHOLIC ANECDOTES

CHAPTER XII.

HOLY ORDERS.

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622. *Revolt of Core (known as Korah), Dathan and Abiron (known as Abiram).* -

The dignity of priest, that is to say, minister of the Lord, is a dignity which God alone can confer; He alone can call thereto whoever He pleases, and woe to those who intrude themselves into it without vocation! We find, my dear friends, a frightful example of this in the Holy Scripture.

God had Himself chosen the family of Aaron to be invested with the priesthood. It was at the beginning of the journey of the Hebrews through the desert, after the miraculous passage of the Red Sea. Three Israelites, jealous of not having been chosen to offer sacrifice to the Lord, revolted against Moses, and murmured even against God himself. The very day when, in presence of all the people, Aaron was to commence exercising the priesthood wherewith he was clothed, these miserable wretches presented themselves with their censors before the tabernacle of the Lord. But the punishment of their sacrilegious audacity was not long delayed; for just as they were assembled, the earth opened under their feet and swallowed them up in its bowels, with two hundred and fifty other conspirators. All the Israelites, terrified at this visible

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punishment, took flight, exclaiming - "Let us beware that the earth does not swallow us with them!" One proof that this chastisement was really directed against the usurpers of the sacerdotal dignity is, that all the children of Dathan and Abiron perished with their fathers, because they had shared their crime whereas the sons of Core were spared, because they would not consent to the wicked design of that unhappy man.

- *Numbers*, Chap. XVI.

623. *A Coal-Heaver Made a Bishop.* -

Amongst the examples of persons of humble origin who merited being raised to the priestly dignity, I know none as striking as that of St. Alexander, the coal-heaver. Here is how it happened.

The Church of Comanus, in the province of Pontus, in Asia, being deprived of a bishop, sent deputies to St. Gregory Thaumaturgus, Bishop of Neo-Caesarea, praying him to give them a pastor.

Temporarily, the Church of the region was not enduring the active persecution of the Roman Emperor and, in fact was held in high regard by the local officials who recognized how widespread the new religion was in the province. That holy bishop, being come for that purpose to Comanus, each one hastened to propose to him for bishop the noblest and most distinguished for their shining qualities. But St. Gregory, who considered only virtue, told the magistrates and chief men of the city, several of whom presented themselves, that they would, perhaps, do better to seek their bishop amongst those of more humble condition. One of those who presided at the election would make this pass for a jest; he said to St. Gregory:

"If that be so, and if you would have us pass over the best men we have, and take a bishop from amongst the common people, I advise you to choose Alexander

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the coal-heaver; we will all consent to that appointment."

-- "And who is this Alexander?" said St. Gregory.

Some one had him brought into the midst of the assembly, and presented him, all the time thinking it was a great joke, and, laughing, thought he playing the great buffoon in being the conductor of such a lowly and dirty commoner. Alexander was clothed in dirty tattered garments, and his trade was easily seen from the blackness of his face and hands. Every one began to laugh, seeing so strange a figure in the midst of the assembly. Alexander, without appearing either ashamed or astonished, looked quiet and composed, which showed that he was content with his state; and that made St. Gregory judge that there was something remarkable in him. He took him aside, and asked him who he was. Alexander acknowledged that it was not necessity which had induced him to adopt that trade, but the desire of hiding himself, practising virtue:

"I regard," said he, "this coal dust which disfigures me as a mask that prevents me from being known. I was once a rich nobleman, but I left that all behind to more closely to follow the Gospel precepts of poverty. I am young, as you see, and if I would take the trouble, might appear very well in the eyes of the world, but all that is a mere vanity." Gregory having examined him carefully, handed him over to his attendants, with the necessary instructions as to what they should do, then returned to the assembly.

He there spoke of the duties of a bishop, and engaged their attention till Alexander was brought in. He had been washed and clothed in St. Gregory's garments, so that he appeared a different man, and attracted every one's attention. "Be not surprised," then said St. Gregory, "if you were mistaken in judging by appearance; the devil even was very glad to prejudice your eyes so as to render this vessel of election useless to you by

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keeping him concealed, or rather, keeping you blind in going by mere external appearances and not bothering to discern the heart of a fellow man." He afterwards consecrated Alexander bishop, with the usual ceremonies, and requested him to speak before the assembly, which he did in a solid and sensible manner that fully justified the wisdom of the choice made of him. He perfectly corresponded with the high opinion formed of his merit, and worthily governed the Church of Comanus during a part of the third century.

- FLEURY, *Ecclesiastical History*, II.

624. *A True Bishop.* -

Would you like, children, that I should show you a true pastor of the Church? Listen: The Eastern Emperor, named Valens, had the misfortune of being an Arian, that is to say, a heretic of the sect of Arius. He knew all the merit of St. Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea, and would gladly have had him join his party. He would at least try, and charged Modestus, Prefect of the Pretorium, with that negotiation. The latter, who was proud and haughty, quickly summoned the good bishop before his tribunal, and arrogantly addressed him: "Basil, how is it that you resist the power of the Emperor?"

-- "I see not that I thereby do wrong," answered the prelate with a noble yet modest air. "Why are you not of the same religion as the Emperor?"

-- "Because a greater Master than the Emperor forbids it!"

-- "How!" cried Modestus, rising from his seat in a fury, "do you not fear the effects of my indignation and my power?"

-- "What are those effects?"

-- "Well! I am going to enumerate them for you, hardened and obdurate man! There

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is question of nothing less than confiscating your goods, sending you into exile, subjecting you to the torture, and putting you to death."

-- "Oh! if that be all, you may save yourself the trouble; there is nothing there that frightens me. He who has nothing is not afraid of confiscation. You may send me into exile, but the whole earth is my country. If you try to make me suffer, that will not last long, since my life is almost spent and Heaven is for eternity. Finally, death would be to me a great boon, for it would put an end to all my miseries and lead me to my God."

The Prefect Modestus was quite disconcerted by this firm and Christian language.

"Never," said he, "did I hear any one speak so!"

- "Ah!" said Basil, "that is because you never met a bishop; any minister of Christ would have answered such threats in the same way. As often as conscience is in question, we make it a duty to be tractable and submissive; but when the cause of God is concerned, we are no longer the same." Modestus thought it no use to go farther with the trial, and went to tell the Emperor that nothing could be done with Basil, and they might as well let him alone.

- D. GENEVAUX, *Hist. Choix.*, 348.

625. *To Die Rather than be a Priest "since I am not Worthy".* -

Saints, my friends, have been seen to ask the grace of dying that they might not be ordained priests. Of this number was Nilammon. He had so high an idea of the priesthood, that notwithstanding all the solicitations made him to receive Holy Orders, he constantly refused that honour. Nevertheless Theophilus, patriarch

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of Alexandria, being come to Hierapolis, his place of abode, declared positively that he purposed not only to ordain him priest, but even to consecrate him bishop of that city; consequently, he commanded him, on the part of God, to obey. Nilammon was extremely surprised and afflicted by what the patriarch said; he had not strength to disobey him; neither could he take flight, because he was carefully watched. He asked time to prepare himself for an action so important. Theophilus granted him but one day and that day was wholly consecrated to prayer. How urgently did that holy man beseech the Lord to avert from him the misfortune wherewith he was so speedily threatened, that of being burdened with a load under the weight of which he thought his salvation would be exposed! "Since I am not worthy, how could I shepherd your people for whom You Yourself have lain down Your life? I am not worthy, and, should I cause scandal to one of the least of Your little ones, it were better if I were to drown in the sea with a mill-stone tied to my neck." The hour of ordination being come, Nilammon was sent for by the patriarch; he besought him to postpone the ceremony yet a few moments, because he had still some prayers to say. Both of them fell on their knees; as soon as the patriarch rose up he made a sign for Nilammon to approach. They went to call the holy man, but he made no answer. It was soon perceived that he could not answer; he was found with his hands joined and his eyes raised to heaven. But God had heard his prayer; Nilammon had said to him: "Lord, let me die rather than be a priest! I am not worthy of such an honour." And God had let him die!

- LASSAUSSE, *Explic. du Cat. de l'Empire*, 659.

626. *A Schoolboy who is to be a Priest.* -

The vocation to the ecclesiastical state, very dear friends,

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almost always manifests itself from our earliest years. St. Anscairus (or Ansgar), Archbishop of Hamburg in the ninth century, was once looking through a window of his abbey at the children going from school to church; he remarked that they were generally very giddy and dissipated. There was one notable exception; his modesty and recollection attracted the Saint's attention. Whilst the others could scarce behave properly even in the church, this pious child prayed like a little angel. This conduct, so edifying, gave great pleasure to the holy Archbishop, who had followed the boys into the church. After Mass he sent for the parents of this virtuous child, and told them that he was willing to have him educated at his own expense, and prepared for the ecclesiastical state, provided they were satisfied. It is easily imagined that the boy's parents willingly consented. The young scholar received a liberal education, and, like the child Jesus, he grew - at once, in age, in wisdom, and in grace before God and man. St. Anscairus subsequently took him for his constant companion in his apostolic journeys; and Nembert, for so he was called, distinguished himself by his piety and zeal for the propagation of religion in Sweden and the north of Germany. After the death of his benefactor, he was unanimously chosen to the archiepiscopal see of Hamburg, where, after having zealously and faithfully discharged the duties of his sacred office for twenty-three years, he died in the odour of sanctity.

- SCHMID et BELET, *Cat. Hist.*, III., 101.

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627. *Respect Due to the Ministers of the Lord.* -

The dignity wherewith priests and other ministers of the Lord are vested requires on our part, dear friends, the most profound respect. Woe to him who should forget what he owes them! It is related that, about the year 1690, in a parish of the diocese of Besancon, in France, not far from that city, a surprising event took place, which was regarded as a blow from Heaven. Two young libertines were scandalizing the parish by their disorders; the pastor, as soon as he perceived it, took care to apprise their fathers, who took the warning very ill. One of them had even the impudence to reply: "Father, I would advise you to mind your breviary, and not meddle with my family affairs, youth must have its fling."

-- "If I inform you of the bad conduct of some of your family, my friend," answered the priest mildly, "it is because my duty obliges me. I am responsible for your son's soul as well as yours, and, consequently, I must watch over his conduct and let you know of it, I speak to you as a pastor, and you do not answer as a Christian; take care that God does not punish you and your children, whose bad conduct you encourage!"

This man, far from profiting by the wise counsels of his pastor, told everywhere that he had given the priest his answer so well that he would never attempt to talk to him again. His wife joined him in condemning the priest. It was on Saturday.

As the thing became public, the pastor thought it might be advisable to say something about it next day in the pulpit. He did so with much moderation, and said

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in his instruction that he had a regard for all his parishioners; that when he was obliged to give them an advice in public or in private, he begged them to believe that it was not to give them trouble, but through charity and for their salvation; that when the advice of a pastor was despised, God could not but be offended, and that He always punished such contempt. After Mass the man who had received his pastor's warning so ill the day before began his invectives again, saying that priests had little else to do than abusing people, but that he cared little what they said. The two young men spent the rest of the day in the tavern, with the consent of their fathers, and, to spite the pastor, they behaved more scandalously than ever.

But God put an end to their scandalous life by a most exemplary punishment. Next day a storm came on.

These two libertines, with two others who were well behaved, ran to the church tower to ring the bell; there came, at the moment, such a peal of thunder that the four ringers, seized with terror, went down with all speed to make their escape. As they were going down, the thunder killed the two libertines, but in a manner that plainly showed it was a judgement of God; and this is how it was: The thunder, in falling, after making the circuit of the tower several times, followed the four young men down the staircase; it spared the first, who was good, and struck the second, who was one of the libertines; it did not harm the third, but struck the fourth, who was the other

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profligate, and killed him. Afterwards the thunder entered the church, where was the mother of one of those wicked young men, carried that woman away, and dashed her against the wall, leaving all the other persons in the church uninjured. At sight of an accident so extraordinary the justice of God was recognized, and the fathers of those libertines came, bathed in tears, to ask pardon of the pious pastor for the contempt wherewith they had treated his salutary warning.

- GUILLOIS, *Nouv. Explic. du Cat.*, 433.

628. *Fenelon's Walk.* -

Nothing is more touching, my dear friends, than the kindness with which the true pastors of the Church occupy themselves with those who are confided to them.

Let me tell you, on that subject, the story of Fenelon's cow. That good Archbishop of Cambrai was one day walking in the fields, when he met a poor villager who was almost in despair. He goes up to him, speaks to him kindly, and wishes to know the cause of his affliction.

"Ah! my good lord," cried the peasant, "I am lost, I am the most unhappy of men! I had a cow that was my only resource and that of my family, and I cannot find her anywhere. I brought her to that pasture, down below, and she has disappeared. What has become of her I don't know. Ah! my God, what am I to do?"

-- "Have patience, my child," said the Archbishop, "I will help you to look for her; I hope God will bless our search. Let us first examine how she got out; then we may find some traces of her; but,

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once more, let us trust in Providence and our efforts may be crowned with success." Immediately he sets out with the peasant, travels about with him all day, and at length succeeded in finding the cow that was supposed to be lost. She was brought back in triumph to the cow-house, and you may well believe what joy her return occasioned. There is, I think, a touching proof of Fenelon's goodness, and also of how far the true pastors of the Church will go in regard to their spiritual children. If you would like to read this pretty story in verse, you may find it in several collections of poetry, where it bears the title of *Fenelon's Walk*.

- REYRE, *Anec. Chret.*, 283.

629. *The Beautiful Tresses of a Little Girl in Versailles.* -

There is nothing so beautiful as you, dear children, when you have the happiness of being good and wise.

You sometimes do such acts of virtue and generosity that aged persons are astonished. Listen. At one of the most disastrous periods of the French Revolution, all the priests of the departments of Seine and Oise were arrested, thrown into carts and taken to Versailles. Innocence and purity are condemned to dwell in prisons, the abode of infamy and crime; these unfortunates, penniless as they are, see nought but death before them.

But He whose holy doctrine they have preached, and whose providence feeds the birds of the air, He who went down with Daniel to the den, to calm the fury of the lions, He will go with the confessors of the faith into their prisons, and in spire all good souls in the city of Versailles with the

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charity that creates resources. And do you know who were the most touching ministers of that Providence, which is the caretaker of the just on earth? They were pious children. They distinguished themselves by their assiduous cares and tender solicitude; they cried out for those who instructed them, those who had, for some time, been preparing them for their First Communion. They were seen to share their bread with their spiritual fathers, and distribute amongst them whatever money they had at their disposal. A little girl of ten or twelve years old, having nothing to offer, was inspired by the genius of charity to invent a new resource, which was to give her the means of equalling any of her companions in the amount of her alms. She has very fine hair, she goes to a hairdresser, and so earnestly entreats him that he consents at length to shave off her fair tresses, and to buy them for five francs. Proud of her noble sacrifice, the girl brings her money to the poor priests who are languishing in the prisons of Versailles. Did you ever see, my young friends, a more generous instance of charity towards the priests of the Lord?

- GUILLOIS, *Nouv. Explic. du Cat.*, 421.

630. *I will be a Brother of the Christian Schools.* -

To be called to the ecclesiastical state, my friends, is a grace which God alone can give; but it is the same with the religious vocation. Let me quote for you an example which concerns us directly. A mother had two sons. The elder, aged twenty years, had left the Military School of Saint Cyr, and distinguished

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himself at the battle of Staorieli. After the conquest of Algiers, in 1830, he returned home.

But alas! on entering the house, he found every one in tears; his younger brother, Henry, who was ten years younger than he, was in the last extremity. The poor mother hardly saw the son who had just arrived and was in good health; her every look, her every care, was for the child she was about to lose. The young officer hastened to do what he could for his brother. The boy's sufferings were prolonged; the breath was barely in him, and his mother's soul seemed to hang on that breath.

"If he dies, I will die, too!" she incessantly repeated: "that child was my life!" These words were hard for the young officer, but God knows he did not blame his mother. He said to himself:

"If it were I that was dying, she would love me and show her love for me just the same way." All the art of the physicians could not restore the little patient; his fine dark eyes were already fixed and glassy; already he saw neither his mother nor brother who held his little cold, thin hands.

"*He is going to die! he is going to die!*" repeated the unhappy woman. The priest already spoke of resignation, and said that children were blessed, that the good God made angels of them. The mother heard only the labouring breath of her son. The young officer's heart was broken by the sufferings of his brother and his mother's despair. The child made a convulsive motion, and every one shuddered.

The priest said *Let us pray!* and they all fell on their knees. My friends, here

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is the prayer the officer said within himself, and which God graciously heard:

"My God, if You restore my brother to health, I make a vow to consecrate myself to the education of children of his age in the institute of the Christian Brothers; yes, I will teach them to love and bless You!

"My God, I will bless You all the days of my life, if You will cure my brother, and console my mother."

This prayer of filial and fraternal love reached Him who strikes, who heals, and who resuscitates: the child was saved! Some weeks after, the officer bid adieu to his mother, telling her of the vow he had made on that occasion.

"There is my sword," said he, "you will give it to Henry, when he grows up; he may, perhaps, use it. Here is a crucifix. He will always have a good use for this. As for me, I am going to keep the promise I made to redeem his life; I will teach children of his age to love God, their mother, virtue and innocence."

The mother throws her arms around her son's neck, she embraces and blesses him. Oh! it was he that she then loved the best. She was torn between pride at such a noble offering for the cause of the Good God, and an understandable maternal sadness on surrendering her eldest son to the service of the poor and of the gospel. She did all she could to keep him with her for a while longer, but he departed to accomplish his vow as she knew he must. . . . Now, my friends, he is one of our Brothers. Sometimes, when he passes through the streets, young people, idle lads scanning the 'Positions Vacant' adds, look at him, and, taking the cigar from their mouth, laugh foolishly in his face.

But the ex-artillery officer of the Army of Africa goes his way in peace, saying to himself "My God, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

- NOEL, *Cat. de Rodez*, V., 199.