

Saint Martin Of Tours

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Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1329 (1960)

WHEN the parish priest of Macleod, near Rosanna, in the Archdiocese of Melbourne decided to dedicate his newly-built Church-school in honour of Saint Martin of Tours, there were few Catholics in that suburb, or even in Victoria; who realized that he was reviving the memory of a saint whose name stands at the very beginning of the Faith in the English-speaking world. For, even before Saint Augustine was first sent by Pope Saint Gregory to preach Christianity to the pagan King Ethelbert of Kent, his Frankish Catholic wife, Queen Bertha, had had an old British Christian Church in Canterbury repaired, in which his chaplain, Liudhard, sang Mass for her and her ladies. That Church was dedicated to Saint Martin of Tours. His name was already mighty as a wonder-worker among the Gauls, and had reached the British Christian world, too, in the last days of its Kings' valiant struggle before they went down before the Saxons and the light of Christ was extinguished for a space in the lands east of Wales and Cambria.

Of the fame of Saint Martin's great medieval shrine in France I shall have a word to say later; but his cult extended throughout Western Christendom, and a myriad churches were dedicated to him; while his name was one of the most frequently given to Christian children at their baptism. Who, then, was this hero of the Faith, whose name and wondrous deeds have inspired so much devotion, from the time of his death — over fifteen hundred, nay sixteen hundred, years ago — even to our own time?

EARLY YEARS — PAVIA AND THE ARMY.

Martin was born in the year A.D. 316 or thereabouts, at a turning point in the history of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Constantine and Licinius, the Emperors, had just proclaimed the peace of the Church after the last and most terrible of her persecutions, that of Diocletian. Everywhere the Faith was emerging from the Catacombs, and Christian influence was now dominant in the court of the new ruler of the West, who was soon to overthrow his pagan partner, Licinius, and to set up a new Imperial capital on the Bosphorus — Constantinople, the first Christian city in the world.

The birthplace of the saint was not Gaul, which was to be the chief field of his apostolate, but "Pannonia" — a region embracing the modern Yugoslavia and part of Hungary. He first saw the light somewhere in the vicinity of the modern town of Szombathely, in Hungary — perhaps to the east of it, in the shadow of the mountains still named "Martinsberg." Was Martin a Slav? The question of race is not important in his case any more than in that of Saint Patrick. What is certain is that both were "Roman" in citizenship and Latin in culture and language. His father was a tribune — a commissioned officer of the Roman army — and both parents were pagan, though he succeeded later in converting his mother.

It was at Pavia, in Italy, where the boy Martin went to school, that he first came into contact with Christians and became a catechumen, in circumstances of which we know nothing. Already, at twelve years of age, he began to dream of dedicating his life to God and of the vocation of a hermit-

monk, which had then immense prestige in the Christian community. But it was not easy to escape from the normal obligation of an officer's son, who was expected to become a soldier like his father; and when he was about sixteen, in the year 332, the Emperor Constantine was in sore need of recruits for the war he was waging against the Goths. An edict lowered the age of enlistment and young Martin entered upon his military training — though, under his uniform, there still beat the heart of a monk. At nineteen, he was a fully-fledged officer, with a batman whom he looked after devotedly, but of whose services he was very reluctant to avail himself.

THE CATECHUMEN'S CLOAK.

It was at this period that there occurred the incident that was destined to become most famous in legend and in Christian art. In the winter of 338-9 — a severe one — he was stationed at Amiens in Gaul. Riding through the gates of the city, wrapped in the woollen tunic of his rank, he saw a beggar, almost naked and shivering under the icy blast. Pulling up, he tore off his cloak, and, drawing his short sword, divided it in half, flinging one portion to the man. Thereafter, he was exposed not merely to the cold but to the mockery of his companions, who already, no doubt, regarded the young man as a weird eccentric for his austerities and lack of military pride. But that night — so the story runs — Christ Himself appeared to the young man, surrounded by angels; and the Lord was dressed in the half of Martin's cloak — in accordance with His own word: "In as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to Me." He heard Him speak to his heavenly audience, saying: "Martin — who is only a catechumen — has clothed Me in this mantle"; and he was not slow to take the hint conveyed in these words of praise and to seek baptism as soon as possible.

MARTIN LEAVES THE ARMY.

Thereafter, he was more than ever bent on fulfilling his vocation to the service of God — but the difficulty of leaving the Emperor's army still seemed overwhelmingly great. Constantine was engaged in a campaign against the Germans and proposed to give them battle near Worms — to become famous in the story of another Martin, the heresiarch Luther, who broke the unity of Christendom some twelve hundred years later. The young officer was among those appointed to lead the attack against the enemy; but he resolved to make a stand, and flatly refused either to accept a largesse distributed to the troops or to bear arms in the coming conflict. He explained his resolve to dedicate his life to God, but the Emperor treated the excuse with contempt. "It is fear of tomorrow's battle," he declared, "not love of the religious life, which is leading you to this act of desertion."

Martin was nettled at the charge of cowardice (he was to show himself the bravest of the brave through all the vicissitudes and perils of a varied life). He offered to go into battle without helmet or armour, "guarded only by the Cross" — that sign in whose name the Emperor himself had been promised victory in his vision years ago. The next day he prepared to carry out the intention — which seemed to promise certain death — but, to the general astonishment, the enemy retreated without a fight. After this, Constantine released Martin from his commission and allowed him to do as he wished.

SAINT MARTIN AND SAINT HILARY.

He went to Treves, one of the great Roman frontier centres of the Rhineland, and there placed himself under the patronage of the Bishop Maximin, in whose company he made a pilgrimage to Rome, already famous as the City of the Apostles Saints Peter and Paul and of many martyrs,

though its political importance was in decay. It was, perhaps, through the Bishop, who came from Poitou, that he made the first contact with the great Saint Hilary of Poitiers, who was to become his guide in learning as well as holiness.

The Roman journey seems to have occurred between 347 and 350. Some five years later Martin left the Bishop, being warned in a dream to go on a visit to his parents, who had returned to Pannonia. It was while on the way there, in a region which was already becoming unsafe for travel after repeated devastation in war with the barbarians, that he was accosted by a band of robbers, from whom he escaped by miracle, while — according to the legend — the Devil appeared and declared that he intended to follow him through all his travels. At home, he had the happiness of bringing his mother to the Faith — but his soldier father refused to abandon his pagan tradition.

The Church was already in the throes of the Arian conflict. The old Emperor Constantine had favoured the cause of Arius in his last years, after having called the General Council of Nicaea, which condemned his heresy — a denial of the full Godhead of Jesus Christ; and of Constantine's three sons, the last survivor, Constantine II, was a fierce and persecuting Arian. Among others, he drove the great orthodox western leader, Bishop Hilary, into exile in the East — an exile which was to be fraught with notable consequences. For it was in the East that the Saint came into close contact with the flourishing monasticism of Syria and Egypt. Already, it seems, his friend Martin had engaged in a pioneer venture as a monastic founder in Milan, the political centre of the Western Empire, but when he rejoined Saint Hilary on his return to Poitiers (360) the two of them launched a new monastic movement which was to have revolutionary consequences in the history of Christianity in the West, where it was still far less widely spread than in the Eastern provinces, the countryside and lesser centres being almost entirely untouched hitherto.

THE FIRST WESTERN MONASTERY.

Close to Poitiers, on the shores of the Clain River, Martin found the solitude which he had always desired, after a long stay with Saint Hilary as his spiritual guide. But he was soon surrounded, at Ligugè, by disciples inspired by his example and there he established the first Western Monastic Community — a group of huts, one for each monk, surrounding a church in which they met for Mass and other spiritual exercises held in common. There was, at first, no Rule, except mutual good example and spiritual obedience to the superior, and contemplation and prayer were combined with apostolic work among the pagan peasantry.

Soon Martin became known not merely as a preacher but as a “wonder-worker”. There is a tradition — preserved in the Church office of the feast — that he not merely headed the Community, but raised three dead persons to life, and two of these supreme miracles were done at Ligugè. It was while here, too, that he was ordained priest by his friend, Saint Hilary.

BISHOP OF TOURS.

A further promotion awaited Martin, for in the neighbouring city of Tours, his name and power were already famous and, when the Bishop died, the Christians there sought him as his successor. Knowing, however, that his humility would make their task very difficult, they decided to bring him into their midst by a stratagem. A certain Rusticus was sent to seek the Saint's aid in healing a woman who was ill and he hastened to respond in his usual warmhearted way. Arrived at Tours, however, he found the whole population gathered at the Cathedral, with several of the neighbouring Bishops, and he was hailed as Bishop with great acclamation, after the fashion of the time. Some of the prelates, to be sure, had been doubtful about the choice of this eccentric, rustic-looking man of

God, but they yielded to the popular voice and in July, 371, Martin was consecrated as Bishop of the city which was to be henceforth inseparably linked with his name and fame.

With the triumph of Christianity in the Empire, the Bishops had become official personages of tremendous importance in its life, which was still centred in its municipal institutions. As the older magistrates fell into decay and the former civic ruling class became bankrupt, the Episcopal authority became all important for defence and administration, as well as for the relief of the poor and those oppressed by bureaucratic tyranny and corruption.

But, while Martin had accepted his consecration as the will of God, he had no intention of becoming a magnificent sacred official, surrounded by an array of lesser officials and a court of clients and hangers-on. He dressed in the coarse druggot of a monk, just as he had before; he continued to live in rigorous austerity and to sleep on the ground; and he did not allow his civic responsibilities to diminish his missionary activities and journeys in the surrounding countryside.

MARMOUTIER AND THE APOSTOLATE.

To begin with, the Bishop lived in a small hut near the Cathedral, which his successor, Saint Gregory of Tours, was to convert into a chapel. Then, finding that the city crowds encroached too much upon his prayer and contemplation, he founded a new monastic settlement higher up the Loire, where some eighty of his disciples came to join him. This was the beginning of the "Majus Monasterium," Marmoutier, whose rule of prayer, labour and learning was later to serve as a model to Saint Benedict in the founding of his own order. Marmoutier was, from the first, a school and seminary as well as a monastic community. Young children were admitted there — among them Saint Brice, who received lessons from Saint Martin himself from his infancy, though, to begin with, he took small profit from them. Young men of distinguished birth bent themselves to austere living under their Bishop-Abbot's guidance and cities throughout Gaul sought his monks to rule them as Bishops because of their reputation for erudition and holiness.

Martin did not neglect his work as a bishop while devoting himself to the growth and guidance of Marmoutier and he continued to travel widely through his diocese, and beyond it also, in order to spread the faith in the country regions, which were still entirely pagan. It is impossible to follow the details of his wide wanderings, but traces of them can be found in the long memories of the peasants and in the traditional cultures of Saint Martin and the sanctuaries consecrated to his honour to be found in the east, north and centre of what was then Roman Gaul, as well as in Aquitaine and the Rhône Valley. How many of these regions he himself visited, and how many owe their legendary veneration of him to the age-long passage of pilgrims, or to the devotion of his disciples, it is not possible now to discover.

It is clear, however, that the multiplication of the French rural parishes is due largely to his work. When the inhabitants of a village had been Christianized, he made a point of setting up a centre of worship, with a college of priests and lesser clerics attached to it (a certain number of parishes in the Touraine area certainly owe their origin directly to Saint Martin). And, like a good shepherd, he made a point of visiting these new "sheepfolds" regularly, making continual journeys around his diocese for that purpose, as well as to open up new fields of apostolic activity. He journeyed to and fro without anything in the nature of pomp — in a cart or on foot, or mounted on a donkey, together with a group of disciples. He commonly refused the hospitality of the great houses, whether in the country or the town, "bedding down" on straw in the sacristy of the Church.

LEGENDS OF THE WONDER WORKER.

Some legendary anecdotes of the missionary journeys of Saint Martin have become so popular in France that they deserve to be recounted — if only to show his reputation as a man of wonderful works. At the place called Saint Barthèlemy, near Tours, he is said to have “debunked” a pretended martyr whose tomb had become the object of misguided local veneration. Having recourse to God to solve his doubt about the personage, he had the vision of a “horrible spectre” who declared that he was, indeed, no martyr, but a ruffian who had met with the richly deserved punishment of his crimes. Saint Martin immediately had the altar over the tomb pulled down and the false cult came to an abrupt end.

Close to Autun there was a ruined pagan temple, beside which grew a magnificent pine-tree which was the object of idolatrous veneration throughout the neighbourhood. The people were unwilling to have it touched, but when they saw that Saint Martin was resolved to get rid of it they challenged him to stand under it while they cut it down. The Bishop agreed and allowed himself to be fastened to the side towards which the sacred tree was leaning while they hacked at the huge trunk with their axes. A cracking was heard, but, as the tree began to fall upon him, Saint Martin made a great Sign of the Cross; whereupon it swung over to the opposite side — to the shocked dismay and admiration of the peasants!

At Levroux, according to the local legend, angelic aid was given to the Saint in answer to his prayer, when the inhabitants refused to allow the destruction of a splendid temple which was their pride. Suddenly two mighty beings made their appearance, armed with shield and lance, and set about the demolition of the shrine with astounding rapidity. The people, seeing that their gods were incapable of resisting the supernatural raid, rallied immediately to the God of Saint Martin!

But the greater number of miracles attributed to the holy Bishop are not “signs and wonders” of this spectacular kind, but the same kind of works of healing which His Divine Master had performed during His earthly life in Palestine. We hear of how in Paris he cured a leper by his loving embrace; of a dumb girl in Chartres restored to speech by a drop of holy oil on her mouth. And at Chartres, also, they speak of the third of his wonders of resuscitation — that of a young man dead whom he gave back to his mother, even as Christ had done long ago at Naim.

On occasions, as we learn, God showed forth the glory of His faithful servant in a visible way. One day when he was saying Mass in his Cathedral, some of those present saw his arms gleaming with precious jewels. But, if few were favoured with these mysterious visions, no one who came in contact with him could escape the force of spiritual strength which emanated from the man of God.

THE PRISCILLIAN CONTROVERSY.

While ministering tirelessly to the poor and relieving their miseries — increasingly great in a world which was already descending into the darkness of a new barbarian age — Martin was fearlessly independent in his dealings with the great ones of the Empire. It is told of him that once, when he came to make a petition to the Emperor Valentinian, he was refused admission — thanks to the intrigues of the Arian Empress Justina. After a period of prayer and fasting Saint Martin at last literally forced his way into the presence of Valentinian, who refused the Bishop the customary courtesy of rising to greet him — until he suddenly saw that his throne had caught fire. After that, it seems, his majesty jumped up quickly and granted Martin’s demand without further ado!

A feature of Saint Martin which is calculated to commend him to moderns is his vigorous rejection of the idea of repressing heresy by the force of the State. This practice — which grew out of the pagan conception of the Emperor as “High Priest” and supreme regulator of religious worship —

had already begun to appear in the Christianized Empire of his time and it was helped by the disorders which frequently arose in connection with religious controversy, especially in Africa and the East. One particular error which concerned Saint Martin's part of his world was that of the Priscillianists. Priscillian, a cleric of the Spanish Church, was an aristocrat famous for his eloquence and asceticism and was the leader of a movement of lay piety and charity which "caught on" very rapidly south of the Pyrénées, since he had a genius for successful propaganda. Unfortunately, his personal authority over his followers soon went to his head, while his ascetical teachings were derived very largely from Apocryphal gospels of Gnostic inspiration and were tinged with the rampant Manichaeism for which Saint Augustine of Hippo had fallen in his youth. He began to be no longer the director of a lay movement but the head of a new sect with strange doctrines and practices, especially regarding the Holy Eucharist and the place of women in Church.

A number of Priscillianist practices were condemned in a Spanish Council at Avila, after consultation with Pope Saint Damasus (I) in Rome, but this did not prevent the glamorous leader from getting himself elected as Bishop of the very city where the Council had been held. He proceeded to take the offensive against his opponents, while the imperial authority in Milan vacillated under the powerful influence of his friends at Court and the opposing influence of the great Saint Ambrose. Eventually Milan came down in his favour, though his orthodox opponents found support among the Bishops and high officials of Gaul, especially at Treves, the seat of the praetorian prefecture under which Spain was comprised.

ST. MARTIN BEARDS AN EMPEROR.

At this point, the political situation was suddenly changed by the usurpation of Maximus (383), the commander in Britain. The new Emperor was acknowledged in Gaul and Spain, as well as Britain, and took over control in Treves, which became his capital. The Bishop there, Ithacus, had little to recommend him but his orthodoxy, from the point of view of Saint Martin; he was worldly and loose-living, as well as ambitious. He soon gained the ear of Maximus, however, who ordered the arrest of Priscillian and one of his colleagues, Instantius, and at their trial by an episcopal council at Bordeaux Priscillian promptly appealed to the Emperor for a personal hearing of his case — while Ithacus and his supporters demanded his execution and the forcible repression of his followers by the State.

At this point Saint Martin appeared at Treves with the force of a spiritual tornado. He told the Emperor Maximus, without making any bones about it, that he was a usurper and, when he was invited to the Imperial table, asserted the dignity of the Church by handing the cup offered to him by the Sovereign to the priest accompanying him, after merely touching it with his lips — instead of handing it back in accordance with courtly custom. The tyrant was impressed — perhaps even somewhat intimidated — by this uncompromising Christian Elias! In any case, he promised that no sanguinary measures should be taken against the recalcitrant Priscillian or his followers. Unhappily, this was not the end of the matter. Once the Saint had left Treves for his home, Ithacus soon recovered his influence and, in his fervour against asceticism and ascetic, the Bishop did not hesitate to denounce Martin himself as a Manichean! As for Priscillian, he was tried for sorcery, supposed immoral orgies, as well as for obscene doctrines, as the result of an enquiry by the prefect, and put to death along with six of his adherents.

THE END OF A TRAGIC AFFAIR.

St. Martin was not impressed by the pretence that the condemnations had been for sorcery, which was a capital offence. He broke off all relations with Ithacus and those involved in the sinister business and protested violently that the sentences were iniquitous. Eventually, after he had returned to Treves, he consented to be reconciled with the “Ithacians” on condition that the persecution begun in Spain should be stopped at once. Finally, Pope (Saint) Siricius, hearing of the proceedings from Maximus, excommunicated Ithacus and his followers, and Saint Ambrose, of Milan, when he came to Treves, refused to have any dealings with Bishops who had “sent heretics to their death.” To the end of life, Saint Martin regretted his own “appeasement” of the evil Bishop of Treves at the last, though it was due solely to his desire to end the shedding of Christian blood. The worst of it was that Maximus did not keep his promise and the persecution in Spain raged until he himself was slain and the lawful Emperor of Milan restored.

The result was to add to the prestige of the dead Priscillian — now revered as a martyr by his followers — while the contest raged on until it was eventually submerged, in 406, by the great flood of barbarian invasion of the West.

THE DEATH OF SAINT MARTIN.

Despite the tremendous energy of his apostolic labours and the ruthless asceticism of his way of life, Saint Martin lived to the age of eighty-two before making his last journey — to Candes, at the confluence of the Vienne and the Loire. His task there was to re-establish peace between the local community of priests, which was rent with bitter disputes. After doing so, the veteran Bishop felt at last the approach of death; his body was exhausted, though his ardent spirit remained indefatigable. He made one final prayer of perfect submission to the God Whose service his valiant life had been dedicated. “I have already made a long fight,” declared the soldier of Christ, “but, if You command that I should remain still in the ranks and endure this labour, I will submit, saying naught of either age or weariness. Yet, if You have pity upon my age, Your will is no less agreeable to me, O my God! For then You Yourself will care for those for whose sake I tremble.”

So saying, he breathed his last and, we are told, as the Angels bore his soul to heaven, the harmonies of a Divine music were heard by those around.

News of Saint Martin’s death spread rapidly from Candes through the whole region and men from Tours and Poitiers made a rush to the place to possess themselves of his precious remains, which were claimed by both places. Those of Tours won the race and brought the body in a barge down the Vienne to the Loire and thence, singing hymns of triumph, to their city.

THE SHRINE OF SAINT MARTIN AT TOURS.

But the death of Saint Martin was only the beginning of a glorious posthumous history of his cult and sacred influence throughout Western Christendom. His influence on Western culture has been significant. His shrine at Tours quickly became a centre of devotion, drawing pilgrims from the whole world of Gaul and beyond; and, after the eclipse of the Roman Empire of the West, the cult of Saint Martin was intimately linked with the new Christian Frankish Monarchy and the beginnings of France. The wonders wrought at the Saint’s intercession are said to have decided the issue, for the Great Clovis, between Arianism and Catholic orthodoxy — a decision of major significance in the history of Europe. A succession of Kings — Merovingian, Carolingian and Capetian — came to worship there through the Middle Ages, and no less than four Popes. One of these, Alexander III, who had taken refuge in France during the occupation of Rome by an anti-Pope, was actually crowned at Tours and sang a Solemn Mass at the chief altar of the Abbey after

the ceremony in the year 1163. The religious community — eventually transformed into a College of Canons — was at one time presided over by the eminent Englishman Alcuin, the beloved friend of Emperor Charlemagne and one of the greatest schoolmasters in history. Around the great basilica of Tours a galaxy of monastic houses and lesser sanctuaries was built, subject to the suzerainty of the chapter — which, incidentally, enjoyed the right of minting “Saint Martin’s money” up to the fourteenth century.

Among the Kings of the later Middle Ages, Charles VII, restored by the efforts of Saint Joan of Arc, and his son, Louis XI, were distinguished for their devotion to Saint Martin’s shrine. It was pillaged by the Protestant bands of the Prince de Condè during the religious wars of the sixteenth century, when the sacred relics of Saint Martin and those of Saint Brice were burnt — only a few fragments being preserved by a priest named Saugeron. The shrine, however, entered upon a new period of splendour after the conversion of the Calvinist King Henry IV ended the civil strife. The King was received as a lay canon of the chapter at Tours in 1598, after the fashion of a long line of his predecessors, and his example was imitated by his successors, Louis XIII and the great Louis XIV, who paid his solemn visit in 1650.

RUIN AND RESTORATION.

After 1789 the revolutionaries imitated the Protestants in raiding the sanctuary — many of its treasures being melted down, though the precious relics of the Saint still surviving were preserved through the Terror, until they could be once again be exposed to the veneration of the faithful after the Concordat of Napoleon Bonaparte with Pope Pius VII. During the darkest time of the First Republic, part of the sanctuary was transformed into a stable for the army horses, the lead from the roofs was melted down, and eventually the whole structure of the ancient basilica was demolished.

The work of its restoration, in the nineteenth century, was due to the zeal of one Monsieur Leo Dupont, from Martinique, in the West Indies, who came to be known as “the Holy Man of Tours,” [and is now honoured as ‘Venerable’] and of a little group of Catholics, including the engineer Stanislas Retal, who was also an archaeologist of considerable ability. In 1854, they began the “Work of Saint Martin,” enlisting the support of the Archbishop of Tours. The ravaged tomb was rediscovered and a new provisional oratory erected, which was blessed by Archbishop Guibert in 1863, in the presence of eight bishops and an enormous crowd. Once again, pilgrims began to come to Tours to pay their homage to Saint Martin, the ancient glory of the Gauls. The revival was imperilled in the eighties by the ill will of the Republican civil authorities and the municipality. It was impossible to restore the great Church of the thirteenth century; but, thanks to the subscriptions received from all over France, a new Romanesque basilica was set up, designed by the young architect Laloux, which at present holds the remains of the saint. His statue, blessing the city, crowns its dome, while the windows are devoted to great events in the “Saint Martin story” and the subsequent history of the cultus and shrine of the wonder-worker — a history which reflects, in its vicissitudes, the fortunes of the Faith which he preached in the Gallic land, from the fourth century to our own day. It is said that no one has understood the culture of the West who has not stood, at least in spirit, as a humble pilgrim in the shrine of Saint Martin.

The harmonious lines of the cupola which covers the sacred tomb stand out against the bright sky of Touraine, between the two towers, witnesses of past glories; and thence, as from a throne, the holy Bishop stretches out his hand to bless his faithful city and the many pilgrims of the present age who come to visit his shrine.

CONCLUSION.

We may fitly close this short account of the life and works of the glorious Saint Martin with the prayer uttered by the Church at the Mass of his feast, which is on November 11:

“O God, Who sees that we put no reliance on our own strength, grant us this boon: that, by the intercession of Your blessed confessor, Bishop Martin, we may be fortified against all harm; through our Lord Jesus Christ Your Son, who is God, living and reigning with You, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.”
