

THE WESTERN FATHERS

*Being the Lives of Martin of Tours, Ambrose,
Augustine of Hippo, Honoratus of Arles,
and Germanus of Auxerre*

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XII

Some time after this he happened, when on a journey, to encounter the corpse of a pagan being carried to its grave with superstitious rites. He had seen the approaching crowd from a distance and stopped for a little, not knowing what it was, for there was nearly half a mile between them and it was difficult to distinguish what he saw. He made out, however, a band of rustics, and linen cloths (that had been spread over the body) fluttering in the wind. He supposed, therefore, that unhallowed sacrificial rites were being performed, for it was the custom of the Gallic rustics, in their lamentable infatuation, to carry round their fields the images of the demons covered with white veils. With uplifted hand, therefore, he made the sign of the Cross before the approaching crowd and ordered them not to move from where they were and to put down what they were carrying.

Then indeed there was a wonderful sight to be seen. First the unfortunate creatures turned as rigid as rocks. Then they tried with all their might to advance but, being quite unable to move forward, they kept turning round in the most ridiculous whirligigs. Finally, completely beaten, they put down the body they were carrying and, looking at one another in their bewilderment, silently speculated as to what had happened to them. However, when the man of blessings found that the assemblage was a funeral procession and not for sacrifices, he raised his hand again and set them free to pick up the body and go on. Thus, when he wished, he made them halt and when he chose he let them go.

XIII

Again, in a certain village he had demolished a very ancient temple and was proceeding to cut down a pine-tree which was close to the shrine, when the priest of the place and all his pagan following came up to stop him. These same people had been quiet enough, at Our Lord's command, while the temple was being thrown down but they were not prepared to see the tree felled.

He painstakingly explained to them that there was nothing sacred about a tree trunk and that they had much better be followers of the God he himself served. As for the tree, it ought to be cut down because it was dedicated to a demon.

Then one of them, more audacious than the rest, said to him : “ If you have confidence in the God you say you worship, stand where the tree will fall, and we will cut it down ourselves ; and if your Lord, as you call Him, is with you, you will not be harmed.”

Martin, with dauntless trust in God, undertook to do this. Thereupon all the assembled pagans agreed to the bargain, reckoning the loss of their tree a small matter if, in its downfall, it crushed the enemy of their religion. And as the pine leant to one side, so that there was no doubt on which side it would fall when cut through, Martin was bound and made to stand on the spot chosen by the rustics, where they were all quite sure that the tree would come down. Then they began to cut down the tree themselves with great joy and delight. A wondering crowd stood at a little distance.

Gradually the pine began nodding and a disastrous fall seemed imminent. Standing at a distance, the monks grew pale ; and, so frightened were they as the danger drew near, that they lost all hope and courage, and could only await the death of Martin. He, however, waited undaunted, relying on the Lord. The tottering pine had already given a crack, it was actually falling, it was just coming down on him, when he lifted his hand and met it with the sign of salvation.

At that—and you would have thought it had been whipped like a top—the tree plunged in another direction, almost crushing some rustics who had ensconced themselves in a safe place. Then indeed a shout went up to heaven as the pagans gasped at the miracle, the monks wept for joy, and all with one accord acclaimed the name of Christ ; and you may be sure that on that day salvation came to that region. Indeed, there was hardly anyone in that vast multitude of pagans who did not ask for the imposition of hands,¹

¹ The reference would appear to be their admission as catechumens, which is described in almost the same terms in the account of a very similar scene at the end of section 2 (IV) of the Dialogue *Postumianus* below (p. 10). See also the Introduction, section I.

abandoning his heathenish errors and making profession of faith in the Lord Jesus.

It is certainly a fact that before Martin's time very few, in fact hardly anyone, in those parts acknowledged Christ but now His Name, thanks to Martin's miracles and example, has gained such a hold that there is no district there not filled with crowded churches or with monasteries. For he immediately built a church or a monastery in every place where he destroyed a pagan shrine.

XIV

It was somewhere about this time that in the course of this work he performed another miracle at least as great. He had set on fire a very ancient and much frequented shrine in a certain village and the flames were being driven by the wind against a neighbouring, in fact adjacent, house. When Martin noticed this, he climbed speedily to the roof of the house and placed himself in front of the oncoming flames. Then you might have seen an amazing sight—the flames bending back against the force of the wind till it looked like a battle between warring elements. Such were his powers that the fire destroyed only where it was bidden.

In a village named Levroux,¹ however, when he wished to demolish in the same way a temple which had been made very rich by its superstitious cult, he met with resistance from a crowd of pagans and was driven off with some injuries to himself. He withdrew, therefore, to a place in the neighbourhood where for three days in sackcloth and ashes, continuously fasting and praying, he besought Our Lord that the temple which human hands had failed to demolish might be destroyed by divine power.

Then suddenly two angels stood before him, looking like heavenly warriors, with spears and shields. They said that the Lord had sent them to rout the rustic host and give Martin protection, so that no one should hinder the destruction of the temple. He was to go back, therefore, and carry out faithfully the work he had undertaken. So he returned to the village and, while crowds

¹ Latin, "Leprosium".

of pagans watched in silence, the heathen sanctuary was razed to its foundations and all its altars and images reduced to powder.

The sight convinced the rustics that it was by divine decree that they had been stupefied and overcome with dread, so as to offer no resistance to the bishop ; and nearly all of them made profession of faith in the Lord Jesus, proclaiming with shouts before all that Martin's God should be worshipped and the idols ignored, which could neither save themselves nor anyone else.

XV

I will also relate what happened in the country of the Aedui.¹ He was demolishing a temple there also, when a frenzied mob of rustic pagans made a rush at him and one of them, more audacious than the rest, drew his sword and went for him. Throwing back his cloak, Martin offered his bare neck to the stroke. Nor was the pagan slow to strike but, when his hand was well above his head, he fell flat on his back. Stricken with the fear of God, he asked for pardon.

Nor was the following incident dissimilar. Once, when he was destroying some idols, someone planned to stab him with a large knife. But in the very act of striking, the weapon was struck from his hand and disappeared. More often, however, when the rustics were protesting against the destruction of their shrines, he so subdued their pagan hearts by his holy preaching that the light of the truth penetrated to them and they themselves threw down their own temples.

XVI

He had the gift of healing in such a degree that a sick man hardly ever came to him without at once being cured, as may easily be seen from the following example. There was a girl at Trier who was suffering from such acute paralysis that for a long time she had been altogether without the use of her body. She was as good as dead in every part of her and drew only a fluttering breath. Her grieving relatives surrounded her, only awaiting her death.

¹ This district centred round Augustodunum, the modern Autun, a very long way from Tours.