

THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

A NEW TRANSLATION

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SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT

DIALOGUES

Translated by
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BOOK ONE

SOME MEN OF THE WORLD had left me feeling quite depressed one day with all their noisy wrangling. In their business dealings they try, as a rule, to make us pay what we obviously do not owe them. In my grief I retired to a quiet spot congenial to my mood, where I could consider every unpleasant detail of my daily work and review all the causes of my sorrow as they crowded unhindered before my eyes.

I sat there for a long time in silence and was still deeply dejected when my dear son, the deacon Peter, came in. He had been a very dear friend to me from his early youth and was my companion in the study of sacred Scripture. Seeing me so sick at heart he asked, 'Have you met with some new misfortune? You seem unusually sad.'

'Peter,' I replied, 'this daily sadness of mine is always old and always new: old by its constant presence, new by its continual increase. With my unhappy soul languishing under a burden of distractions, I recall those earlier days in the monastery where all the fleeting things of time were in a world below me, and I could rise far above the vanities of

life. Heavenly thoughts would fill my mind, and while still held within the body I passed beyond its narrow confines in contemplation. Even death, which nearly everyone regards as evil, I cherished as the entrance into life and the reward for labor.

'But now all the beauty of that spiritual repose is gone, and the contact with worldly men and their affairs, which is a necessary part of my duties as bishop, has left my soul defiled with earthly activities. I am so distracted with external occupations in my concern for the people that even when my spirit resumes its striving after the interior life it always does so with less vigor. Then, as I compare what I have lost with what I must now endure, the contrast only makes my present lot more burdensome. I am tossed about on the waves of a heavy sea, and my soul is like a helpless ship buffeted by raging winds. When I recall my former way of life, it is as though I were once more looking back toward land and sighing as I beheld the shore. It only saddens me the more to find that, while flung about by the mighty waves that carry me along, I can hardly catch sight any longer of the harbor I have left.

'Such, in fact, is generally the way our mind declines. First we lose a prized possession but remain aware of the loss; then as we go along even the remembrance of it fades, and so at the end we are unable any longer to recall what was once actually in our possession. That is why, as I have said, when we sail too far from shore, we can no longer see the peaceful harbor we have left. At times I find myself reflecting with even greater regret on the life that others lead who have totally abandoned the present world. Seeing the heights these men have reached only makes me realize the lowly state of my own soul. It was by spending their days in

seclusion that most of them pleased their Creator. And to keep them from dulling their spiritual fervor with human activities, God chose to leave them free from worldly occupations.'

And now I think it will be best if I present the conversation that took place between us by simply putting our names before the questions and the answers we exchanged.

PETER

I do not know of any persons in Italy whose lives give evidence of extraordinary spiritual powers, and therefore I cannot imagine with whom you are comparing yourself so regretfully. This land of ours has undoubtedly produced its virtuous men, but to my knowledge no signs or miracles have been performed by any of them; or, if they have been, they were till now kept in such secrecy that we cannot even tell if they occurred.

GREGORY

On the contrary, Peter, the day would not be long enough for me to tell you about those saints whose holiness has been well established and whose lives are known to me either from my own observations or from the reports of good, reliable witnesses.

PETER

Would you do me the favor, then, of saying at least something about them? Interrupting the study and explanation of the Scriptures for such a purpose should not cause grave

concern, for the amount of edification to be gained from a description of miracles is just as great. An explanation of holy Scripture teaches us how to attain virtue and persevere in it, whereas a description of miracles shows us how this acquired virtue reveals itself in those who persevere in it. Then, too, the lives of the saints are often more effective than mere instruction for inspiring us to love heaven as our home. Hearing about their example will generally be helpful in two ways. In the first place, as we compare ourselves with those who have gone before, we are filled with a longing for the future life; secondly, if we have too high an opinion of our own worth, it makes us humble to find that others have done better.

GREGORY

I shall not hesitate to narrate what I have learned from worthy men. In this I am only following the consecrated practice of the Scriptures, where it is perfectly clear that Mark and Luke composed their Gospels, not as eyewitnesses, but on the word of others. Nevertheless, to remove any grounds for doubt on the part of my readers, I am going to indicate on whose authority each account is based. You should bear in mind, however, that in some instances I retain only the substance of the original narrative; in others, the words as well. For if I had always kept to the exact wording, the crude language used by some would have been ill suited to my style of writing. The following narrative I obtained from elderly men who are highly respected.

(1) On the estate of the late Senator Venantius, in the district of Samnium, lived a tenant whose son Honoratus, when only a boy, had cultivated a deep love for his heavenly

home by the practice of abstinence. As he advanced in virtue he curbed his tongue from idle talk, and his abstinence from meat enabled him to gain mastery over his flesh. One day his father and mother invited their neighbors to dinner. When the meat was served, Honoratus would not take any, preferring to continue in his self-denial. His parents began to laugh at him and asked, 'Why can't you eat what is set before you? Do you expect us to have fish up here in the mountains?' For where they were living fish was not to be had.

Just then the supply of water for the meal gave out. So, as was customary there, a servant took a wooden bucket to the spring to get some. As it was filling it a fish slipped in. When he got back and poured out the water in the presence of all, to their amazement they saw the fish, which was large enough to supply Honoratus with food for an entire day. His parents did not say another word in derision but instead were filled with esteem for his abstinence. Thus the man of God was cleared of dishonor and ridicule by the discovery of a fish in that mountainous region.

His unusual progress in holiness and the miracles he performed soon led Venantius to grant him his freedom. Honoratus then built a monastery at Fondi, where he was abbot of nearly 200 monks and edified the entire countryside by his saintly life.

One time, for example, a huge mass of rock had broken loose from the mountain that towered high above the monastery and, as it rolled down, threatened to demolish the buildings and kill the monks. The holy abbot raised his right hand toward it and with the sign of the cross opposed its fall, all the while invoking the name of Christ. By so doing, as the devout Lawrence assured me, he stopped it where it was on the steep mountainside. Today the huge rock still appears

to be on the verge of rolling down, for nothing can be seen there that would block its fall.

PETER

I should think this saintly man would have needed someone to instruct him before he could become a spiritual guide for others.

GREGORY

As far as I know he had no one, but then, the gift of the Holy Spirit is not restricted by any law. According to sound monastic practice, a person should not presume to become a superior until he has learned submission; if he does not know how to obey, he should not be requiring obedience of others. Yet there are times when the Spirit directs a soul entirely from within. In such cases the guidance of this divine Teacher supplies for the absence of any human instruction. Weaker souls, however, must not try to imitate this freedom in their own lives. For if, on the vain presumption that they, too, are filled with the Holy Spirit, they refuse to be guided by another human being, they will only become teachers of error. The soul that is really filled with the Spirit of God will easily be recognized by its miraculous powers and humility. Where these two signs of holiness are found to perfection they show beyond a doubt that God is truly present. John the Baptist, for example, did not have an instructor, either, as far as we can tell from sacred Scripture. Even the divine Master, who is Truth Itself, did not make John one of His disciples as He did the Apostles, whom He taught through His human presence. Instead, Christ left him free of these

external ties and continued to instruct him by divine inspiration. Moses, too, after being taught in the desert, received instructions from an angel, not from a human being.¹ But, as I said before, examples like these are rather to be admired by weaker souls than imitated.

PETER

I am glad you discussed that point. Tell me, though, did any of the saint's disciples later follow in his footsteps?

GREGORY

(2) There was Libertinus, a highly respected man. He had lived as a disciple under Honoratus and received his training from him. Later, in the time of King Totila, he became prior of the the monastery of Fondi. Although the numerous miracles ascribed to him by many trustworthy men are commonly known, I will add a few that I heard from the devout Lawrence whom I mentioned previously. This Lawrence is still alive and tells me a great deal about Libertinus, for the two had been intimate friends at Fondi. The following incident just occurs to me.

Libertinus once was going through Samnium, taking care of some business matters for the monastery. When Darida, a Gothic commander, came to the same region with his army, some of his men, seeing Libertinus riding past, made him dismount and robbed him even of his horse. Far from showing any resentment at the loss of the animal, the saintly man offered them his rider's whip, also, saying, 'Here, take

¹ Cf. Exod. 24 20-25.

this, too. You will need it to drive the horse.' Then he knelt down to pray.

The soldiers rode off at a rapid pace and soon came to the Volturno River. There the horses came to a stop and would not go down to the water, even though the riders struck them with their lances and dug their spurs into their flanks until the blood flowed. Spurs and whips were useless. A plunge down a fatal precipice would not have seemed more terrifying to the horses. After the soldiers had worked themselves into a state of exhaustion with these useless efforts, one of them remarked that they were suffering this setback because of the wrong they had done to the man of God. Without further delay they turned back to find Libertinus. He was still on his knees praying. To their demands that he get up and take his horse, he answered, 'Go in peace. I have no need of a horse.' But they dismounted, lifted the protesting prior back onto his own horse and rode off again. This time, when they reached the banks of the Volturno, the horses dashed through the water as though the river bed were completely dry. And so, after this one stolen horse had been given back to its rightful master, all the soldiers again received full mastery over their own horses.

It was during these years, too, that Buccelin² with his Franks arrived in Campania. They heard rumors that Libertinus had large sums of money hidden away in his monastery at Fondi. So, breaking into the chapel, they began angrily to shout his name, not knowing that he was lying prostrate in prayer on the chapel floor. The remarkable thing is that in their mad search they kept stumbling against him without been able to see him. Frustrated in their blindness, they left the monastery empty-handed.

² He had entered Italy in 553.

At another time his abbot, the successor of Honoratus, asked him to go to Ravenna to take care of some business matters for the monastery. Now, out of veneration for his saintly master, Libertinus had made it a practice never to go anywhere without carrying on his person one of Honoratus' sandals. On his way to Ravenna it happened that he met a woman carrying her dead child in her arms. She looked at the man of God and, acting on the impulse of her maternal love, seized his horse by the bridle. Then, invoking the name of God, she solemnly declared, 'You shall not pass until you have brought my son back to life!'

Libertinus, considering such a thing most unusual, was frightened at the oath in her petition. To complete his confusion, he discovered that he could not turn out of her way, try as he would. One can readily imagine the struggle that went on his heart where the habitual humility of his life now came face to face with the devotedness of a mother. Fear kept him from attempting to fulfill a request so unusual, while a feeling of compassion kept urging him to help the mother in her bereavement. But, thanks be to God, the pious mother was victorious in this struggle, and the saint, in being overcome, gave proof of real strength. For, if the devotion of the mother had not been able to conquer his heart, how could he have been a man of true virtue? So he dismounted, knelt down, and raised his hands to heaven. Then, taking the sandal from the folds of his garment, he placed it on the breast of the dead child and, as he continued praying, the boy came back to life. Libertinus took him by the hand and gave him back to his weeping mother. After that he continued on his way to Ravenna.

PETER

How can you explain this great miracle? Did the merits of Honoratus cause it or the prayers of Libertinus?

GREGORY

It was the virtue of both, combined with the woman's faith, that produced this striking miracle. And it is my conviction that Libertinus was able to perform such a deed because he had learned to put greater trust in his master's powers than in his own. Undoubtedly he realized that his prayer had been answered through the spirit of Honoratus, whose sandal he had placed on the dead child's breast. Did not the Prophet Eliscus in like manner have with him the mantle of Elias, his master, when he came to the Jordan? He struck the waters but they did not part. So he quickly exclaimed, 'Where is now the God of Elias?' And striking the river with the mantle, he opened up a pathway through its waters. Now you see, Peter, how important humility is for working miracles. Only when he called upon his master's name and returned to his humble position as a disciple, could he exercise his master's powers and share in his marvelous deeds.

PETER

This is very interesting. Are there, perhaps, some other edifying incidents in his life that you might tell us?

3 4 Kings 2.11.

GREGORY

There are, indeed. But who is willing to imitate them? The virtue of patience they exemplify is, to my mind, greater than the power of working miracles. One day the abbot who succeeded Honoratus in the government of the monastery broke out in violent anger against Libertinus. Not finding a rod, he seized a footstool and struck Libertinus on the head and face, leaving them swollen and disfigured. In spite of the bruises, the saintly man retired to his bed without a word.

Arrangements, however, had been made for him to take care of some business for the monastery the next day. So, after the morning office, Libertinus came to the abbot's bed and humbly asked for the blessing. The abbot, realizing the great honor and esteem this monk enjoyed in the community and suspecting that the unjust treatment was causing him to leave, asked him where he was going.

'To take care of the business matters we arranged yesterday,' answered Libertinus. 'I promised to do it today, and I should now like to go and fulfill my obligation.'

After reflecting deeply upon his own harshness and severity and upon the humility and gentleness of Libertinus, the abbot rose quickly from his cot, knelt at the feet of his monk and humbly confessed that he was guilty of sin for having inflicted cruel injuries on a holy man. But Libertinus cast himself to the ground and protested that the bruises were due to his own faults and not the result of the abbot's severity. This incident turned out to be a lesson in humility for the abbot, who thereafter became a most gentle superior.

On his way to settle the business at hand, Libertinus met some of his friends and admirers who were much alarmed

at his condition and asked the reason for the bruises. Resolved to remain truthful and at the same time conceal the abbot's weakness, Libertinus answered, 'Yesterday evening my own sinfulness caused me to strike my face against a footstool. As a result you see these swellings.' And so without telling a lie he saved the abbot's good name.

PETER

After hearing all the miracles you relate of Libertinus, is it not quite natural to suppose that there were some in this large community to imitate his virtuous life?

GREGORY

(3) Surely you remember Felix, the hunchback. He was prior of the monastery a short time ago. I recall many of the remarkable stories he used to tell me about the monks there. But I must leave them unsaid and get on with other matters. There is one, however, that I must not pass over in silence.

At the monastery there was a very saintly man who acted as gardener. Now a thief used to come regularly and climb over the fence and steal his vegetables. Since the holy monk planted many vegetables which he could not find later, and noticed that some were trampled underfoot while others were stolen, he made a tour of inspection through the whole garden and found the place where the thief used to enter. On continuing his inspection, he found a serpent and commanded it to follow him. When he came to the thief's place of entrance he said, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I charge you to guard this entrance and keep the thief out.'

Immediately, the serpent stretched itself full length across the path, and the monk returned to the monastery.

During the noon hour while all were resting, the thief came as usual. He climbed the fence and just as he was going to put his foot down into the garden, he saw the serpent lying in his way. Terrified at the sight, he fell backwards over the fence. But his shoe got caught in the pickets so that he hung there, head downwards, unable to right himself. When the gardener returned he found him in this awkward position. But before turning to the thief, the saintly monk spoke to the serpent. 'Thanks be to God,' he said. 'You did just as I told you. Now you may go.' And the serpent crawled away. Then going to the thief, he said, 'What has happened here, brother? It is God who has delivered you into my hands. How did you dare to come so often to steal the fruits of our monastic labor?' With this he loosed the shoe from the picket and let the thief gently to the ground. 'Follow me,' he then told him and led the way to the entrance. There he graciously gave him the vegetables he had been trying to steal. 'Go, now,' he said, 'and do not steal again. If you have need of vegetables, come to me here in the garden and I will give you with God's blessing what you are wrongly trying to get by theft.'

PETER

I see now how unfounded my previous impression was that Italy had no wonder-workers.

GREGORY

Fortunatus, the saintly abbot of the monastery known as Cicero's Bath, and some other holy men are the sources for the following account.

(4) A most devout man by the name of Equitius, of the province of Valeria, was held in highest esteem by all because of his great holiness. For this reason, too, he had been made abbot over many monasteries of that province. Fortunatus was well acquainted with him. Finding himself much distressed as a young man by violent temptations of the flesh, Equitius turned with all the greater zeal to fervent prayer. One night while he was earnestly begging God for aid in this matter, he saw himself made a eunuch while an angel stood by. Through this vision he realized that all disturbances of the flesh had been taken away, and from that time on he was a complete stranger to temptations of this kind as though his body were no longer subject to the tendencies of human nature.

Relying on this virtue, which God had helped him to acquire, he took upon himself the guidance of communities of women just as he had done of monks. Yet he warned his disciples to be distrustful of themselves and not to be too eager to follow his example, for they would be the cause of their own downfall in trying to do what God had not given them the power to do.

At the time when certain magicians were put under arrest in Rome, Basil, whose skill in magic arts was surpassed by none, fled to Valeria disguised as a monk. There he approached the revered Castorius, Bishop of Amiternum, and asked to be placed under the care of Abbot Equitius with a recommendation for entrance into his community. So the

bishop, taking Basil with him, went to the monastery and asked Equitius to accept him as a member of his community. After one glance at Basil the holy abbot said, 'Father, the man whom you recommend looks to me like a devil and not a monk.'

To this the bishop answered, 'You are trying to find an excuse to refuse my request.'

'No,' quickly replied the abbot, 'I am only describing this person as I see him. But that you may not think me unwilling to obey, I will do as you command.' And so Basil was received into the monastery.

A few days later the man of God went a greater distance than usual from the monastery on his missionary journey urging the faithful to turn their hearts Godward. During his absence, a nun in one of the convents under his care, a person endowed with a beauty that corrupts with the flesh, took sick, and a high fever caused her to become extremely restless. She no longer confined herself to loud shouting but became hysterical. 'I am going to die,' she kept calling, 'unless the monk Basil comes immediately to cure me.'

In the absence of their saintly abbot the monks would not let anyone of the community go to the convent, least of all this new arrival whose manner of life they did not yet know. Instead they quickly sent a message to Equitius, informing him that this nun was ill with a high fever and anxiously demanding a visit from the monk Basil. The abbot listened to the messenger and gave his answer with a knowing smile: 'I always said he was a devil and not a monk. Go and bid him leave the monastery. About the nun who was sick and hysterical you need not worry. The fever has left her now and she is no longer asking for Basil.'

The monk returned and discovered that the nun had been cured when the words of healing were spoken.

In this act Equitius followed the example of his divine Master, who, when invited to attend the ruler's son, restored him to health by a word, so that the father went home and found that his son had been healed the same hour at which he had heard from Christ Himself the life-giving words.⁴

In obedience to the abbot's command, the monks with one accord expelled Basil from the monastery. Later on, this imposter declared that through his magic arts he had frequently suspended Equitius' monastery in mid-air, but had never been able to injure any of his monks. Not long after, he was burned to death as a magician as a result of the fervent zeal of the Christian people of Rome.

One day a nun of this same convent, on entering the garden, found some lettuce there which appealed to her taste. Forgetting to say the customary blessing, she began to eat of it greedily. Immediately the Devil threw her to the ground in a fit of pain. The other nuns, seeing her in agony, quickly sent word to Abbot Equitius to come with all speed and help them with his prayers. As soon as the holy man entered the garden, the Devil, using the nun's voice, began to justify himself. 'I haven't done anything!' he kept shouting. 'I haven't done anything! I was sitting here on the lettuce when she came and ate me!'

Full of indignation, the man of God commanded him to depart and vacate the place he held in this handmaid of almighty God. The Devil did so at once and after that could no longer exercise his powers over her.

A nobleman from Norcia by the name of Felix, the father of Castorius who is now with us here at Rome, noticed that

⁴ Cf. John 4:50.

Equitius was not in holy orders, yet traveled about from one place to another preaching the Gospel most zealously. Because they were good friends, Felix one day asked him how he dared to preach, since he was not in holy orders and did not have permission from the Bishop of Rome under whose jurisdiction he was.

Obliged to answer so direct a question, the holy man explained how he had been authorized to preach. 'I have considered well,' he said, 'all the objections you are raising. But one night a young man of radiant beauty appeared to me in a vision and placed a lancet on my tongue and said, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. Go forth and preach."⁵ Since that day I could not be silent about God even if I so wished.'

PETER

I should like to know the miracles performed by this man so blessed with God's grace.

GREGORY

The deed depends on the gift and not the gift on the deed; otherwise, grace would no longer be grace. Gifts precede every deed, even though the gifts may be increased by the deed that follows. But that you may not be kept from knowing this holy man's life, I refer you to Albinus, the esteemed Bishop of Rieti, who is well acquainted with it. There are also a number of other persons who could inform you.

But why do you look for more deeds when the purity of

⁵ Cf. Isa. 51:16; 59:21.

his life was as remarkable as the fervor of his preaching? The zeal that burned within him to harvest souls for God was strong enough to enable him to govern his monasteries and to find time, besides, for preaching in the churches of the surrounding hamlets and villages and for visiting even private dwellings, everywhere turning the hearts of the faithful to love their eternal heavenly home. His attire was poor and mean. Anyone who did not recognize him might pass him by without so much as returning his greeting. Whenever he went out to preach, he would ride the poorest beast the monastery possessed. Instead of a bridle he used a halter, and sheepskins served for saddle. Two leather pouches, in which he carried the books of sacred Scripture, hung down from his shoulders on either side. Whenever he arrived at a place, he would open these books and from the fountains of their spiritual doctrine would refresh the minds and souls of his hearers.

Rumors of his reputation for preaching reached Rome. Soon the clergy of that city began to complain. In words of flattery that corrupt those who listen to their charms, they said to the Pope, 'Who is this rustic who presumes authority to preach? Ignorant as he is, he dares to usurp a right reserved for you alone, our apostolic Lord. If it so please you, let an order be issued for him to come to Rome where he will learn to understand the discipline of the Church.'

Flattery, if it is not immediately cast from the mind, easily captivates the soul of one who is preoccupied with a multitude of affairs. And so the Pope, at the persuasion of the clergy, gave his consent to have Equitius summoned to Rome that he might learn to limit his preaching properly.

Julian, who was protector⁶ of the Church rights at the

⁶ An ecclesiastical official who acted as spokesman for the Church when its rights were in question.

time, and later Bishop of Sabina, was sent to carry out the command. The Pope gave him special orders to conduct Equitius to Rome with the respect due a man of God and not to let him suffer any ill treatment because of the summons. Eager to comply promptly with the wishes of the clergy in regard to Equitius, Julian hurried off. Arriving at the monastery, he found the scribes busy at their work, but the abbot himself was not there. When he asked for Abbot Equitius he was told that he was down in the valley directly below the monastery, cutting hay.

Now, Julian had among his servants a proud and insolent fellow whom he himself could manage only with difficulty. And this was the one he chose to go quickly and summon the abbot. Hastening to the meadow in a fierce mood, he found all the monks busy cutting hay. At his demand to see Abbot Equitius, the monks pointed him out. But no sooner had he caught sight of the man of God in the distance than the servant felt himself overcome by an unusual fear. In fact, he became weak with terror and could hardly keep from sinking to the ground. Coming to the man of God in this condition he humbly threw his arms around the abbot's knees, kissed them and announced that his master had come to see him.

The abbot greeted him in turn and said, 'Take some fresh hay with you for the horses. As you see, there is still a little work to be done. I will follow you as soon as it is finished.'

At the monastery, Julian wondered what was keeping his servant so long. When he finally saw him coming up from the meadow carrying a bundle of hay on his shoulders, he became exceedingly angry. 'What is the meaning of this?' he shouted. 'I did not send you to fetch hay! I told you to call the abbot!'

'The abbot will be coming in a short time,' answered the boy.

Just then a man in hobnailed boots, with a scythe hanging over his shoulders, came into view. The boy pointed toward him, indicating to his master that it was Abbot Equitius. Disdainful of the abbot's rustic appearance, Julian was preparing to give him the reception he deserved. But as soon as the abbot came near, Julian felt an overpowering terror in his soul. He trembled and his tongue could scarcely formulate the message he had come to deliver. His pride was broken. Going forward, he knelt down at the abbot's feet, begged for his prayers, and at the same time delivered the Pope's message summoning him to Rome. This news evoked a prayer of thanksgiving from the heart of Equitius, who declared himself blessed from heaven by this message from his Holiness. He ordered horses to be saddled at once for the journey, insisting that Julian start out with him immediately. But the latter declined, saying that it was quite impossible. Exhausted as he was, further travel on that day was out of question.

'You disappoint me, my son,' replied Equitius. 'For if we do not set out today, tomorrow will be too late.' And so the tired executor of the Pope's command compelled the servant of God to wait that night at the monastery.

The next day at dawn a messenger, with his horse panting from a long journey, came to deliver a letter to Julian. It contained an order not to trouble the servant of God, but to leave him at his monastery. When Julian asked why his instructions had been reversed, he was told that, the very night he had set out from Rome, the Pope had been terrified in a vision for having summoned the man of God. So Julian rose quickly and, commending himself to the prayers of

Equitius, said, 'The Holy Father wishes to spare you the fatigue of this journey.'

The words grieved the holy abbot. 'Did I not say yesterday,' he declared, 'that if we did not set out at once we should not set out at all?' Then, as a mark of charity, he detained the reluctant Julian at the monastery for a while to accept its hospitality in return for the trouble and fatigue he had endured.

Now mark well, Peter, how those who have learned to despise themselves in this life enjoy the protection of God. Since they are not ashamed to accept dishonor among men, they receive a spiritual rank among most honorable citizens. On the other hand, God sees how truly despicable those men are who, moved by a desire for the empty glory of this life, plume themselves with greatness in their own and in their neighbors' eyes. It is to such that Christ, the Truth, says: 'You are always courting the approval of men, but God sees your hearts; what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in God's sight.'⁷

PETER

I am surprised that the great Pope could have been misled about so great a saint.

GREGORY

Why are you surprised, Peter, that we who are but human make mistakes? Have you forgotten that it was David's reliance on the untruthful words of a servant that caused him to pronounce sentence against the innocent son of Jonathan?⁸ And David had the spirit of prophecy. But, since

⁷ Luke 16:15.

⁸ Cf. 2 Kings 16:3; 19:27.

David did this, we can be sure that in God's secret judgment he acted justly, even though we cannot see the justice of it with our human reason. Why should we be surprised, then, if we who are not prophets are sometimes led astray by deceitful men? An important point to consider is that the mind of a superior is distracted by a world of cares, and once the attention is preoccupied with a variety of matters it becomes less observant of details. One who is occupied with a multitude of affairs is all the more liable to be misled in regard to any one of them.

PETER

That is very true.

GREGORY

I must also tell you what Valentine, my former abbot, told me about this holy man Equitius, who, as he says, lay buried in the Church of St. Lawrence the Martyr. Once a farmer set a box of grain on the tomb without consideration or respect for the renowned saint. Suddenly a strong gust of wind came up, seized the box and hurled it far away, without so much as moving another article in the church out of place. This was a clear sign to all that the saint whose body rested there was a man of great virtue.

The following details I heard from the same Fortunatus who was mentioned previously in my story. He has become very dear to me because of his age and the simplicity of his life. When the Lombards entered Valeria, the monks fled from Equitius' monastery to his tomb in the Church of St. Lawrence. Wild with rage, the barbarians broke into the

church and forced the monks out into the open, intending to torture or kill them. With a groan of anguish one of the monks exclaimed sadly, 'O blessed Equitius! Do you want us to be driven out in this way? Why do you not come to defend us?'

At the sound of his voice, an unclean spirit seized the Lombards. They fell to the ground and were tormented relentlessly until all, even those outside, came to realize what was happening. After that, they no longer dared to profane the holy place. And the saintly man who at this time defended his disciples was later to help many who fled to his tomb for aid.

(5) Another story was told me by a fellow bishop of mine who had been a monk in the city of Ancona and had lived the religious life with extraordinary zeal. Some of our older men who come from there will bear me out in this statement.

Near the city of Ancona there was a church dedicated to St. Stephen the Martyr. The sacristan of this church, a pious man named Constantius, was known far and wide for his sanctity. Having renounced the things of this world completely, he directed his soul heavenward with all the powers of his mind.

One day the church's oil supply ran out, and Constantius had nothing with which to fill the lamps. So he took water, poured some into each lamp, and fixed a wick in the middle as usual. Then he lighted the lamps and they all began to burn as if they were fed with oil. Try to imagine now, Peter, how great must have been the merits of the man who could change the nature of a physical element.

PETER

This is indeed wonderful. Now I should like to learn about the humility in the heart of this man whose life was most remarkable in external manifestations of holiness.

GREGORY

You do well in looking among the virtues to find a man's true spirit, for almost invariably the miracles a man performs cause severe temptations to his spirit. But you will quickly understand the greatness of Constantius' humility if you listen to but one deed of his.

PETER

Since you have described his miracles so well, I am eager to hear what you have to say about his humility of soul.

GREGORY

The renown of Constantius' holiness spread for miles around and many people were eagerly looking for an opportunity to see him. One day a farmer came a great distance for this very purpose. It happened that at the time the holy man was standing on a kind of ladder, busily trimming the lamps in the church. He was short of stature, frail and slight in appearance. The farmer kept asking for someone to show him the saint. So those who knew Constantius pointed him out. But, as dull minds measure the quality of a man by his physical appearance, the farmer could not make himself believe that this small and lowly figure was the great Con-

stantius of whom he had heard so much. In his unlettered mind he could not reconcile what he had heard with what he now saw. He felt that a person of such a renown could not possibly be so small in appearance. Therefore, when the others insisted that this man really was the saint, the farmer laughed in derision and said, 'I expected to see a man, but this fellow has nothing manly about him.'

Constantius, overhearing these words, left the lamps as they were, hurried down the ladder and threw his arms most affectionately around the farmer and with a friendly kiss thanked him for having expressed his opinion so openly. 'You are the only one,' he said, 'who has looked at me with open eyes.'

The degree of humility Constantius had acquired must be judged from this act, since it shows the great love he had for one who despised him. It takes an insult to prove our hidden qualities. For while the proud rejoice in honors, the humble are usually happy to be despised. In fact, when they are little esteemed in the eyes of others, they find good reason to rejoice, because then they see that the judgment they have already formed of themselves is being confirmed.

PETER

This man was truly great because of his miracles, but I see now that he was even greater by reason of his humility.

GREGORY

(6) Marcellinus, another saintly man, was Bishop of Ancona. Because he suffered from the gout, walking was extremely painful for him; so, whenever necessary, his friends

carried him from place to place. It happened one day that due to some carelessness a fire broke out in the city. As its flames grew more and more violent, people came running from all sides to put it out. But in spite of all their efforts to extinguish it, the fire continued to spread and began to threaten the whole city with destruction. Advancing quickly into all the neighboring areas, the conflagration had soon destroyed a large part of the city. No one could stop it now. Then the bishop came to the scene, carried by his friends. The crisis forced him to act. 'Set me down in the path of the fire,' he commanded. They obeyed and put him down in a place toward which the full force of the fire seemed to be driving. Now, strange to say, the flames doubled back over themselves as if thereby to indicate that they could not pass over the bishop. Once the fire was checked at this point, it advanced no farther, but gradually died away without causing further destruction. Now, Peter, consider what great sanctity was required for a sick man to sit there and by prayers subdue the flames.

PETER

I marvel at the thought of it.

GREGORY

(7) Now I will tell you a story about a neighboring place as I heard it from Bishop Maximian and the elderly monk Laurio whom you know well. Both are living today. Laurio received his training under the saintly Anastasius in the monastery of Suppentonia near the city of Nepi. Anastasius himself was a friend of Nonnosus, the prior of the monastery

which stands on Mount Soracte. These two men, noble in character and zealous in the pursuit of virtue, living as they did in neighboring monasteries, frequently found occasion to associate with each other. Nonnosus in his monastery lived under a very severe abbot whose harshness he bore with remarkable peace of mind. As prior he showed himself gentle and mild toward the brethren, while his humility frequently softened the abbot's irascible nature. Since the monastery was built on top of a mountain, there was not enough level ground for planting even a small garden. The only possible place was a ledge running along the mountainside, but this was occupied by a huge rock protruding from the ground. One day it occurred to Nonnosus that this area might suffice for raising at least a few vegetables, if only the rock were taken away. Yet he realized that even fifty pair of oxen could not move so huge a mass. Despairing of human efforts, he turned to God for help. Accordingly, he went there during the night and prayed fervently. In the morning, when his brother monks came to the place, they saw that the massive rock had been removed, leaving ample room for a garden.

At another time the holy man was washing the glass lamps in the chapel. One of them fell from his hands and dropped to the floor with a crash. Fearing the violent anger of his abbot, Nonnosus swept the fragments together before the altar and knelt down in earnest prayer. When he looked up, all the broken pieces had been neatly fitted together into one unbroken whole.

In these two miracles he imitated two other saints: St. Gregory,⁹ who moved a mountain, and St. Donatus,¹⁰ who restored a broken chalice.

⁹ Gregory the Wonder-worker (d. Nov. 17, c. 270).
¹⁰ Bishop of Arezzo (martyred, August 7, 362).

PETER

We have new miracles, then, in imitation of the old.

GREGORY

I should also like to point out a similarity between the miracles of Nonnosus and Eliseus if you care to listen.

PETER

Nothing could please me more.

GREGORY

One day the monastery's oil supply had run out. Since the new crop of olives was now being harvested and the olive trees in their own orchard bore hardly any fruit, the abbot decided to let the brethren go into the neighboring orchards to find work. In payment for their labor they were to ask a portion of oil for the monastery. Nonnosus, however, in all humility prevented this from happening, for he feared that the monks in going out of the monastery to seek gain would suffer spiritual harm. Therefore, he ordered the few olives that could be found in the monastery's garden to be gathered and put into the oil press. Whatever oil they yielded was to be brought to him.

The brethren did as he wished and, collecting the oil in a small jar, brought it to him. Nonnosus took it and at once placed it in front of the altar. Then, bidding his brethren leave the chapel, he knelt down to pray. In a few moments he called them back and asked them to pour a little of the

blessed oil into every jar they could find in the monastery, so that each might contain some of this blessed fluid. These jars were then closed. The next day when they were opened they were found full of oil.¹¹

PETER

Every day of our life we see the fulfillment of our Lord's words, 'My Father has never ceased working, and I too must be at work.'¹²

GREGORY

(8) Anastasius, whom I referred to above, was at that time a notary of the Church at Rome, which, by the grace of God is now in my care. Desiring to devote all his time to God alone, he gave up his public position in order to live the monastic life at Suppentonia, the monastery I mentioned at the opening of this story. Having spent many years there in great piety he ruled it with utmost care when he was made its abbot.

A steep mountain rose to a great height over the monastery and below it lay a deep chasm. Now, when the time had come for God to reward the labors of Anastasius, a voice was heard one night calling from the top of the cliff in prolonged tones, 'Anastasius, come!' Immediately after that, seven other monks were called by name in the same way. A short period of silence followed and then the voice summoned another monk. Since the whole community heard these names clearly spoken, there was no doubt in the mind of anyone that death awaited those who had been thus sum-

¹¹ Cf. 4 Kings 4:1-7.

¹² John 5:17.

moned. Within a few days Anastasius died. The others were summoned in the order in which they had been called. The brother whose name was heard after the interval of silence continued to live on for a few days after the others had passed away, then he, too, died. The monks now understood why there had been a period of silence.

But a remarkable incident had occurred at Anastasius' death. One of the monks, not wishing to be left behind, had come to kneel at his bedside, pleading tearfully with him. 'By the God whom you are going to face soon,' he had said, 'I beg you let me depart from this world within seven days after you have passed away.' He died about a week after Anastasius. Now, since his name had not been called by the voice from the cliff, it was evident that the saintly Anastasius himself had obtained for this disciple of his the grace of following him so quickly to eternity.

PETER

Since this monk was not summoned with the others, yet was taken out of the world through the prayers of the holy Anastasius, what am I to conclude but that great saints are sometimes able to obtain what God has not predestined?

GREGORY

By no means! Holy men cannot obtain what has not been predestined. Whatever they accomplish through prayer has been predestined for accomplishment through prayer. Even our predestination to heaven has been so ordained that we must exert ourselves to attain it, for it is only through

prayer that we obtain the kingdom decreed for us by God from all eternity.

PETER

I should like to have clearer proof that prayer can be of help for predestination.

GREGORY

What I have said, Peter, can be quickly proved. You know that the Lord said to Abraham, 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be called.' He also said to him, 'I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.' And again He promised him, 'I will indeed bless you, and will surely multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and the sands on the seashore.'¹³ From these statements it is clear that almighty God intended to increase the posterity of Abraham through his son Isaac. Yet we read in the Bible, 'Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren. The Lord answered Isaac and his wife Rebecca conceived.'¹⁴ Now, if the increase of Abraham's people was predestined to come through Isaac, why did he receive a sterile wife? Can we not readily conclude from this that predestination is fulfilled through prayer, seeing that the one in whom God predestined the descendants of Abraham to be multiplied was blessed with offspring in this manner?

¹³ Gen. 21.12; 17.5; 22.17.

¹⁴ Gen. 25.21.

PETER

Your reasoning has solved the problem and removed all my doubts.

GREGORY

Would you like to hear about the saints of Tuscany, their character and intimate knowledge of God?

PETER

By all means! Please tell me about them.

GREGORY

(9) Boniface, Bishop of Ferentino, was a very saintly man and a true bishop in every respect. The priest Gaudentius has many remarkable things to say about him, and what he says is all the more trustworthy because he received his training under this good bishop and was witness to the events he narrates.

There was great poverty in Bishop Boniface's church—a condition which in upright souls safeguards the virtue of humility. The only source of revenue he had was a small vineyard, and even that was one day struck by a severe hailstorm. Nearly everything in it was destroyed. There remained only a few clusters of grapes here and there on the vines. Seeing himself thus further impoverished, the saintly bishop entered the vineyard and thanked God sincerely for this added deprivation.

When the grapes began to ripen, he set a guard over the

vineyard to keep watch as usual, and asked his nephew, the priest Constantius, to prepare all the wine jars and wine casks with a fresh coating of pitch. Constantius was very much surprised at this, for he thought it rather foolish to bother about wine jars if there was going to be no wine. Yet he did not ask the reason for the command, but obediently got all the vessels ready for use.

Having gathered the grapes and brought them to the wine press, the man of God ordered everyone to leave the storehouse except a small boy who was to stay there with him to trample out the few handfuls of grapes. As the juice began to flow from the press the bishop caught it in a small vessel. By pouring a little of it into each of the jars and casks that had been prepared, he put a blessing upon all of them. Then he asked Constantius to have the poor gather round the wine press. At once the wine began to flow abundantly until all the poor had their needs well supplied. After that the boy came out of the wine press, and the bishop, having locked and sealed the door of the storehouse, returned to his church.

Two days later he called Constantius again and, after saying a prayer, opened the door of the storehouse. The jars into which he had poured only a few drops of wine were now filled to the brim. In fact, they would have overflowed and flooded the entire room with wine had the bishop waited outside a moment longer. With a stern countenance he commanded the priest not to disclose the miracle to anyone as long as he, the bishop, was still alive. No doubt he feared that he would become worthless in the eyes of God if this miracle was to bring him honor and esteem from men. He wished to follow the example of our divine Master, who commanded His disciples to tell no one the things they

had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead,¹⁵ thereby instructing us in the ways of humility.

PETER

I have been looking for an opportunity to ask why the two blind men who had their sight restored by Christ went out and 'talked of him in all the country round'¹⁶ after they had been expressly commanded to tell no one. Did the only-begotten Son, co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit, express in this instance a wish beyond His power to fulfill? Was it impossible for Him to keep this miracle hidden?

GREGORY

Every act of our Redeemer, performed through His human nature, was meant to be a pattern for our actions, so that in following His footsteps according to the measure of our ability we might walk unflinching along the path of our present lifework. And so our Lord, having performed the miracle, commanded the two men to tell no one, and yet He could not stop them from spreading the fame of it. The purpose of this was to show His disciples that, in following the example of His teaching, they should have the will to remain hidden in their great deeds, but that their holy deeds should be made public against their will, for the benefit of others. Thus, the desire to keep their good works hidden would be an expression of great humility, while the inability to keep them so would bring great profit to others. Our Lord, then, did not will anything that He was powerless to

¹⁵ Cf. Matt. 17.9.

¹⁶ Matt. 9.31.

fulfill; rather, in his position as teacher, He showed his disciples by example what they should be willing to do and what should be done in their regard even against their will.

PETER

I am delighted with your explanation.

GREGORY

There are still a few deeds of Bishop Boniface that should be included here, since we are giving his life story. Once, shortly before the feast of the martyr St. Proclus, Fortunatus, a nobleman of the city, earnestly requested the bishop to stop at his house for a meal after Mass at the martyr's shrine. The man of God could not refuse this charitable invitation. So, after Mass, he went to dine at Fortunatus' home. Before they could say grace, a man with a monkey appeared at the door, clashing his cymbals. He was one of the popular minstrels of the city who made his living by this kind of entertainment. Annoyed at the sound of the cymbals, the holy man exclaimed, 'Alas! That poor wretched is dead! He is dead, I say. I come to table and, before I have opened my mouth to pray, this man with a monkey at his side is already playing cymbals. Nevertheless, be charitable to him,' he added, 'and give him something to eat and drink. But be assured, he is dead.'

The unfortunate man was received into the house and given bread and wine, but as he crossed the threshold to leave, a large stone fell from the roof and struck him on the head. Prostrated by the blow, he was raised half-dead from

the ground. The next day he died. And so the bishop's words were fulfilled.

You see, Peter, great reverence is due to holy men because they are the temples of God. When a holy man is provoked to anger, no less a person is angered than He who dwells in that temple. We must, therefore, fear the anger of the just from a firm conviction that the One who is present in them has full power to inflict whatever vengeance He may choose.

At another time, the priest Constantius, having sold his horse, deposited the twelve gold solidi he received for it in his money chest for safe keeping. One day while he was away on business several poor people came unexpectedly to the house to beg for alms. The saintly Boniface, unable to find anything to give them, was deeply grieved, for how could he, the bishop, turn these wretched poor from his door empty-handed. Then he remembered that his nephew had sold his horse and put the money away in a chest. Filled with holy zeal, the man of God broke open the chest, took the twelve gold pieces and distributed them among his poor visitors. When Constantius came back and saw the chest broken and the money gone, he began to shout and scold angrily: 'Everyone can live peacefully in this house except me. For me that is impossible!'

The commotion brought the entire household to the scene. The bishop tried to calm his excited nephew with reassuring words, but received only abusive language in return. 'All others can live here quietly,' he was told. 'But for me there is no peace in your house. Give me back my money.'

Greatly disturbed at these words the bishop took refuge in the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Standing there with the folds of his garment stretched out over his extended

arms, he begged her to give him what was needed to appease the anger of the irate priest. When he looked down again at the open folds, he saw there, to his astonishment, twelve solidi shining brightly like gold taken directly from the fire. Leaving the Church at once, he threw the gold pieces into the lap of the infuriated priest. 'Here,' he said, 'you have the money you demand. But mark my word. Because of your avarice you shall not succeed me as bishop of this church.'

This sentence proved to be true. The priest, no doubt, was laying aside the money to obtain the episcopal see. The words of the God-fearing bishop prevailed—Constantius never became bishop, but ended his life as a priest.

At another time two Goths came to Bishop Boniface asking hospitality. They were going to Ravenna, they said. The bishop gave them a small wooden cask of wine to drink on the way with their meals. They drank of this every day until they came to Ravenna, and continued to do so during the few days they spent there. Finally they came back to the venerable bishop, carrying the cask with them. They had used wine every day, yet it had never failed them, just as if this little wooden cask itself were the source of wine, not a mere container being refilled.

An elderly cleric who came from this region a short time ago also told me about Bishop Boniface. His account is worth repeating. One day, on entering his garden, the bishop found it covered with caterpillars. Seeing all his vegetables going to ruin, he turned to the caterpillars and said, 'I adjure you in the name of our Lord God, Jesus Christ, depart from here and stop eating these vegetables.' In obedience to his voice all the caterpillars, down to the very last one, disappeared from the garden.

But why should anyone be surprised to hear what this

man did as bishop, when he was standing high in dignity before the Lord and full of manly virtues? The deeds of his boyhood, as they are related by the elderly cleric, cause even greater astonishment.

While he was still at home with his mother, he would sometimes leave the house and later return without his coat or even without his shirt, for, as soon as he saw anyone in need of clothes, he would give up his own. By divesting his body in this way, he wished to clothe his soul in the sight of God with merits for heaven. His mother frequently rebuked him for this, telling him that it was not right to give his garments to the poor when he himself was in need.

Going to the granary one day, the mother found that her son had distributed in alms to the poor almost all the wheat she had stored up that year for the family. The thought of having lost a whole year's food supply nearly drove her frantic. Boniface, the child of God, seeing her in such distress, tried to console her as well as he knew how. But she would not listen to him. So he begged her to leave the granary. Meanwhile, he knelt down beside the small pile of wheat that still remained and prayed fervently. Then he invited his mother to come back again into the granary. It was now filled to the top with a supply of grain much greater than before. Moved to compunction by this miracle, the mother thereafter urged her son to continue giving freely, since his prayers were so quickly and so abundantly answered.

Boniface used to tend his mother's hens in a yard near the house. Frequently a fox would come from his den nearby and carry off some of the flock. One day when the boy Boniface was standing in the yard, the fox came as usual and took one of them. The boy quickly ran into the church and fell on his knees: 'O God,' he prayed in a loud voice,

'can you be satisfied to see me go hungry at my mother's table? Look! A fox is eating up all our hens!' The moment he finished the prayer he ran out again. Almost immediately the fox came back, opened his jaws to free the hen, and fell dead at Boniface's feet.

PETER

How wonderful that God should answer the prayers of those who hope in Him, even when they pray for childish favors!

GREGORY

It is the way of God's providence, Peter. He grants us many little favors to increase our hope for greater ones. In this case, He heard the simple request of an upright little boy in order to teach him complete confidence in petitions of greater moment.

PETER

That is a charming explanation.

GREGORY

(10) Fortunatus, Bishop of Todi, was another man of great piety in Tuscany. He possessed extraordinary power over evil spirits, for on occasions he would expel legions of them, and, when they turned their violence against him personally, he would crush them with the weapon of incessant prayer.

One of Fortunatus' intimate friends was a man named Julian, the protector of our church, who died here at Rome

a short time ago. It was from him that I learned the story I am going to tell you now. Because of their great friendship, Julian was often witness to the bishop's doings, and in later years he was to draw examples for our instruction from his delightful store of memories.

A noble lady in the neighborhood of Tuscany had a daughter-in-law, who, a short time after her marriage, had been invited to come with her mother-in-law to the dedication of the Church of St. Sebastian. During the night preceding the dedication she was unable to abstain from the use of marriage. This indulgence caused her some pangs of conscience in the morning, yet human respect bade her join the procession. So, fearing embarrassment in the sight of men more than the dread judgment of God, she accompanied her mother-in-law to the dedication of the church. As soon as the relics of the martyr St. Sebastian were brought into the chapel, the evil spirit seized the young wife and threw her to the ground in agony. The priest of the church, seeing her wretched condition, took the linen cloth from the altar to cover her. But the Devil immediately turned on him, too, for in wishing to help the woman he had exceeded the limits of his power. Through this experience, therefore, the priest was forced to recognize the incident for what it really was. The bystanders then carried the stricken woman out of the church to her home, where she continued to suffer from these attacks without interruption. Finally, her relatives, pursuing her with misguided human love, entrusted her cure to magicians who would utterly ruin her soul in their attempt to aid her body temporarily with their magic art. Accordingly, the young woman was taken to a river and submerged, while the magicians with endless formulas tried to expel the evil spirit. No sooner had they expelled one devil from her

by their unholy craft, than God, who judges all, allowed a whole legion to enter into her. From then on it seemed that all the devils together were wildly agitating her body, shouting and screaming furiously.

At this, her relatives came to their senses. They acknowledged their utter lack of faith and agreed to place the young woman under the care and protection of the saintly Fortunatus. Once he had accepted responsibility for the woman's welfare, the holy bishop spent many days and nights in prayer, applying all the diligence and zeal necessary to overcome the legion of devils standing against him. After some days of fervent prayer, he was able to give the young woman back to her relatives, sound and healthy, without a trace of the former evil remaining.

At another time this servant of God drove an unclean spirit out of a possessed man. Toward evening, a time when few men are about, this unclean spirit masquerading as a stranger walked up and down the streets of the city. 'Oh, what a holy bishop you have in Fortunatus,' he kept shouting. 'See what he has done! He has thrown me, a stranger, out of my lodging. I look for a night's shelter but can find none in this city.'

A man sitting at the open hearth in his home with his wife and little son happened to hear the voice, and, curious to know what the bishop had done, invited the stranger into his house to join the family. While they were talking together, the evil spirit suddenly took hold of the little boy and cast him into the hearth where the flames quickly caused his death. Only too late did the wretched father realize that he had welcomed into his own home the evil spirit expelled by Bishop Fortunatus.

PETER

How was it that the Devil dared to commit such a crime in this home, seeing that the father had practiced toward him the hospitality due to strangers?

GREGORY

My dear Peter, many things are good only in appearance but not in reality, because they do not flow from good motives. That is why Christ says in the Gospel, 'If thy eye is diseased, the whole of thy body will be in darkness.'¹⁷ For an act which results from an evil intention becomes bad in itself, though outwardly it may still appear good. I believe that the man who lost his son while showing hospitality found pleasure not in his work of mercy, but in the defamation of the bishop. The punishment which followed makes it clear that the previous act of hospitality was not without blame. For there are some who perform their good works in order to cast a shadow of reproach on their neighbors. They are motivated not by the good they do, but by the praise they receive at another's expense. I am inclined to think that the man who invited the evil spirit to accept hospitality was more intent on parading his own goodness than on doing a work of mercy. He wished to appear more righteous than the bishop, by receiving a person whom the bishop had rejected.

¹⁷ Matt. 6:23.

PETER

What you say is true, for the outcome shows that the hospitality did not proceed from a pure motive.

GREGORY

At another time, a blind man who had been brought to Fortunatus begged for the help of his powerful intercession. The request was granted. After saying a prayer, the holy bishop made the sign of the cross on the poor man's eyes and immediately the blindness vanished and clear vision was restored.

There is also the story of a soldier's mad horse. It took a number of men to hold it under control, and even then it would lash out right and left trying to bite whoever was within reach. Once the men had secured it as well as they could, they brought it to the man of God, who instantly made the sign of the cross over its head. With this, the horse became perfectly gentle. In fact, when the soldier noticed the sudden and complete change in the temper of his horse, he decided to give it to Bishop Fortunatus as a present. The latter, however, refused to accept it. When the soldier persisted in his offer, the bishop decided on a happy compromise. By paying a fair price he could accept the horse without taking it as a reward for the miracle. An outright rejection, he saw, would only have caused the soldier great disappointment. So, following the dictates of charity, he bought the horse, though he had no need of it.

There is another miracle I should mention. It was related to me about twelve days ago by a rather poor old man who had been directed to me. Since I always delight in conversing

with old men, I asked him where he was from. He informed me that he came from the city of Todi. "Tell me, then, my dear man," I said, "did you know Bishop Fortunatus?"

"I knew him well," he replied.

"Do you know of any miracles he performed?" I continued. "What kind of man was he? I would be very happy to know."

"He was far different from the men of today," answered the old man. "Whenever he turned to almighty God with a request, it was answered without delay. There is one miracle that comes to my mind now.

"One day some Goths passing through Todi on their way to Ravenna carried off two small boys from an estate at the outskirts of the city. When the news of this reached Fortunatus, he had the Goths summoned to his presence immediately. At first he spoke kindly to them, trying to soften the hardness of their hearts. Then he added, "I will pay you whatever price you demand, but bring back the boys you carried off. Do it as a personal favor to me."

"We are prepared to carry out any request of yours but this," answered the one who appeared to be their leader. "We will not give back the boys on any account."

"With a mild threat in his voice Fortunatus replied, "This makes me very sad. You do not listen to your father. Do not disappoint me. It will bring you no blessings."

"But the Goths remained obdurate and left without granting the bishop's request.

"The next day, on leaving the city," the leader of the Goths paid Fortunatus another visit. All the good bishop could do was repeat his previous request on behalf of the boys. The Goth would not agree to restore them. With deep sorrow in his voice the bishop then said, "I know this it will go hard with you for leaving me so sadly disappointed."

"Making light of these words, the Goth returned to his quarters and ordered the boys to go ahead on horseback with his men. He himself followed shortly after. When he passed in front of the Church of St. Peter the Apostle, his horse slipped and fell. As a result, the Goth suffered a badly broken rib and had to be carried to his lodging. His first thought was to have the boys brought back. Then without delay he sent Fortunatus a short message saying, "Please, father, bid your deacon come to see me."

"When the latter arrived at his bedside, the Goth had the boys brought into the room. Though previously he had utterly refused to leave them with the bishop, he now presented them to the deacon with the words, "Go and say to my lord the bishop: Because you have cursed me, I have been struck down. Here are the boys for whom you pleaded. Take them, and do not forget to say a prayer for me."

"As soon as Fortunatus had the boys safely in his care, he gave the deacon some holy water and bade him hurry back to the Goth. The deacon went as he was told and, as he sprinkled the Goth with the holy water, a most remarkable thing happened. No sooner had the water touched his side than the fractured rib became one solid piece again, completely healed. The Goth rose from his bed that same hour and, mounting his horse, continued his journey as if he had suffered no physical harm of any kind.

"It turned out that the Goth, who in spite of the ransom offered had refused to give up the boys in obedience to the holy bishop, was compelled by physical suffering to give them back without hope of recompense."

When the old man had finished this story he was eager to pass on to another. But some people whom I was instructing had arrived, and besides it was growing late. So at the

time I could not very well continue listening to his accounts, much as I always enjoy doing so.

The next day the old man told me about another miracle of Fortunatus, even more remarkable than the previous one. 'In the same city of Todi,' he began, 'there was a man of exemplary life named Marcellus, who lived there with his two sisters. On Holy Saturday evening he took sick and died. Since it was necessary to carry his remains a great distance, he could not be buried the same day. The consequent delay in the funeral services gave the two sisters time to hurry to their revered bishop, Fortunatus, and pour out their hearts in grief. "We know that you follow in the footsteps of the holy Apostles," they said, "and that you cleanse lepers and give sight to the blind. Come with us and bring our brother back to life."

"This was very sad news for Bishop Fortunatus and he, too, could not restrain his tears. "Go home again," he told them, "and do not insist on this request of yours, for your brother's death occurred by God's decree, which no man can oppose." With this answer the two sisters departed, leaving the bishop alone to mourn his friend's death.

Before dawn of Easter Sunday he summoned his two deacons and went with them to the home of the deceased, proceeding directly to the place where the corpse was laid out. There he knelt down and after praying for some time rose and sat down near the body. Then in a subdued voice he called, "Brother Marcellus." At the sound of this low voice so near him, the dead man was roused as though awakened from a gentle slumber. Opening his eyes and looking at the bishop, he said, "What have you done? What have you done?" The bishop in turn asked, "What have I done?" To this Marcellus answered: "Yesterday two people came to

release me from the body and lead me to the abode of the blessed. Today a messenger is sent to them with the command, "Take him back, because Bishop Fortunatus is visiting at his home." Marcellus quickly regained his strength and lived for a long time after this episode.'

We must not suppose, however, that he lost the place that had been given him in heaven. There is no doubt that through the prayers of his patron he was able to live even more virtuously after this experience with death than before it, for he had always made an earnest effort to please almighty God.

But why relate all these miracles from the lifetime of Bishop Fortunatus, when even at present numerous wonders are worked at the tomb where he lies buried? Here, whenever people come to venerate his earthly remains with a lively faith, Fortunatus continues to drive out devils from possessed persons and to heal the sick, just as he had done during his lifetime.

Now I wish to return again in my narrative to the province of Valeria, because it is the scene of some remarkable deeds which were told me by the Fortunatus whom I mentioned much earlier in this book.¹⁸ He still comes to see me frequently and edifies me with stories of the past.

(11) In this province there was a man named Martyrius, a devout servant of almighty God. As a witness to his sanctity we have the following miracle.

One day, when some of the monks were baking bread, they forgot to stamp the sign of the cross on the loaves. It was the custom there to stamp the unbaked loaves with a wooden form which divided them into four equal parts. Overhearing the conversation of his fellow monks, Martyrius

¹⁸ See above, p. 16.

knew that the loaves had not been marked. The loaves were already in the hot embers and covered with ashes. Turning to his companions, he asked, 'Why did you not stamp this bread?' At the same time he made the sign of the cross over the embers. As he did so, a loud noise like the breaking of a jar, came from inside the hot ashes where the bread was baking. When the loaves were removed from the fire it was found that they had been stamped with a cross, not through contact with a physical object, but by the power of faith.

(12) There is in that region a valley called Interocrina, or Interocrina, its popular name. Here the saintly Severus exercised his priestly care over the Church of Blessed Mary Ever Virgin, Mother of God. One day he received an urgent summons from the owner of an estate who was lying on his deathbed. The messengers begged Severus come quickly and intercede for the poor man's soul, so that he might repent and die absolved from his sins. Severus, busy at the time watering his vineyard, told the messengers to go back to the sick man, adding that he himself would follow in a very short time. He saw that the work in the vineyard would require but a few moments, so he stayed long enough to finish it before setting out to visit the sick man.

On his way there, he was met by the same messengers returning to him. 'Why did you delay, Father?' they asked. 'There is no need to trouble yourself any longer, for our friend is now dead.'

At this news, Severus trembled with fear and began loudly to accuse himself of being responsible for the man's death. With tears in his eyes he arrived at the scene, fell to his knees in front of the bed and wept bitterly. While he was thus lamenting and afflicting himself for his sinful neglect, the dead man suddenly came back to life. At sight of this

the bystanders burst out in shouts of amazement and wept now for joy. On being asked where he had been and how he had come back, he said: 'The guides who led me away were dreadful creatures. From their mouths and nostrils they breathed a most unbearable fire. While they were leading me through a dark region, suddenly, like a beautiful vision, a young man with wings came to meet us and said to my guides, "Lead him back again, because the priest Severus is weeping and through his tears has obtained pardon from God for the soul of this man."'

Hearing this, Severus quickly got to his feet and offered the powers of his intercession to help the man do penance for his sins. And so, after spending seven days in works of penance, the man died a happy death on the eighth day.

Consider, therefore, how much the Lord loved His disciple Severus only for a brief moment would he allow sadness to overwhelm him.

PETER

These are truly remarkable deeds! Up to the present they were entirely unknown to me. How is it that we cannot find men of this type today?

GREGORY

I believe there still are many such men in the world, Peter. One cannot conclude that there are no great saints just because no great miracles are worked. The true estimate of life, after all, lies in acts of virtue, not in the display of miracles. There are many, Peter, who without performing miracles, are not at all inferior to those who perform them.

PETER

How, then, I ask you, can I tell that there are some saints who without working miracles are equal to those saints who do?

GREGORY

Surely you know that in the apostolic college Paul was brother to Peter, the prince of the Apostles.

PETER

I do, indeed, and there is no doubt that, although he was the least of the Apostles, he labored more than all the rest.

GREGORY

You recall, too, how Peter walked on the water, whereas Paul was shipwrecked on the high seas.¹⁹ In the very same element, then, where Paul was unable to proceed on board ship, Peter could go on foot. Though these two Apostles did not share equally in the power of performing miracles, it is clear that they have an equal share in the rewards of heaven.

PETER

I am much pleased with what you say, for I realize now that in these matters one must consider a man's way of life, not his miracles. But, since miracles are a testimony to holiness of life, I beg you not to end your narrative now, but to continue nourishing my spirit with these examples of sanctity.

¹⁹ Cf. Matt. 14:29; Acts 27:14-41.

GREGORY

I should be delighted to tell you the miracles of the saintly Benedict, thereby bringing honor and glory to our Redeemer, but the day is nearly spent. So, if we leave these miracles for another time, we shall be free to speak of them at greater length.