

LEGENDS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN.

The Poor Priest

Mater Christi – Mother of Christ

This is no embellished legend, but simple anecdote of unquestionable veracity, and it claims a page in this collection, although doubtless known to many of our readers. Its subject is a prayer -the Memorare-dear to every Catholic heart, from the pen of that great servant of Mary, St. Bernard.*

In the days Of Louis XIII, a courtier, freeing himself from the busy life of the world, its follies and its pleasures, had the happiness, moved by God's grace, to embrace the solid, pure, and calm life of the service of God. He was of a noble family, and he quitted the splendors of wealth to live in the straits of poverty. At the commencement of his new career a great temptation surprised him, in the shape of one of those enticements which the world so alluringly throws out to entrap those it is on the point of losing; instead of vainly braving the danger, the new soldier of Christ took refuge in a church in Paris, which, alas like so many others, does not now exist. He humbly but confidently threw himself at the feet of our Lady of Deliverance, whose history we have just recounted, and the temptation and its object vanished.

He shortly afterwards was ordained, and sung his first Mass in the Church of St. Julien-the-poor, at the Hotel-Dien,** surrounded by the poor, whom he henceforth adopted as his family. A fortune of 18,000 pound fell to his share, which he eagerly seized upon, not for his own use, but for the solacing of the miseries and wants of his new friends. But so numerous was his adopted family, that his fortune soon disappeared; and he began to seek the wealthy and beg alms from them. Devoted to the care of the poor and unfortunate members of society, this priest had abandoned everything, and, possessed of naught but his warm heart, performed prodigies of charity, and effected numerous conversions. His care was not confined to the free poor; he went into the prisons, and carried consolation to their wretched inmates, and often accompanied them to the scene of their terrible death. It is difficult to believe that a man, in the hour of distress and prostration, at the threshold of a violent death, can still forget God. It is, however, of too frequent occurrence. The holy priest, of whom we write, had a particular compassion for these poor creatures. Bernard by name, he was more generally known throughout Paris by the title of "The Poor Priest."

Full of confidence and love of the Blessed Virgin, to her he had recourse in all the conversions he desired to make. His favorite prayer was that of his namesake—the Memorare. He always carried about with him this prayer, printed on small pieces of paper, of which he distributed several hundred thousand copies. How much good must these have effected, for assuredly this sweet prayer has been the means of procuring a thousand times more graces than It contains words.* It was the strength of the good priest, whose quiet disinterestedness was not more remarkable than was his sanctity. Many pleasing instances of this might be cited. Cardinal

* The following the English translation of the "Memorare," so called from the first word of the Latin version: Remember, O most sweet Virgin Mary, that no one has ever been known in any age to have had recourse to your protection, implored your assistance, - or sought your intercession in vain. Animated with this confidence, I run to thee, O Virgin Mother of Virgins, I come to thee, I kneel before thee, an afflicted sinner. Do not despise my prayer, O mother of the Word Incarnate, but favorably and graciously hear me. Amen.'

** "God's house" the principal hospital in Paris served by Sisters of Charity Of St. Augustine.

Richelieu, who entertained great admiration for him, insisted on bestowing some patronage upon him. But, finding he could not prevail on the humble priest to accept it, he one day said to him, " Tell me, then, any other way in which I can be of service to you; and ask me for some favor." " Willingly will I profit by your Eminence's goodness," replied the priest ; may I beg of your grace to order new planks to be placed In the cart in which the prisoners are conducted to the place of execution, so that their attention may not be distracted from the love of God, and preparing to meet Him, by the fear of falling through the cart.

One morning he was told that there lay in the prison of Chatelet a wretched man, condemned to be broken alive on the wheel, who persisted in denying his guilt, and in refusing to see or hear a minister of religion. Bernard hastened to his cell, saluted, embraced, and consoled him. He used his most persuasive language to try and soften this heart of granite. All his charity was in vain; his zeal was thrown away. The sullen prisoner raised not his eyes, nor gave the least sign of attention ; he replied not, but while the priest exhausted his store of patience, remained motionless, seated on a stone bench. Now was the time to try the efficacy of his favorite prayer. Bernard said, " Come, brother, you will not refuse to say a little prayer to our Blessed Mother to obtain her assistance in your hour of need."

The prisoner remained like a rock in his state of impassible taciturnity.

" Well, I will recite it alone," said the priest, kneeling by the side of the prisoner: do you merely unite your attention with mine, and if you suffer too much to speak, you will participate in my prayer by answering, Amen."

He one of his little prayers out of his breviary. He recited it aloud; and when he finished, waited an instant to see whether the prisoner's heart had relented ; but he only saw an impatient movement, and heard a brutal exclamation. Wrung with grief, the priest listened only to his zeal. He raised his trembling hand, and, placing the holy prayer on the criminal's lips, he tried to force it into his mouth, saying, " Since you will not recite it, you shall swallow it. "

The prisoner was chained, and could not resist, an quietly suffered what he had not the power of preventing. He opened his mouth, till now fixed in despair, and promised to recite the prayer which had doubtless already purified the lips which it had touched. While, trembling with joy, the good priest again repeated the prayer, he saw, with visible emotion, that each word proceeding from the prisoner's lips with increasing warmth of devotion ; at length he sighed, sobbed, and wept ; and as the prayer was ended, his hardened heart had relented. He was overcome with deep contrition; he was no longer the obstinate infidel, but the repentant sinner.

Through the tears which choked his utterance, he confessed the many and grievous sins of his life ; he accepted, with humble submission, the sacrifice of his life, which he acknowledged to be too small for such a series of wickedness as his career had been composed of. So deeply, indeed, had the feeling of contrition sunk into his soul, that he fainted. The sinner, saved by the power of Mary, died at the poor priest's feet, who had just bestowed on him with the plenitude of his office the entire pardon of his transgressions.

Father Bernard, full of good works, departed this life on the 23d of March, and was interred in the cemetery attached to the Hospital of Charity.**

*The same expression was used by St. Francis de Sales speaking of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius.

**An alms house for aged priests in Paris