

MAY IV.

## ST. MONICA, WIDOW.

From St. Austin's works, collected by Tillemont, t. 3. p. 455. and Berti.

A. D. 387.

THE Church is doubly indebted, under God, to the saint of this day, namely, for the birth, and still more so for the conversion of the great St. Austin ; who was more beholden to St. Monica for his spiritual life by grace, than for his corporal life by his birth and education. She was born in 332, in a pious family, and early instructed in the fear of God. She often professed her singular obligations to a virtuous discreet maid-servant, whom her parents intrusted with the education of their children, and who instilled into them maxims of piety, restrained the least sallies of their passions, and by her prudence, words, and example, inspired them with an early sense and love of every duty. She was so strict in regard to her charge, that, besides making them observe great temperance in their meals, she would not allow them to drink even water at any other times, how great thirst soever they might pretend. She used to say, " You are now for drinking water, but when you come to be mistresses of the cellar, water will be despised, but the habit of drinking will stick by you." Notwithstanding the prudent care of this tutoress, the young Monica contracted insensibly an inclination to wine; and when she was sent by her parents, who were strangers to it, to draw wine for the use of the family, in taking the liquor out with a cup, she would put her lips to it and sip a little. This she did at first, not out of any intemperate desire of liquor, but from mere youth and levity. However, by adding to this little every

day a little more, she overcame the original reluctance she had to wine, and drank whole cups of it with pleasure, as it came in her way. This was a most dangerous intemperance, though it never proceeded to any considerable excess.<sup>1</sup> God watched over his servant to correct her of it, and made use of a servant-maid as his instrument; who, having observed it in her young mistress by following her into the cellar, words arising one day between them, she reproached her with it, calling her a wine-bibber. This affected Monica in such a manner, that, entering seriously into herself, she acknowledged, condemned, and from that moment entirely corrected her fault. She after this received baptism, from which time she lived always in such a manner, that she was an odour of edification to all who knew her.

As soon as marriageable, she was disposed of to one Patricius, a citizen of Tagaste, a man of honour and probity, but an idolater. She obeyed and served him as her master, and laboured to gain him to God: though the chief argument she used, whereby to reclaim him from his vices, was the sanctity of her conduct, enforced by an obliging affectionate behaviour, by which she commanded his love, respect, and esteem. She had by him two sons, Austin and Navigius, and one daughter. She tolerated the injuries done by him to her marriage-bed in such manner, as never

<sup>1</sup> It is a notorious mistake and misrepresentation, to call this fault the crime of drunkenness, though such a habit insensibly paves the way to the utmost excesses: and this danger of a saint ought to be a powerful warning to deter all persons, especially servants and young people, from a like custom of sipping, how insignificant and trifling soever the first steps towards it may appear. If Monica was awakened before she was brought to the brink of the precipice, this was the effect of a singular grace; and, where she repented, thousands perish, and regardless of every evil, present and future, become the murderers of their bodies, their reason, the fortunes of their family, and their immortal souls. This destroying evil arises from small beginnings neglected. See Dom. Martenne, in his learned and judicious note on this passage, in the late French translation of the Confessions of St. Austin.

to make him the least bitter reproach on that subject. As on the one side he was very good natured and loving, so on the other, he was hasty and choleric. Monica never thwarted him by the least action or word whilst she saw him in anger; but when the fit was over and he was calm, she mildly gave him her reasons, and an account of her actions. When she saw other wives bearing the marks of their husband's anger on their disfigured faces, and heard them blaming their roughness of temper or debaucheries, she would answer them, "Lay the blame rather on yourselves and your tongues." Her example alone was a sufficient proof; for, notwithstanding the passionate temper of her husband, it was never known that he ever struck her, or that they had ever, for so much as one day, entertained any domestic dissention; because she bore all his sallies with patience, and in silence, made no other return, but that of a greater obsequiousness, and waited an opportunity to make him sensible of his mistake when that was necessary. And as many as followed her advice in this respect towards their husbands, rejoiced in the experience of the comfort and advantages which accrued to them from their patience and complaisance; while those that did not follow it, continued still in their vexations and sufferings. One of the happy fruits Monica reaped from her patience, was her husband's conversion to Christ; who, thereupon, became chaste, and faithful in all the duties of a good Christian; he died the year after he had been baptised. By mildness she also gained, both to her own interest and to Christ, her froward mother-in-law. Our saint had an excellent talent at making peace among neighbours, when any falling out had happened among them; on which occasion such was the energy and the spirit of tender charity with which she delivered herself, that she seemed

instructed by her interior Master in what she said. It was her great delight to serve the poor, supplying their wants with cheerfulness and liberality. She assisted daily at the holy oblation of the altar, and never failed to go to church twice a day, morning and night, to assist at public prayer, and the dispensation of the divine word, having eternity always in her thought. She studied to imitate the actions of the saints, who were in possession of immortal bliss: and, full of confidence in their intercession, she often visited the tombs of the martyrs.<sup>1</sup> She well knew that, in matters relating to religion and a Christian life, nothing should be looked upon as trifling and insignificant; and that the least actions become great when done for God, and with great fervour. Her exercises of piety did not hinder her attention in watching over the education of her children, in which God Almighty gave her great occasion of merit and suffering, particularly in Austin, that he might more amply crown her care in the end. He was born in November, 354. As he grew up, she endeavoured continually to instil into him sentiments of piety: but fell into an unperceived passion and immoderate desire that he should excel in learning; though she flattered herself that she regarded this only as a means whereof he might one day make a good use to the honour of God. Her husband earnestly desired the same thing, because he looked upon it as the greatest step whereby his son could raise himself in the world. In his infancy she had ranked him among the catechumens; and once in an illness, all things were prepared for his baptism, but it was deferred.

Patricius died about the year 371. Austin, who was then seventeen years of age, still continued his studies at Carthage, where, in 373, he was se-

duced by the Manichees, and drawn into that heresy.<sup>1</sup> Monica, being informed of his misfortune, grieved more bitterly for his spiritual death than worldly mothers do, when they see their children carried to their graves; nor would she suffer him to live under the same roof with her, or to eat at the same table. "You have heard her vows," says St. Austin, addressing himself to God, "and you have not despised her tears; for she shed torrents in your presence, in all places where she offered to you her prayer." His divine Majesty was pleased to give her an assurance that she was heard, by a dream, in which she seemed to herself standing on a rule of wood, very sorrowful; and that a young man, shining with light, asked her the cause of her grief, and bade her dry up her tears, saying, "Your son is with you." Then casting her eyes towards the place he pointed at, she saw Austin standing on the rule with her. She told her son this dream, and upon his inferring from it that she should come over to his sentiments in matters of religion, "No," said she, "it was not told me that I was with you, but that you was with me." This her quick answer made a great impression on her son, who after his conversion considered it as a divine admonition. She was so much comforted by it, that she again permitted him to eat and live with her. This happened about the end of the year 377; almost nine years before his conversion, in August 386. During all this time the holy widow continued her prayers for his conversion, and her sighs and tears, which nothing but his baptism at Milan could dry up. She engaged virtuous and learned prelates to speak to him. One who had himself been brought up a Manichee, and had been converted by reading their own books, excused himself, saying, "The heart of the youth was yet too indocile, but that God's time would

come." She urged him with the greater importunity: at last the good old bishop answered her, "Go: continue to do as you do; it is impossible that a child of such tears should perish:" which words she received as an oracle from heaven. Austin was twenty-nine years old when he determined to go to Rome, with a view to teach rhetoric. She endeavoured to divert him from such a design, fearing it might delay his conversion, and followed him to the sea-side, resolving either to bring him back, or to bear him company into Italy. He feigned he had no intention to go, that he might rid himself of her importunity. But while she passed the night in a chapel of St. Cyprian in the neighbourhood, he secretly set out. "I deceived her with a lie," says St. Austin, "while she was weeping and praying for me: and what did she ask of you, my God, but that you would not suffer me to sail away? But you graciously heard her main desire, namely, that I might be engaged in your service, and refused to grant what she asked then, in order to give what she always asked." Next morning, coming to the sea-side and finding him gone, she was seized with a grief not to be expressed. God, by this extreme affliction would punish her too human tenderness; and his wisdom suffered her son to be carried by his passions to a place where he had decreed to heal them.

Upon his arrival at Rome, he fell dangerously sick; and he attributes his recovery to the prayers of his mother, though she did not then know his situation: cut of a favourable regard to whose petitions God would not cut him off in his impenitence. From Rome he went to teach rhetoric at Milan, in 384, and being convinced by St. Ambrose of the errors of his sect, renounced that heresy, yet without being fixed in the truth; continuing his search after it in a fluctuating state of mind. Monica followed him, and in a great



storm at sea comforted the sailors, assuring them, from a vision, that they would certainly reach the port. Finding him at Milan, she learned from his own mouth that he was no longer a Manichee: but she redoubled her tears and prayers to God to obtain his thorough conversion. She respected St. Ambrose as the spiritual physician of his soul; and was herself wonderfully delighted with hearing his solid and beautiful discourses. St. Ambrose forbid at Milan the custom of carrying bread and wine to the tombs of the martyrs; and Monica, going thither with her offerings, was stopped by the porter: and being informed that the custom had been forbid, she was more ready to condemn the practice in the simplicity of obedience, than to inquire into the reasons of prohibition. She therefore was content to carry to those holy places a heart full of pure and religious dispositions, reserving her alms for other occasions. To satisfy her scruple, St. Austin consulted St. Ambrose on the fast of the Saturday. She had been used to keep fast on that day according to the custom of the church of Tasgate, which was also that of Rome, but at Milan this fast was not observed. She was therefore in doubt what she ought to do. The answer of St. Ambrose, taken into the canon law, was, "When I am here, I do not fast on the Saturday; but I fast when I am in Rome; do you the same, and follow always the custom and discipline of the churches where you are:" which precept she obeyed. She had the joy to see St. Austin perfectly converted in August, 386. She had contrived a good match for him which might be a bar against any relapse into his former disorders, but understood from him, with great satisfaction, that he was resolved to embrace a state of perpetual continency. When the vacation of the schools, during the vintage, came on, St. Austin retired with his friends to a country house. His mother accompanied them, and had a great

share in their learned entertainments; in which she, by her natural genius and constant conversation with God, showed an extraordinary penetration and judgment. Saint Austin has preserved many of her ingenious and pious reflections; the first he sometimes compares with the finest strokes of Tully and Hortensius, in his books On Order, and in that On a Happy Life.

St. Austin was baptised at Easter, in 387, with some of his friends, with whom he continued to live some time. St. Monica took as much care of them all as if they had been her children, and paid them all a deference as if each of them had been her father. They all set out together for Africa; but lost St. Monica on the road, who fell sick and died at Ostia, where they were to embark. Before her illness, conversing there with her son Austin concerning eternal happiness, and the contempt of this world, she said to him, "Son, there is nothing now in this life that affords me any delight. What have I to do here any longer, or why I am here, I know not: all my hopes in this world being now at an end. The only thing for which I desired to live was that I might see you a Catholic and child of heaven. God has done much more, in that I see you now despising all earthly felicity, and entirely devoted to his service. What farther business then have I here?" Another day, entertaining herself with her friends in the same place, she spoke so well on the happiness of death, as much surprised them: and being asked if she was not afraid to be buried in a place so far from her own country, she answered, "Nothing is far off from God. Neither do I need to fear that God will not find my body to raise it with the rest." Five days after this she was seized with a fever; and one day, being worse than ordinary, she swooned away, and was for a little while insensible.<sup>1</sup> Her

<sup>1</sup> St. Aug. Conf. 1. 9. c. 11, 12, 13.



two sons ran to her. When she came to herself, awaking as it were out of a profound sleep, she said to them, "Here you shall bury your mother." Austin stood silent, Navigus wished that she might not die abroad, but in her own country: but she, checking him with her eyes, said to them, "Lay this body any where; be not concerned about that. The only thing I ask of you both is, that you make remembrance of me at the altar of the Lord wheresoever you are."<sup>1</sup> Her distemper growing stronger upon her, she suffered much; and on the ninth day of her illness, in the fifty-sixth year of her age, and of our Lord 387, that religious and pious soul was loosed from the body. St. Austin, who was then thirty-three years of age, closed her eyes; and though his grief was extreme, restrained his tears and those of his son Adeodatus, thinking that weeping did not become the funeral of her, who neither died miserably, nor at all as to her principal and better part. The corpse was carried to the church, and when it was set down by the grave, according to the custom of the place, the sacrifice of our ransom was offered for her. St. Austin had hitherto held in his tears; but calling to mind, when alone, her holy and pious conversation towards God, and her tender and affectionate love and care of her children, of which she was so suddenly deprived, he gave free scope to his tears. He adds, "If any one think it a sin that I thus wept for my mother some small part of an hour; and a mother who many years had wept for me that I might live to thy eyes, O Lord, let him not deride me for it; but rather, if his charity be great, let him weep also for my sins before thee." He prays for her in his confessions, and beseeches God to inspire all who shall read his book, to remember at the altar Monica and Patricius. He says, "I

<sup>2</sup> Tantum illud vos rogo, ut ad Domini altare memineritis mei ubi fueritis. Conf. l. 9, c. 11.

pray for the sins of my mother: hear me by the remedy of our wounds, who hung on the cross, and sitting on the right-hand, intercedes for us. I know she showed mercy, and forgave from her heart all debtors: forgive her also her debts."<sup>1</sup>

Her body was translated from Ostia to Rome, in 1430, under pope Martin V. and remains there in the church of St. Austin. The history of this translation of the relics of St. Monica to Rome, with an account of several miraculous cures with which it was honoured, is given by pope Martin V. himself.<sup>2</sup> Some pretend this to be the body of St. Prima, and that the remains of St. Monica are kept at Arrouaise, a convent of regular canons near Bapaume, in Hainault, whence the head was translated to the church of St. Amatas in Douay.<sup>3</sup> But the latter seems to be the body of St. Prima, whom Walter, who conveyed this treasure from Ostia into the Low Countries, in 1162, imagined to be the same person with St. Monica; though her body remained long after at Ostia.

St. Monica, by her earnestness to gain her son to God, is the model of good mothers. She was persuaded that he did not live; nay, that his state

1 Nunc pro peccatis matris meæ deprecor te: exaudi me per medicinam vulnerum nostrorum quæ pependit in ligno, et sedens ad dexteram tuam te interpellat pro nobis. Scio misericorditer operatam, et ex corde dimisisse debita debitoribus suis; dimitte illi debita sua, si qua contraxit per tot annos post aquam salutis. Dimitte, Domine, dimitte obsecro: ne intres cum eâ in iudicium; promissisti misericordibus misericordiam, &c. Non ista mandavit nobis, sed tantummodo memoriam sui ad altare tuum fieri desideravit, cui nullius diei prætermissione servivit, unde sciret dispensari victimam sanctam qua deletum est chirographum quoderat contrarium nobis. Conf. 1. 9. c. 13.

2 Martin V. Sermo ad Fratres Augustinienses de Translatione corporis S. Monicæ Ostiâ Romam, printed at Rome in 1586: also in an express bull, published with the usual solemnities, in 1430, &c. See Berti de S. Monica, c. 7, 8, 9, 10.

3 Walter, a canon regular of Arrouaise, relates, that in 1162, he brought thither the relics of St. Monica, called by the Latins Prima, found in a brick sepulchre at old Ostia, nearer the sea than the present ruins of Ostia. Henschenius and Papebroke maintain this relation true and genuine. But it depends on the single testimony of an unknown person: and the narrative betrays itself. Ostia was built by Aucus Martius, thirteen miles from Rome, where the Tiber divides itself into two channels, where it has always stood, though now its ruins only remain. Monica in Greek does not signify Prima, but Unica or Solitaria. Walter tells us that pope Adrian died in 1161, whereas his death happened in 1159, when Alexander III. succeeded him. Walter probably mistook the sepulchre of St. Prima for that of St. Monica. See Berti de Rebus Gestis S. Aug. Comm. de S. Monicâ, c. 11, 12. p. 254. If those who upon the credit of Walter, take the relics of St. Prima for those of St. Monica, are mistaken, they cannot be charged with superstition, God in his servant Monica being the object of their devotion: nor are they conscious of any forgery in the relic or symbol.

was infinitely more miserable than if he had had no existence, so long as he lived not to him who made him and who was his only happiness, and his last end, as she proved to him with admirable penetration, from the principles of sound philosophy, in a conference with him and his friends soon after his conversion; of which, to the honour of her memory, he has preserved us a part, in one of his works. Her perseverance in tears and prayers for his conversion could not fail of success, being supported by fervour, perfect purity of intention, and sanctity of life, and accompanied with all prudent measures which it was in her power to take for bringing him to his duty. In vain some mothers flatter themselves that by their long devotions they satisfy this difficult obligation: they are bound also to watch continually over their children, to give and procure them constant instructions, set before them good example, and to use, when necessary, reprimands and correction, which must be tempered with mildness and affection, be seasonably employed at the times when likely to take best effect, and must always be free from the least motion or appearance of passion. This condition can only be observed by those who have obtained an entire mastery over themselves. Pride and self-love are always impatient, and sure to show themselves on such occasions: and wherever they appear, instead of healing a heart already disordered, they usually inflame and increase the evil. Monica converted Patricius, and made a deep impression upon the heart of Austin in the midst of his disorders, because her remonstrances were free from this fault. If the instructions and watchfulness of a St. Monica could not preserve Austin from the snares of bad company, what precautions are not parents bound to take to keep unexperienced youths from the possibility of falling upon this most fatal rock!