

APRIL III.

SS. AGAPE, CHIONIA, AND IRENE,

SISTERS, AND THEIR COMPANIONS, MARTYRS.

From their original acts, abridged out of the presidial court registers of Thessalonica, in Surius, Ruinart, p. 421. Tillemont, t. 5. p. 240 and 580. Ceillier, t. 3. p. 490.

A. D. 304.

THESE three sisters lived at Thessalonica, and their parents were heathens when they suffered martyrdom. In the year 303, the emperor Dioclesian published an edict forbidding, under pain of death, any persons to keep the holy scriptures. These saints concealed many volumes of those sacred books, but were not discovered or apprehended till the year following; when, as their acts relate, Dulcetius, the governor, being seated in his tribunal, Artemesius, the secretary, said: "If you please, I will read an information given in by the Stationary,* concerning several persons here present." Dulcetius said: "Let the information be read." The solicitor read as follows: "The Pensioner Cassander to Dulcetius, president of Macedonia, greeting. I send to your highness six Christian women, with a man, who have refused to eat meats sacrificed to the gods.—They are called Agape, Chionia, Irene, Casia, Philippa, Eutychia, and the man's name is Agatho, therefore I have caused them to be brought before you." The president, turning to the women, said: "Wretches, what madness is this of yours, that you will not obey the pious commands of the emperors and Cæsars?" He then said to Agatho: "Why will you not eat of the meats offered to the gods, like other subjects of the empire?" He answered: "Because I am a Christian." Dulcetius.—"Do you still persist in that resolution?" "Certainly," replied Agatho. Dulcetius next addressed himself to Agape, saying:

* Stationarius was a person appointed to keep ward in any place. Such officers, when distinguished by certain privileges, or particular benefits, conferred upon them for past services in the army, were also called Beneficiarii

"What are your sentiments?" Agape answered: "I believe in the living God, and will not by an evil action lose all the merit of my past life." Then the president said: "What say you, Chionia?" She answered: "I believe in the living God, and for that reason did not obey your orders." The president, turning to Irene, said: "Why did not you obey the most pious command of our emperors and Cæsars?" Irene said: "For fear of offending God." President—"But what say you, Casia?" She said: "I desire to save my soul." President—"Will not you partake of the sacred offerings?" Casia—"By no means." President—"But you, Philippa, what do you say?" She answered: "I say the same thing." President—"What is that?" Philippa—"That I had rather die than eat of your sacrifices." President—"And you, Eutychia, what do you say?" "I say the same thing," said she, "that I had rather die than do what you command." President—"Are you married?" Eutychia—"My husband has been dead almost these seven months." "By whom are you with child?" She answered: "By him whom God gave me for my husband." President—"I advise you, Eutychia, to leave this folly, and resume a reasonable way of thinking; what do you say? will you obey the imperial edict?" Eutychia—"No: for I am a Christian, and serve the Almighty God." President—"Eutychia being big with child, let her be kept in prison." Afterwards Dulcetius added: "Agape, what is your resolution? will you do as we do, who are obedient and dutiful to the emperors?" Agape—"It is not proper to obey Satan; my soul is not to be overcome by these discourses." President—"And you, Chionia, what is your final answer?" "Nothing can change me," said she. President—"Have you not some books, papers, or other writings, relating to the religion of the impious Christians?" Chionia said: "We have none: the emperors now reigning have taken them all from us." President—"Who drew you into this persuasion?" She said, "Almighty God." President—"Who induced you to embrace this folly?" Chionia repeated again, "Almighty God and his only Son our Lord Jesus Christ." Dulcetius—"You are all bound to obey our most puissant emperors and Cæsars. But because you have so long obstinately despised their just commands, and so many

edicts, admonitions, and threats, and have had the boldness and rashness to despise our orders, retaining the impious name of Christians; and since to this very time you have not obeyed the stationaries and officers who solicited you to renounce Jesus Christ in writing, you shall receive the punishment you deserve." Then he read their sentence, which was worded as follows: "I condemn Agape and Chionia to be burned alive, for having out of malice and obstinacy acted in contradiction to the divine edicts of our lords the emperors and Cæsars, and who at present profess the rash and false religion of Christians, which all pious persons abhor." He added: "As for the other four, let them be confined in close prison during my pleasure."

After these two had been consumed in the fire, Irene was a third time brought before the president. Dulcetius said to her: "Your madness is plain, since you have kept to this day so many books, parchments, codicils, and papers of the scriptures of the impious Christians. You were forced to acknowledge them when they were produced before you, though you had before denied you had any.* You will not take warning from the punishment of your sisters, neither have you the fear of death before your eyes, your punishment therefore is unavoidable. In the mean time, I do not refuse even now to make some condescension in your behalf. Notwithstanding your crime, you may find pardon and be freed from punishment, if you will yet worship the gods. What say you then? will you obey the orders of the emperors? are you ready to sacrifice to the gods, and eat of the victims?" Irene.—"By no means: for those who renounce Jesus Christ, the Son of God, are threatened with eternal fire." Dulcetius.—"Who persuaded you to conceal those books and papers so long?" Irene.—"Almighty God, who has commanded us to love him even unto death; on which account we dare not betray him, but rather choose to be burnt alive, or suffer anything whatsoever than discover such writings." President.—"Who knew that those writings were in the house?" "Nobody," said she, "but the Almighty, from

* They probably were not then in her custody, at least not known to Chionia, who had denied them: or she only denied herself convicted of the fact in court.

whom nothing is hidden : for we concealed them even from our own domestics, lest they should accuse us." President.—"Where did you hide yourselves last year, when the pious edict of our emperors was first published?" Irene.—"Where it pleased God, in the mountains." President.—"With whom did you live?" Irene.—"We were in the open air, sometimes on one mountain, sometimes on another." President.—"Who supplied you with bread?" Irene.—"God, who gives food to all flesh." President.—"Was your father privy to it?" Irene.—"No; he had not the least knowledge of it." President.—"Which of your neighbours knew it?" Irene.—"Inquire in the neighbourhood, and make your search." President.—"After you returned from the mountains, as you say, did you read those books to any body?" Irene.—"They were hidden at our own house, and we durst not produce them; and we were in great trouble, because we could not read them night and day, as we had been accustomed to do." Dulcetius.—"Your sisters have already suffered the punishments to which they were condemned. As for you, Irene, though you were condemned to death before your flight for having hid these writings, I will not have you die so suddenly: but I order that you be exposed naked in a brothel, and be allowed one loaf a day, to be sent you from the palace; and that the guards do not suffer you to stir out of it one moment under pain of death to them." The infamous sentence was rigorously executed; but God protecting her, no man durst approach her, nor say or do any indecency to her. The president caused her to be brought again before him, and said to her: "Do you still persist in your rashness?" "Not in rashness," said Irene, "but in piety towards God." Dulcetius.—"You shall suffer the just punishment of your insolence and obstinacy." And having called for paper, he wrote this sentence: "Since Irene will not obey the emperor's orders and sacrifice to the gods, but, on the contrary, persists still in the religion of the Christians, I order her to be immediately burnt alive, as her sisters have been." Dulcetius had no sooner pronounced this sentence but the soldiers seized Irene, and brought her to a rising ground where her sisters had suffered martyrdom, and having lighted a large pile, ordered her to mount thereon. Irene, singing psalms, and celebrating

the glory of God, threw herself on the pile, and was there consumed in the ninth consulship of Dioclesian, and the eighth of Maximian, on the 1st day of April; but Ado, Usuard, and the Roman Martyrology name St. Agape and Chionia on the 3rd, and St. Irene on the 5th of April.

These saints suffered a glorious martyrdom rather than offend God by an action which several Christians at that time on various foolish pretences excused to themselves. How many continually form to themselves a false conscience to palliate the enormity of gross sins in spite of the light of reason and the gospel; in which their case is far more deplorable and desperate than that of the most flagrant sinners! These are often awakened to sincere repentance: but what hopes can we have of those who, wilfully blinding themselves, imagine all goes right with them, even whilst they are running headlong into perdition? How many excuse to themselves notorious usuries and a thousand frauds, detractions, slanders, revenge, antipathies, sensual fondnesses, and criminal familiarities, envy, jealousy, hypocrisy, pride, and numberless other crimes! How often do men canonize the grossest vices under the glorious names of charity, zeal, prudence, constancy, and other virtues! The principal sources of this fatal misfortune of a false conscience are, first, the passions. These so strangely blind the understanding and pervert the judgment, that men fail not to extenuate the enormity of their crimes, and even to justify to themselves many violations of the divine law where any passion hath a strong bias. Whatever men are eagerly bent to commit, they easily find pretences to call lawful. A second cause of our practical errors are the example and false maxims of the world. We flatter ourselves that what every body does must be lawful, as if the multitude of sinners could authorize any crime, or as if the rule by which Christ will judge us, was the custom or example of others; or lastly, as if the world had not framed a false system of morals very opposite to the gospel. A third source of this dreadful and common evil is an affected ignorance. Parents, magistrates, priests, and others, are frequently unacquainted with several essential obligations of their state. How often are Christians ignorant of many practical duties which they owe to God, their neighbours, and themselves!