

MAY XVII.

ST. PASCHAL BAYLON, C.

From his two lives, one written by John Ximenes, his companion; the other, in order to his canonization. See other monuments in Papebroke, t. 4. Maij, p. 48. 132.

A. D. 1592.

THE state of poverty was honoured by the choice of our blessed Redeemer, and hath been favoured with his special blessing. It removes men from many dangers and temptations, and furnishes them with perpetual occasions for the exercise of self-denial, patience, penance, resignation to the divine will, and every other heroic Christian virtue: yet these great means of salvation are by many, through ignorance, impatience, and inordinate desires, often perverted into occasions of their temporal and eternal misery. Happy are they who by making a right use of the spiritual advantages which this state, so dear to our divine Redeemer, offers them, procure to themselves present peace, joy, and every solid good; and make every circumstance of that condition in which providence hath placed them a step to perfect virtue and to everlasting happiness. This in an eminent degree was the privilege of St. Paschal Baylon. He was born in 1540, at Torre-Hermosa, a small country town in the kingdom of Arragon. His parents were day-labourers, and very virtuous; and to their example our saint was greatly indebted for the spirit of piety and devotion, which he seemed to have sucked in with his mother's milk. Their circumstances were too narrow to afford his being sent to school; but the pious child, out of an earnest desire of attaining to so great a means of instruction, carried a book with him into the fields

where he watched the sheep, and desired those that he met to teach him the letters; and thus in a short time, being yet very young, he learned to read. This advantage he made use of only to improve his soul in devotion and piety: books of amusement he never would look into; but the lives of the saints, and above all, meditations on the life of Christ, were his chiefest delight. He loved nothing but what was serious and of solid advantage, at a time of life in which many seem scarce susceptible of such impressions. When he was of a proper age, he engaged with a master to keep his flocks as under shepherd: he was delighted with the innocent and quiet life his state permitted him to lead. That solitary life had charms for him. Whatever he saw was to him an object of faith and devotion. He read continually in the great book of nature; and from every object raised his soul to God, whom he contemplated and praised in all his works. Besides external objects, he had almost continually a spiritual book in his hands, which served to instruct and to inflame his soul in the love and practice of virtue. His master, who was a person of singular piety, was charmed with his edifying conduct, and made him an offer to adopt him for his son, and to make him his heir. But Paschal, who desired only the goods of another life, was afraid that those of this world would prove to him an incumbrance; he therefore modestly declined the favour, desiring always to remain in his humble state, as being more conformable to that which Christ chose for himself on earth, who came not into the world to be served, but to serve. He was often discovered praying on his knees under some tree, whilst his flocks were browsing on the hills. It was by this secret entertainment of his soul with God, in the most profound humility, and perfect purity of his affections, that he acquired a most sublime science

and experience in spiritual things, at which those who were the most advanced were struck with admiration. He could truly say with David, *Blessed is he whom thou thyself shalt instruct, O Lord.*¹ He spoke of God and of virtue with an inimitable unction and experimental light, and with sentiments which the Holy Ghost alone forms in souls which are perfectly disengaged from earthly things, and replenished with his heavenly fire. Often was he seen ravished in holy prayer; and frequently was not able to conceal from the eyes of men the vehement ardour of the divine love, with which his soul melted in an excess of heavenly sweetness. He felt in himself what many servants of God assure us of, that, "the consolation which the Holy Ghost frequently infuses into pious souls, is greater than all the pleasures of the world together, could they be enjoyed by one man. It makes the heart to dissolve and melt through excess of joy, under which it is unable to contain itself."² In these sentiments did this servant of God sing with David, *My soul shall rejoice in the Lord, and shall be delighted in his salvation. All my bones shall say, O Lord, who is like to thee?*³ The reward of virtue is reserved for heaven; but some comforts are not denied during the present time of trial. Even in this vale of tears, *God will make its desert as a place of pleasure; and its wilderness as the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness shall be found in it, thanksgiving and the voice of praise.* Isai. li. 3. It is sufficiently understood that the saint did not receive these heavenly comforts without severe interior trials, and a constant practice of self-denial, by which his heart was crucified to the world. The dew of extraordinary spiritual comforts never falls on unmortified souls, which seek the delights of this world. St. Paschal in his

¹ Psal. xciii. 12.

² Ruysbroch. Spir. Nupt. l. 2. c. 19.

³ Psal. xxxiv.

poverty joined alms with his continual prayer; and not having any other means to relieve the poor, always gave them a good part of his own dinner which was sent him into the fields.

How great soever his love was for his profession, he found however several difficulties in it which made him think of leaving it. He was not able, notwithstanding all the care he could take, to hinder a flock of goats he had in charge from sometimes trespassing on another's ground. This occasioned his giving over the inspection of that flock. But he found other troubles in taking care of other cattle. Some of his companions, not having the same piety with himself, were but too much addicted to cursing, quarrelling, and fighting; nor were they to be reclaimed by his gentle rebukes on these accounts. He was therefore determined to leave them, not to participate in their crimes. And to learn the will of God in this important choice of a state of life which he might most faithfully serve him, he redoubled his prayers, fasts, and other austerities. After some time spent in this manner, he determined to become a religious man. Those to whom he first disclosed his inclination to a religious state, pointed out to him several convents richly endowed. But that circumstance alone was enough to disgust him; and his answer was, "I was born poor, and I am resolved to live and die in poverty and penance." Being at that time twenty years of age he left his master, his friends, and his country, and went into the kingdom of Valentia, where was an austere convent of barefoot reformed Franciscans, called Soccolans, which stood in a desert solitude, but at no great distance from the town of Montfort. He addressed himself to the fathers of this house for spiritual advice; and, in the mean time, he entered into the service of certain farmers in the neighbourhood to keep their sheep. He continued here his penitential and retired

life in assiduous prayer, and was known in the whole country by the name of the Holy Shepherd. To sequester himself from the world, he made the more haste to petition for the habit of a lay-brother in the house above-mentioned; and was admitted in 1564. The fathers desired to persuade him to enter himself among the clerks, or those who aspired to holy orders, and sing the divine office in the choir; but they were obliged to yield to his humility, and admit him among the lay-brothers of the community. He was not only a fervent novice, which we often see, but also a most fervent religious man, always advancing, and never losing ground. Though his rule was most austere, he added continually to its severity, but always with simplicity of heart, without the least attachment to his own will; and whenever he was admonished of any excess in his practices of mortification, he most readily confined himself to the letter of his rule. The meanest employments always gave him the highest satisfaction. Whenever he changed convents, according to the custom of his order the better to prevent any secret attachments of the heart, he never complained of any thing, nor so much as said that he found any thing in one house more agreeable than in another; because, being entirely dead to himself, he everywhere sought only God. He never allowed himself a moment of repose between the Church and cloister duties, and his work; nor did his labour interrupt his prayer. He had never more than one habit, and that always threadbare. He walked without sandals in the snows, and in the roughest roads. He accommodated himself to all places and seasons, and was always content, cheerful, mild, affable, and full of respect for all. He thought himself honoured if employed in any painful and low office to serve any one.

The general of the Order happening to be at Paris, Paschal was sent thither to him about some

necessary business of his province. Many of the cities through which he was to pass in France, were in the hands of the Huguenots, who were then in arms. Yet he offered himself to a martyrdom of obedience, travelled in his habit, and without so much as sandals on his feet, was often pursued by the Huguenots with sticks and stones, and received a wound on one shoulder of which he remained lame as long as he lived. He was twice taken for a spy; but God delivered him out of all dangers. On the very day on which he arrived at his convent from this tedious journey, he went out to his work and other duties as usual. He never spoke of any thing that had happened to him in his journey unless asked; and then was careful to suppress whatever might reflect on him the least honour or praise. He had a singular devotion to the mother of God, whose intercession he never ceased to implore that he might be preserved from sin. The holy sacrament of the altar was the object of his most tender devotion; also the passion of our divine Redeemer. He spent, especially towards the end of his life, a considerable part of the night at the foot of the altar on his knees, or prostrate on the ground. In prayer he was often favoured with ecstasies and raptures. He died at Villa Reale, near Valentia, on the 17th of May, in 1592, being fifty-two years old. His corpse was exposed three days, during which time the great multitudes which from all parts visited the church, were witnesses to many miracles by which God attested the sanctity of his servant. St. Paschal was beatified by Pope Paul V. in 1618, and canonized by Alexander VIII. in 1690.

If Christians in every station endeavoured with their whole strength continually to advance in virtue, the Church would be filled with saints. But alas! though it be an undoubted maxim, that not to go on in a spiritual life is to fall back, "No-

thing is more rare," says St. Bernard, "than to find persons who always press forward. We see more converted from vice to virtue, than increase their fervour in virtue." This is something dreadful. The same father assigns two principal reasons. First, many who begin well, after some time grow again remiss in the exercises of mortification and prayer, and return to the amusements, pleasures, and vanities of a worldly life. Secondly, others who are regular and constant in exterior duties, neglect to watch over and cultivate their interior; so that some interior spiritual vice insinuates itself into their affections, and renders them an abomination in the eyes of God. "A man," says St. Bernard,¹ "who gives himself up entirely to exterior exercises without looking seriously into his own heart to see what passes there, imposes upon himself, imagining that he is something whilst he is nothing. His eyes being always fixed on his exterior actions, he flatters himself that he goes on well, and neither sees nor feels the secret worm which gnaws and consumes his heart. He keeps all fasts, assists at all parts of the divine office, and fails in no exercise of piety or penance; yet God declares, '*His heart is far from me.*' He only employs his hands in fulfilling the precepts, and his heart is hard and dry. His duties are complied with by habit and a certain rotation: he omits not a single iota of all his exterior employments; but whilst he strains at a gnat, he swallows a camel. In his heart he is a slave to self-will, and is a prey to avarice, vain-glory, and ambition: one or other or all these vices together reign in his soul."

SAINT POSSIDIUS, B. C.

HE was a native of the proconsular Africa, and had his education under the great St. Austin. In

¹ St. Bern. Serm. 2. in Cap. Jejunij.