

Lelandi Collect. t. 1, p. 28, t. 2, p. 217; and Præf. in Thomæ Cæii Vindicias Oxon. contra Joan. Caium Cantabrig. p. 27; Woode Ant. Oxon. t. 1, p. 9.

JULY IX.

ST. EPHREM OF EDESSA, C.

DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH.

From his works in the late Vatican edition; also from St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his panegyric of St. Ephrem; and from Palladius, Theodoret, Sozomen, &c. See t. 1, Op. St. Ephrem. Romæ, An. 1743, or St. Ephrem Syri Opera Omnia Latine. Venetiis, 1755, 2 tomis.

A. D. 378.

THIS humble deacon was the most illustrious of all the doctors, who, by their doctrine and writings have adorned the Syriac church. He was born in the territory of Nisibis, a strong city on the banks of the Tigris, in Mesopotamia. His parents lived in the country, and earned their bread with the sweat of their brows, but were ennobled by the blood of martyrs in their family, and had themselves both confessed Christ before the persecutors under Dioclesian, or his successors. They consecrated Ephrem to God from his cradle, like another Samuel, but he was eighteen years old when he was baptized. Before that time he had committed certain faults which his enlightened conscience extremely exaggerated to him after his perfect conversion to God, and he never ceased to bewail, with floods of tears, his ingratitude towards God, in having ever offended him. Sozomen(1) says these sins were little sallies of anger, into which he had sometimes fallen with his playfellows in his childhood. The saint himself mentions in his confession(2) two crimes (as he styles them) of this age, which called for his tears during his whole life. The first was, that in play he had driven a neighbour's cow among the mountains, where it happened to be killed by a wild beast; the second was a doubt which once came into his mind in his childhood, whether God's

(1) Sozom. l. 3, c. 16.

(2) T. 3, p. 23.

particular providence reached to an immediate superintendency over all our individual actions. This sin he exceedingly magnifies in his contrition, though it happened before his baptism, and never proceeded further than a fluctuating thought from ignorance in his childhood ; and in his Testament he thanks God for having been always preserved by his mercy since his baptism from any error in faith. Himself assures us that the divine goodness was pleased in a wonderful manner to discover to him, after this temptation, the folly of his error, and the wretched blindness of his soul in having pretended to fathom the secrets of providence.

Within a month after he had been assaulted by the temptation of the aforesaid doubt, he happened in travelling through the country to be benighted, and was forced to take up his quarters with a shepherd who had lost in the wilderness the flock committed to his charge. The master of the shepherd suspected him guilty of theft, and pursuing him, found him and Ephrem together, and cast them both into prison, upon suspicion that they had stolen his sheep. Ephrem was extremely afflicted at his misfortune, and in the dungeon found seven other prisoners, who were all falsely accused or suspected of different crimes, though really guilty of others. When he had lain seven days in prison in great anguish of mind, an angel appearing to him in his sleep told him he was sent to show him the justice and wisdom of Divine Providence in governing and directing all human events ; and that this should be manifested to him in the case of those prisoners who seemed to suffer in his company unjustly. The next day the judge called the prisoners before him, and put two of them to the torture, in order to compel them to confess their crimes. While others were tormented, Ephrem stood by the rack trembling and weeping for himself, under the apprehension of being every moment put to the question. The by-standers rallied him for his fears, and said,—“ Ay, it is thy turn next ; it is to no purpose now to weep : why didst thou not fear to commit the crime ?” However, he was not put on the rack, but sent back to prison. The other prisoners, though innocent of the crimes of which they were first arraigned, were all convicted of other misdemeanors, and each of them received the chastisement due to his offence.

As to Ephrem, the true thief having been discovered, he was honourably acquitted, after seventy days' confinement. This event the saint relates at length in his confessions.* God was pleased to give him this sensible proof of the sweetness, justice, and tender goodness of his holy providence, which we are bound to adore in resignation and silence; waiting till the curtain shall be drawn aside, and the whole economy of his loving dispensations to his elect displayed in its true amiable light, and placed in its full view before our eyes in the next life. Though to take a view of the infinite wisdom, justice, and sanctity which God displayeth in all the dispensations of his providence, we must take into the prospect the rewards and punishments of the next world, and all the hidden springs of this adorable mystery of faith; yet his divine goodness to excite our confidence in him, was pleased, by this revelation to his servant, to manifest in this instance his attributes justified in part, even in this life, of which he hath given us a most illustrious example with regard to holy Job.

St. Ephrem, from the time of his baptism, which he received soon after this accident, began to be more deeply penetrated with the fear of the divine judgment, and he had always present to his mind the rigorous account he was to give to God of all his actions, the remembrance of which was to him a source of almost uninterrupted tears. Hoping more easily to secure his salvation in a state in which his thoughts would never be diverted from it, soon after he was baptized he took the monastic habit, and put himself under the direction of a holy abbot, with whose leave he chose for his abode a little hermitage in the neighbourhood of the monastery. He seemed to set no bounds to his fervour. He lay on the bare ground, often fasted whole days without eating, and watched a great part of the night in prayer. It was a rule observed in all the monasteries of Mesopotamia and Egypt, that every religious man should

* On this genuine work see Assemani, *Op. t. 1, p. 119*; *ib. Proleg. c. 1, et t. 2, p. 37*. Item *Biblioth. Orient. t. 1, p. 141*. The disciples of St. Ephrem committed to writing this same history, as they had often heard it from his mouth. Hence we have so many relations of it. One formerly published by Gerard Vossius, is republished by Assemani, (*t. 3, p. 23.*) But the most complete account is that given us in the saint's confession, extant in the new Vatican edition.

perform his task of manual labour, of which he gave an account to his superior at the end of every week. The work of these monks was always painful, that it might be a part of their penance; and it was such as was compatible with private prayer, and a constant attention of the mind to God; for they always prayed or meditated at their work; and for this purpose, the first task which was enjoined a young monk was to get the psalter by heart. The profits of their labour, above the little pittance which was necessary for their mean subsistence in their penitential state, were always given to the poor. St. Ephrem made sails for ships. Of his poverty he writes thus in his Testament: "Ephrem hath never possessed purse, staff, or scrip, or any other temporal estate; my heart hath known no affection for gold or silver, or any earthly goods." He was naturally choleric, but so perfectly did he subdue this passion, that meekness was one of the most conspicuous virtues in his character, and he was usually styled *The meek, or the peaceable man of God*. He was never known to dispute or contend with any one; with the most obstinate sinners he used only tears and entreaties. Once, when he had fasted several days, the brother who was bringing him a mess of pottage made with a few herbs for his meal, let fall the pot, and broke it. The saint seeing him in confusion, said cheerfully, "As our supper will not come to us, let us go to it." And sitting down on the ground by the broken pot, he picked up his meal as well as he could. Humility made the saint rejoice in the contempt of himself, and sincerely desire that all men had such a knowledge and opinion of his baseness and nothingness as to despise him from their hearts, and to look upon him most unworthy to hold any rank among creatures. This sincere spirit of profound humility all his words, actions, and writings breathed in a most affecting manner.

Honours and commendations served to increase the saint's humility. Hearing himself one day praised, he was not able to speak, and his whole body was covered with a violent sweat, caused by the inward agony and confusion of his soul at the consideration of the last day; for he was seized with extreme fear and dread, thinking that he should then be overwhelmed with shame, when his baseness and hypocrisy should be pro-

claimed, and made manifest before all creatures, especially those very persons who here commended him, and whom he had deceived by his hypocrisy. We may hence easily judge how much the thought of any elevation or honour affrighted him. When a certain city sought to choose him bishop, he counterfeited himself mad.

Compunction of heart is the sister of sincere humility and penance, and nothing seemed more admirable in our saint than this virtue. Tears seemed always ready to be called forth in torrents as often as he raised his heart to God, or remembered the sweetness of his divine love, the rigour of his judgments, or the spiritual miseries of our souls. "We cannot call to mind his perpetual tears," says St. Gregory of Nyssa, "without melting into tears. To weep seemed almost as natural to him as it is for other men to breathe. Night and day his eyes seemed always swimming in tears. No one could meet him at any time, who did not see them trickling down his cheeks." He appeared always drowned in an abyss of compunction. This was always painted in most striking features on his countenance, the sight of which was, even in his silence, a moving instruction to all who beheld him. This spirit of compunction gave a singular energy to all his words and writings; it never forsakes him, even in panegyrics or in treating of subjects of spiritual joy. Where he speaks of the felicity of paradise or the sweetness of divine love in transports or overflowing hope and joy, he never loses sight of the motives of compunction, and always returns to his tears. By the continual remembrance of the last judgment he nourished in his soul this constant profound spirit of compunction.

St. Gregory of Nyssa writes, that no one can read his discourses on the last judgment without dissolving into tears, so awful is the representation, and so strong and lively the image which he paints of that dreadful day. Almost every object he saw called it afresh to his mind. The spotless purity of our saint was the fruit of his sincere humility, and constant watchfulness over himself. He says that the great St. Antony, out of modesty, would never wash his feet, or suffer any part of his body, except his face and hands, to be seen naked by any one.

St. Ephrem spent many years in the desert, collected within himself, having his mind raised above all earthly things, and living as it were out of the flesh, and out of the world, to use the expression of St. Gregory Nazianzen. His zeal drew several severe persecutions upon him from certain tepid monks; but he found a great support in the example and advice of St. Julian, whose life he has written. He lost this comfort by the death of that great servant of God; and about the same time died, in 338 (not 350, as Tillemont mistakes), St. James, bishop of Nisibis, his spiritual director and patron. Not long after this, God inspired St. Ephrem to leave his own country, and go to Edessa, there to venerate the relics of the saints, by which are probably meant chiefly those of the apostle St. Thomas. He likewise desired to enjoy the conversation of certain holy anchorets who inhabited the mountains near that city, which was sometimes reckoned in Mesopotamia, and sometimes in Syria. Under the weak reigns of the last of the Seleucidæ, kings of Asia, it was erected into a small kingdom by the princes called Abgars. As the saint was going into Edessa, a certain courtesan fixed her eyes upon him, which when he perceived he turned away his face, and said with indignation: "Why dost thou gaze upon me?" To which she made this smart reply; "Woman was formed from man; but you ought always to keep your eyes cast down on the earth, out of which man was framed." St. Ephrem, whose heart was always filled with the most profound sentiments of humility, was much struck and pleased with this reflection, and admired the providence of God which sends us admonitions by all sorts of means. He wrote a book on those words of the courtesan, which the Syrians anciently esteemed the most useful and the best of all the writings of this incomparable doctor; but it is now lost. It seems to have contained maxims of humility.

St. Ephrem lived at Edessa, highly honoured by all ranks and orders of men. Being ordained deacon of that church, he became an apostle of penance, which he preached with incredible zeal and fruit. He from time to time returned into his desert, there to renew in his heart the spirit of compunction and prayer; but always came out of his wilderness, inflamed with the ardour of a Baptist, to announce the divine truths to a

world buried in spiritual darkness and insensibility. The saint was endued with great natural talents, which he had improved by study and contemplation. He was a poet, and had read something of logic; but had no tincture of the rest of the Grecian philosophy. This want of the heathenish learning and profane science was supplied by his good sense and uncommon penetration, and the diligence with which he cultivated his faculties by more sublime sacred studies. He learned very accurately the doctrine of the Catholic faith, was well versed in the holy scriptures, and was a perfect master of the Syriac tongue, in which he wrote with great elegance and propriety. He was possessed of an extraordinary faculty of natural eloquence. Words flowed from him like a torrent, which yet were too slow for the impetuosity and multitude of thoughts with which he was overwhelmed in speaking on spiritual subjects. His conceptions were always clear, his diction pure and agreeable. He spoke with admirable perspicuity, copiousness, and sententiousness, in an easy, unaffected style; and with so much sweetness, so pathetic a vehemence, so natural an accent, and so strong emotions of his own heart, that his words seemed to carry with them an irresistible power. His writings derive great strength from the genius and natural bold tropes of the Oriental languages applied by so great a master, and have a graceful beauty and force which no translation can attain; though his works are only impetuous effusions of an overflowing heart, not studied compositions. What recommends them beyond all other advantages of eloquence, is, they are all the language of the heart, and a heart penetrated with the most perfect sentiments of divine love, confidence, compunction, humility, and all other virtues. They present his ardent, humble, and meek soul such as it was, and show how ardently he was occupied only on the great truths of salvation; how much he humbled himself without intermission, under the almighty hand of God, infinite in sanctity and terrible in his justice; with what profound awe he trembled in the constant attention to his adorable presence, and at the remembrance of his dreadful judgment, and with what fervour he both preached and practised the most austere penance, labouring continually with all his strength "to prepare himself a treasure for the last

hour," as he expresses himself. His words strongly imprint upon the souls of others those sentiments with which he was penetrated: they carry light and conviction; they never fail to strike, and pierce to the very bottom of the soul. Nor is the fire which they kindle in the breast a passing warmth, but a flame which devours and destroys all earthly affections, transforms the soul into itself, and continues without abating, the lasting force of its activity.* "Who that is proud," says St. Gregory of Nyssa, "would not become the humblest of men by reading his discourse on humility? Who would not be inflamed with a divine fire by reading his treatise on charity? Who would not wish to be chaste in heart and spirit, by reading the praises he has given to virginity?"

The saint, though most austere to himself, was discreet in the direction of others, and often repeated this advice, that it is a dangerous stratagem of the enemy to induce fervent converts to embrace in the beginning excessive mortifications.(1) Wherefore it behoves them not to undertake without prudent counsel any extraordinary practices of penance; but always such in which they will be able to persevere with constancy and cheerfulness. Who ever laid on a child a burden of a hundred pounds weight, under which he is sure to fall?

St. Ephrem brought many idolaters to the faith, and converted great numbers of Arians, Sabellians, and other heretics. Saint Jerom commends a book which he wrote against the Macedonians, to prove the divinity of the Holy Ghost. He established the perfect efficacy of penance against the Novations, who, though the boldest and most insolent of men, seemed like children without strength before this experienced champion, as St. Gregory of Nyssa assures us. Not less glorious were his triumphs over the Millenarians, Marcionites Manichees, and the disciples of the impious Bardesanes, who denied the resurrection of the flesh, and had in the foregoing century spread his errors at Edessa, by songs which the people learned to sing. St. Ephrem, to minister a proper antidote

(1) Serm. Ascetic. 1, p. 4.

* See Appendix on St. Ephrem's Works, at the end of the life.

against this poison, composed elegant Catholic songs and poems which he taught the inhabitants both of the city and country with great spiritual advantage. Apollinaris began openly to broach his heresy a little before the year 376, denying in Christ a human soul, which he pretended that the divine person supplied in the humanity: whence it would have followed that he was not truly man, but only assumed a human body, not the complete human nature. St. Ephrem was then very old, but he opposed this new monster with great vigour. Several heresies he crushed in their birth, and he suffered much from the fury of the Arians under Constantius, and of the Heathens under Julian, but in both these persecutions reaped glorious laurels and trophies.

It was by a divine admonition, as himself assures us,⁽¹⁾ that about the year 372, he undertook a long journey to pay a visit to Basil. Being arrived at Cæsarea, he went to the great church, where he found the holy bishop preaching. After the sermon, St. Basil sent for him, and asked him by an interpreter, if he was not Ephrem, the servant of Christ.* "I am that Ephrem," said he, "who have wandered astray from the path of heaven." Then melting into tears, and raising his voice, he cried out: "O, my father, have pity on a sinful wretch, and lead me into the narrow path." St. Basil gave him many rules of holy life, and after long spiritual conferences dismissed him with great esteem, having first ordained his companion priest. St. Ephrem himself never would consent to be promoted to the sacerdotal dignity, of which he expresses the greatest dread and apprehension, in his sermon on the priesthood.⁽²⁾ Being returned to Edessa, he retired to a little soli-

(1) In encomio Basilij, t. 2.

(2) T. 4, b. 1, ed. Vaticanæ.

* From his conversing with St. Basil by an interpreter it is clear that St. Ephrem never understood the Greek language. The old vicious translation of the life of St. Basil, under the name of St. Amphilocheius, pretends that St. Basil obtained for him miraculously the knowledge of the Greek tongue, and ordained him priest. But this is a double mistake, though the latter was admitted by Baillet. St. Jerom, Palladius, and other ancients always style him deacon, never priest. Nor does Pseudo Amphilocheius say, that St. Basil raised St. Ephrem, but only his disciple and companion to the priesthood, as the new translation of this piece, and an attentive inspection of the original text demonstrate.

tary cell, where he prepared himself for his last passage, and composed the latter part of his works. For, not content to labour for the advantage of one age, or one people, he studied to promote that of all mankind, and all times to come. The public distress under a great famine called him ~~again~~ out of his retirement, in order to serve, and procure relief for the poor. He engaged the rich freely to open their coffers, placed beds for the sick in all the public porticos, visited them every day, and served them with his own hands. The public calamity being over, he hastened back to his solitude, where he shortly after took ill of a fever. He wrote about that time his seventy-six Paræneses, or moving exhortations to penance, consisting in a great measure of most affective prayers; several of which are used by the Syrians in their church office. His confidence in the precious fruits of the holy sacrament of the altar raised his hope, and inflamed his love, especially in his passage to eternity. Thus he expresses himself: (1) "Entering upon so long and dangerous a journey, I have my viaticum, even Thee, O Son of God. In my extreme spiritual hunger, I will feed on thee, the repaireur of mankind. So it shall be that no fire will dare to approach me; for it will not be able to bear the sweet saving odour of thy body and blood." The circumstances of our saint's death are edifying, and deserve our notice; for nothing more strongly affects our heart, or makes on it a more sensible impression than the behaviour and words of great men in their last moments.

St. Ephrem was always filled with grief, indignation, and confusion when he perceived others to treat him as a saint, or to express any regard or esteem for him. In his last sickness he laid this strict injunction on his disciples and friends: (2) "Sing no funeral hymns at Ephrem's burial; suffer no encomiastic oration. Wrap not my carcase in any costly shroud. erect no monument to my memory. Allow me only the portion and place of a pilgrim; for I am a pilgrim and a stranger as all my fathers were on earth." Seeing that several persons had prepared rich shrouds for his interment, he was much afflicted, and he charged all those who had such a design to

(1) Necrosima, can. 81, p. 355, t. 6.

(2) St. Ephrem in Testam. pp. 286, 395, and St. Greg. Nyss. p. 12.

drop it, and give the money to the poor, which he in particular obliged a rich nobleman, who had bought a most sumptuous shroud for that purpose, to do. St. Ephrem, as long as he was able to speak, continued to exhort all men to the fervent pursuit of virtue, as his last words sufficiently show, says St. Gregory of Nyssa, meaning the saint's testament, which is still extant genuine, and the same that was quoted by St. Gregory, Sozomen, &c. In it he says: "I Ephrem die. Be it known to you all that I write this testament to conjure you always to remember me in your prayers after my decease."⁽¹⁾ This he often repeats. He protests that he had always lived in the true faith, to which he exhorts all most firmly to adhere. Deploring and confessing aloud the vanity and sinfulness of his life, he adjures all present that no one would suffer his sinful dust to be laid under the altar, and that no one would take any of his rags for relics, nor show him any honour, for he was a sinner, and the last of creatures. "But," says he, "throw my body hastily on your shoulders, and cast me into my grave, as the abomination of the universe. Let no one praise me; for I am full of confusion, and the very abstract of baseness. To show what I am, rather spit upon me, and cover my body with phlegm. Did you smell the stench of my actions, you would fly from me, and leave me unburied, not being able to bear the horrible corruption of my sins." He forbids any torches or perfumes, ordering his corpse to be thrown into the common burying-place among poor strangers. He expresses most feeling sentiments of compunction, and gives his blessing to his disciples, with a prediction of divine mercy in their favour; but excepts two among them, Aruad and Paulonas, both persons famed for eloquence; yet he foresaw that they would afterwards apostatize from the Catholic faith. The whole city was assembled before the saint's door, every one being bathed in tears; and all strove to get as near to him as possible, and to listen to his last instructions. A lady of great quality, named Lamprotata, falling at his feet, begged his leave to buy a coffin for his interment; to which he assented, on condition that it should be a very mean one, and that the lady would promise to renounce all vanities in a spirit of penance, and never again to

(1) Testam. t. 2, p. 230, &c.

be carried on the shoulders of men, or in a chair; all which she cheerfully engaged herself to perform. The saint having ceased to speak, continued in silent prayer till he calmly gave up his soul to God. He died in a very advanced age about the year 378. His festival was kept at Edessa immediately after his death. On it St. Gregory of Nyssa soon after spoke his panegyric, at the request of one Ephrem, who having been taken captive by the Ismaelites, had recommended himself to this saint his patron, and had been wonderfully delivered from his chains and from many dangers. St. Gregory closes his discourse with this address to the saint: "You are now assisting at the divine altar, and before the Prince of life, with the angels, praising the most holy Trinity; remember us all, and obtain for us the pardon of our sins." The true martyrology of Bede calls the 9th of July the day of his deposition; which agrees with Palladius, who places his death in harvest-time, though the Latins have long kept his festival on the 1st of February, and the Greeks on the 28th of January. His perpetual tears, far from disfiguring his face, made it appear more serene and beautiful, and his very aspect raised the veneration of all who beheld him. The Greeks paint him very tall, bent with old age, of a sweet and beautiful countenance, with his eyes swimming in tears, and the venerable marks of sanctity in his looks and habit.

Saint Austin says, that Adam in paradise praised God, and did not sigh; but in our present state, a principal function of our prayer consists in sighs and compunction. Divine love, as St. Gregory observes,(1) our banishment from God, our dangers, our past sins, our daily offences, and the weight of our own spiritual miseries, and those of the whole world call upon us continually to weep, at least spiritually, and in the desire of our heart, if we cannot always with our eyes. Every object round about us suggests many motives to excite our tears. We ought to mingle them even with our hymns of praise and love. Can we make an act of divine love without being pierced with bitter grief and contrition, reflecting that we have been so base and ungrateful as to have offended our infinitely good God? Can we presume without trembling to sing his praises with our

impure affections, or to pronounce his adorable name with our defiled lips? And do we not first endeavour, by tears of compunction, to wash away the stains of our souls, begging to be sprinkled and cleansed by hyssop, dipped not in the blood of sheep or goats, but in the blood of the spotless Lamb, who died to take away the sins of the world? If the most innocent among the saints weep continually from motives of holy love, how much more ought the sinner to mourn! "The voice of the turtle hath been heard in our land."⁽¹⁾ If the turtle, the emblem of innocence and fidelity, make its delight to mourn solitary in this desert, what ought not the unfaithful soul to do? The penitent sinner, instead of the sighs of the turtle, ought to pour forth his grief in loud groans, imitating the doleful cries of the ostrich, and in torrents of tears, by which the deepest sorrow for having offended so good a God, forces his broken heart to give it vent.

ON THE WRITINGS OF ST. EPHREM.

THE first volume of the Vatican edition of this father's works begins with his sermon On Virtues and Vices. He expresses in it a surprise to see the full seek food from him who was empty, and says he is confounded to speak, seeing every word would accuse and condemn himself. However, trembling, he recommends to his hearers the fear of God; charity, by which we are meek, patient, tender to all, desirous to serve, and give to all; hope, and longanimity, by which we bear all; patience, meekness, sweetness to all; inviolable love of truth in the smallest things, obedience, temperance, &c. and speaks against all the contrary vices, envy, detraction, &c.

His two Confessions or Reprehensions of himself are only effusions of his heart in these dispositions. The first he begins as follows: "Have pity on me, all ye that have bowels of compassion." Then he earnestly begs their prayers that he may find mercy with God, though he was from his infancy an useless abandoned vessel. He laments his spiritual miseries in the most moving words, declaring that he trembles lest, as flames from heaven devoured him who presumed to offer profane fire on the altar, so he should meet with the same judgment for appearing before God in prayer without having the fire of his divine love in his heart. He invites all men to weep and pray for him, making a public confession of the failings which his pure lights discovered in his affections; for in these, notwithstanding his extraordinary progress in the contrary virtues, he seemed to himself to discern covetousness, jealousy, and sloth, though he appeared of all men the most remote from the very shadow of those vices; and by tears of compunction he studied more and more to

(1) Cant. ii. 12.