

LIVES

OF THE

FATHERS, MARTYRS, AND OTHER PRINCIPAL SAINTS.

DECEMBER I.

ST. ELIGIUS, BISHOP OF NOYON, C.

(CALLED IN FRENCH ELOY.)

From his life compiled in two books by his intimate friend St Owen, bishop of Rouen, thirteen years after his death, extant in Surius, D'Acheri, Spicilieg. t. 5, p. 147, translated into French with his homilies, by M. Levesque. at Paris, in octavo, in 1693. See Fleury, pp. 37, 38, 39. Rivet, Hist. Littér. t. 3, p. 595. Ceillier, t 17, p. 682. Gallia Christiana Nov. t. 9, p. 984.

A.D. 559.

THE name of Eligius, and those of his father Eucherius, and his mother Terrigia, show this saint to have been born not of French, but of Roman Gaulish extraction. He was born at Catelat, two leagues north of Limoges, about the year 588. His parents, who were very virtuous, and in good circumstances, brought him up from his infancy in the fear of God, and seeing him industrious, placed him with a goldsmith named Abbo, who was a considerable person, master of the mint at Limoges, and a devout servant of God. Eligius was a youth of uncommon genius and address, and, by his extraordinary application, arrived at an eminent skill in his profession. The qualities of his mind, and his steady virtue and religion exceedingly enhanced his reputation, and endeared him to all who had the happiness of his acquaintance. His heart was full of sincerity, his whole conduct was under the regulation of an exact prudence, and his temper was sweet and obliging: his discourse was agreeable, modest, and easy, and his attendance on religious duties most assiduous and edifying. He never failed assisting at the whole

divine office in the church, and never lost an opportunity of attending to sermons, or spiritual instructions. The oracles of the holy scriptures he carefully laid up in his memory, and made them the subject of his profound meditation, that they might sink deeply into his soul, and that he might apply them to his own use.

Eligius having some business which called him into France, that is, on this side the Loire, became known to Bobo, treasurer to Clotaire II. at Paris. This king, to whom Bobo had recommended him, gave the saint an order to make him a magnificent chair of state, adorned with gold and precious stones. Out of the materials the king furnished him, he made two such chairs or thrones, instead of one. The king admired the skill and honesty of the workman, and finding by his discourse that he was a man of great parts, and endowed with excellent understanding, gave him a great share in his confidence, took him into his household, and made him master of the mint. His name is still to be seen on several gold coins, struck at Paris in the reigns of Dagobert I. and his son Clovis II. as appears from Le Blanc's History of Coins. (1) His great credit at court hindered him not from attending his profession, and he was much delighted in making rich shrines for the relics of saints. The tombs of St. Martin at Tours, and St. Dionysius near Paris were sumptuously and curiously adorned by him. (2) The shrines also of St. Quintin, SS. Crispin and Crispinian at Soissons, St. Lucian, St. Piat, St. Germanus of Paris, St. Severinus, St. Genevieve, &c., were made by our saint. These employments were no impediments to his exercises of piety. Even whilst he was at work he had some good book open before him, on which he often cast an eye to instruct himself at the same time in the law of God, and to kindle a fresh flame of devotion in his affections. On the walls round his chambers were also placed pious books, particularly those of the holy scriptures, which he read for a considerable time after his hour of prayer and singing psalms. The corruption of a court never infected his soul, or impaired his virtue; such was his diligence in fencing his heart against it by the most powerful antidotes. He

(1) Le Blanc, *Hist. de Mon.* p. 50, 54. Fleury, l. 37, n. 38.

(2) Vita S. Eligij, c. 32. Du Chesne, *Franc. Script.* t. 1, p. 578. n. 20.

had not been long there when he formed a resolution of entering upon a more devout and austere way of living, took a strict view of his whole life, made a general confession of all the actions of youth to a priest, (1) and imposed upon himself a severe penance. At first when he went to court he conformed to the fashion, and was magnificently habited, sometimes wearing nothing but silk, though at that time it was not very common: and he had waistcoats embroidered with gold, and sashes and purses adorned with gold and precious stones. Yet even then he privately wore a hair shirt: and after he had entered upon a stricter course of virtue, he gave all his ornaments to the poor, and became so negligent in his dress, that he often girded himself with a cord. The king, when he saw him in this habit, would often give him his own clothes and sash; but the saint gave to the poor all that he received from the king's bounty. The liberality of his sovereign allowed him to bestow great sums in alms. If any stranger asked for his house, he was answered: "Go into such a street, and to that part of it where you see a crowd of poor people." Wherever he went he was followed by a great number of them, and he himself, or one of his servants, distributed victuals and money to them. He daily fed a great number at his own house, whom he served himself, and he ate what they left. He gave them wine and flesh, though he touched neither himself; and he frequently fasted two or three days together. Sometimes, when the usual hour was come, and the table laid, he had nothing to give his poor people, having distributed all before; but he always relied upon Providence, which never failed to supply him, either by means of the king, or of some pious persons. He took care to bury the body of malefactors, and was particularly zealous to ransom captives. When he knew that a slave was to be sold in any place, he made haste thither, and sometimes ransomed fifty or a hundred at a time, especially Saxons, who were sold in great companies. After he had set them at liberty he gave them their choice, either to return to their own country, or to continue with him, or to enter into monasteries: of these last he took particular care. One of the Saxon slaves whom

(1) Vita S. Elig. c. 7.

he brought up with him in the practice of piety, became so eminent for sanctity, that he is commemorated among the saints, on the 7th of January, under the name of St. Theau. Several of his domestics sung the canonical office with him day and night. Among these are named Bauderic, his freedman; Tituan, who waited on him in his chamber, was of the nation of the Suevi, and arrived at the crown of martyrdom: Buchin, who had been a pagan, and was afterwards abbot of Ferrieres: Andrew, Martin, and John, who, by his means, became clerks. Several relics of saints were fastened to the ceiling of his room, under which he prostrated himself upon a hair cloth to pray; then he began to read, which he often broke off, to lift his eyes to heaven, sighing and weeping bitterly; for he was remarkable for an extraordinary tenderness of heart, and easily melted into tears. If the king pressed him to come to him, sending one messenger after another, he would not go till he had finished his devotions. He never went out of doors without praying first, and making the sign of the cross; and the first thing he did, after he returned, was to pray. Discretion, mixed with simplicity, appeared in his countenance: he was tall, had a handsome head, and a ruddy complexion: his hair was naturally curled. By the innocence and regularity of his life he made his court to his prince without design, more successfully than others do by flattery and other low arts.

Clotaire dying in 628, his son and successor Dagobert, entertained so just an idea of the saint's virtue and wisdom that he frequently consulted him preferably to all his council about public affairs, and listened to his directions for his own private conduct. Eligius took every favourable opportunity to inspire him with sentiments of justice, clemency, and religion. The king was so far from being offended at the liberty which the saint took in his councils and admonitions, that he treated him with the greater regard; which drew on him the envy and jealousy of the whole court, particularly of the vicious part of the nobility, who did all in their power to blast his character. But their calumnies were too weak to do him any prejudice, and served only to give his virtue a fresh lustre, and enhance Dagobert's veneration for him, who loaded him with favours; though it never was in his power to make him rich, because all that the

saint received was immediately employed in relieving the necessitous, or in raising charitable and religious foundations. The first of these was the abbey of Solignac, which he built two leagues from Limoges, on a piece of ground granted him by the king for that purpose. The saint richly endowed it, peopled it with monks from Luxeu, and made it subject to the inspection of the abbot of that monastery. This new community increased considerably in a little time, and consisted of a hundred and fifty persons, who worked at several trades, and lived in admirable regularity. Dagobert also gave our saint a handsome house at Paris, which he converted into a nunnery, and placed in it three hundred religious women under the direction of St. Aurea, whose name occurs in the Roman Martyrology on the 4th of October. This monastery has since been given to the Barnabites, and the estates which belonged to it are now annexed to the bishopric of Paris. When the saint had begun this building, he found that it exceeded the measure of the land which he had specified to his Majesty by one foot; upon which, being struck with great grief and remorse, he immediately went to the king, and throwing himself at his feet, begged his pardon with many tears. Dagobert, surprised at his caution, to recompense his piety, doubled his former donation. When the saint was gone out, he said to his courtiers: "See how careful and faithful those who serve Christ are. My officers and governors stick not to rob me of whole estates; whereas Eligius trembles at the apprehension of having one inch of ground which is mine." It not being then allowed to bury within cities, the saint made a burial-place for these nuns without the walls, and built there a church in honour of St. Paul, which is now a large parish church. The inhabitants of Brittany having provoked the king by making frequent inroads and plunders, he sent Eligius upon an embassy to them, who prevailed upon Judicaël, their prince, to go in person to Paris, and by his submission appease the king's anger.* Dagobert being desirous to employ the saint in his most important commissions, pressed him to take an oath of

* Lebeuf (*Hist. du Diocèse de Paris*, t. 11,) observes from this life of St. Eligius, that the king's palace was then at Gentilly, at that time the most agreeable spot near Paris, though it is now a watery and disagreeable village.

fidelity, as was usual on such occasions. Eligius having a scruple lest this would be to swear without sufficient necessity, excused himself with an obstinacy which for some time displeased the king. Still the saint persisted in his resolution for fear of incurring the danger of offending God, and repeated his excuses with many tears, as often as the king pressed him on that score. Dagobert at length perceiving that the only motive of his reluctance was an extreme tenderness of conscience, graciously assured him that his conscientious delicacy was a more secure pledge of his fidelity than the strongest oaths of others could have been.

The extraordinary piety, and prudent fear of offending God, which St. Eligius showed in all his actions, made so strong an impression on the mind of St. Owen when he was but twelve years old, and lived in the court, that the fervent young nobleman resolved to walk in his steps; and, as he grew up, contracted so close a friendship with him that they seemed to have but one heart and one soul. Whilst they were laymen, and lived at court, they zealously laboured to maintain the purity of the faith, and the unity of the church. St. Eligius procured a council to be held at Orleans against certain heretics, drove a company of impious persons out of Paris, and, with St. Owen, employed his endeavours effectually to root out simony, a vice which had grievously infected France ever since the unhappy reign of Brunehalt. St. Desiderius, who lived then in the court of Dagobert, and was afterwards made bishop of Cahors, was joined in holy friendship with these two saints; also St. Sulpicius, afterwards archbishop of Bourges, and these holy men, by their mutual example, were a spur to each other in the heroic practice of every virtue. The whole kingdom was exceedingly edified by the sanctity of these zealous courtiers, and the bishops took a resolution to procure them to be called into the episcopal Order. The sees of Noyon and Tournay, which had been united ever since St. Medard, in 512, and then comprised Upper Picardy, and all the provinces that lie between that country and the mouth of the Rhine, became vacant by the death of St. Acarius, in 639, and St. Eligius was required to take upon him that arduous charge, and soon after St. Owen was chosen bishop of Rouen. King Clovis II. who had succeeded his father Dago-

bert, stood in need of such ministers; but the spiritual good of so many souls took place. St. Eligius trembled at the sight of the burden, and obtained a delay of two years to prepare himself, during which time he was ordained priest, and practised the clerical duties. St. Owen did the like, having retired for that purpose beyond the Loire. They agreed to meet and receive the episcopal consecration together at Rouen, which they did on Sunday before Rogation-week, in 640, or, according to some, in 646. The inhabitants of the district of Ghent and Courtray, which then depended on the diocese of Noyon, were still pagans, and so fierce and savage that they would not so much as hear the gospel preached to them. This was the chief reason of choosing so zealous a pastor for them as St. Eligius. From Rouen he only went back to court to take his last leave of it, and thence he repaired straight to Noyon.*

Our saint in this new dignity increased his fasts and watchings with his labours, and showed the same humility, the same spirit of poverty, penance, and prayer as before: also the same charity towards the poor and the sick, whom he continued frequently to serve with his own hands, regularly entertaining twelve poor persons at his own table on certain days in the week. He always took particular delight to be in the company of the poor, and often left his clergy and others to shut himself up with them, and he often clothed them, washed their faces and hands, and shaved their heads with his own hands. His pastoral solicitude, zeal, and watchfulness were most admirable. The first year he employed entirely in reforming his clergy, and

* Thirteen bishops sat at Augusta Veromanduorum, or Virmandis, long since a village. St. Medard was consecrated the fourteenth bishop in 530, and, that city having been destroyed by barbarians, translated his see to Noyon in 531, and was also made bishop of Tournay in 532. St. Acarius, a monk of Luxeu, was made bishop of Noyon and Tournay about the year 621, is styled saint by Molanus and Miræus: on his death St. Eligius was promoted to that see. Gall. Chr. Nov. t. 9, p. 981.

By a decree of Eugenius III. in 1146, the see of Tournay was again separated, and has had from that time its own bishops, who soon after were created counts and ranked among the twelve peers of France who officiate at the king's coronation. Tournay and Lille had received the faith in part by the preaching of St. Piat, mentioned by St. Gregory of Tours; but few traces of it remained when St. Eligius, by his zealous labours, entirely banished idolatry out of that flourishing country, and founded at Tournay the famous abbey of St. Martin, which, in the twelfth century, adopted the rule of St. Bennet.

regulating the manners of his Christian flock. After this, he turned his thoughts to the conversion of the infidels among the Flemings about Antwerp, and the Frisons and Suevi, as far as the sea-shore, especially about Ghent and Courtray. St. Amandus, born of a Roman family near Nantes, being the son of Serenus and Amantia, and a monk, had been ordained by the Gallican prelates a bishop of nations, in 626, and had begun to plant the faith in the neighbourhood of Ghent,* under the direction of St. Acarius bishop of Noyon; and in 636 St. Omer was ordained bishop of the Morini. But a great part of Flanders was chiefly indebted to St. Eligius for the happiness of receiving the light of the gospel. He preached in the territories of Antwerp, Ghent, and Courtray. The inhabitants, who at first were as fierce as wild beasts, were ready every day to tear him to pieces; yet he persevered exhorting them, desiring nothing more than martyrdom. He instructed, with more than paternal tenderness, those who long refused to hear him, took care of their sick, comforted them in their afflictions, assisted them in their wants, and employed every means that the most tender and ingenious charity could suggest to overcome their obstinacy. The barbarians were at length softened, and considering his disinterestedness, his goodness, meekness, and mortified abstermious manner of living, they began to admire, and even to desire to imitate him. Many were converted, and these induced others to hear the holy prelate's sermons, from which they went in bodies to destroy their temples and idols of their own accord: then returned to the holy prelate, and desired baptism. Eligius usually tried and instructed them for a whole year before he admitted them to the sacred laver of regeneration. By his discourses he raised the minds of the supine and slothful barbarians to an affection for heavenly things, and inspired them with a meek and peaceable temper: he taught them the means of rooting out of their hearts the love of pleasures and riches, and of perfectly subduing the evil habits of lying, enmity, hatred, and re-

* The Chronicle of the abbey of Blandinium or St. Peter's at Ghent, says that St. Amand enlarged the buildings and augmented the revenues of that monastery, built St. Martin's church at Courtray, and the churches of Bruges, Aldenburg, Rodenburg, and Oostburg. See Sanders, l. 4, *Gandavensium rerum*, p. 289.

venge, and ceased not to inculcate the precept of fraternal charity. In his exhortations he joined prayers and tears with reprehensions and threats; for his sweetness and mildness had no mixture of weakness, and his apostolic vigour and severity had nothing in it of bitterness or harshness. Every year at Easter he baptized great numbers both of old and young, whom he had brought to the knowledge of the true God, in the space of the twelve preceding months; to whom he had long before given the habit of catechumens, and who had long exercised themselves in suitable practices of fervent devotion and penance. The prudence and zeal of our holy paster were not less remarkable in bringing sinners after baptism to sincere penance. Many, like patients who in a fit of raving fall on the physicians who come to cure them, rose up against their holy bishop, because he refused to suffer them to live according to their passions and fancy. But Eligius considered that a charitable physician or tender father abandons not a sick patient who, in the violence of his fever, forgets the respect and obedience that is due to him, feared no dangers in the discharge of his pastoral duty, and in maintaining the indispensable laws of penance, and the rules of ecclesiastical discipline. Many sinners ran to receive penance by confessing their sins, and the holy bishop was very earnest in the care of their conversion. He exhorted all to frequent the churches, give alms, set their slaves at liberty, and practise all sorts of good works; and he engaged several of both sexes to embrace a monastic life. Once, not far from Noyon, he preached, on the feast of St. Peter against dancing, which the people made a frequent occasion of many sins. Many murmured hereat, and even threatened the holy prelate: but he preached the next festival on the same subject with greater vehemence than ever. Hereupon, the incorrigible sinners openly threatened his life. The servants of the lord of the place went about stirring up the whole country against him: for such men, where they are not restrained by their master's authority, easily become lawless, and are the bane of a whole parish. The bishop at length found himself obliged to cut off these sons of Belial from the communion of the faithful, and to deliver them over to Satan, for the remedy of their souls. Fifty of them were afflicted by God, and made visible specta-

cles of his judgments: but, upon their repentance, were cured by the saint. St. Owen mentions many blind, lame, and sick persons, who received the benefit of their health, and use of their limbs, by the prayers of St. Eligius.

Among other prophecies, his prediction of the division of the French monarchy amongst the three sons of Clovis II. and its reunion under Theodoric, the youngest of them, was recorded by St. Owen, before its entire accomplishment.(1) This author informs us,(2) that our saint assembled the people every day, and instructed them with indefatigable zeal; and he gives us an abstract of several of his discourses united in one; by which it appears that his style was plain, simple, and without many ornaments, but tender and pathetic; and that he often borrowed whole passages from the sermons of St. Cæsarius, as was customary in France at that time. He often explained the obligation of the solemn vows or promises which Christians make at their baptism, exhorting the faithful to have them always before their eyes, and to be no less careful to practise, than to believe what they profess under the most sacred engagements. He insisted much on the obligation of almsdeeds, recommended the invocation of saints, and instructed the faithful to beware of the superstitious practices then in vogue; among which he reckons the observation of unlucky days, the solemnizing of New-year's day with drinking and diversions, and the like. He strongly recommended prayer, the partaking of the body and blood of Christ, extreme-unction in time of sickness, and the sign of the cross to be always worn on our forehead, the efficacy of which sign he set forth. The seventeen homilies, which bear his name in the library of the fathers, cannot be his work; for the author had been a monk before he was bishop.(3) The charter of St. Eligius for the foundation of the abbey of Solignac is still extant.(4) The saint having governed his flock nineteen years and a half, was favoured with a foresight of his death, and a little before he was seized with his last sickness, foretold it to his disciples. Seeing them weep, he said: "Grieve not, my children; but rather congratulate

(1) Vita S. Elig. l. 2, c. 31. Fleury, l. 40, n. 9. (2) Ib. l. 2, c. 14.

(3) Bibl. Patr. t. 12, p. 300. Ceillier, p. 586. Rivet, p. 598.

(4) Mabill. Act. Ben. t. 2, pp. 1091, 1092.

with me. I have longed for this time, and, sighing under the miseries of this world, have wished for a releasement." Falling ill of a fever, he prayed almost without interruption; and, on the sixth day, convened his disciples, and made them a pathetic exhortation to a virtuous life. They bursting all together into tears, he was not able to refrain from weeping with them; and on his knees, he commended them all to God, praying him not to abandon them, and to give them a holy pastor. After this, he continued his private prayers for several hours; then, reciting the canticle *Nunc dimittis*, &c. and fervently commending his soul into the hands of his Redeemer, he happily expired at one o'clock the next morning, on the 1st of December in 659, or in 665, if he was consecrated bishop in 646, being seventy years and some months old. Upon the news of his sickness, Queen Bathildes set out from Paris with her children, the lords of her court, and a numerous train: but arrived only the morning after his death. She bathed the corpse with a flood of tears, and caused all preparations to be made for carrying it to her monastery at Chelles. Others were very desirous that it should be conveyed to Paris: but the people of Noyon so strenuously opposed it, that the precious remains of their holy pastor were left with them, and the greatest part is kept at Noyon to this day. His body was deposited in the church of St. Lupus of Troyes, out of the walls, soon after called St. Eligius's, as St. Owen testifies. This monastery of St. Eligius is now of the Benedictin Order of the reformed congregation of St. Maur. The relics of the saint were afterwards translated into the cathedral. Several other churches lay claim to small portions. St. Owen relates many miracles which followed his death, and informs us, that the holy abbess, St. Aurea, who was swept off by a pestilence, with a hundred and sixty of her nuns, in 666, was advertised of her last hour sometime before it, by a comfortable vision of St. Eligius. Queen Bathildes soon after, laying aside all ornaments of state, gave them all to the poor, except her gold bracelets, of which she caused a cross to be made, which she placed at the head of St. Eligius's monument. She also ordered a sort of canopy called *Repa*, to be made of gold and silver, and set it over his tomb. The noblemen of her court, imitating her example, offered abundance of gold and

precious stones to adorn the same: and, as it shone very bright, it was covered in Lent with a linen cloth bordered with silk. A certain liquor which dropped from this linen cloth, cured various distempers.(1) Fleury takes notice from this circumstance, that it was the custom at that time to cover, on penitential days, whatever looked bright or shining in churches.

St. Eligius learned to be a saint, living in the world and in a court. But for this he studied neither to be of the world, nor to be withdrawn by the world from a constant application to religious duties. To attend to them, he sometimes excused himself even from waiting upon his prince, when called upon by him: nor would he remain in his service upon other conditions. In the world, conversation is a devoir of civility, charity, and friendship: but first it must be sincere; not formality and mere compliment, which is frequently the case. Men who are idolaters of themselves, are incapable of true charity towards others; jealousy, envy and resentment, being on every occasion easily kindled in their hearts. Hence, their protestations of friendship are often a base hypocrisy, and a traffic of mutual deceit; a disposition diametrically opposite to that of charity and simplicity. Secondly, conversation with men, must not take up a considerable part of our time, nor be a source of vain amusement, or unprofitable fooleries. Toward those who would overwhelm us with idle visits, we are allowed, and when necessary, ought to shew some coolness, in order to break off a frivolous and fruitless commerce. Worldly discourse usually tends to promote vanity, pride, sensuality, and other passions. Men in general are not capable of being spoken to in the language of solid truth. Therefore, we ought to speak it often to ourselves by holy meditation and reading; and the oftener our circumstances oblige us to listen to the language of the world, so much the more diligent are we bound to be in attending to the voice of truth. It is only the blindness of the spirit of vanity that reigns in the world, which has brought any other dialect but that of truth into fashion. St. Eligius and many other saints found leisure even in courts to converse mostly with heaven and themselves. Who then can plead any excuse?

(1) S. Audeon. vit S. Eligii, c. 40. See Du Cange, in Glossar. v Repa.