

JANUARY II.

ST. MACARIUS OF ALEXANDRIA,

ANCHORET.

From Palladius, bishop of Helenopolis, who had been his disciple, c. 20. Rufin, Socrates, and others in Rosweide, D'Andilly, Cotelier, and Bollandus, p. 85. See Tillemont, T. 8. p. 626. Bulteau, Hist. Mon. d'Orient, l. 1. c. 9. p. 128.

A.D. 394.

ST. MACARIUS the younger, a citizen of Alexandria, followed the business of a confectioner. Desirous to serve God with his whole heart, he forsook the world in the flower of his age, and spent upwards of sixty years in the deserts in the exercise of fervent penance and contemplation. He first retired into Thebais, or Upper Egypt, about the year 335.* Having learned the maxims and being versed in the practice of the most perfect virtue, under masters renowned for their sanctity; still aiming, if possible, at greater perfection, he quitted the Upper Egypt, and came to the Lower, before the year 373. In this part were three deserts almost adjoining to each other; that of Sceté, so called from a town of the same name on the borders of Lybia; that of the Cells, contiguous to the former, this name being given to it on account of the multitude of hermit-cells with which it abounded; and a third, which reached to the western branch of the Nile, called from a great mountain, the desert of Nitria. St. Macarius had a cell in each of these deserts. When he dwelt in that of Nitria, it was his custom to give advice to strangers, but his chief residence was in that of the Cells. Each anchorer had here his separate cell, which he made his continued abode, except on Saturday and Sunday, when all assembled in one church to celebrate the divine mysteries, and partake of the holy communion. If any one was absent, he was concluded to be sick, and was visited by the rest. When a stranger came to live among them, every one offered him his cell, and was ready to build another

* Some confound our saint with Macarius of Pispier, or the disciple of St. Antony. But the best critics distinguish them. The latter, with his fellow-disciple Amathas, buried St. Antony, who left him his staff, as Cronius, the priest of Nitria, related to Palladius. To this Macarius of Pispier St. Antony committed the government of almost five thousand monks, as appears from the life of St. Posthumian.

for himself. Their cells were not within sight of each other. Their manual labour, which was that of making baskets or mats, did not interrupt the prayer of the heart. A profound silence reigned throughout the whole desert. Our saint received here the dignity of priesthood, and shone as a bright sun influencing this holy company, whilst St. Macarius the elder lived no less eminent in the wilderness of Sceté, forty miles distant. Palladius has recorded(1) a memorable instance of the great self-denial professed and observed by these holy hermits. A present was made of a newly gathered bunch of grapes to St. Macarius: the holy man carried it to a neighbouring monk who was sick; he sent it to another: it passed in like manner to all the cells in the desert, and was brought back to Macarius, who was exceedingly rejoiced to perceive the abstinence of his brethren, but would not eat of the grapes himself.

The austerities of all the inhabitants of that desert were extraordinary; but St. Macarius in this regard far surpasses the rest. For seven years together he lived only on raw herbs and pulse, and for the three following years contented himself with four or five ounces of bread a day, and consumed only one little vessel of oil in a year; as Palladius assures us. His watchings were not less surprising, as the same author informs us. God had given him a body capable of bearing the greatest rigours; and his fervour was so intense, that whatever spiritual exercise he heard of, or saw practised by others, he resolved to copy the same. The reputation of the monastery of Tabenna, under St. Pachomius, drew him to this place in disguise, some time before the year 349. St. Pachomius told him that he seemed too far advanced in years to begin to accustom himself to their fastings and watchings; but at length admitted him, on condition he would observe all the rules and mortifications of the house. Lent approaching soon after, the monks were assiduous in preparations to pass that holy time in austerities, each according to his strength and fervour; some by fasting one, others two, three, or four days, without any kind of nourishment; some standing all day, others only sitting at their work. Macarius took some palm-tree leaves steeped in water, as materials for his work, and standing in a private corner, passed the whole time without eating, except a few green cabbage leaves on Sundays. His hands were employed in almost continual labour, and his heart

(1) Hist. Lannac, c. 20.

conversed with God by prayer. If he left his station on any pressing occasion, he never stayed one moment longer than necessity required. Such a prodigy astonished the monks, who even remonstrated to the abbot at Easter, against a singularity of this nature, which, if tolerated, might on several accounts be prejudicial to their community. St. Pachomius entreated God to know who this stranger was; and learning by revelation that he was the great Macarius, embraced him, thanked him for his edifying visit, and desired him to return to his desert, and there offer up his prayers for them.(1) Our saint happened one day inadvertently to kill a gnat that was biting him in his cell; reflecting that he had lost the opportunity of suffering that mortification, he hastened from his cell to the marshes of Sceté, which abound with great flies, whose stings pierce even wild boars. There he continued six months exposed to those ravaging insects; and to such a degree was his whole body disfigured by them with sores and swellings, that when he returned he was only to be known by his voice.(2) Some authors relate(3) that he did this to overcome a temptation of the flesh.

The virtue of this great saint was often exercised with temptations. One was a suggestion to quit his desert and go to Rome, to serve the sick in the hospitals; which by due reflection, he discovered to be a secret artifice of vain-glory inciting him to attract the eyes and esteem of the world. True humility alone could discover the snare which lurked under the specious gloss of holy charity. Finding this enemy extremely importunate, he threw himself on the ground in his cell, and cried out to the fiends: "Drag me hence, if you can, by force, for I will not stir." Thus he lay till night, and by this vigorous resistance they were quite disarmed (4). As soon as he arose they renewed the assault; and he, to stand firm against them, filled two great baskets with sand, and laying them on his shoulders, travelled along the wilderness. A person of his acquaintance meeting him, asked him what he meant, and made an offer of easing him of his burden; but the saint made no other reply than this—"I am tormenting my tormentor." He returned home in the evening, much fatigued in body, but freed from the temptation. Palladius informs us, that St. Macarius, desiring to enjoy more perfectly the sweets of heavenly contemplation, at least for five days without inter-

(1) Pallad. Laus. c. 20.

(2) Ib.

(3) Rosweide, b. 8. c. 20. p. 722.

(4) Pallad. Laus. c. 20.

ruption, immured himself within his cell for this purpose, and said to his soul—"Having taken up thy abode in heaven, where thou hast God and his holy angels to converse with, see that thou descend not thence: regard not earthly things." The two first days his heart overflowed with divine delights; but on the third he met with so violent a disturbance from the devil, that he was obliged to stop short of his design, and return to his usual manner of life. Contemplative souls often desire, in times of heavenly consolation, never to be interrupted in the glorious employment of love and praise: but the functions of Martha, the frailty and necessities of the human frame, and the temptations of the devil, force them, though reluctant, from their beloved object. Nay, God oftentimes withdraws himself, as the saint observed on this occasion, to make them sensible of their own weakness, and that this life is a state of trial. St. Macarius once saw in a vision, devils closing the eyes of the monks to drowsiness, and tempting them by diverse methods to distractions, during the time of public prayer. Some, as often as they approached, chased them away by a secret supernatural force, whilst others were in dalliance with their suggestions. The saint burst into sighs and tears; and, when prayer was ended, admonished every one of his distractions, and of the snares of the enemy, with an earnest exhortation to employ, in that sacred duty, a more than ordinary watchfulness against his attacks.(1) St. Jerom(2) and others relate, that a certain anchorite in Nitria, having left one hundred crowns at his death which he had acquired by weaving cloth, the monks of that desert met to deliberate what should be done with that money. Some were for having it given to the poor, others to the church; but Macarius, Pambo, Isidore, and others, who were called the fathers, ordained that the one hundred crowns should be thrown into the grave and buried with the corpse of the deceased, and that at the same time the following words should be pronounced: *May thy money be with thee to perdition.*(3) This example struck such a terror into all the monks, that no one durst lay up any money by him.

Palladius, who, from 391, lived three years under our saint, was eye-witness to several miracles wrought by him. He relates,

(1) Rosweide, Vit. Patr. l. 2. c. 29. p. 481.

(2) S. Hier. ep. 18. (ol. 22.) ad Eustoch, T. 4. par. 2. p. 44. ed. Ben. et Rosw. Vit. Patr. l. 3. c. 319.

(3) Acts viii. 20.

that a certain priest, whose head, in a manner shocking to behold, was consumed by a cancerous sore, came to his cell, but was refused admittance; nay, the saint at first would not even speak to him. Palladius, by earnest entreaties, strove to prevail upon him to give at least some answer to so great an object of compassion. Macarius, on the contrary, urged that he was unworthy, and that God, to punish him for a sin of the flesh he was addicted to, had afflicted him with this disorder: however, that upon his sincere repentance, and promise never more during his life to presume to celebrate the divine mysteries, he would intercede for his cure. The priest confessed his sin, with a promise, pursuant to the ancient canonical discipline, never after to perform any priestly function. The saint thereupon absolved him by the imposition of hands; and a few days after the priest came back perfectly healed, glorifying God, and giving thanks to his servant. Palladius found himself tempted to sadness, on a suggestion from the devil, that he made no progress in virtue, and that it was to no purpose for him to remain in the desert. He consulted his master, who bade him persevere with fervour, never dwell on the temptation, and always answer instantly the fiend: "My love for Jesus Christ will not suffer me to quit my cell, where I am determined to abide in order to please and serve him agreeably to his will."

The two saints of the name of Macarius happened one day to cross the Nile together in a boat, when certain tribunes, or principal officers, who were there with their numerous trains, could not help observing to each other, that those men, from the cheerfulness of their aspect, must be exceeding happy in their poverty. Macarius of Alexandria, alluding to their name, which in Greek signifies *happy*, made this answer—"You have reason to call us happy, for this is our name. But if we are happy in despising the world, are not you miserable who live slaves to it?" These words, uttered with a tone of voice expressive of an interior conviction of their truth, had such an effect on the tribune who first spoke, that hastening home, he distributed his fortune among the poor, and embraced an eremitical life. In 375, both these saints were banished for the Catholic faith, at the instigation of Lucius, the Arian patriarch of Alexandria. Our saint died in the year 394, as Tillemont shows from Palladius. The Latins commemorate him on the 2nd, the Greeks with the elder Macarius, on the 19th of January.

In the desert of Nitria there subsists at this day a monastery which bears the name of St. Macarius. The monastic rule, called St. Macarius's, in the code of rules, is ascribed to this of Alexandria. St. Jerom seems to have copied some things from it in his letter to Rusticus. The concord or collection of rules, gives us another, under the names of the two SS. Macariuses; Serapion (of Arsinoe, or the other of Nitria); Paphnutius (of Bechale, priest of Sceté); and thirty-four other abbots.(1) It was probably collected from their discipline, or regulations and example. According to this latter, the monks fasted the whole year, except on Sundays, and the time from Easter to Whitsuntide; they observed the strictest poverty, and divided the day between manual labour and hours of prayer; hospitality was much recommended in this rule, but, for the sake of recollection, it was strictly forbid for any monk, except one who was deputed to entertain guests, ever to speak to any stranger without particular leave.(2) The definition of a monk or anchoret, given by the Abbot Rancé of la Trappe, is a lively portraiture of the great Macarius in the desert; when, says he, a soul relishes God in solitude, she thinks no more of any thing but heaven, and forgets the earth, which has nothing in it that can now please her; she burns with the fire of divine love, and sighs only after God, regarding death as her greatest advantage: nevertheless, they will find themselves much mistaken, who, leaving the world, imagine they shall go to God by straight paths, by roads sown with lilies and roses, in which they will have no difficulties to conquer, but that the hand of God will turn aside whatever could raise any in their way, or disturb the tranquillity of their retreat; on the contrary, they must be persuaded that temptations will every where follow them, that there is neither state nor place in which they can be exempt, that the peace which God promises is procured amidst tribulations, as the rose buds amidst thorns: God has not promised his servants that they shall not meet with trials, but that with the temptation, he will give them grace to be able to bear it.(3) Heaven is offered to us on no other conditions; it is a kingdom of conquest, the prize of victory—but, O God, what a prize!

(1) *Concordia Regularum*, autore S. Benedicto Ananias Abbate, edita at Hugone Menardo, O. S. B. in 4to. Parisiis, 1638. Item, *Codex Regularum collectus à S. Benedicto Ananias, actus à Luca Holstenio*, two vols. 4to. Romæ, 1661.

(2) C. 60. p. 809. edit. Menardi.

(3) 1 Cor. x. 13.