

WAS THE RULE OF ST. AUGUSTINE WRITTEN FOR ST. MELANIA THE YOUNGER?

THE commonly accepted opinion is that St Augustine wrote his Rule for the community of nuns governed by his sister at Hippo. Dom. Besse, O.S.B., is giving this opinion when he writes 'Il y avait à Hippone une de ces communautés de femmes, que gouvernait sa propre sœur. Elles étaient de sa part l'objet d'une constante sollicitude. C'est pour elle qu'il écrivit, en 423, sa fameuse lettre considérée depuis lors comme une règle'. Epist. cxxi *P. L.* t. xxxiii, col. 960-965. (*Dict. Théol.* Paris 1903 i 2472).

The origin of this Rule and the uncertainty about the text and date of this famous letter dispense us from any attempt to establish its accepted authenticity. We may, however, remark:

(a) The letter seems to be divided into two parts. Part I (ending *Petri pastoris*) deals with a movement against the *praeposita* or superior of the convent. Part II (beginning *Haec sunt ut observetis praecipimus*) is the official Rule of St Augustine.

(b) The nuns to whom the first part of the letter was written could hardly have lived at Hippo. If they lived in the same town as St Augustine, it is not likely that he would try to quell a disturbance amongst them by writing them a letter. The preacher-bishop was not unaccustomed to deal with local difficulties by word of mouth.

(c) There seems a curious contradiction between Part I and Part II of the letter. Part I seems to suggest that the cause of the trouble was the appointment of a new *praepositus* or priest-superior. And St Augustine suggests that, rather than rid themselves of their old *praeposita*, or sister-superior, they should rid themselves of their new *praepositus*.

But Part II in contrasting the *praeposita* with the *praepositus* exalts the latter: 'Praepositae tamquam matri obediatur . . . multo magis presbytero' ('Obey your sister-superior as a mother . . . but much more your priest-superior').

(d) If the community who received the fatherly admonition forming the first part of the letter was the community at Tagaste over which St Melania for some time acted as sister-superior, then (1) some of the references in the letter become more pointed and some facts more intelligible. The monastery has greatly increased ('numero crevistis').

This great increase has been due to the Sister-superior ('sub illa estis eruditae; sub illa velatae; sub illa multiplicatae'). (2) A reason is given why St Augustine living at Hippo should write to nuns living at Tagaste. (3) We are not at a loss to know why St Melania finally left for Egypt about 417.

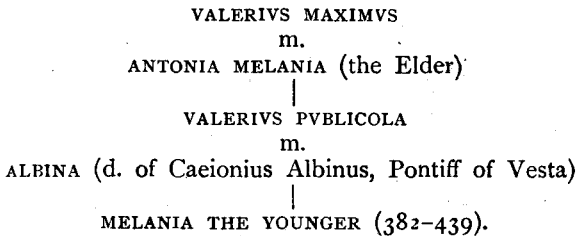
Yet, on the other hand, it may be difficult to see how St Melania could be said to 'have been many years' in their midst ('praeposita, qua in monasterio illo per tam multos annos perseverante').

(e) If the first part of the letter has, as we believe, no organic unity with the second part, that is if we may look on Part I as a private letter and Part II as a definite Rule, we are at liberty to discuss the origin of the Rule on its own merits.

PROOFS THAT ST AUGUSTINE PROBABLY WROTE HIS RULE FOR
ST MELANIA THE YOUNGER.

We have said 'probably wrote' &c. In matters where evidence is so lacking it would be wrong to claim certainty.

(i) The genealogy of Melania is as follows:



The chronology of Melania is as follows:

- 383. Melania the Younger born in Rome.
- 397. Marries Valerius Severius Pinianus.
- 402. Melania the Elder leaves Jerusalem and comes to Rome.
- 403. Melania the Elder in Africa with St Augustine.
Melania the Younger wishes to become poor.
- 404. Publicola, her father, dies. Melania the younger undertakes an ascetic life.
- 405. Palladius and Cassian stay with Melania the Younger in Rome.
Melania the Elder dies.
- 408. Pinian and Melania leave Rome; in Africa with St Augustine.
- 409. Melania founds monasteries for men and women at Tagaste.
- 417. Pinian and Melania leave Tagaste for Egypt and Palestine.
- 418. Melania writes to St Augustine about Pelagius.
St Augustine replies by 'De Gratia Christi et Peccato Originali'.

431. Albina, mother of Melania, dies. Melania founds a monastery in Jerusalem.

432. Pinian, husband of Melania, dies. Melania founds a monastery of men on Mount Olivet.

436. Melania visits her uncle Volusianus at Constantinople; stays with Lausus.

437. Melania dies.

(ii) The Rule of St Augustine was primarily written for women. This fact is generally accepted.

(iii) The fact that the Rule was written for women would naturally lead to the question, 'What women were of such interest to St Augustine that, having written no rule for his fellow-monks, he should write a Rule for these nuns?'

What group of women present the features of the group drawn by St Augustine in his Rule?

(iv) The group of women drawn by St Augustine included some who had given up great riches. To the group of poorer sisters the saint gives the counsel '*Nec erigant cervicem quia sociantur eis ad quas foris accedere non audebant*' ('Let them, i. e. the poorer sisters, not be puffed up because they associate with *those whom, in the world, they would not have dared to approach*'). This is an expression of extreme emphasis.

It would hardly have been applicable to any group of women living either at Tagaste or Hippo under the charge of St Augustine's sister. The family circle of the saint belonged to the professional class. The saint himself was but a teacher of rhetoric. It would certainly be rhetoric of a superlative kind, nowhere else found in the Rule, if the poorer sisters were represented as a class *that would not have dared to approach* either the saint's sister or any other women in Africa.

But the poorer classes of Africa would literally not have dared to approach the noble patrician woman Melania, who, later on, was to draw the Empress Eudoxia on a pilgrimage from Constantinople to Jerusalem.

(v) Not only does the monastery, described by the Rule, include some rich, noble women whom the poorer sisters would not have dared to approach; but these rich women by their very alms have made it possible for the poorer sisters to dwell in the monastery. '*Illae quae aliquid esse videbantur in saeculo, non habeant fastidio sorores suas, quae ad illam sanctam societatem ex paupertate venerunt. Magis autem studeant non de parentum divitum dignitate, sed de pauperum sororum societate gloriari. Nec extollantur si communi vitae de suis facultatibus aliquid contulerunt; nec de suis divitiis magis superbiunt, quia eas in monasterio partiuntur quam si eis in saeculo fruerentur. Alia quippe quaecumque iniquitas in malis operibus exercetur ut fiant;*

superbia vero etiam bonis operibus insidiatur ut pereant. Et quid prodest dispergere dando pauperibus et pauper fieri, si anima misera superior efficiatur contemnendo quam fuerat possidendo?' ('Those who held a certain position in the world must beware of despising those among their sisters who may have come from a poor state to his holy sisterhood. They should seek to glory in the companionship of their poor sisters more than in the rank of their rich parents. Nor ought they vainly to exult if they have contributed anything out of their abundance to the support of the community; thus taking heed not to be more proud of their riches because they have been divided in the monastery than they were when they enjoyed them in the world. For this is the peculiar feature of pride, that whereas every other kind of wickedness is exercised in the accomplishment of bad deeds, pride creeps stealthily in and destroys even good deeds. And what, think you, does it profit one to give all her goods in alms to the poor and to become poor herself, if her wretched soul becomes more proud by despising riches than by possessing them?')

There seems slender ground for attributing this state of riches and poverty to the nuns under the rule of St Augustine's sister. But it would be the very atmosphere of the monastery ruled by Melania at Tagaste. This city was the centre of her vast African estates. 'Melania and Pinian settled at Tagaste, a town of less traffic than Carthage or Hippo. There they built and endowed with ample revenues two large monasteries, one for 130 nuns, the other for 80 monks; and Melania became not only the cedar in whose branches sparrows nested, but she herself became a sparrow. The monks and nuns were drawn from her enfranchised slaves of yesterday' (*Sainte Mélanie*. Georges Goyau, 1908, p. 113).

(vi) The Rule of St Augustine supposes amongst the nuns a literary activity which has few parallels in contemporary monasticism. 'Sive autem quae cellario, sive quae vestibus, sive quae codicibus praeponuntur sine murmure serviant sororibus suis. Codices certa hora *singulis diebus* petantur; extra hora quae petiverint non accipiant' ('Those who have charge of the store-room, wardrobe, or books should willingly place themselves at the service of their sisters. Books should be applied for at an appointed hour *each day*, out of which time none should obtain them').

There must have been a keen appreciation of books in a community of nuns where the library was open every day, and the librarian was commanded to serve her sisters without grumbling.

Whilst we have no means of knowing whether this atmosphere of book-learning was present in the monastery governed by St Augustine's sister, we have authentic knowledge of its presence in the monastery

ruled by St Melania. Her biographer says 'Le règlement de vie qu'elle s'était donné l'amenait à lire, d'un bout à l'autre, un nombre déterminé de pages. Soit des écrivains sacrés, soit de leurs commentateurs, elle se faisait dicter ces pages par une nonne, et, d'avance, en connaissait si bien le texte qu'elle rectifiât, à la minute, la moindre erreur de lecture. Elle recherchait les œuvres d'exégèse, les écrits des saints; elle s'évertuait à les assimiler de façon à n'en rien ignorer; elle les transcrivait afin de mieux les connaître' (*ibid.*, p. 168).

(vii) Goyau, in speaking of the monastery which St Melania founded in Jerusalem 431, makes a series of contrasts between the Saint's mode of action and the Rule of St Augustine.

(a) He recalls the first discourse of St Melania to her nuns: 'I will not let you want for anything; *keep yourselves from dealing with men*'; and parallels it with the words of the Rule. 'Oculi vestri . . . figantur in neminem . . . Nec dicatis vos habere animos pudicos, si habeatis oculos impudicos' ('Let your eyes be fixed . . . on no man. Say not that your minds are pure if you have impure glances').

(b) St Melania's word of self-abasement, 'I will wait upon you in everything as your servant,' recalls 'Ipsa quae vobis praeest non se existimet potestate dominante, sed charitate serviente, felicem' ('Your Superior should not take pleasure in ruling you but in serving you with all charity').

(c) In her wise and gentle treatment of those who had led a life of luxury, Goyau sees a reminiscence of St Augustine's words, 'Quae infirmæ sunt ex pristina consuetudine si aliter tractantur in victu, non debet aliis molestum esse nec iniustum videri, quas fecit alia consuetudo fortiores' ('If some who are weak from former habits are treated differently in matters of meat and drink, this must not breed any feeling of discontent, nor be considered unjust to those whom habit has made stronger'; *ibid.* pp. 159, 160).

(d) A more striking relation between the practice of St Melania and the Rule of St Augustine is thus described by Goyau: 'Soucieuse de mettre ses religieuses à proximité de Dieu, Mélanie fit élever dans le monastère même un petit oratoire privé, comme il en existait en Afrique dans les communautés des vierges par saint Augustin' (*ibid.* p. 165). Goyau has overlooked or has not emphasized the fact that this custom of having an oratory in the monastery itself is part of the Rule of St Augustine: 'IN ORATORIO nemo aliquid agat nisi ad quod est factum, unde et nomen accepit'. ('In the Oratory let no one do anything except the one thing for which it is made, and from which its name is derived').

(viii) But perhaps the most striking identification between St Melania's rule and the Rule of St Augustine is the fact that from Lausus, the

prefect of Constantinople, St Melania obtained *money to build a bath in her monastery of nuns.*

(a) Cardinal Rampolla writes 'Contrary to the practice of the other monasteries of her time, she was careful that the religious over whom she ruled should have an abundant supply of fresh water. She even went so far as to provide a bath ; to procure which she had recourse to a rich Roman patrician living at Constantinople, probably Lausus, formerly prefect of the palace under Arcadius' (*Life of St Melania*, London 1908, p. 213).

It need hardly be mentioned that it was for this Lausus that Palladius (whom we have seen in the house of Melania in Rome) wrote his famous history of the Christian hermits and monks called *The Lausiack History.*

(b) The moderation of St Melania the younger may be measured by the following anecdote of her grandmother, the elder Melania, which is recorded by Palladius in his *Lausiack History* : ' It happened by chance that I and they' (i. e. the Elder Melania and her company) 'once travelled together from Aelia to Egypt, and we were accompanying on our journey the gentle virgin Sylvania, the sister of Rufinus, a man of consular rank. Jovinianus was also with us. Now he was at that time a deacon ; but subsequently he became bishop in the Church of God of the city of Askalon. He was a God-fearing man and was exceedingly well versed in doctrine. And it came to pass that a fierce and fiery heat overtook us on the way ; and we came into Pelusium that we might rest therein. And Jovinianus, who is worthy of admiration, came by chance upon a trough for washing. And he began to wash his hands and his feet in a little water that by means of the coolness thereof he might refresh himself after the intensity of the blazing heat. Then having washed himself he threw on the ground a sheep-skin whereon he might rest from the labour of the journey.

' And behold, the mighty one among women stood up over him like a wise mother, and in her simplicity rebuked him with her word, saying, " Seeing that thou art still in the heat of youth, how canst thou have confidence that by means of carefulness on thy part thou wilt be able to resist the natural heat of the constitution of the body which still burneth in thy members? And dost thou not perceive the injurious effects which will be produced in thee by this washing? Believe me, O my son, for I am this day a woman of sixty years old from the time I took upon myself this garb. Water hath never touched more of my body than the tips of the fingers of my hand ; and I have never washed my feet or my face or any one of my members. And although I have fallen into many sicknesses and have been urged by the physicians, I have never consented nor submitted myself to the habit of applying

water to any part of my body' (*Paradisus of Palladius*, tr. by Walter Budge, London 1907; i pp. 159-160).

(c) Perhaps this heroic if not wholly wise attitude towards baths was part of St Jerome's dominant influence over the Elder Melania. Fr H. Dumaine says 'C'était . . . à saint Jérôme . . . qu'il appartenait, avant tout autre, d'encourager cette pratique d'ascèse. Mains passages de ses lettres en témoignent: le bain est pour lui un déplorable excitant à la mollesse' [*Dict. Arch. Chrét.*—Bains, p. 90]. St Jerome singles out for praise St Melania the Elder and St Paula in this matter of abstaining from baths.

(d) Indeed, in speaking of Paula the Elder who had founded one monastery for men and another for women at Bethlehem, St Jerome says: 'Balneas nisi periclitans non adiit' ('No one goes to the baths without danger'). Again, speaking of the nuns whom Paula gathered round her in the monastery at Bethlehem, St Jerome says: 'Unus omnium habitus. Linteamine ad tergendas solum manus utebantur . . . Si vidisset (Paula) aliquem compitiorem . . . dicens Munditiam corporis atque vestitus animae esse immunditiam' ('All the sisters were clothed alike. Linen was used only for drying the hands. . . . If she (Paula) saw any of them attentive to her dress . . . she would say, "A clean body and clean clothes mean an unclean soul"' [Epist. cviii]).

(e) All this must be contrasted with the wise Rule of St Augustine, 'Lavacrum etiam corporum, ususque balnearum non sit assiduus; sed eo quo solet intervallo temporis tribuatur, hoc est, semel in mense. Cuius autem infirmitatis necessitas cogit lavandum corpus, non longius differatur; fiat sine murmure de consilio medici, ita ut etiam si nolit, iubente praeposito faciat quod faciendum est pro salute' ('Bodily washing and the use of the baths should not be too frequent; but should be accorded at the stated intervals, that is, once a month. When any ailment necessitates a bodily washing, it should not be put off longer. Let it be done without murmuring by the advice of the doctor; so that even if it is not desired that may be done by command of the superior which ought to be done for the health of the body').

This wise asceticism of the Rule of St Augustine is all the more remarkable because even a century later the Rule of St Benedict says, 'Balnearum usus infirmis quotiens expedit offeratur; sanis autem, et maxime iuvenibus tardius concedatur' ('Let the use of the baths be granted to the sick as often as needed; but to the hale and especially to the young it should be rarely allowed').

(f) It is therefore significant that St Melania the Younger chose not to live in the monastery of St Paula at Bethlehem, nor yet in the monastery of her grandmother the Elder Melania on Mount Olivet, but

built a new monastery on the same mountain. From the first the monastery of the younger Melania was easily distinguishable from the other monasteries in Bethlehem and Jerusalem by the comparative mildness of its rule.

(g) This mildness of St Melania the Younger in her monastic rule is all the more striking because it stands so violently contrasted with her extraordinary personal asceticism of life. All her biographers are at pains to point out that in her practices of mortification she not only equalled but outstripped the great champions of the desert.

It is therefore surely remarkable that this woman, so rude and almost cruel to herself, should depart from the tradition of her own kindred in the matter of her rule; and especially in this matter of the baths which was occupying so much attention in the letters of St Jerome. If in this we see her turning aside from the almost intemperate heroism of St Jerome to the wise moderation of St Augustine, we have no misgivings that history will point out a *Non Possumus*. Indeed, St Melania's example will thus appear as the first victory of that Rule which has made St Augustine, even in these days, the Patriarch of Western Religious Life.

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