

Made Perfect in Faith: A Second Volume

More Sermons on the Lives and Works of the Holy Church Fathers

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Saint Sulpicius Severus

One of the great Christian writers of the fifth century was Saint Sulpicius Severus¹, a follower of Saint Martin the Merciful, Bishop of Tours. Saint Sulpicius “was born in Gaul about the year 363, of a noble Aquitanian family.”² He was “an eloquent lawyer and had married into a rich consular family”³ Coming from a wealthy West Roman family, the Saint received the finest of educations. That is reflected in his polished and sophisticated Latin, which is “marked by a considerable degree of classical purity and clearness.”⁴ He is thus honored by some with the appellation “the Christian

¹ Spelled “Sulpitius” in some texts. The Saint should not be confused with the Sainly sixth-century Bishop of Bourges of the same name, with whose life our Saint’s life is still sometimes conflated. While some texts claim that the present Sulpicius Severus, the ecclesiastical writer, is not numbered among the Saints, others assert the contrary. I have followed the eminent patrologist, Professor Dr. Bardenhewer (1851-1935) of the University of Munich, the hagiographer Father Omer Englebert, and the hagiographer Father Alban Butler, in whose works he is so designated. See Otto Bardenhewer, *Patrology*, P. 451; Omer Englebert, *The Lives of the Saints*, Christopher & Anne Fremantle, Trans., (NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1994), P. 40, and the Rev. Alban Butler, *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1845), P. 339.

² Otto Bardenhewer, *Patrology*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., “Life and Writings of Sulpicius Severus,” in *The Works of Sulpitius Severus/The Commonitory of Vincent of Lérins, for the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith Against the Profane Novelties of All Heresies/The*

Sallust,”⁵ after the celebrated classical Roman historian, since “his diction ... is elegant and reminds the reader of the classical age.”⁶

In approximately the year 392, Saint Sulpicius’ wife, to whom he was devoted, died quite suddenly and unexpectedly, after which event the Saint renounced the world completely and entered instead into a life of solitude, asceticism, prayer, and study. It is said that his father begged him to reconsider, but he was unwavering in his decision and, as a result, his father, angry that his son had thrown away a distinguished career, disinherited him. It is believed that the Saint was eventually ordained to the Holy Priesthood, but that is not certain.

Saint Sulpicius Severus is most famed for his *Life of Saint Martin of Tours* (*Vita S. Martini*), whom he regarded as his Spiritual Father and towards whom he “cherished the profoundest admiration and affection, and whose extraordinary career he has traced with a loving pen.”⁷ Additionally, he wrote a *Chronicle* (*Chronicorum libri duo*) sometimes called simply *Sacred History* (*Historia Sacra*), in which he presents in abridged form the history of the world, from the Creation, through the whole of the Old Testament, and down to the year 400 A.D. However, in his history he omits the New Testament, “lest”, he writes, “the character of our condensed work should, in any measure, detract from the dignity of the events.”⁸ Saint Sulpicius Severus also wrote a work known as *The Dialogues* (*Dialogi*) in which he extols the virtues and works of the Desert Fathers of Egypt, and then compares them with the virtues and works of his Spiritual Father and sacred hero, Saint Martin of Tours. The object is to demonstrate that Saint Martin exhibits the same degree of holiness and is in the same tradition as the Holy Fathers of the East. Finally, we have a collection of the Saint’s letters some of which are acknowledged as authentic by scholars, others of which are rejected as spurious, and yet some others the authenticity of which is disputed.

During his old age, at a time when controversy raged throughout Christendom over the teachings of the heretic Pelagius, Saint Sulpicius was apparently deceived into uttering something indicative of sympathy for

Works of John Cassian, Vol. XI, 2nd Ser., of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ N.A. Weber, “Sulpicius Severus,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. XIV (NY: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913), P. 333.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Pelagianism, which denied, or at least minimized, the efficacy of God's Grace in the process of salvation. He quickly recognized his blunder, was deeply ashamed of it, and imputed it to his loquaciousness. To correct this fault of excessive talking, he imposed upon himself an *epitimia*—a quite stringent *epitimia*—that he would remain mute for the remainder of his life, which he did. Saint Sulpicius Severus reposed about the year 425.

Now, let us turn to a passage from the Saint's writings. In his *Dialogues*, Saint Sulpicius relates the following incident involving Saint Martin the Merciful and his disciple, a man named Briccio:

“Again, on a certain day, after [Saint Martin] had sat down on that wooden seat of his (which you all know), placed in the small open court which surrounded his abode, he perceived two demons sitting on the lofty rock which overhangs the monastery. He then heard them, in eager and gladsome tones, utter the following invitation, ‘Come hither, Briccio, come hither, Briccio.’ I believe they perceived the miserable man approaching from a distance, being conscious how great frenzy of spirit they had excited within him. Nor is there any delay: Briccio rushes in in absolute fury; and there, full of madness, he vomits forth a thousand reproaches against Martin. For he had been reprov'd by him on the previous day, because he who had possessed nothing before he entered the clerical office, having, in fact, been brought up in the monastery by Martin himself, was now keeping horses and purchasing slaves. . . . The miserable man, moved with bitter rage on account of these things, and, as I believe, chiefly instigated by the impulse received from those demons, made such an onset upon Martin as scarcely to refrain from laying hands upon him. The holy man, on his part, with a placid countenance and a tranquil mind, endeavored by gentle words to restrain the madness of the unhappy wretch. But the spirit of wickedness so prevailed within him, that not even his own mind, at best a very vain one, was under his control. With trembling lips, and a changing countenance, pale with rage, he rolled forth the words of sin, asserting that he was a holier man than Martin who had brought him up, inasmuch as from his earliest years he had grown up in the monastery amid the sacred institutions of the Church, while Martin had at first, as he could not deny, been tarnished with the life of a soldier, and had now entirely sunk into dotage by means of his baseless superstitions, and ridiculous fancies about visions. After he had uttered many things like these, and others of a still more bitter nature, which it is better not to mention, going out, at length, when his rage was satisfied he seemed to feel as if he had completely vindicated his conduct. But with rapid steps he rushed back by the way he had gone out, the demons having, I believe, been, in the meantime, driven from his heart by the prayers of

Martin, and he was now brought back to repentance. Speedily, then, he returns, and throws himself at the feet of Martin, begging for pardon and confessing his error, while, at length restored to a better mind, he acknowledges that he had been under the influence of a demon. It was no difficult business for Martin to forgive the suppliant. And then the holy man explained both to him and to us all, how he had seen him driven on by demons, and declared that he was not moved by the reproaches which had been heaped upon him; for they had, in fact, rather injured the man who uttered them. And subsequently, when this same Briccio was often accused before him of many and great crimes, Martin could not be induced to remove him from the presbyterate, lest he should be suspected of revenging the injury done to himself, while he often repeated this saying: 'If Christ bore with Judas, why should not I bear with Briccio.'"⁹

So here we have Saint Martin verbally assaulted by Briccio,¹⁰ a man whom Saint Martin had rescued when Briccio was still a child and had raised him at his Monastery and elevated him to the Holy Priesthood. As Father Omer Englebert notes, Briccio, during the years of his rearing, "became wicked, proud, ungrateful, and disorderly in his life."¹¹ But Saint Martin did not lose hope. Instead, he continued to nurture Briccio with patience and love, and prayed for him without respite. Now, you may wonder, what became of Briccio?

When Saint Martin died in 397, he was succeeded as Bishop of Tours by none other than his unruly spiritual son, Briccio! The Episcopal reign of Briccio was at once marked by negligence and laxity and, before long, by accusations of immorality. In addition, he was enormously unpopular with his flock. So disliked was he that he was forced to flee his See by threats that he would be publicly stoned if he did not depart Tours forthwith. Even after he was brought before an ecclesiastical court in Rome and finally cleared of the charges of immorality, he dare not return to his See. For seven long years he lived in exile in Rome. However, those years worked a miracle. By the Grace of God, and doubtless through the intercession of his reposed spiritual Father, Saint Martin, the Bishop underwent a radical

⁹ "The Dialogues of Sulpitius Severus," in *The Works of Sulpitius Severus/The Commonitory of Vincent of Lérins, for the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith Against the Profane Novelties of All Heresies/The Works of John Cassian*, Vol. XI, 2nd Ser., of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p.53.

¹⁰ The name "Briccio" is anglicized in many texts as "Brice."

¹¹ Omer Englebert, *The Lives of the Saints*, p. 431.

transformation: from haughtiness to humility; from laziness to diligence; from spiritual indifference to sanctity. Eventually he returned to Tours and there he ruled his diocese with such devotion to duty and obvious holiness that, by the time of his death in 444, he was looked upon by his people as a Saint. Thus the indolent and corrupt man was transmuted into a Saint of the Church: Saint Brictio!

How sincerely we must thank Saint Sulpicius Severus for preserving this story for us! And how many lessons we learn from it! We first learn of the danger of uncontrolled anger, a subject about which we have spoken before. When Saint Brictio unleashed his torrent of words against Saint Martin, it was as if he were no longer speaking himself, but Satan speaking through him. He was, one could say, insane with anger. Next we learn of patience. Saint Martin endured the hateful barbs hurled at him by his spiritual son, only gently reproving him and never giving up on him. Saint Martin's longsuffering was eventually rewarded, long after the spiritual Father's death. We learn too of the power of prayer, Saint Martin praying ceaselessly for his self-indulgent disciple. Finally we learn that even a man as wicked as Saint Brictio can, by his own efforts combined, most importantly, with God's Grace, be remade into Saints, the old man of the Evil One giving way inexorably to the New Man of Christ.

May God shower His Grace on us all. May He make all of us—all of us Brictios—into Saints!