

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

In a city near Ephesus the Apostle, after having made a discourse, remarked a young man in the multitude that gathered near. He was handsome, of noble stature, pleasing countenance, and his soul was far more beautiful than his body.

Taking the youth with him, St. John presented him to the bishop of that place, saying: "I confide this young man to your care, in the presence of Christ and before this congregation. Christ will be my witness in regard to the sacred deposit which I place in your hands. It is the treasure of my heart."

The bishop promised to take care of him, but the venerable old Saint again repeated his injunction. He then departed for Ephesus.

The youth was received into the bishop's own house. The prelate educated him, loved him, cherished him as his own soul, and at length conferred upon him the celestial grace of Baptism.

When, however, the bishop had signed the young man with the divine seal of salvation, he began to relax somewhat of his former vigilance; and his charge, finding himself thus too early set at liberty, soon saw himself surrounded by young men of his own age, idle, daring, and corrupt.

At first they taught him, the way to idleness, merrymaking, intemperance; after a time he became a criminal, and finally a robber. Like a spirited horse whose mettle carries him over the precipice, the young wanderer fell into the utmost excesses. He even tried to outdo his wild companions, thinking that for himself at least all was lost.

In vain the bishop tried to check him. It was now too late.

At length the misguided young fellow assembled the herd of wretches among whom he moved, formed them into a troop of desperadoes, and became their bold and hardy leader. He was soon the terror of the country.

After a certain time, however, the aged Apostle was summoned to the same city.

Having ended his mission and settled various affairs, he solemnly addressed the bishop, saying: "Restore to me the deposit which Christ and myself confided to you in the presence of this church of which you are pastor."

The bishop was sorely puzzled. He thought that perhaps it was a question of some deposit of money. But St. John said: "I reclaim from you the soul of our youthful brother." At these words the prelate lowered his eyes, wept, and answered: "He is dead"

"How and by what manner of death?" inquired the Apostle. "Dead," replied the other, "to God; for now he is but a wicked, lost wretch - in short, a robber. He has quitted the Church, and he dwells on the mountain, which he has seized with an armed troop of men like himself."

On hearing this, St. John, overcome with sorrow, wept bitterly, and exclaimed: "Is this the sort of guardian that I have set to watch over a brother's soul?" He then asked for a horse and guide, and hastily took his way towards the mountains.

He reached the spot and was soon in the hands of the advance guard of the robbers. He coolly allowed them to take possession of all his, merely saying: "Lead me to your chief; it is for him that I have come." The armed chief awaited the captive. He saw him as the party approached, and, recognizing the holy and venerable Apostle, he was seized with shame and ran away.

St. John, however, urged on his steed, and, forgetting his great age, called out loudly: "My son, why do you flee from me - an unarmed old man? Have pity on me, my child. Do not fear. There is still hope for you. I will be your guarantee to Christ. If necessary I will cheerfully give my life for you, even as the Lord has given His life for us all. I will give my soul to purchase yours. Stop, my son. Believe me, it is Christ who sends me after you."

These kind, earnest words had the desired effect. The hardened robber - the leader in many a wild and desperate deed - stopped and cast his eyes towards the ground. He then threw away his arms, and trembled as the big, round tears rolled down his still handsome, manly countenance.

St. John approached, and the robber chief humbly embraced his feet. The poor penitent was bathed in his tears as in a second baptism, but he still kept his right hand, which had shed so much blood, concealed under his garments.

The Apostle encouraged him and pledged himself that he would obtain his pardon from the great God, whose mercy is above all His works. The holy old man even fell upon his knees, seized that crime-stained hand - for evermore purified - and tenderly kissed it.

"The young man," says the ancient writer; was brought back into the assembly of the saints. John prayed with him. He fasted with him. Together they did penance. He healed his soul by his words as if by a sovereign charm, and he no more quitted him till he had raised him to the life of grace and restored him to the Church.