

The Life of
ST. PELAGIA
THE HARLOT

Vita Sanctae Pelagiae, Meretricis Translated by Sr. Benedicta Ward, S.L.G., “Pelagia, Beauty Riding By” in *Harlots of the Desert, a study of repentance in early monastic sources* (Cistercian Publications, Inc., Kalamazoo, 1986): Latin Text in *PL* 73, 663-672)

THE LIFE of SAINT PELAGIA
the HARLOT,

written by the Deacon James and translated into Latin by Eustochius.

[663] OCTOBRI VIII. VITA SANCTAE
PELAGIAE, MERETRICIS AUCTORE JACOBO
DIACONO Ita auctor seipsum vocat hic in
praefatione.] , INTERPRETE EUSTOCHIO.

VERSE PROLOGUE *by Eustocius.*

PROLOGUS INTERPRETIS.

THE words of this writer about holy hidden things
Have I, Eustochius, into Latin rendered;
Good readers, take note of all my labour,
And ask God in your prayers to remember me.

[663A] Verba sacerdotis tanti, et
celata Latinis, Eustochius Christi
transtuli subsidio.

[664A] Sed vos, lectores, mecum
pensate laborem,
Et memores nostri fundite verba
Deo.

PREFACE *of the Author.*

Praefatio auctoris. [663]

WE should always have in mind the great mercy of
our Lord who does not will the death of sinners but
rather that all should be converted to repentance
and live (1 Tim. 2). So, listen to a wonder that happened
in our times. It has seemed good to me, James, to
write this to you, holy brothers, so that by hearing
or reading it you may gain the greatest possible aid
for your souls. For the merciful God, who wills that
no one should perish, has given us these days for
the forgiveness of our sins, since in the time to
come He will judge justly and reward everyone

[376] Magnas semper Domino
nostro gratias referre debemus,
qui non vult perire peccatores in
mortem, sed omnes per
poenitentiam converti cupit ad
vitam (I Tim. II) . Audite ergo
miraculum quod gestum est in
diebus nostris. Visum est mihi
peccatori Jacobo scribere vobis
fratribus sanctis, ut audiendo vel
legendo sciatis, et animabus
vestris maximum consolationis
auxilium acquiratis. Misericors
enim Deus, qui nullum hominem
vult perire, statuit in hoc saeculo
ut per satisfactionem delicta
donentur, quia in futuro justum
iudicium erit, in quo recipiet
unusquisque secundum opera
sua. Nunc ergo silentium mihi
praebete, et intuemini mecum

according to his works. Now be silent, and listen to me with all the care of which you are capable because what I have to tell you is very rich in compunction for us all.

omni diligentia cordis, quia relatio nostra compunctione satis uberrima plena est.

LIFE

VITA. [663]

1. **THE** most holy bishop of the city of Antioch called together all the bishops nearby about a certain matter; and so eight bishops came, and among them was Nonnus, the most holy man of God, my **bishop**, a marvellous man and a **most observant monk** of the monastery called **Tabennisis**. Because of his incomparable life and most excellent conduct, he had been snatched away from the monastery and ordained bishop. When we had all assembled in the aforesaid city, the bishop of Antioch told us the meeting would be in the church of the most blessed martyr Julianus. So we went out and sat there before the door of the church with the other bishops who had come.

[663B] I.—Sacratissimus episcopus Antiochiae civitatis convocavit ad se omnes prope se existentes episcopos, pro certa quadam causa: unde convenerunt episcopi numero octo, inter quos fuit et sanctissimus Dei vir Nonnus, **episcopus** meus, vir mirificus et efficacissimus **monachus**, de monasterio quod dicitur **Tabenensiotarum**. Propter incomparabilem enim ejus vitam et decoratissimam conversationem raptus est de monasterio, et episcopus ordinatus. Congregatos ergo in praedicta civitate, jussit nos episcopus ipsius civitatis manere in basilica beatissimi martyris Juliani. Ingressique successimus, ubi et caeteri qui convenerant episcopi ante januam ipsius basilicae resederunt.

2. **WHEN** we were seated the bishops asked my lord Nonnus to speak to them, and at once the holy bishop began to speak words for the edification and salvation of all.

Now when we were marvelling at his holy teaching, lo suddenly there came among us the chief actress of Antioch, the first in the chorus of the theatre, sitting on a donkey.

SHE was dressed in the height of fantasy, wearing nothing but gold, pearls, and precious stones, even her bare feet were covered with gold and pearls. With her went a great throng of boys and girls all

CAP. II.—Quibus sedentibus, aliqui episcopi dominum meum Nonnum rogabant ut aliquid ab ipso docerentur; statimque ex ore suo sanctus episcopus coepit loqui ad aedificationem et ad salutem omnium [664,B] qui audiebant.

Cunctis vero nobis admirantibus sanctam doctrinam ejus, ecce subito transiit per nos prima mimarum Antiochiae; ipsaque est prima choreutiarum pantomimarum sedens super asellum;

et processit cum summa phantasia, adornata ita, ut nihil videretur super ea nisi aurum et margaritae et lapides pretiosi; nuditas vero pedum ejus ex auro et margaritis erat cooperta: cum qua maxima erat pompa puerorum et puellarum in vestibis pretiosis

dressed in cloth of gold with collars of gold on their necks, going before and following her.

SO great was her beauty that all the ages of mankind could never come to the end of it. So they passed through our company, filling the air with traces of music and the most sweet smell of perfume.

WHEN the bishops saw her bare-headed and with all her limbs shamelessly exposed with such lavish display, there was not one who did not hide his face in his veil or his scapular, averting their eyes as if from a very great sin.

3. BUT the most blessed Nonnus gazed after her very intently for a long space of time, and after she had gone by he turned round and still gazed after her. Then he turned towards the bishops sitting round him and said, “Were you not delighted by such great beauty?” When they did not reply, he buried his face on his knees over the holy Bible which he held in his hands and all his emotions came out in tears; sighing deeply he said again to the bishops, “Were you not delighted by her great beauty?” Still they did not answer, so “Indeed”, he said, “I was very greatly delighted and her beauty pleased me very much. See, God will place her before his awful and tremendous judgement seat and he will judge her on her gifts, just as he will judge us on our episcopal calling.”

AND he went on to say to the bishops, “What do you think, beloved brothers, how many hours does this woman spend in her chamber giving all her mind and attention to adorning herself for the play.,

amicta, et torques aurea super collum ejus. Quidam praecedebant, alii vero sequebantur eam: pulchritudinis autem decoris ejus non erat satietas omnibus saecularibus hominibus. Quae tamen transiens per nos, totum implevit aerem ex odore music vel caeterorum suavissimorum odoramentorum fragrantia.

Quam ut viderunt episcopi ita ³⁷⁷ nudo capite et omni membrorum compage sic invecunde transire cum tantis obsequiis ut nec velamen ^[0665A] super caput positum, nec super scapulas, tacentes ingemuerunt, et quasi a peccato gravissimo averterunt facies suas.

CAP. III.—Beatissimus autem Nonnus intentissime eam et diu respiciebat, ita ut posteaquam transisset, intueretur et respiceret eam. Et postea avertit faciem suam, dicens ad circumsedentes episcopos: Vos non delectati estis tanta pulchritudine ejus? Illis vero nihil respondentibus, posuit faciem super genua sua, et manuale sanctum quod tenebat sanctis manibus suis, et sic omnem sinum suum replevit lacrymis, et suspirans graviter, dixit iterum ad episcopos: Non delectati estis tanta pulchritudine ejus? Illis vero nihil respondentibus: Vere, ait, ego valde delectatus sum, et placuit mihi pulchritudo ejus, ^[0665B] quoniam istam habet Deus praeponere et statuere in conspectu tremendae et admirabilis sedis suae, judicaturus tam nos quam episcopatum nostrum.

Et iterum dixit ad episcopos: Quid putatis, dilectissimi, quantas horas fecit in cubiculo suo haec mulier, lavans et componens se, cum omni sollicitudine animi et intentione ad spectaculum ornans se, ut corporali pulchritudini et ornatui nihil deesset, quatenus

in order to lack nothing in beauty and adornment of the body; she wants to please all those who see her, lest those who are her lovers today find her ugly and do not come back tomorrow.

HERE we are, who have an almighty Father in heaven offering us heavenly gifts and rewards, **our immortal bridegroom**, who promises good things to his watchman, things that cannot be valued ‘which eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to know what things God has prepared for those who love him’ (I Cor.2.9).

WHAT else can I say? when we have such promises, when we are going to see the great and glorious face of our Bridegroom which has a beauty beyond compare, ‘upon which the cherubim do not dare to gaze’ (I Pet.1.12),

why do we not adorn ourselves and wash the dirt from our unhappy souls, why do we let ourselves lie so neglected?”

omnibus placeret, ne turpis videretur esse suis amatoribus, qui hodie sunt, et crastino non sunt?

Ergo et nos habentes patrem in coelis omnipotentem, sponsam immortalem, donantem bene custodientibus promissiones, quae habent divitias coelestes et aeterna praemia, quae aestimari non possunt, quae oculus non vidit, nec auris audivit, nec in cor hominis ascenderunt, ^[0665C] quae praeparavit Deus diligentibus se.

Quid enim plura loquor? habentes repromissionem, faciem illam magnam et splendidam, et inaestimabilem sponsi vultum videre, cui Cherubim respicere non audent, non ornatus

neque detergimus sordes de miseris animabus nostris, sed dimittimus eas negligenter jacere.

Nonnus: (1) prostrates in penitent prayer (2) prays with parrhesia; (3) trusts in God's mercy

4. **WHEN** he had said all this, Bishop Nonnus took me, his sinful deacon, with him, and we went to the rooms we had been given for our lodging. Going into his bedchamber, the bishop

[1] **threw** himself on the ground with his face to the floor, and beating his breast he wept, saying, ‘Lord Jesus Christ. I know I am a sinner and unworthy, for today the ornaments of a harlot have shone more brightly than the ornaments of my soul. How can I turn my face towards you?

IV.—His omnibus dictis, apprehendit me peccatorem diaconum, pervenimusque in hospitium, ubi nobis fuerat cellula data. Et ingressus cubiculum suum,

jactavit se in pavementum, et faciem suam ad terram; percutiensque pectus suum, lacrymabatur, dicens: Domine Jesu Christe, ignosce mihi peccatori et indigno, quia unius diei ornatus meretricis supervenit ornatum animae meae. Quali vultu respiciam ad ^[665D] te? aut quibus sermonibus justificer in conspectu tuo?

What words can justify me in your sight?

[2] **I will not hide my heart from you**, for you know all its secrets. Alas, I am a sinner and unworthy, for I stand before your altar and I do not offer you a soul adorned with the beauty you want to see in me. She promises to please men; I have promised to please you; and my filthiness makes me a liar. I am naked before earth and heaven, because I do not keep your commandments. I cannot put my hope in anything good that I do, but

[3] **I place my trust in Your mercy** which saves.’ He said this kind of thing and wept for many hours; that day was a great festival of tears for us.

Non enim occultabo cor meum ante te, quoniam prospicis secreta mea. Et vae mihi peccatori et indigno, quoniam ante altare tuum assisto, et non offero pulchram animam qualem expetis a me. Illa enim promisit placere hominibus, et fecit; et ego promisi tibi placere, et mentitus sum propter pigritiam meam. Nudus sum tam in coelo quam in terra, non adimplens praecepta mandatorum tuorum. Ergo non est mihi spes ex operibus bonis, sed

spes mea in misericordia tua, qua confido salvari. Haec vero illo dicente, et horum causa plurimum ululante, eodem die vehementer festa celebravimus.

5. **WHEN** day came, it was Sunday and after we had completed our night prayers, the holy bishop Nonnus said to me, ‘I tell you, brother deacon, when I was asleep I was deeply disturbed and I do not understand it’. Then he told me the dream he had had: ‘At the corner of the altar was a black dove, covered with soot, which flew around me and I could not bare the stench and filth of it. It stood by me until the prayer for the dismissal of the catechumens, and when the deacon announced to the catechumens, "Depart", no more was seen of it. After the prayer of the faithful, and the complete oblation had been offered and everyone had been dismissed, I came to the threshold of the house of God, and there ^[p.69] I saw the dove again, covered grievously with filth, and again it fluttered around me. Then I held out my hands and drew it to me, and plunged it into the font which was in the ante-

V.—Superveniente autem die, quae est Dominica, ^[666A] postquam complevimus nocturnas orationes, dicit ad me sanctus Nonnus episcopus: Tibi dico, frater diacone, vidi somnium et fortiter conturbor, eo quod non possum discernere illud. Qui mox dicit ad me vidisse se in somnis, quomodo ad cornu altaris staret nigra columba, multis sordibus involuta, quae circumvolabat me, et fetorem ac squalorem sordium ejus ferre non valebam. Illa vero circumstetit me, donec dimissa est oratio catechumenorum . Postquam vero proclamavit diaconus catechumenis: Procedite, statim nusquam comparuit. Et post missam fidelem et completionem oblationis, cum dimissa esset ecclesia, egrediente me limitem domus Dei, venit denuo ipsa columba multis sordibus involuta, et iterum circumvolabat me. Ego vero ^[666B] extendens manum, apprehendi eam, et jactavi in concham, quae erat in atrio sanctae ecclesiae; et dimisit in aqua omnes sordes suas quibus obvoluta erat, et ascendit de aqua candida sicut nix: quae et volans,

chamber of the holy church and washed off all the dirt with which it was covered and it came out of the water as white as snow. It flew up into the highest heaven and was lost to my sight.’ When the holy man of God, bishop Nonnus, had recounted his dream, he took me with him and brought me to the cathedral with the rest of the bishops and there we greeted the bishop of Antioch.

in excelsum ferebatur, et omnino ab oculis meis sublata est. Cum ergo narrasset somnium sanctus Dei Nonnus episcopus, apprehendit me: et pervenimus ad maiorem ecclesiam cum caeteris episcopis, et salutavimus episcopum civitatis.

Pelagia Hears Nonnus preach on judgment and the joy of heaven

6. **HE** went in and preached to the people who came and sat around his throne and when he had read the canon of the holy Gospel, the same bishop of that city held the Gospel book towards the most blessed Nonnus and asked him to speak to the people. Nonnus then opened his mouth and spake by the wisdom of God, without any set speech or philosophy and with no indiscretion. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he exhorted and urged the people, speaking very earnestly about the future judgement and **the good gifts in store in eternity**. All the people were moved with **compunction** by his words, and the floor of the church was awash with the tears of the hearers.

VI.—Et ingrediens, omnem populum ecclesiae hortatus est, qui ingressi sederunt super thronos suos; et post omnem canonicam celebrationem vel lectionem sancti Evangelii, idem episcopus civitatis porrigens sanctum Evangelium beatissimo Nonno, hortabatur eum ut verba faceret ad populum. [666C] Qui aperiens os suum loquebatur sapientiam Dei, quae habitabat in eo, quoniam nihil compositionis, aut philosophiae, aut indiscretum alloquebatur, nihil in se habens humanae naturae superfluum: sed repletus Spiritu sancto, arguebat et commonebat plebem, sincerissime loquens de futuro iudicio, et perpetuis bonis quae reposita sunt. Cuncta ergo plebs **compuncta** est ex 378 verbis, quibus locutus est per eum Spiritus sanctus, ita ut pavimentum sanctae Ecclesiae inundaret populi lacrymis.

Pelagia Demands Baptism

7. **NOW** by the guiding hand of the mercy of God it happened that there came into the church that very harlot about whom I am speaking. What was even more marvellous was that she who was outside the church and had never before entered the house of God and had never before even considered her sins,

VII.—Gubernatione vero misericordiae divinae contigit, ut conveniret ad eandem ecclesiam et meretrix haec, de qua factus est nobis sermo; et quod mirum est, catechumena, cui nunquam accessit sollicitudo peccatorum, nec aliquando ad Dei convenisset [666D] ecclesiam,

was now suddenly **pierced** by the fear of the Lord when she heard bishop Nonnus preaching to the people.

She was so struck that she despaired of herself and her tears flowed in such a flood that she could not control them. At once she gave orders to two of her servants: ‘Stay in this place and when holy Nonnus the bishop comes out follow him, find out where he is lodging and come and tell me.’ The servants did as their mistress ordered them, and followed us as far as the basilica of St Julianus which was near the place where we were lodging. They returned home and told their mistress, ‘He is in the church of the most blessed Julianus’.

When she heard this at once she sent the same servants for the *dyptichs* and on them she wrote:

‘To the holy disciple of ^[p.70] Christ, greetings from a sinner and disciple of the devil. I have heard of your God, how he bent the heavens and came down to earth not for the righteous but for the salvation of sinners. So greatly did he humble himself that he came near to publicans, and he whom the cherubim do not dare to look upon (1 Pet.1.12) spoke with sinful men. My lord, you are very holy, and so, just as your lord Jesus showed himself to the harlot in Samaria at the well (John 8.48) will you look upon me, as he did whose follower you are, as I have heard Christians say? If you are a true disciple of Christ, do not reject me, for **through you** I may deserve to **see His face**.’

The holy bishop Nonnus wrote in reply,

‘Whoever you are, show yourself to God and you

subito **compuncta** est timore Domini, cum argueret sanctus Nonnus populum,

ita ut desperaret de se, ipsa mulier plangens flumina lacrymarum fundebat, nec ullo modo a fletu continere se poterat. Et statim praecepit duobus pueris suis, dicens: Sustinete in hoc loco; et dum egressus fuerit sanctus Nonnus episcopus, sequamini eum, et inquirite ubi maneat, et venite et renuntiate mihi. Pueri vero fecerunt sicut praecepit eis domina sua; et sequentes nos, venerunt in basilicam beatissimi martyris Juliani, ubi nobis hospitium seu cellula erat. Et regressi, venerunt, dominae suae dicentes: Quoniam in basilica beatissimi martyris Juliani manet.

Quo illa audito, statim transmisit diptychum ^[667A] tabularum per eosdem pueros, ita continentem:

«Sancto discipulo Christi, peccatrix et discipula diaboli. Audivi de Deo tuo, quod coelos inclinavit, et descendit super terram, non propter justos, sed ut peccatores salvaret (Matth. IX); intantum humiliatus, ut publicanis appropinquaverit, et in quem cherubim respicere non audent, cum peccatoribus conversatus sit. Et tu, domine meus, qui multam sanctitatem habes, etsi carnalibus oculis ipsum Dominum Jesum Christum, qui se illi mulieri meretrici Samaritanae manifestavit ad puteum (Joan. IV), non aspexisti, tamen verus cultor illius es, sicut a Christianis audivi referentibus. Si vero illius Christi verus es discipulus, non me respuas, per te desiderantem videre Salvatorem, ut per te merear videre ^[667B] vultum sanctum suum.»

Tunc rescripsit ei sanctus Nonnus episcopus:

«Quaecunque es, manifesta es Deo, et tu, et tractatus tuus, et voluntas tua. Attamen dico tibi, ne

will be saved. But I tell you, I am a man, a sinner, and a servant of God, and **you would tempt my humanity**. But if you really do desire God, have strength and faith and come to me among the other bishops, for I cannot let you see me alone.’

When the harlot read this, filled with joy she came running to the church of the blessed martyr Julianus, and we were told that she was there.

When Nonnus heard this, he called all the bishops around him, and ordered that she should be brought to him. When she came in where the bishops were gathered, she threw herself on the floor and seized the feet of the holy bishop Nonnus saying, ‘I beg you, my lord, imitate your master the Lord Jesus Christ and pour out on me your goodness and make me a Christian. My lord, I am an ocean of sin, a deep pit of iniquity and I ask to be baptised.’

velis tentare humilitatem meam, ego enim sum homo peccator servus Dei. Si pro certo habes desiderium divinitatis, virtutem adipiscendi et fidem, et me vis videre, sunt mecum episcopi alii; veni, et ante eos me videbis, nam sola me videre non poteris.»

Cum haec relegisset meretrix, gaudio repleta, cursu venit ad basilicam beati martyris Juliani, et nuntiavit nobis de praesentia sua. Quo audito sanctus Nonnus episcopus, vocavit ad se omnes qui illic aderant episcopos, et iussit eam venire ad se. Quae accedens ubi congregati erant episcopi, jactavit se in pavementum, et apprehendit pedes ^[667C] beati Nonni episcopi, dicens: Rogo te, domine meus, imitare magistrum tuum Dominum Jesum Christum, et effunde super me tuam bonitatem, et fac me Christianam. Ego enim sum, domine meus, pelagus peccatorum et abyssus iniquitatis. Peto me baptizari.

Pelagia challenges Nonnus and is Baptized

8. BISHOP Nonnus could hardly persuade her to get up, but when she did, he said, ‘The holy canons say that a harlot may not be baptised unless she has sponsors who will guarantee that she will not return to her old way of life.’ When she heard this ruling of the bishops she threw herself on the floor again and seized the feet of Nonnus, **washing them with her tears and wiping them with the hair of her head** (Luke 7.38) saying,

‘You will give account for my soul and to you I will confess all the sins I have committed: and you will wash away by baptism all my great sins and wickednesses. You will not now find a

VIII.—Cum vix eam persuasisset sanctus Nonnus episcopus surgere a pedibus suis, cum surrexisset, dicit ad eam: Canones sacerdotales continent non baptizari meretricem, nisi fidejussores praestiterit, ut non se iterum in ipsis malis revolvat. Quae audiens talem episcopi sententiam, jactavit se iterum in pavementum, et apprehendit pedes sancti Nonni, et ipsos lacrymis suis lavit, et capillis suis exergebat, dicens:

Rationem reddas Deo pro anima mea, et tibi ascribam iniquitates factorum meorum, ^[667D] si distuleris me iniquam et turpissimam baptizare. Non invenias portionem apud Deum cum sanctis, nisi me nunc feceris alienam malorum

place with the saints before God unless you put away from me my evil deeds. **Unless you give me rebirth as a bride of Christ and present me to God, you are** ^[p.71] **no more than an apostate and idolater.**'

Then all the bishops and clergy which were there, when they saw how greatly this sinner desired God were amazed and said they had never before seen such faith and such desire for salvation as in this harlot: and at once they sent me, the sinful deacon, to the bishop of Antioch to tell him all about it and to ask him to send one of his deaconesses back with me. When he heard about it, he rejoiced with great joy saying, 'It is right, bishop Nonnus, that this great work should have waited for you. I know that you will speak for me in this matter.' At once he sent back with me the lady Romana, the first of the deaconesses. When we got back, we found the harlot still at the feet of the holy bishop Nonnus, who was with difficulty urging her to get up, saying, 'Get up, my daughter, so that I may exorcise you.'

Then he said to her, 'Do you confess all your sins?' To which she replied, 'I have looked so closely into my heart that I cannot find there any single good action. **I know my sins** and they are more than the sand upon the seashore: water like the sea is little compared to the extent of my sins. **But I trust in your God that he will forgive** me the whole extent of my sinfulness and look upon me again.' Then the holy bishop Nonnus said, 'Tell me, what is your name?' and she replied, 'I was called Pelagia by my parents but the people of Antioch have called

operum meorum. Neges Deum, et idola adores, nisi me hodie in sponsam Christi renasci feceris, et obtuleris Deo.

Tunc omnes episcopi et clerici qui convenerunt, videntes talem peccatricem pro Deitatis desiderio talia loquentem, admirantes dicebant nunquam se talem vidisse fidem et desiderium salutis, sicut hujus meretricis. Et statim transmiserunt me peccatorem diaconum ad episcopum civitatis, ut haec omnia ei insinuarem, et unam de diaconissis juberet ejus beatitudo transmittere mecum. Qui audiens, laetatus est gaudio magno, dicens: Bene, pater honorabilis, ^[668A] te exspectabant opera ista, scio quod os meum eris. Et statim transmisit mecum dominam Romanam primam diaconissarum. Quae veniens, invenit eam adhuc ad pedes sancti Nonni episcopi, cui vix persuasit surgere a pedibus suis, dicens: Surge, filia, ut exorcizeris.

Dixitque ei: Confitere omnia peccata tua. Quae respondit: Si perscrutata fuero scientiam cordis mei, non invenio in me aliqua opera bonorum actuum. **Peccata enim mea scio**, quod arena maris graviora sint; aqua enim perparva est prae mole peccatorum meorum. **Confido vero de Deo** tuo, quod dimittat pondus iniquitatum mearum, et respiciat super me. Tunc dixit ad eam sanctus Nonnus episcopus: Dic quod sit nomen tuum? Quae respondit: Naturali nomine Pelagia vocata sum a parentibus ^[668B] meis; cives vero Antiochiae Margaritam me vocant, propter pondus ornamentorum quibus me adornaverunt peccata ³⁷⁹ mea. Ego enim eram ornamentum et comptum

me Margaret (*a pearl*) because of the amount of jewelry with which my sins have adorned me; for I am decked out as a slave for the devil.’ Nonnus said to her, ‘Your natural name is Pelagia?’ To which she replied, ‘Yes, my lord.’

Then Nonnus exorcised her and baptized her, placing on her the sign of the cross, and he gave her the Body of Christ. And with the lady Romana he was god-parent to her and the deaconess received her and took her to the place of the catechumens while we remained where we were. Then the bishop said to me, ‘I tell you, brother deacon, today we are rejoicing with the angels of God, with the bread and wine of spiritual joy beyond measure, because of the salvation of this girl.’

ergasterium diaboli. Iterum dicit ad eam sanctus Nonnus episcopus: Naturali nomine Pelagia vocaris? Quae respondit: Ita domine.

Quo audito, sanctus Nonnus episcopus exorcizavit eam, et baptizavit; et imposuit ei signum Domini, tradiditque illi corpus Christi. Fuitque illi mater spiritalis sancta domina Romana, prima diaconissarum: quae accipiens eam, ascendit in catechumenum, eo quod et nos ibi maneremus. Tunc dicit ad me sanctus Nonnus episcopus, Tibi dico, frater diacone, laetemur hodie cum angelis Dei, et oleum extra consuetudinem sumamus in cibo, [668C] et vinum cum laetitia spiritali accipiamus, propter salutem hujus puellae.

The Devil Complains

9. WHILE we were eating some food, we suddenly heard sounds as of a man suffering violence and the devil cried out, saying, ‘Alas, alas, what am I suffering from this decrepit old man? It was not enough for you to snatch from me three ^[p.72] thousand Saracens and baptise them, and obtain them for your God. It was not enough for you that you took over Heliopolis and gave it to your God when it belonged to me and all who lived there worshipped me. But now you have taken my greatest hope from me and now more than ever I cannot bear your schemes. Oh, how I suffer because of that accursed man! Cursed be the day on which you were born! I am so weakened that a river of tears flows from me, for my hope is taken

IX.—Sumentibus vero nobis cibum, audiuntur voces subito, velut hominis qui violentiam patitur: diabolus enim clamavit dicens: Vae, vae! quid patior a decrepito sene isto? Non tibi sufficiunt triginta millia Sarracenorum, quos mihi abripuisti et baptizasti, et obtulisti Deo tuo? Non tibi sufficiebat Heliopolis, quoniam cum et ipsa mea esset, et omnes qui in ea habitabant, me adorarent, tu mihi abripuisti et obtulisti Deo tuo? Sed et nunc maximam spem meam abstulisti a me, jam nunc non fero machinationes tuas. O jam quid patior a damnabili isto! Maledicta dies illa, in qua natus es tu: flumina lacrymarum infirmo hospitio inundant, jam spes mea [668D] abstracta est. Ista omnia clamabat diabolus, et lamentabatur ante januas, et audiebatur ipse ab omnibus hominibus. Et iterum repetens, ad neophytam puellam dixit: Haec mihi facis, domina mea Pelagia, et

away.’ The devil said all this outside, crying and lamenting, and everyone heard him. When she returned, he said to the newly-baptised girl, ‘My lady Pelagia, why are you doing this to me? Why have you become my Judas? For was not he also crowned with glory and honour and became an apostate by betraying his lord? This is what you have done to me!’

tu meum Judam imitaris? Ille enim gloria et honore coronatus, et apostolus constitutus, tradidit Dominum suum, ita et tu mihi fecisti.

Pelagia:[1] exorcist; [2] Heavenly Bride; [3] gives wealth to poor; [4] preaches conversion to her servants; [5] becomes an amma

The holy Nonnus said to her, ‘Make the sign of the Cross in the name of Christ.’ [1] And she **made the sign of the Cross** in the name of Christ and she blew at the demon and at once he disappeared.

Tunc dicit ad eam sanctus Nonnus episcopus: Signa te cruce Christi, et abrenuntia ei. Quae signavit se in nomine Christi, et insufflavit in daemonem, et statim nusquam comparuit.

10. **TWO** days later, when Pelagia was asleep in her room with the holy Romana her godmother, the devil appeared to her in the night and awakened Pelagia the servant of God, saying, ‘I ask you, my lady Margaret, were you not once rich with gold and silver? Did I not adorn you with gold and jewels? Tell me, how have I displeased you? Tell me, so that I may make amends, for you have made me a very great cause for mockery among the Christians.’ Then the handmaid Pelagia made the sign of the Cross and blew at the demon, saying, [2] ‘My God who snatched me out of your teeth and led me into the **heavenly bridal chamber** will resist you for me.’ At once the devil disappeared.

X.—Post biduum ergo, dormiente ea cum sancta Romana commatre sua in cubiculo suo, apparuit diabolus nocte, et suscitavit ancillam Dei Pelagiam, [669A] et dicebat: Rogo te, domina mea Margarita, nunquid non ex auro et argento ditata es? nunquid non ex auro et gemmis pretiosis adornavi te? Rogo te, quid te contristavi? Responde mihi, ut satisfaciam tibi, tantum ne me facias opprobrium Christianorum. Tunc ancilla Dei Pelagia signavit se, et exsufflavit in daemonem, dicens: Deus meus, qui eripuit me de medio dentium tuorum, et induxit in coelestem thalamum suum, ipse tibi resistet pro me. Et statim nusquam comparuit diabolus.

11. **ON** the third day after the baptism of the holy Pelagia, she called her servant who was in charge

XI.—Tertia vero die, posteaquam baptizata est sancta Pelagia, rogavit puerum suum, qui praeerat rebus ejus omnibus, et dicit ad

of all her goods and said to him, ‘Go to my rooms and make an inventory of all the gold and silver, the ornaments and the precious clothes, and bring it to me.’ The servant did as his mistress told him and reported it all to her. At once she sent for holy Nonnus through the holy Romana her godmother, and she placed all she had in his hands, saying,

[3] ‘Lord, these are the riches with which Satan ensnared me; I place them at your disposal; do with them whatever you think is right, for my [p.73] choice is the riches of Christ.’ At once the bishop called the senior custodian of the church and in her presence he gave all her goods into his hands saying, ‘I charge you, by the undivided Trinity, do not let any of this remain with the bishop or with the church, but let it all be expended on the widows and orphans and the poor, so that whatever evil clings to it may be removed by this good use and the riches of sin become the treasures of righteousness. But if you sit lightly to this promise and either you or anyone else keep any of it, let anathema come upon you and them and their houses, and let them have a part with those who cry, ‘Crucify, crucify.’ Pelagia then [4] called to all her servants, boys and girls, and set them free and gave each a collar of gold from her own hands and said, ‘Make haste to free yourselves from this wicked world, so full of sin, so that we who have been together in this world may remain together without grief in that life which is most blessed.’

eum: Vade in vestiarius meum, et scribe omnia quae sunt tam in auro quam in argento, vel in ornamentis aut vestibus pretiosis, [669B] et affer mihi. Puer fecit sicut praecepit ei domina sua, et omnem substantiam suam detulit. Quae statim vocavit sanctum Nonnum episcopum per sanctam Romanam commatrem suam, et omnem substantiam suam posuit in manibus ejus, dicens: Hae sunt, domine, divitiae quibus ditavit me Satan: has trado in arbitrio sanctitatis tuae, et quod noster expedire, facias ex eis, mihi enim optandae sunt divitiae Domini mei Jesu Christi. Qui statim vocavit custodem ecclesiae seniores; et ipsa praesente, omnem substantiam ejus in manibus illius tradidit, dicens: Adjuro te per inseparabilem Trinitatem, ne quid hinc in episcopium aut in ecclesiam ingrediatur, sed magis viduis et orphanis et pauperibus erogetur, ut quod male attractum est, bene distribuatur, et divitiae [669C] peccatricis fiant thesauri iustitiae. Si vero spreto sacramento, sive per te, sive per quemlibet alium subtraxeris de his quidquam, anathema ingrediatur domum ejus, et cum illis habeat partem qui dixerunt: Crucifigatur, crucifigatur. Illa vero convocavit omnes pueros et puellas suas, et liberavit omnes: donavitque tortos aureos eis de manu sua, dicens: Festinate, et liberate vos de hoc saeculo nequam, pleno peccatis, ut sicut fuimus in hoc saeculo simul, ita simul permaneamus sine dolore in vita illa quae est beatissima.

12. **ON** the eighth day when it is the custom for the baptised to take off their white robes, Pelagia rose in the night, though we did not know it, and took

XII.—Octava vero die, quando habebat depositionem albarum facere, surgens nocte, nobis ignorantibus, deposuit vestem baptismatis sui, et induit se

off her baptismal dress and [5a] put on a tunic and breeches belonging to the holy bishop Nonnus; and from that day she was never seen again in the city of Antioch. The holy lady Romana wept bitterly, but the holy bishop Nonnus said to her, ‘Do not weep, my daughter, but rejoice with great joy, for Pelagia has chosen the better part (Luke 10.42) like Mary whom the Lord preferred to Martha in the Gospel.’ [5b] Now Pelagia went to Jerusalem and built herself a cell on the mount of Olives and there she prayed to the Lord.

tunicam tricinam sancti Nonni [669D] episcopi, et ex illa die nusquam comparuit in civitate Antiochia. Quam sancta Romana flebat amarissime, et sanctus Nonnus consolabatur eam, dicens: Noli flere, filia, sed laetare gaudio magno, quoniam Pelagia optimam portionem elegit, sicut Maria, quam Dominus praeferit Marthae in Evangelio. Illa autem abiit Jerosolymam, et construxit sibi cellulam in monte Oliveti, ubi Dominus oravit.

James Visits Jerusalem

13. **AFTER** a little while, the bishop of Antioch called the bishops together, so that they might all go back to their own homes. Three or four years later, I, James the deacon, wanted to go to Jerusalem to worship the resurrection of Christ and I asked the bishop to let me go. When he gave me his blessing he said to me, ‘Brother deacon, when you reach the city of Jerusalem, ask the whereabouts of a certain brother Pelagius, a monk and a eunuch, who has lived there for some years shut up alone; go and visit him; truly I think you will be helped by him.’ I did not at all understand that he was talking about the handmaid of God, Pelagia. [p.74]

XIII.—Post aliquantum vero temporis convocavit episcopus civitatis omnes episcopos, ut unusquisque reverteretur ad propria. 380 Post triennium aut quadriennium temporis, desideravi ego Jacobus diaconus proficisci Jerosolymam, ut ibi adorarem resurrectionem Domini nostri Jesu Christi, et [670A] petii episcopum meum, ut me permitteret ire. Dum me permisisset ire, dicit ad me: Tibi dico, frater diacone, dum perveneris Jerosolymam, require ibi quemdam fratrem Pelagium, monachum et eunuchum, qui multos annos habitabat in solitudine clausus, quasi eum visitaturus; vere enim poteris ab eo juvari. Haec autem omnia dicebat mihi de ancilla Dei Pelagia non manifeste.

The Death of Pelagia

14. **SO** I reached Jerusalem, and when I had joined in the adoration of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, on another day I made inquiries about the servant of God. I went and found him on the

XIV.—Perveni ergo Jerosolymam, et adoravi sanctam resurrectionem Domini nostri Jesu Christi: et alia die requisivi servum Dei. Et accessi, et inveni eum in monte Oliveti, ubi Dominus oravit, in modica cellula undique circumclusa, et parvam

mount of Olives where he used to pray to the Lord in a small cell which was closed on all sides, with one small window. I knocked on the window and at once she appeared and she recognised me, though I did not recognise her. How could I have known her again, with a face so emaciated by fasting? It seemed to me that her eyes had sunk inwards like a great pit. She said to me, ‘Where have you come from, brother?’ And I replied, ‘I was sent to you by the order of the holy bishop Nonnus.’ At once she closed the little window on me, saying, ‘**Tell him to pray for me**, for he is a saint of God.’ At once she **began the psalms of the third hour**. I prayed beside the cell and then left, much helped by the sight of her angelic face. I returned to Jerusalem and began to visit the brothers in the monasteries there.

fenestellam habuerat in pariete. Et percussi ostium fenestellulae, et statim aperuit mihi, et coguovit me: ego vero ^[670B] non cognovi eam. Quomodo enim poteram cognoscere illam, quam antea videram inaestimabili pulchritudine, jam facie marcidam factam prae nimia abstinencia? Oculi vero ejus sicut fossae videbantur. Quae dicit ad me: Unde venis, frater? Ego respondi et dixi: Missus sum ad te, jubente Nonno episcopo. Quae ait ad me: Oret pro me, quoniam vere sanctus Dei est. Et statim clausit ostiolum fenestellae, et coepit psallere horam tertiam. Ego vero oravi juxta parietem cellulae ejus, et recessi, multum juvatus de angelica visione ejus. Reversus vero Jerosolymam, coepi per monasteria ambulando visitare fratres.

15. THROUGHOUT these monasteries, great indeed was the fame of the monk Pelagius. So I decided to make another journey to speak with her and receive some saving teaching. When I reached the cell and knocked, calling her name, there was no reply. I waited a second day and also a third, calling the name of Pelagius, but I could not hear anyone. Then I said to myself, ‘Either there is no one there or he who was a monk has left.’ But warned by a nudge from God, I said to myself, ‘I had better see if, in fact, he has died.’ So I broke open the little window; and I saw that he was dead. So I closed the opening and I was filled with sorrow. I ran all the way to Jerusalem and told whoever I met that the holy monk Pelagius who had wrought so many wonders was now at rest. Then the holy fathers

XV.—Magna vero ferebatur fama per monasteria de domino Pelagio: propterea deliberavi etiam iterato ad eum redire, et salutaribus doctrinis ^[670C] ejus refici. Cumque ad cellulam suam pervenissem, et pulsare, imo nominatim eum interpellare praesumerem, nihil respondit. Exspectavi secunda die et tertia perseverans, et proprio nomine Pelagium interpellans, neminem audivi. Quare intra me dixi: Aut nemo est hic, aut recessit qui hic erat monachus. Nutu vero Dei monitus, iterum dixi: Considerem ne forte mortuus sit; et aperui ostiolum fenestellulae, et prospexi, et vidi eum mortuum, et clausi ostiolum; et de luto replens diligenter, cursu veni Jerosolymam, et nuntiavi commanentibus, quod sanctus Pelagius monachus mirabilia faciens requievisset. Tunc sancti patres venerunt cum diversis monasteriis monachorum, et sic solutum est ostiolum cellulae; et delatum est foras sanctum

came with monks from several monasteries and the door of the cell was broken in. They carried out his sacred little body as if it had been gold and silver they were carrying. When the fathers began to anoint the body with myrrh, they realised that it was a woman. They wanted to keep such a wonder hidden but they could not, because of the crowds of people thronging around, who cried out with a loud voice, ‘Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for you have hidden away on earth such great treasures, women as well as men.’ So it was known to all the people, and monks came in from all [p.75] monasteries and also nuns, from Jericho and from the Jordan where the Lord was baptised, bearing candles and lamps and singing hymns; and the holy fathers bore her body to its burial.

MAY the life of this harlot, this account of total conversion, join us to her and bring us all to the mercy of the Lord on the day of judgement, to whom be glory and power and honour to the ages of ages. Amen.

corpusculum [670D] ejus, quod auro et lapidibus pretiosis condigne posuerunt. Et dum sancti patres ungerent corpus myrrha, tunc cognoverunt quod fuisset mulier: qui volentes miraculum abscondere, sed populum ipsum latere non poterat, exclamaverunt voce magna, dicentes: Gloria tibi, Domine Jesu Christe, qui multas divitias abscondas habes super terram, non solum viriles, sed etiam muliebres. Divulgatum est autem omni populo, et venerunt omnia monasteria virginum, tam de Jericho, quam ex Jordane, ubi Dominus baptizatus est, cum cereis, lampadibus et hymnis; et sic depositae sunt sanctae reliquiae ejus, portatae a sanctis patribus.

Haec vita meretricis, haec conversatio desperatae; [671A] cum qua et Dominus nos faciat invenire misericordiam suam in die judicii; quoniam ipsi est honor et [672A] gloria, potestas et imperium in saecula saeculorum. Amen.

[From Sr. Benedicta's introduction (p. 59): "*This recognition of the beauty of Pelagia as a creature formed by God struck Nonnus to the heart; a man of genuine prayer, he was able to see her truly while the more timid men, who were aware of their own capacity for lust, hid their eyes.*"]
