

INSCRUTABLE MERCY

or

More Saints to the Rescue!

Part Two

By Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

In the previous article, we read the account about Falconilla in the Life of Saint Thecla, and also Saint John Damascene's observations about Falconilla.

It is evident that Falconilla, by the prayers of Saint Thecla, somehow had the capacity to repent of [regret] her former idolatry and to espouse the truth of the Christian faith, to which she had *never* had the opportunity to be exposed in her lifetime.

How else could she have been counted worthy of "rest and eternal life" in the Kingdom of God?

Below, we present more examples of God's inscrutable mercy towards mankind. The first example is from the Life of Saint Perpetua of Carthage, who was martyred A. D. 203. This account is written by Saint Perpetua herself while she was in prison, shortly before her execution. At one point, this is what she writes:

Some days later when we were all at prayer, suddenly while praying I spoke out and uttered the name Dinocrates. I was surprised; for the name had never entered my mind until that moment. And I was pained when I recalled what had happened to him. At once I realized that I was privileged to pray for him. I began to pray for him and to sigh deeply for him before the Lord. That very night I had the following vision. I saw Dinocrates coming out of a dark hole, where there were many others with him, very hot and thirsty, pale and dirty. On his face was the wound he had when he had died.

Now Dinocrates had been my brother according to the flesh; but he had died horribly of cancer of the face when he was seven years old, and his death was a source of loathing to everyone. Thus it was for him that I made my prayer. There was a great abyss between us: neither could approach the other. Where Dinocrates stood there was a pool full of water; and its rim was higher than the child's height, so Dinocrates had to stretch himself up to drink. I was sorry that, though the pool had water in it, Dinocrates could not drink because of the height of the rim. Then I woke up, realizing that my brother

was suffering.* But I was confident that I could help him in his trouble; and I prayed for him every day until we were transferred to the military prison. For we were supposed to fight with the beasts at the military games to be held on the occasion of the emperor Geta's birthday. And I prayed for my brother day and night with tears and sighs that this favour might be granted me.

On the day we were kept in chains, I had this vision shown to me. I saw the same spot that I had seen before, but there was Dinocrates all clean, well dressed, and refreshed. I saw a scar where the wound had been; and the pool that I had seen before, now had its rim lowered to the level of the child's waist. And Dinocrates kept drinking water from it, and there above the rim was a golden bowl full of water. And Dinocrates drew close and began to drink from it, and yet the bowl remained full. And when he had drunk enough of the water, he began to play as children do. Then I awoke, and I realized that he had been delivered from his suffering.

Note that the account does not say that Dinocrates was in the glory and splendor of the Saints, but only that he was no longer suffering and was "playing like a child." Perhaps, as Saint Ephraim the Syrian might have said in his *Hymns on Paradise*, the account is trying to tell us that Dinocrates was counted worthy of some measure of Paradise, according to his capacity.

Nevertheless, this is yet another instance of a soul rescued from the suffering in Hades, and this is now the third century "after" our Saviour's Descent into Hades.

If these accounts are misleading or heretical, then one must ask: why have they been cherished and treasured in the Church's memory for all these centuries? If they were misleading, then they should have been condemned, to prevent people from being led astray by their wrong message. Yet, they appear time and again, and are repeated and endorsed by eminent Saints and Fathers of the Church, as we shall see.

We must remember that the Church has millions of Saints, all of whom were taught to pray for mankind's salvation, and were instructed by our Saviour in the Gospel to:

Love your enemies and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Most High; for He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

(Luke 6:35-6)

* Apparently, Dinocrates was unbaptized when he died. St. Perpetua herself was a convert to Christianity, being the daughter of pagan parents.

It appears the Church felt that, by the prayers of the Saints, God, in His mercy, would extend an opportunity to people to believe in Him even after their repose, and be spared from Hades. This was because the Church Fathers, it seems, believed that Christ's Descent into Hades had the quality of timelessness to it, and His mercy would be extended to those who, in this life, had never had the opportunity to hear or "grasp" (as St. John Damascene would say) the true Christian teaching.

The account that is recorded below concerning Saint Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome (+604), first appears in the eighth century, that is, in the century after his repose. This is not unusual in the Lives of the Saints; for example, Cyril of Scythopolis, who recorded the Lives of many prominent Saints of the Judean desert, and whose accounts are regarded as trustworthy and impeccable, wrote the Life of Saint Sabbas the Sanctified some eighty years after the Saint's repose.

Another element that is noteworthy is how widespread the convictions were among early Orthodox Christians that the prayers of the Saints could rescue even unbelievers from the tyranny and pangs of Hades — even centuries "after" the Descent of our Saviour into Hades.

According to one incident recorded in Saint Gregory the Great's Life, the Saint was moved by the report that he had heard regarding the justice and humility the pagan emperor Trajan had shown towards a poor widow, whose son had been slain. Consequently, Saint Gregory prayed and received from God the assurance that the soul of the emperor had been delivered from Hades.

This is what that "guide of Orthodoxy, and teacher of piety and holiness," Saint John Damascene, has to say about Saint Gregory the Great:

Gregory the Dialogist, the senior bishop of Rome, as everybody knows, was a man well known for his righteousness and knowledge. They even say that a divine angel assisted him when he was conducting the Liturgy. One day this Gregory, while taking a walk on a stone pavement, stood carefully still and uttered a mighty prayer directed toward the soul-loving Lord for the forgiveness of the sins of Trajan the king. Immediately after saying these things, he heard a voice borne to him from God: "I have heard your prayer and I grant forgiveness to Trajan. But you should not again put forward prayers addressed to Me on behalf of pagans." And that this story is true and blameless, the whole of the East and West is witness. Look, this even surpasses what happened to Falconilla. For she was a party to no other evil (beyond idolatry), but Trajan brought about the deaths of many martyrs. Thou art marvelous, Lord, and marvelous

are Thy works! We praise Thine incredible goodness, because Thou always dost incline toward the love of mankind!

(St. John Damascus, *Concerning Those Who have Died in the Faith*
PG 95. 261-64)

I believe that we may be assured from this that, at least, Saint John of Damascus is praying for the salvation of mankind!

Another pillar of Orthodoxy has this to say:

"Certain people were heard not only when they prayed for the faithful, but also for the unfaithful. For example, the blessed Thecla, by means of her prayers, transferred Falconilla from the place of the unjust, and the great Gregory the Dialogist, as it is said, rescued the emperor Trajan."

(St. Mark of Ephesus [Ludovico Petit and Gregory Hoffmann,
De "Purgatorio," p. 71.]

The Roman Catholic teacher, Thomas Aquinas, believed that Hades was divided into four compartments: 1) purgatory; 2) the region where the souls of the patriarchs and the righteous of the Old Testament abode; 3) the region for unbaptized children and 4) the region of the eternally damned. Apparently, he felt that Christ descended only to the region of Hades where the souls of the Old Testament righteous dwelt, although Christ's presence was somehow "felt" in the other regions. From this, the saintly Catholicos of Georgia, Bessarion the Wonderworker (+1737), drew the conclusion that the Latins did not *really* believe that Christ had descended into Hades, since they did not understand that Hades was still open, that, as yet, there was no final condemnation or damnation, not until the Last Judgment. So, in the eighteenth century, he wrote the dissertation, "Against the Latins Who Say That Christ Did Not Descend Into Eternal Hades." At one point in his work, Catholicos Bessarion writes the following:

So who were they that did not believe? The Light Unapproachable descended to those held captive in Hades, in the darkness and shadow of death, and He preached to the dead, as we saw in what was said by the Apostle Peter. Those who were entirely darkened with unbelief did *not* receive His coming, neither confess His Divinity nor bend their knees.

[We affirm also that] the great Abraham did not need preaching, neither did Isaac and Jacob, nor Noah and Job, nor any other of the Prophets and the Just, because they already foresaw His coming, and also His descent to them into Hades. So why would they need preaching, or how would they fail to recognize His coming to them? But He Himself says, "I am come not to call the righteous, but

sinners to repentance" and, there in Hades also, He descended to call the sinners and He preached to them. . . .

And it is not surprising that Christ the Master, Who suffered death for men, should have redeemed by His Blood not only those worthy of mercy, but also those who were unworthy. *For He granted this power even to His servants, that they should deliver from Hades the ungodly and lawless*, as Saint Gregory the Great did the ungodly and lawless emperor Trajan, and as the First Woman Martyr Thecla did for the daughter, Falconilla; and also Saint George, and Saint Macarius, who brought forth from Hades the priests of the idols. . . .

As for you, sons of the Catholic Church, who are established and built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, at whose head is Christ Jesus, the Chosen Stone and the Rock of Life, do not abandon this foundation, neither transgress the boundaries set by the Fathers, that we may be heirs of eternal life, through Christ Jesus, our God, to Whom is due all glory, honour and worship, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

So, according to these texts, just as Christ proclaimed the Good Tidings to the souls in Hades, and those who believed were delivered from suffering, in like manner did the Saints, by the power invested in them by Christ, deliver the souls in Hades in the centuries after His descent into Hades.

Just as Christ came to Hades "to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance," so also did He give this authority to the Saints to call, by their prayers, the errant souls in Hades to repentance, so that they might believe and — if they chose rightly — be delivered from their suffering. But all of this is a result of God's boundless and ineffable mercy.

As monastics, we have heard these narratives for years in the monastery vigils and at the refectory readings, and it was only in response to a pastoral inquiry that we proceeded to set down in writing what had been brought to our attention from these sacred texts. As Orthodox Christians, we must be aware that this is what the Church has taught and believed for centuries. Certainly, these are issues we must consider when we reflect upon God's plan for the salvation of mankind.