

A REMARKABLE CONVERSION

To have had and lost the gift of faith, is the greatest evil that can befall man because it concerns his eternal salvation. And if the unfortunate soul repented and returned to the fold it was by reason of an extraordinary grace from God. But if he relapsed, and once more the grace of repentance was afforded him, what shall we say? Still more, if he later received the grace of the priesthood, certainly the mercy of God exceeds all our feeble attempts to appreciate it.

Four hundred years ago this year there lived in Sienna, Italy, a Jew named Sixtus. This man not only became a Christian, but fell into heresy twice, and afterwards became a most learned doctor and defender of the Church. Little is known of Sixtus' early years other than that he was a young man of exceptional talent. Having been converted from Judaism he entered the Franciscan Order and pursued his studies under the celebrated Ambrose Catharin. His remarkable knowledge of Greek and Hebrew earned for him a most brilliant reputation during the ten years he preached and taught throughout Italy. In good faith, he at first embraced the erroneous opinions of Catharin concerning predestination, but soon abandoned them to hold the principles of St. Augustine and the Angelic Doctor.

Meanwhile, this intrepid genius, frequently subject to original and dangerous ideas, had his hour of darkness and fell into errors of such a serious nature that he apostatised from both his state and the faith. Recovering himself the first time, he relapsed and was again arrested, imprisoned in the holy office or Inquisition in Rome, and, after trial, condemned to be burnt.

These events took place during the pontificate of Julius III. Father Michael Ghislieri, O. P., afterwards Pope St. Pius V, then filled the office of Commissary General of the Inquisition. It was the custom of this holy man to visit frequently the prisoners and persuade them, if possible, to return to the faith. He entered these prisons one day, not for the purpose of superintending tortures, as is often thought, but to see and converse with those therein confined. He came upon Sixtus, guilty of a second relapse into heresy and under sentence of death. Father Michael was touched with compassion and endeavored to persuade the young man to abandon his errors, and lay aside the haughty

resolution he had made of preferring death to submission and its consequent humiliations. The Dominican Inquisitor then went to the Pope, and besought him not only to revoke the sentence of death but also to permit him to receive Sixtus into the Dominican Order. The Holy Father granted these favors and God completed the work by converting the young Hebrew's heart.

Fifteen years later Sixtus, in his dedication to Pope Pius V of his masterpiece, the *Bibliotheca Sancta*, thus addresses his generous deliverer: "I could not seek a more friendly or more powerful protector than you, who long ago delivered me from the very gates of hell and restored me to the light of truth and to a yet more perfect state. When you deigned to receive me into your own Order, you were pleased to cloth me with your own hands, yes, even with your own habit, and at the same time you adopted me as your spiritual son."

Pius had saved a valuable soul. The powerful grasp of religious discipline completed the conversion of the hitherto eccentric young genius. He never relapsed again and from that moment consecrated to the service of the Church his great knowledge and wonderful talent. He was permitted to exercise again the duties of preaching and teaching and soon re-established his great reputation. His original method in composing sermons, contained in the *Bibliotheca Sancta*, was in itself a great contribution to the priestly office. His vast erudition permitted him to render great assistance to the Holy See, especially in combating Judaism, which was at that time actively attacking Christianity. He is said to have discovered many valuable Jewish productions and saved them from the flames.

It is hard to conceive how Sixtus was able to accomplish so much writing, when one considers his continual preaching, his long and difficult journeys, added to the duties of the religious life. His writing was prodigious. We have a list of his numerous works which are mostly commentaries on Scripture. Poetry also found in him an ardent champion, and besides accommodating verses from Vergil to commentaries on the Psalms, he translated several of St. Gregory Nanzianzen's works. All this he did before he was fifty years old.

His extreme and incessant labors, together with religious austerity, shortened his days. Being hindered by a premature death from improving the greater part of his manuscripts, Sixtus preferred to destroy them rather than bequeath them to us im-

perfect. He became ill in the convent of Santa Maria de Castello at Genoa, and throwing the unfinished manuscripts into the fire, he turned his whole heart towards God and eternity. Shortly afterwards, towards the fall of 1569 he died, hardly fifty years old, yet esteemed as one of the most holy and learned Scripture scholars of the Church. His *chef d'oeuvre*, as we have said, was the *Bibliotheca Sancta*, a work in eight volumes, which treats of Scripture from various viewpoints. This work has ever been regarded as a most valuable contribution to Scriptural study.

The varied career of this great Dominican is perhaps without equal. Mistakes he made, and great ones, but by the mercy of God he finally returned to the bosom of Mother Church, ever to honor her in life and in death. Certainly when we consider his career, we must exclaim with St. Paul: "Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are His judgments and how unsearchable His ways!" (Epist. Romans, II, 33.)

—Bro. Reginald Hughes, O. P.

