



EXTRAORDINARY
WOMEN
of CHRISTIAN HISTORY

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM
THEIR STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS

RUTH A. TUCKER



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Introduction

I invite you on a pilgrimage, dear Reader. Come along with me . . . to places we have never seen before and to people we could otherwise never have expected to know. . . . And we shall meet sundry folk even more exotic than ourselves. “By adventure”—by happenstance—we have fallen into fellowship.

Thomas Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages*

The setting is the Mediterranean world of the first century. She wears men’s clothing to disguise her gender. A coworker and companion of the apostle Paul, Thecla is a miracle worker, missionary, and desert holy woman. Church fathers revere her, and today she is recognized as a saint. Another desert saint is Mary of Egypt. Leaving behind a life of depravity and sex addiction, she denies herself basic necessities to follow God’s call. She dies on April 1. More than fifteen hundred years later, Pulitzer Prize winner John Berryman writes a poem titled “April Fool’s Day, or, St Mary of Egypt.”

Springtime in the Italian Apennine Mountains, 1212. Young, beautiful, and highborn, Clare runs away with Francis only to be cloistered in a convent for the remainder of her life. Later they both are canonized as saints, the great duo from Assisi. Generations after Clare, in another Italian village, Catherine of Siena is thought by many to be mentally ill. To show her identity with plague victims, she drinks pus from the sores of the one to whom she is ministering. Seventeenth-century French mystic Jeanne Guyon takes her spirituality a step further. She pulls out healthy

teeth and rolls in prickly nettles in her imagined service to God. But she's also capable of offering timeless advice:

I entreat you, give no place to despondency. This is a dangerous temptation . . . of the adversary. Melancholy contracts and withers the heart, and renders it unfit to receive the impressions of grace. It magnifies and gives a false coloring to objects, and thus renders your burdens too heavy to bear. God's designs regarding you, and His methods of bringing about these designs, are infinitely wise.¹

Argula von Stauffer stands up to Catholic prelates in defense of Martin Luther. To them, she is no more than a daughter of Eve. Anne Hutchinson, another such daughter—and the mother of fifteen children—is banished from Boston by Puritan preachers. Deemed a heretic, she is justly killed by Native Americans, so say the Puritan divines. In 1865 Catherine Booth, with her husband William, cofounds the Salvation Army and is a popular preacher among the affluent of London's West End.

Carry Nation, in her Kansas campaign against alcohol, wields a hatchet to smash saloons. Pandita Ramabai, across the globe, establishes a mission society and sets in motion a great religious revival in India. Popular evangelist and founder of the Foursquare Church, Aimee Semple McPherson captures the headlines in the spring of 1926. Missing in action. Speculation. Rumors. A drowning? A kidnapping? Appointment with a plastic surgeon? Hiding out with her handsome music director? Except for her not having drowned, the verdict is still out. Eliza Davis George fights racism to serve as a Baptist missionary to Africa. After toiling some six decades, she dies in 1979 at age one hundred.

One after another these extraordinary women grab our attention, sometimes for all the wrong reasons. They form a dizzying and disparate array of personalities and lifestyles. Imagine them today as headliners for a grand conference, the *mother* of all women's retreats. Impossible, some would say. Imagine them all fitting into the same heaven. Impossible? Their enormous differences and flaws are not easily swept under the carpet, but they all stand solidly on common ground. Amid their malfunctions and failures, they profess an undying faith in Christ and seek to serve him. We dare not dismiss them any more than we would their biblical counterparts.

We easily imagine that the demarcation between biblical history and church history is very clear, one stopping as suddenly as the other begins, one sacred the other secular. But the church fathers recognized a continual flow as a river from one century to the next. True, they stipulated certain writings as the canon of Scripture, but one generation of believers followed another with no assumption that those featured in the biblical text had an edge over those who followed after.

Jerome, in fact, rated his friend Marcella above the prophet Anna. Here is this celebrated theologian and Bible translator of the fourth century, concluding that Anna comes out on the short end:

Let us then compare her case with that of Marcella and we shall see that the latter has every way the advantage. Anna lived with her husband seven years; Marcella seven months. Anna only hoped for Christ; Marcella held Him fast. Anna confessed him at His birth; Marcella believed in Him crucified. Anna did not deny the Child; Marcella rejoiced in the Man as king.²

Jerome might have added that Marcella demonstrates sacrificial ministry in action, forsaking her wealth to serve the poor and afflicted. He would not have made favorable remarks about Héloïse, who lived and died several centuries later. Except for her cloistered life as a nun, her story is easily situated in the twenty-first century, as the opening paragraph of a 2005 *New York Times* book review indicates:

Almost a thousand years ago, a teacher fell in love with his student. Almost a thousand years ago, they began a torrid affair. They made love in the kitchens of convents and in the boudoir of the girl's uncle. They wrote hundreds of love letters. When the girl bore a child, they were secretly married, but the teacher was castrated by henchmen of the enraged uncle. At her lover's bidding, the girl took religious orders. He took the habit of a monk. They retreated into separate monasteries and wrote to each other until parted by death.³

The account of Héloïse illustrates the wide-ranging popularity of historical biography. And her case is not unusual. The lives of Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Ávila, Susanna Wesley, Aimee Semple McPherson, Corrie ten Boom, Mother Teresa, and others have been written multiple

times. This introductory volume, with issue-oriented questions at the end of each chapter, will hopefully stimulate more writers and more readers to dig into their fascinating stories. And may this book also spur similar overviews featuring Asian, African, and Hispanic women.

So how does an author even attempt to write some sort of two-thousand-year overview of Christian women from around the world? It's an impossible assignment. Indeed, had my publisher permitted me more space, I might have titled this book *777 Extraordinary Christian Women*. Truly hundreds of such women have been left out, and the reader can only sigh and scribble additional names in the table of contents. Needless to say, my pleasure in choosing the tastiest candy from this sampler box of chocolates turned into a very subjective task. In the end, weight gain was the biggest consideration, thus a lean and shapely volume.

But aren't there already enough sampler-box books of women in Christian history? And aren't there profiles of these women online? Perhaps. But in many cases the candy is too sweet for the palate—sugarcoated heroines. Flaws and failures are frosted over, without a hint of the bitter cocoa that gives chocolates that singular gourmet tastiness. In fact, as I reread and edited the manuscript, I was struck by how many failed marriages and failed ministries had become added ingredients of this volume. And I was loathe to leave them out. These women are anything but the super-saints of pious heroine tales. They are real people, and they are like us.

The greatest honor we can bestow on them is to present them as honestly as the sources allow. The Bible is our model. Beginning with Eve, the text is straightforward about sin and failures. Sarah's anger toward her husband and her foul attitude toward Hagar are not disguised, nor is the account of Lot's daughters, who carry out their conspiracy to commit incest with their father. Rebekah is a manipulative wife and mother. Rachel is an envious sister and a conniving thief of household idols. Tamar pretends to be a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law. And all this in Genesis alone.

No woman is well served when we transform her into a plaster saint. The words of Helen Taft Manning are fitting:

I should hope that . . . she [M. Carey Thomas] may escape the fate of the many heroes and heroines of the past whose immortality is little more than

a name and a list of achievements, due to the misguided piety of their biographers. Those biographers have tried to erase from the record such qualities as seem to them uncomfortable or undignified . . . and have succeeded in making of their heroes plaster saints. . . . [Such biographers are] guilty of a criminal waste of rich and abundant material.⁴

Throughout the book I have used first names, in part to distinguish women from their husbands, but also because the use of a last name is a historical formality that does not seem appropriate. Although these women were often involved in significant public ministries, the private side of life was equally demanding. Married women in particular felt the burden of balancing ministry with obligations on the home front. Those women who were identified primarily by their positions of authority had often circumvented church polity and procedures to attain their status, their standing authenticated by their giftedness—or visionary claims—alone.

Here we take a round-the-world pilgrimage, encountering women from our colorful Christian heritage. Their voices rise out of the grave to challenge and inspire us to sacrificial service even as they warn us of sin and temptation. We are ever conscious that they inhabit their own historical and geographical settings and hold to religious values and worldviews that often seem utterly bewildering to the twenty-first-century mind. Nevertheless, they are part of that “cloud of witnesses,” a long train of believers who first walk out of the pages of Genesis and continue on to the present day.

“By adventure”—by happenstance—we have fallen into fellowship.



Thecla and Early Martyrs, Monastics, and Saints

The apostle Paul. Love him or hate him. It's hard to be neutral. That certainly was true for Pearl S. Buck. Speaking of her missionary mother, she wrote: "Since those days when I saw all her nature dimmed I have hated Saint Paul with all my heart."¹ A missionary to China herself, Pearl later became a best-selling author and winner of both the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes. I have just reread Peter Conn's biography of her and realized once again what a fascinating individual she was. She died in 1973 in her late seventies.

If her passing made the news, I was unaware. Some two decades later, however, I did take notice of her. While alone on a long road trip, I listened to her award-winning novel, *The Good Earth*. More than ten hours of audiocassettes left me spellbound. Since then I have been a fan. How I would love to time travel back to the late 1960s and have lunch with her. I would want to glean some writing tips and quiz her about her incredibly interesting life. But more than that I would like to talk about Paul. I would politely point out that he would have been the least likely person to dim the nature of a missionary—male or female—who had journeyed all the way to China to spread the gospel.

Pearl should have known better than to presume Paul was some sort of male chauvinist. He commended women associates as faithful coworkers, not the least of whom were Phoebe and Priscilla. He simply took women's public ministry for granted. For that alone I would tell her I love Paul. But besides his support for women in ministry, I love Paul because he was so honest, so straightforward. No feigning of phony spirituality. When he was furious with Barnabas or Peter or others who opposed him, he did not pretend otherwise. He was no super-saint. Indeed, he candidly disclosed his own struggles and spiritual failures.

So what's there not to love about Paul? There's plenty, if the only Paul one knows is the one who's been accused of dimming the natures of women. Such has too often been the case throughout history. If only there were a document that would prove once and for all how much he encouraged women in ministry.

Some would say there is: the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The central thesis of this ancient text is Paul's close collaboration with a female coworker. This writing, however, is apocryphal, not accepted as part of the biblical

Paul Speaks on Marriage and Celibacy

As we consider Thecla and other women who renounced marriage and sexual relations, it behooves us to consider how important Paul's writings on this subject were to many believers in the early church. They interpreted and applied his words in his first letter to the church in Corinth from a perspective that seems strange to most Christians today.

Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In

canon—and rightly so. It is widely regarded as little more than a fanciful romance. A reader seeking to find a realistic record of early Christian ministry will be seriously disappointed. In fact, once we step outside the pages of the Bible, biographical accounts are airbrushed, all blemishes removed. Personalities are flattened like pancakes and topped with syrupy spirituality. What a pity.

Beginning with Thecla, we move beyond sacred texts as our sources. The question we mull over in our minds, then, when we encounter what appears to be a fanciful story, is not could God have performed such a miracle but rather did God. Whether we are considering the martyrdom of Perpetua, the angelic life of Macrina, the self-sacrificing Marcella, the holy and venerable Paula, or the scandalous Mary of Egypt, we do well to understand the purpose behind the writing. Many of the early Christian texts, we must remember, were written primarily to inspire. What we sometimes sadly miss in these accounts is the forthright honesty of the Bible. From Eve and Sarah to Gomer and the woman at the well, Scripture exposes warts and all.

the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

1 Corinthians 7:1–9

THECLA

Legendary Companion of Paul

A convert of Paul in Iconium, Thecla gave up a life of leisure to become a missionary on the run, disguising herself as a man to escape her pursuers. She is regarded “equal to the apostles” and a saint in Eastern Orthodoxy and was so considered by the Roman Catholic Church until 1969, when she was removed from the list. The claims for her sainthood were deemed spurious.

Although the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was considered apocryphal even in the early church and was thus not included in the canon, the historicity of Thecla herself was rarely questioned. In fact, the church fathers, with the notable exception of Tertullian, commended her as a true follower of Christ—and Paul. St. Augustine cited her to bolster his support of what he regarded as Paul’s view of marriage, and John Chrysostom commended her for giving up her priceless jewelry. Gregory of Nyssa testified that long after her death Thecla appeared to his mother as she was about to give birth to her first child.

By the fourth century the cult of Thecla was in full swing. She was revered for her commitment to virginity as the ultimate ideal of Christian virtue. But not virginity alone. She was heralded as a courageous missionary and an orthodox defender of Paul’s teachings.

We first meet this young virgin sitting in the window of her upscale home in Iconium. She is transfixed by the sound of a man’s voice, even more so by his words. The speaker is the apostle Paul, who has found lodging with her neighbors Onesiphorus and Lectra. But Thecla is not the only one who has come under his spell. She observes other women making their way to the meeting. She longs to join them and see for herself who this man is. “For three days and three nights Thecla does not rise from the window, neither to eat nor to drink.”²

So distressed is her mother that she sends for Thamyris, Thecla’s fiancé. Perhaps he can bring her to her senses. Her daughter, she tells him, is “tied to the window like a spider, lays hold of what is said by Paul with a strange eagerness and awful emotion.” She is worried sick. Thamyris goes to the window and kisses Thecla, but she pays him no heed. She’s obsessed—obsessed by a man who is preaching celibacy, depriving “young men of wives, and maidens of husbands.”

An important aspect of this apocryphal treatise is its meticulous listing of names and places, many of which correspond with the biblical text, lending the work an aura of authenticity.

Thamyris, distraught by the turn of events, appeals to the local tribunal, demanding that Paul be held accountable for his contemptible teaching. When Paul defends his instruction as the very revelation of God, he is bound over to guards and locked in prison. Thecla sneaks away and searches him out. After arriving at the prison by night, she bribes the guards with costly bracelets, enters Paul's cell, and kisses the chains that bind him. When she is discovered "enchained by affection," both she and Paul are ordered to go before the tribunal. When she refuses to respond to questions or even acknowledge her fiancé, her mother cries out, "Burn the wicked wretch."

Paul is then cast out of the city, and Thecla is ordered burned at the stake. But "though a great fire was blazing, it did not touch her; for God, having compassion upon her, made an underground rumbling, and a cloud overshadowed them from above, full of water and hail." Having escaped the flames, Thecla, with the help of a young boy, is guided to a cave where Paul is hiding. There she hears him praying: "O Saviour Christ, let not the fire touch Thecla, but stand by her, for she is Yours."

We want them to run away together and live happily ever after as a celibate gospel-preaching team, but that is not about to happen. Soon back in Antioch, the beautiful young Thecla is sexually harassed by Alexander, a high-ranking official. "And taking hold of Alexander, she tore his cloak, and pulled off his crown, and made him a laughing-stock." Not to be made a fool, he brings her before the governor. As punishment, she is bound "to a fierce lioness. . . . But the lioness, with Thecla sitting upon her, licked her feet; and all the multitude was astonished."

The rulers, however, are determined to put her to death. They bring her to the arena to face wild beasts, only to witness another miracle: the lioness protecting her from all harm. Again she survives unscathed—and more than that. She sees a ditch full of water and throws herself in as an act of self-baptism. Alexander's wrath, however, is only intensified. He will defeat her with bulls "exceedingly terrible," and they "put red-hot irons under the privy parts of the bulls, so that they, being rendered more furious might kill her."

In the end, Alexander concedes defeat, and Thecla is brought before the governor, who issues an edict before the crowd: “I release to you the God-fearing Thecla.” Soon after this she disguises herself in a man’s attire and again meets with Paul and then spends the rest of her days either traveling with him or living in a cave where the sick and demon possessed are brought for healing. Despite opposition from “lawless ones,” she lives to ninety, at which time she is miraculously entombed inside a rock.

And there came a voice out of the heaven, saying: Fear not, Thecla, my true servant, for I am with you. Look and see where an opening has been made before you, for there shall be for you an everlasting house, and there you shall obtain shelter. And the blessed Thecla regarding it, saw the rock opened as far as to allow a man to enter, and did according to what had been said to her: and nobly fleeing from the lawless ones entered into the rock; and the rock was straightway shut together, so that not even a joining appeared.

PERPETUA

Early Christian Beheaded in the Arena

The account of Perpetua and her slave girl comes from an early source, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. It is the testimony of a death more than a biography or autobiography of a life. In fact, nothing is known of Perpetua’s youth. We first meet her in 203, a young mother and a catechumen, still unbaptized. In early Christianity, most conversions, unlike Paul’s or Thecla’s, transpired over a period of time rather than as a response to a vision or an evangelistic invitation.

Hailing from Carthage in North Africa, Perpetua was a student of Saturus, a deacon who conducted catechism classes. She was twenty-two and the mother of an infant son, the father of whom is not mentioned. Her means of support or how she acquired a servant are not specified, but the account does identify her aged father as an esteemed nobleman.

The most startling aspect of Perpetua’s story is that she seems almost to beg for martyrdom, and not only she but also her pregnant servant, Felicitas, and many others. In fact, the wish for holy martyrdom became so intense that one Roman official reportedly snarled: “You wretches, if you

want to die, you have cliffs to leap from and ropes to hang by.”³ How can she be offering herself for execution when the emperor’s edict targets only those “teaching or making converts”? She has not yet even been initiated into the believing community.

Her parents and her brother were beside themselves over the turn of events. Desperate to rescue their daughter, her father pleaded and threatened, while her mother sought to awaken her maternal instincts. But nothing they did lessened her resolve. Her testimony speaks of their mutual suffering: “I nursed my baby, who was faint from hunger. In my anxiety I spoke to my mother about the child, I tried to comfort my brother, and I gave the child in their charge. I was in pain because I saw them suffering out of pity for me.” A later medieval version of her testimony does not permit such weakness: “But she threw the child aside, and repulsed her parents, saying: ‘Be-gone from me, enemies of God, for I know you not!’”⁴

On the day of their execution, Perpetua and Felicitas were ordered to the arena, where they were gored by a “mad heifer.” When the spectators shouted “Enough!” the young women were brought before a gladiator. When he failed to fully sever her neck, Perpetua, according to the *Pas-sion*, took charge herself: “She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat.”

Both Perpetua and Felicitas, mistress and slave, are celebrated as saints in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Indeed, CatholicCulture.org informs the reader that the story of their martyrdom “has been loved and revered by the faithful for centuries.” So also today: “What a wonderful story for children,” for it “teaches a most beautiful lesson [not only] in modesty” but also of courage: they were “so brave, and so full of love.” And, according to the site, it teaches us about race, that we should “not let our color be a stumbling block . . . for Perpetua was white and Felicitas was black.”⁵

That the account of a mother leaving a child behind and offering herself to be martyred is a wonderful story for children is surely not a universal truism. Nor is the claim of their being a white master and black slave convincing. They were both North Africans.

MARCELLA

Biblical Scholar and Translator

If Thecla was regarded “chief of virgins” by certain church fathers, Marcella (325–410) ranked close behind. Virginity was truly the highest spiritual status a woman could attain. That men had come to this conclusion and heralded this heavenly way of life was beside the point. One of the leading proponents of women virgins was Methodius, a fourth-century bishop in Asia Minor whose very significant and only surviving work is his fictional *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*. Here the virgins are wined and dined at a festive banquet in the garden of Arete. Each virgin gives a discourse. Thecla opens the ceremony by leading a twenty-four-verse hymn praising the purity of virginity, with the nine other virgins joining on the chorus.

Marcella offers the first discourse, “since,” according to Methodius, “she sits in the highest place, and is at the same time the eldest.”⁶ She lays out God’s plan from the beginning, when “the men of old times thought it nothing unseemly to take their own sisters for wives, until the law coming separated them, and by forbidding that which at first had seemed to be right, declared it to be a sin.” God allowed men and women “during the period of childhood, to amuse themselves like young animals,” to practice polygamy and to populate the world. Marriage continued to be affirmed throughout the whole Old Testament period, but it was “Christ alone [who] taught virginity, openly preaching the Kingdom of Heaven. . . . For in old times man was not yet perfect, and for this reason was unable to receive perfection, which is virginity.”

These words should not be confused with Marcella’s own words. Her life exemplifies service far more than celibacy. Born into a wealthy aristocratic family in Rome, she enjoyed the privilege of education and culture and the finest fashion money could buy: fancy gowns, hairpieces, jewelry, and layers of makeup. Banquets and balls offered entertainment for both young and old. Soon a well-heeled aristocrat arranged to marry the beautiful maiden. When he died less than a year later, it was assumed that after her period of mourning she would be the most eligible young widow in town. But her life took a very different turn.

For Marcella, the call to Christian ministry was tugging at her heart-strings. There was no sudden conversion experience, no appeal from a

traveling evangelist to transform her into another Thecla. Her call had been seeping into her psyche since early childhood, when her mother, Albina, had offered lodging to Athanasius, one of the greatest theologians of the early church. He was the patriarch of Alexandria who had been hounded out of the region by his theological enemies. He had fled to Rome, where he was warmly welcomed into her mother's palatial home.

Amid his busy schedule, the famous churchman found time to interact on theological matters with her mother while Marcella listened in. The memories she cherished most, however, were miracle stories associated with desert monks, particularly St. Anthony. When Athanasius departed to return to Constantinople, he presented Albina with his book, *Life of St. Anthony*, a treasured gift never to be forgotten.

Although a Christian herself, Albina years later would urge Marcella to remarry for money. Cerealis, an older man with close imperial ties and a vast estate, was most eager to wed her widowed daughter, and Albina had her eye on the inheritance. But Marcella was determined to move in a different direction—to give up her wealth and truly follow Jesus in ministry. There was no precedent, however, at least according to Jerome, for such a life of poverty. “In those days no highborn lady at Rome had made profession of the monastic life, or had ventured—so strange and ignominious and degrading did it then seem—publicly to call herself a nun.”⁷

Nevertheless, Marcella vowed to forfeit wealth and serve the poor. Abandoning her costly finery, she donned a plain brown garment suited for a washerwoman. Though not seeking to stir controversy, her action was nothing short of shocking—and shameful. Had she gone to the desert and lived in a cave, she would have brought less disgrace to her family than living like a pauper in plain sight amid style-conscious Romans.

As time passed, other women joined her in ministry, and together they became known as the Brown Dress Society. Her Aventine Hill mansion served as a refuge for the poor—and for scholars. The most celebrated visitor was Jerome, who for three years was her houseguest. An attentive hostess, she was also an astute editor and critic of his Bible translation, putting to good use her knowledge of Greek and Latin. More than that, she was a constructive critic, not accepting his “explanation as satisfactory,” as he later testified, “but she proposed questions from the opposite viewpoint, not for the sake

of being contentious, but so that by asking, she might learn solutions for points she perceived could be raised in objection. . . . What cleverness.”⁸

When Jerome returned to his monastery in Jerusalem, Marcella became his spokesperson. “Thus after my departure, if an argument arose about some evidence from scripture, the question was pursued with her as the judge.” Fully aware of criticism that might be flung her way due to her gender, Jerome insisted she discourse with her challengers “as if what she said was not her own, even if the views were her own,” coming “from [Jerome] or from another man . . . lest she seem to inflict an injury on the male sex.”⁹

Among those of the male sex she did not offend was Pope Anastasius I, bishop of Rome, who was contesting the teachings of Origen, a renowned scholar and theologian. Having never read Origen’s treatise himself, the pope consulted Marcella (a renowned *anti-Origenist*) before condemning the work. Defenders of Origen would argue that his beliefs (relating to the creation of the world and other matters) were distorted by his critics and that Marcella contributed to that distortion, but her influence in high places was an accepted fact.

In 410, when Alaric and his hoodlum army of Visigoths sacked Rome, Marcella was one of the many casualties. Refusing to believe that she had no hidden jewels or money, they roughed her up and struck her to the ground. She died the following day at age eighty-five.

PAULA

Hebrew, Greek, and Latin Linguist

“If all the members of my body were to be converted into tongues,” wrote Jerome, “and if each of my limbs were to be gifted with a human voice, I could still do no justice to the virtues of the holy and venerable Paula.”¹⁰ Sounds almost like the words of a lover.

A wealthy fourth-century Roman widow, Paula was converted to the monastic life through the influence of Marcella, who was more than twenty years older than she. Marcella welcomed Paula into her circle of prayer and service to the poor. Paula was thirty-five when she first met Jerome at Marcella’s home. It might have been love at first sight considering all they

had in common. Both were born in 347, educated in Rome, and interested in languages, translation, biblical studies, and theology.

Jerome was highly impressed with Paula's intellect and capabilities, particularly her knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Indeed, it is an interesting historical footnote that he conscripted her to help him with his great Bible translation. So close was their relationship that rumors of inappropriate conduct, perhaps spurred by Jerome's enemies, spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Jerome's sudden departure from Rome to the Holy Land and Paula's own departure sometime later only fueled such stories. In Palestine Paula established a monastery for women, but the gossip continued. "Before I knew the house of saintly Paula," wrote Jerome, "my praises were sung through the city." But an "evil report" quickly sullied his reputation. "The only fault found in me is my sex, and that only when Paula comes to Jerusalem."¹¹

As a desert ascetic, Jerome was surely not free from sexual desires. "How often did I fancy myself among the pleasures of Rome!" he confessed. "I often found myself amid bebies of girls. . . . My mind was burning with desire, and the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me."¹² Whether or not there was any truth to the rumors about him and Paula, Jerome outwardly defended virginity. More than that, he glorified it: "I praise matrimony. But only because it produces virgins."¹³ On a numeric scale, he assigned marriage a 30, widowhood a 60, and virginity a solid 100.

Bishop Palladius later lamented that Paula was under Jerome's spell. "For though she was able to surpass all, having great abilities, he hindered her by his jealousy, having induced her to serve his own plan."¹⁴ She died in her midfifties and was buried in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. When Jerome died some fifteen years later, his body was interred nearby.

MACRINA THE YOUNGER *"Angelic and Heavenly" Saint*

Macrina was a genuine living saint, at least in the eyes of her brother Gregory of Nyssa (who was also regarded a saint by both the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches). She lived an "angelic and heavenly life," with "no anger or jealousy, no hatred or pride." He questioned whether "indeed

she should be styled woman,” explaining, “For I do not know whether it is fitting to designate her by her sex, who so surpassed her sex.” As with many notable saints, her birth in 330 was accompanied by a miracle:

At her [mother’s] first confinement she [bore a daughter] Macrina. When the due time came for her pangs to be ended by delivery, she fell asleep and seemed to be carrying in her hands that which was still in her womb. And some one in form and raiment more splendid than a human being appeared and addressed the child she was carrying by the name of Thecla, that Thecla, I mean, who is so famous among the virgins.¹⁵

This Thecla was, of course, no other than Paul’s convert and fellow missionary who wore a man’s attire (thus truly not “styled a woman”). So Macrina at the very time of her birth was greeted by this great saint of centuries earlier. The mother in labor, Emmelia, would give birth to nine more children. Reared among servants and luxurious surroundings in Caesarea in Cappadocia, Macrina was homeschooled with an emphasis on Scripture. According to her brother Gregory, “the Psalter was her constant companion, like a good fellowtraveller that never deserted her.”¹⁶

Barely in her teens, Macrina (the Younger, as opposed to Macrina the Elder, her saintly grandmother) vowed, upon learning of her fiancé’s death, to devote her life entirely to God. Her most outstanding endowment, according to Gregory, was her profound influence on others, including her mother and brothers. In fact, when one of her beloved brothers died, she became the “prop of her mother’s weakness” so that her mother did not “behave in any ignoble and womanish way, so as to cry out at the calamity.” She also convinced her widowed mother to live a life of asceticism:

And weaning her from all accustomed luxuries, Macrina drew her on to adopt her own standard of humility. She induced her to live on a footing of equality with the staff of maids, so as to share with them in the same food, the same kind of bed, and in all the necessities of life, without any regard to differences of rank.¹⁷

Macrina followed this ascetic lifestyle until her mother’s death and long after when she served as an abbess of her own monastery. As is true of all those who would become saints, her holy life needed authentication

by a miracle. The testimony came from a soldier who had visited Macrina's monastery with his wife and little girl whose deformed eye was most "hideous and pitiable." Macrina sent a sister nun to the pharmacy for a drug "which [was] powerful to cure eye complaints." However, overwhelmed in the presence of this great saint, the parents forgot to take the drug when they returned home, only to subsequently discover that their daughter had been healed without it—a miracle that confirmed Macrina's sainthood.

Not that there were no other miracles. But Gregory summarizes them while at the same time insisting he is omitting them:

Consequently I omit that extraordinary agricultural operation in the famine time, how that the corn for the relief of need, though constantly distributed, suffered no perceptible diminution, remaining always in bulk the same as before it was distributed to the needs of the suppliants. And after this there are happenings still more surprising, of which I might tell. Healings of diseases, and castings out of demons, and true predictions of the future. All are believed to be true, even though apparently incredible, by those who have investigated them accurately.¹⁸

Gregory of Nyssa, considered one of the great church fathers, wondered if Macrina should be "styled" a woman because she "so surpassed her sex." Such a perspective was not uncommon in the church and in civic life, and it colored the ministry of women in the centuries that followed, even to this present day.

MARY OF EGYPT

"A Fire of Public Debauchery"

If Macrina is remembered for her holy life, Mary of Egypt, born in the mid-fourth century, is not. Without her testimony of dissolute behavior, her story would be lost in the desert dust.

That Mary's confessions are not as widely read as Augustine's *Confessions* is surely not because hers are any less graphic—or pornographic. Indeed, his story pales in comparison. She and Augustine were contemporaries, both North Africans. Apart from her tale of degradation, followed

by years of penitence as a hermit in the desert, however, she accomplished little when compared with the celebrated bishop of Hippo. Her story of “insatiable and an irrepressible [sexual] passion” was passed along for two centuries before it was written down. As such it surely must have offered titillation for sex-starved desert monks. It is best told in her own words as purportedly related during a chance meeting with Father Zosimas, a desert pilgrim.

I am ashamed. . . . But as you have already seen my naked body I shall likewise lay bare before you my work, so that you may know with what shame and obscenity my soul is filled. . . . Already during the lifetime of my parents, when I was twelve years old, I renounced their love and went to Alexandria. . . . For about seventeen years . . . I was like a fire of public debauchery. . . . Then one summer I saw a large crowd of Lybians and Egyptians running towards the sea. I asked one of them, . . . “Will they take me with them if I wish to go?” [He said], “No one will hinder you if you have money to pay for the journey and for food.” And I said to him, “To tell you truth, I have no money, neither have I food. But I . . . have a body.” . . . Seeing some young men standing on the shore, about ten or more of them, full of vigor and alert in their movements, I decided that they would do for my purpose. . . . I frequently forced those miserable youths even against their own will. There is no mentionable or unmentionable depravity of which I was not their teacher. . . . At last we arrived in Jerusalem. I spent the days before the festival in the town, living the same kind of life. . . . The holy day of the Exaltation of the Cross dawned while I was still flying about—hunting for youths. At daybreak I saw that everyone was hurrying to the church, so I ran with the rest. When the hour for the holy elevation approached, I was trying to make my way in with the crowd which was struggling to get through the church doors. . . . But when I trod on the doorstep which everyone passed, I was stopped by some force which prevented my entering.¹⁹

Stricken with remorse, Mary confessed her depravity before an “icon of the most holy Mother of God.” She then retreated to the desert beyond the Jordan River and endured privation until her death nearly a half century later. She is today celebrated as a saint in both the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

After graduating from college, I spent a summer as a counselor at Word of Life Island in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. Each week Jack Wyrzten, founder and director, brought in special speakers to challenge the college-age campers. Invariably they had testimonies of sinking deep into sin before finding God. As counselors we always wondered if this week's speaker would be able to top the previous week in a shocking tale of depravity. In introducing these individuals, Jack promised us compelling accounts of their wallowing in the "garbage pails of sin."

Mary of Egypt would have rated high as a Word of Life speaker, though we never heard a testimony of sex addiction *per se*. One might wonder if her story had been embellished for effect—as we often wondered back then. Nevertheless, her story is a refreshing contrast to Thecla's wild and crazy miracle tales and Macrina's life of angelic holiness. These women mostly seem too good to be true and as such may seem out of place in the twenty-first century. Alongside these stories we see women who sacrificed their wealth to reach out to the marginalized while at the same time keeping their intellects well oiled. Marcella and Paula might today be ranked high among the church fathers but for their gender.

Like the celebrated church fathers, they were not scholars only. Separating spirituality from scholarship to them would have seemed absurd. Biblical translation and theological studies were not academic disciplines. The goal was perfection, whether sought for by the holy woman herself or imagined by the hagiographer. Today the accounts of these women teach us how deeply and earnestly individuals in another era strived for holiness.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

How does Thecla fit into the narrative that flows from the New Testament into the early Christian church? If parts of her story seem fanciful, should we ignore her altogether? How do we relate to biblical stories that seem almost impossible to believe?

Does the story of Perpetua and Felicitas appear to be contrived? How would you regard someone today who volunteered to be martyred—a

mother leaving an infant behind? Should Perpetua have had more regard for her aged father? Do you think she was obeying Jesus in leaving behind her family and taking up the cross to follow him?

What aspect of Marcella's life and ministry do you find most inspiring? How do you assess her alongside Paula? How would you feel if someone such as Jerome paid high tribute to your scholarship, faith, and holy living?

Would your brother (or any brother you know) sing your praises as Gregory did of his sister Macrina? Would her story be more believable if he were to disclose that she was sometimes cranky and critical?

Do you think leaders in the early church exaggerated the claim that both Jesus and Paul celebrated virginity and celibacy? How should we assess that claim today?

Do you think the testimony of Mary of Egypt rings true, or do you suspect that a desert monk with time on his hands may have begun an embellishment that after two centuries turned into a page-turner?

If you were assigned a roommate for a two-day women's retreat, which one of these women would you hope to spend time with? What questions would you ask her?