

EAST AND WEST AND PRAYERS FOR THE REPOSED

or

"Go East, Young Man!"

by

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At the Council of Florence, Saint Mark of Ephesus, a bishop renowned for his learning and faithfulness to Holy Tradition, often quoted Saint John of Damascus, the very authoritative Church Father, in his debate with the Latins over the question of Purgatory. Saint Mark cites Saint John of Damascus' mention of the incident in the life of Saint Thecla, in which, by her intercession, she rescued the deceased pagan Falconilla from perdition. Saint Mark gives as another example Saint John Damascene's narrative of how Pope Saint Gregory the Great delivered the soul of the pagan Roman Emperor Trajan. Saint Mark was demonstrating that the Church had the power through her prayers to help not only notorious sinners who reposed in the Church, but that saints were known to have prayed even for those who died outside the Church and had even, like Trajan, persecuted the faithful. The West had more or less adopted Augustine's position that the Church could help only those who reposed in the Church with insignificant sins. Saint Mark said that it will not be known until the Day of Judgment on how effective the prayers the Church will be for these sinners, while also qualifying this by saying that the Church can only pray for those who belong to her. He makes reference to the private prayers of two saints for pagans to underscore his point that if this is possible, so is the other (i.e. that the Church can alleviate the sufferings of her reposed and even release them from the eternal punishment that awaits them).

It is interesting that after this confrontation at the Council of Florence, according to the scholar Willy Rordorf, three Latin manuscripts produced after the Florentine Council *leave out or significantly alter Saint Thecla's prayer for Falconilla*. In Rordorf's view, this was one way to respond! Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that even secular scholars observe, as demonstrated in the fascinating *Rescue for the Dead* by Jeffery A. Trumbower, that the Eastern Orthodox Church has not had any problems with accepting the incidents in the lives of Saint Thecla, Saint Gregory the Great, and it can be added, Saint Perpetua's prayer for her brother Dinocrates (a child of seven

who died as a pagan) as examples of how nothing is final in the eternal fate of any human being before the Day of Judgment.

Not surprisingly, Augustine was the principle player in discounting the incidents in lives of Saint Thecla and Saint Perpetua in the West. The first life he ignores, and of the second he gives a strained interpretation to make it fit with his own speculations on grace, free will, predestination and baptism, for which he is famous (or infamous). Augustine goes so far as to insist that Dinocrates "must" have been baptized for his sister's prayers to have been effective, and that her brother had apostatized to paganism (a child of five, six, or seven?!?) and that is why he is referred to as a pagan. When challenged on this, he asked his opponents to prove that Dinocrates (who was born of pagan parents) had *not* been baptized...to be logical Dinocrates "had" to be baptized for him to find consolation through Saint Perpetua's prayers. Of course, Augustine's same mechanical logic led him to believe that unbaptized babies (and, indeed, almost all human beings) were damned, and they were damned because God had predestinated them to be so! This is all rather surprising, because Saint Perpetua was from Carthage in North Africa, which was Augustine's locale, and popular piety had led the local churches there to read her whole life in the service in her honor, the prayer and granting of consolation to her brother Dinocrates included. To be fair, it does not say in Saint Perpetua's life that her brother was in the same place she was; he had just been given great consolation and relief in the place he was in, and there was a great abyss between them. It is open to question whether Saint Perpetua believed that her pagan brother would one day join her in Paradise.

Author Jeffery Trumbower (mentioned above) has this interesting observation to make:

"Many subsequent Greek theologians did not hesitate to invoke the example of Thecla's prayer for Falconilla and others similar to it, Gregory the Great's prayer for Trajan, in their discourse on prayer for the dead. The earliest of these is a text attributed to John of Damascus (d.749) titled *Concerning those who have fallen asleep in the faith*.the author invokes the example of Thecla and Falconilla...the text clearly sees this example as exceptional, but not impossible. God is sovereign and can do as He pleases, even to the point of saving a dead pagan... This situation was entirely different in the West, where the Perpetua/Dinocrates text was the major one in view and where Augustine's interpretation of it held sway for centuries" (*Rescue for the Dead*, pp. 74-75).

Finally, Trumbower quotes Metropolitan Kallistos Ware on the Kneeling Prayers at Pentecost: "O Christ our God; Who didst descend into Hades and didst shatter the everlasting bars, showing an ascent unto them that sat be-

low...Who on this all-perfect and saving Feast hast vouchsafed to accept the supplicatory prayers of forgiveness for them that are held in Hades; Who grantest us great hope that unto the departed held in the bondage of grief, there be sent from Thee rest and refreshment..."

Ware goes on to point out that even though this prayer does not specifically request a release from Hades¹, in the opinion of many Orthodox Christians such a release is possible because "in the period between Christ's resurrection and His Second Coming the gates of Hades stand open, and until the last judgment no one is as yet irrevocably condemned to remain there for eternity." It is significant that in this prayer on Pentecost, Christ's harrowing of Hades is seen as an open-ended process, precisely the point of view that Augustine wished to quash in his *Epistle 164, to Evodius*.

In contrast to the Augustinian certainty that God would never posthumously save an unbaptized person or a grievous sinner, many Eastern Theologians are inclined to leave the matter up to God. If He wishes to be merciful, as in the cases of Falconilla or Trajan, so be it (*Rescue for the Dead*, pg. 152).

The Prayer of the Elder, Saint Lev of Optina, for the Reposed Heterodox

Have mercy, O Lord, if it is possible, on the soul of Thy servant (name) departed to eternal life in separation from Thy Holy Orthodox Church. Unsearchable are Thy judgments! Account not this my prayer as sin, but may Thy holy will be done.

Elder Joseph of Optina, p. 294

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¹ Ware actually uses the word Hell instead of Hades, and indeed the archaic definition of Hell is simply the realm of the dead. However, in modern usage and understanding, Hell means the abode of condemned souls and devils; the place of punishment for the wicked after death (The American Heritage Dictionary). Greek Hades and the Semitic Sheol are the realms of the dead in contrast to Gehenna, which our Lord Jesus Christ uses to indicate the place of eternal torment after the final judgment and is the equivalent of the modern usage of Hell. We have changed Ware's use of Hell to Hades to avoid confusion on this point.