

St. Fabiola (Italy-Rome) (d. 399)

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into which she might gather sufferers out of the streets,
and where she might nurse the unfortunate victims of sickness and want...
Often did she carry on her own shoulders persons
infected with jaundice or with filth.
Often too did she wash away the matter
discharged from wounds which others,
even though men, could not bear to look at.
She gave food to her patients with her own hand,
and moistened the scarce breathing lips of the dying with sips of liquid.
---St. Jerome, (399AD, Letter 77, 6)---*

St. Fabiola (d 399) was a lay widow who divorced her husband for his dissolute life, and remarried. Estranged from the Church, upon the death of her second husband, she returned to the Church, devoted herself to charitable works and aiding churches. She built the first Christian public hospital in the West. There she personally tended the sick. According to her contemporary, St. Jerome, "She was the first person to found a hospital, where she might gather sufferers from the streets and where she might nurse the unfortunate victims of sickness and want."

(Memorial - December 27)



Letter LXXVII. To Oceanus:¹

The eulogy of Fabiola whose restless life had come to an end in 399 A.D. Jerome tells the story of her sin and of her penitence (for which see Letter LV), of the hospital established by her at Portus, of her visit to Bethlehem, and of her earnestness in the study of Scripture. He relates how he wrote for her his account of the vestments of the high priest (Letter LXIV) and how, at the time of her death, he was at her request engaged upon a commentary on the forty-two halting-places of the Israelites in the wilderness (Letter LXXIX). This last he now sends along with this letter to Oceanus. Jerome also bestows praise upon Pammachius as the companion of all Fabiola's labours. The date of the letter is 399 A.D.

1. Several years since I consoled the venerated Paula, whilst her affliction was still recent for the falling asleep of Blaesilla (Letter XXXIX). Four summers ago I wrote for the bishop Heliodorus the epitaph of Nepotian, and expended what ability I possessed in giving expression to my grief at his loss (Letter LX). Only two years have elapsed since I sent a brief letter to my dear Pammachius on the sudden flitting of his Paulina (Letter LXVI). I blushed to say more to one so learned or to give him back his own thoughts: lest I should seem less the consoler of a friend than the officious instructor of one already perfect. But now, Oceanus, my son, the duty that you lay upon me is one that I gladly accept and would even seek unasked. For when new virtues have to be dealt with, an old subject itself becomes new. In previous cases I have had to soften and restrain a mother's affection, an uncle's grief, and a husband's yearning; according to the different requirements of each I have had to apply from scripture different remedies.

2. Today you give me as my theme Fabiola, the praise of the Christians, the marvel of the gentiles, the sorrow of the poor, and the consolation of the monks. Whatever point in her character I choose to treat first, pales into insignificance compared with those which follow after.

Shall I praise her fasts? Her alms are greater still. Shall I commend her lowliness? The glow of her faith is yet brighter. Shall I mention her studied plainness in dress, her voluntary choice of plebeian costume and the garb of a slave that she might put to shame silken robes? To change one's disposition is a greater achievement than to change one's dress. It is harder for us to part with arrogance than with gold and gems. For, even though we throw away these, we plume ourselves sometimes on a meanness that is really ostentatious, and we make a bid with a saleable poverty for the popular applause. But a virtue that seeks concealment and is cherished in the inner consciousness appeals to no judgment but that of God. Thus the eulogies which I have to bestow upon Fabiola will be altogether new: I must neglect the order of the rhetoricians and begin all I have to say only from the cradle of her conversion and of her penitence. Another writer, mindful of the school, would perhaps bring forward Quintus Maximus, "the man who by delaying rescued Rome," (Ennius) and the whole Fabian family; he would describe their struggles and battles and would exult that Fabiola had come to us through a line so noble, shewing that qualities not apparent in the branch still existed in the root. But as I am a lover of the inn at Bethlehem and of the Lord's stable in which the virgin travailed with and gave birth to an infant God, I shall deduce the lineage of Christ's handmaid not from a stock famous in history but from the lowliness of the church.

3. And because at the very outset there is a rock in the path and she is overwhelmed by a storm of censure, for having forsaken her first husband and having taken a second, I will not praise her for her conversion till I have first cleared her of this charge. So terrible then were the faults imputed to her former husband that not even a prostitute or a common slave could have put up with them. If I were to recount them, I should undo the heroism of the wife who chose to bear the blame of a separation rather than to blacken the character and expose the stains of him who was one body with her. I will only urge this one plea which is sufficient to exonerate a chaste matron and a Christian woman. The Lord has given commandment that a wife must not be put away "except it be for fornication, and that, if put away, she must remain unmarried" (Mt 19:9; 1 Cor 7:11). Now a commandment which is given to men logically applies to women also. For it cannot be that, while an adulterous wife is to be put away, an incontinent husband is to be retained. The apostle says: "he which is joined to a harlot is one body" (1 Cor 6:16). Therefore she also who is joined to a whoremonger and unchaste person is made one body with him. The laws of Caesar are different, it is true, from the laws of Christ: Papinianus¹ commands one thing; our own Paul another. Earthly laws give a free rein to the unchastity of men, merely condemning seduction and adultery; lust is allowed to range unrestrained among brothels and slave girls, as if the guilt were constituted by the rank of the person assailed and not by the purpose of the assailant. But with us Christians what is unlawful for women is equally unlawful for men, and as both serve the same God both are bound by the same obligations. Fabiola then has put away—they are quite right—a husband that was a sinner, guilty of this and that crime, sins—I have almost mentioned their names—with which the whole neighbourhood resounded but which the wife alone refused to disclose. If however it is made a charge against her that after repudiating her husband she did not continue unmarried, I readily admit this to have been a fault, but at the same time declare that it may have been a case of necessity. "It is better," the apostle tells us, "to marry than to burn" (1 Cor 7:9). She was quite a young woman, she was not able to continue in widowhood. In the words of the apostle she saw another law in her members warring against the law of her mind; (Rm 7:23) she felt herself dragged in chains as a captive towards the indulgences of wedlock. Therefore she thought it better openly to confess her weakness and to accept the semblance of an unhappy marriage than, with the flame of a monogamist, to ply the trade of a courtesan. The same apostle wills that the younger widows should marry, bear children, and give no occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully (1 Tim 5:14) And he at once goes on to explain his wish: "for some are already turned aside after Satan" (1 Tim 5:15). Fabiola therefore was fully persuaded in her own mind: she thought she had acted legitimately in putting away her

¹A Roman jurist of great renown who held high legal office first under Marcus Aurelius and afterwards under Severus. He was put to death by Caracalla.

husband, and that when she had done so she was free to marry again. She did not know that the rigour of the gospel takes away from women all pretexts for re-marriage so long as their former husbands are alive; and not knowing this, though she contrived to evade other assaults of the devil, she at this point unwittingly exposed herself to a wound from him.

4. But why do I linger over old and forgotten matters, seeking to excuse a fault for which Fabiola has herself confessed her penitence? Who would believe that, after the death of her second husband at a time when most widows, having shaken off the yoke of servitude, grow careless and allow themselves more liberty than ever, frequenting the baths, flitting through the streets, shewing their harlot faces everywhere; that at this time Fabiola came to herself? Yet it was then that she put on sackcloth to make public confession of her error. It was then that in the presence of all Rome (in the basilica which formerly belonged to that Lateranus who perished by the sword of Caesar²) she stood in the ranks of the penitents and exposed before bishop, presbyters, and people—all of whom wept when they saw her weep—her disheveled hair, pale features, soiled hands and unwashed neck. What sins would such a penance fail to purge away? What ingrained stains would such tears be unable to wash out? By a threefold confession Peter blotted out his threefold denial (Jn 18:15-27; Jn 21:15-17). If Aaron committed sacrilege by fashioning molten gold into the head of a calf, his brother's prayers made amends for his transgressions (Ex 32:30-35). If holy David, meekest of men, committed the double sin of murder and adultery, he atoned for it by a fast of seven days. He lay upon the earth, he rolled in the ashes, he forgot his royal power, he sought for light in the darkness (2 Sam 12:16). And then, turning his eyes to that God whom he had so deeply offended, he cried with a lamentable voice: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight," and "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with thy free spirit" (Ps 101:4; Ps 101:12). He who by his virtues teaches me how to stand and not to fall, by his penitence teaches me how, if I fall, I may rise again. Among the kings do we read of any so wicked as Ahab, of whom the scripture says: "there was none like unto Ahab which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord"? (1 Kings 21:25). For shedding Naboth's blood Elijah rebuked him, and the prophet denounced God's wrath against him: "Hast thou killed and also taken possession? ...behold I will bring evil upon thee and will take away thy posterity" (1 Kgs 21:19, 1 Kgs 21:21) and so on. Yet when Ahab heard these words "he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted ...in sackcloth, and went softly" (1 Kgs 21:27). Then came the word of God to Elijah the Tishbite saying: "Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? Because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days" (1 Kgs 21:28; 1 Kgs 21:29). O happy penitence which has drawn down upon itself the eyes of God, and which has by confessing its error changed the sentence of God's anger! The same conduct is in the Chronicles (2 Chr 33:12; 2 Chr 33:13) attributed to Manasseh, and in the book of the prophet Jonah (Jon 3:5-10) to Nineveh, and in the gospel to the publican (Lk 18:13). The first of these not only was allowed to obtain forgiveness but also recovered his kingdom, the second broke the force of God's impending wrath, while the third, smiting his breast with his hands, "would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven." Yet for all that the publican with his humble confession of his faults went back justified far more than the Pharisee with his arrogant boasting of his virtues. This is not however the place to preach penitence, neither am I writing against Montanus and Novatus.³ Else would I say of it that it is "a sacrifice ...well pleasing to God," (Ph 4:18) I would cite the words of the psalmist: "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit," (Ps 101:17) and those of Ezekiel "I prefer the repentance of a sinner rather than his death," (cf. Ez 18:23) and those of Baruch, "Arise, arise, O Jerusalem," (Bar 5:5, cf. Is 110:1) and many other proclamations made by the trumpets of the prophets.

5. But this one thing I will say, for it is at once useful to my readers and pertinent to my present theme. As Fabiola was not ashamed of the Lord on earth, so He shall not be ashamed of her in heaven (Lk 9:26). She laid bare her wound to the gaze of all, and Rome beheld with tears

² A senator who having conspired against Nero was by that emperor put to death. His palace on the Aelian Hill was long afterwards bestowed by Constantine upon Pope Silvester who made it a church which it has ever since remained.

³ Rigourists who denied the power of the Church to absolve persons who had fallen into sin.

the disfiguring scar which marred her beauty. She uncovered her limbs, bared her head, and closed her mouth. She no longer entered the church of God but, like Miriam the sister of Moses, (Nu 12:14) she sat apart without the camp, till the priest who had cast her out should himself call her back. She came down like the daughter of Babylon from the throne of her daintiness, she took the millstones and ground meal, she passed barefooted through rivers of tears (Is 47:1-2). She sat upon the coals of fire, and these became her aid (Is 47:14 Vulgate). That face by which she had once pleased her second husband she now smote with blows; she hated jewels, shunned ornaments and could not bear to look upon fine linen. In fact she bewailed the sin she had committed as bitterly as if it had been adultery, and went to the expense of many remedies in her eagerness to cure her one wound.

6. Having found myself aground in the shallows of Fabiola's sin, I have dwelt thus long upon her penitence in order that I might open up a larger and quite unimpeded space for the description of her praises. Restored to communion before the eyes of the whole church, what did she do? In the day of prosperity she was not forgetful of affliction; (Ecc 11:25) and, having once suffered shipwreck she was unwilling again to face the risks of the sea. Instead therefore of re-embarking on her old life, she broke up and sold all that she could lay hands on of her property (it was large and suitable to her rank), and turning it into money she laid out this for the benefit of the poor. She was the first person to found a hospital, into which she might gather sufferers out of the streets, and where she might nurse the unfortunate victims of sickness and want. Need I now recount the various ailments of human beings? Need I speak of noses slit, eyes put out, feet half burnt, hands covered with sores? Or of limbs dropsical and atrophied? Or of diseased flesh alive with worms? Often did she carry on her own shoulders persons infected with jaundice or with filth. Often too did she wash away the matter discharged from wounds which others, even though men, could not bear to look at. She gave food to her patients with her own hand, and moistened the scarce breathing lips of the dying with sips of liquid. I know of many wealthy and devout persons who, unable to overcome their natural repugnance to such sights, perform this work of mercy by the agency of others, giving money instead of personal aid. I do not blame them and am far from construing their weakness of resolution into a want of faith. While however I pardon such squeamishness, I extol to the skies the enthusiastic zeal of a mind that is above it. A great faith makes little of such trifles. But I know how terrible was the retribution which fell upon the proud mind of the rich man clothed in purple for not having helped Lazarus (Lk 16:19-24). The poor wretch whom we despise, whom we cannot so much as look at, and the very sight of whom turns our stomachs, is human like ourselves, is made of the same clay as we are, is formed out of the same elements. All that he suffers we too may suffer. Let us then regard his wounds as though they were our own, and then all our insensibility to another's suffering will give way before our pity for ourselves.

Not with a hundred tongues or throat of bronze, could I exhaust the forms of fell disease (Virg. Aen. 6, 625-627) which Fabiola so wonderfully alleviated in the suffering poor that many of the healthy fell to envying the sick. However she showed the same liberality towards the clergy and monks and virgins. Was there a monastery which was not supported by Fabiola's wealth? Was there a naked or bedridden person who was not clothed with garments supplied by her? Were there ever any in want to whom she failed to give a quick and unhesitating supply? Even Rome was not wide enough for her pity. Either in her own person or else through the agency of reverend and trustworthy men she went from island to island and carried her bounty not only round the Etruscan Sea, but throughout the district of the Volscians, as it stands along those secluded and winding shores where communities of monks are to be found.

7. Suddenly she made up her mind, against the advice of all her friends, to take ship and to come to Jerusalem. Here she was welcomed by a large concourse of people and for a short time took advantage of my hospitality. Indeed, when I call to mind our meeting, I seem to see her here now instead of in the past. Blessed Jesus, what zeal, what earnestness she bestowed upon the sacred volumes! In her eagerness to satisfy what was a veritable craving she would run through Prophets, Gospels, and Psalms: she would suggest questions and treasure up the answers in the desk of her own bosom. And yet this eagerness to hear did not bring with it any feeling of satiety: increasing her knowledge she also increased her sorrow, (Ecc 1:18) and by casting oil upon the

flame she did but supply fuel for a still more burning zeal. One day we had before us the book of Numbers written by Moses, and she modestly questioned me as to the meaning of the great mass of names there to be found. Why was it, she inquired, that single tribes were differently associated in this passage and in that, how came it that the soothsayer Balaam in prophesying of the future mysteries of Christ (Nu 24:15-19) spoke more plainly of Him than almost any other prophet? I replied as best I could and tried to satisfy her enquiries. Then unrolling the book still farther she came to the passage (Nu 33) in which is given the list of all the halting-places by which the people after leaving Egypt made its way to the waters of Jordan. And when she asked me the meaning and reason of each of these, I spoke doubtfully about some, dealt with others in a tone of assurance, and in several instances simply confessed my ignorance. Hereupon she began to press me harder still, expostulating with me as though it were a thing unallowable that I should be ignorant of what I did not know, yet at the same time affirming her own unworthiness to understand mysteries so deep. In a word I was ashamed to refuse her request and allowed her to extort from me a promise that I would devote a special work to this subject for her use. Till the present time I have had to defer the fulfillment of my promise: as I now perceive, by the Will of God in order that it should be consecrated to her memory. As in a previous work (Letter LXIV) I clothed her with the priestly vestments, so in the pages of the present (Letter LXXVIII on the Mansions or Halting-places of Israel in the Desert) she may rejoice that she has passed through the wilderness of this world and has come at last to the land of promise.

8. But let me continue the task which I have begun. Whilst I was in search of a suitable dwelling for so great a lady, whose only conception of the solitary life included a place of resort like Mary's inn; suddenly messengers flew this way and that and the whole East was terror-struck. For news came that the hordes of the Huns had poured forth all the way from Maeotis (The Sea of Azov) (they had their haunts between the icy Tanais (The Don) and the rude Massagetae (An Asiatic tribe to the East of the Caspian Sea) where the gates of Alexander keep back the wild peoples behind the Caucasus); and that, speeding hither and thither on their nimble-footed horses, they were filling all the world with panic and bloodshed. The Roman army was absent at the time, being detained in Italy on account of the civil wars. Of these Huns Herodotus (Hdt. 1:106 of the Scythians) tells us that under Darius King of the Medes they held the East in bondage for twenty years and that from the Egyptians and Ethiopians they exacted a yearly tribute. May Jesus avert from the Roman world the farther assaults of these wild beasts! Everywhere their approach was unexpected, they outstripped rumour in speed, and, when they came, they spared neither religion nor rank nor age, even for wailing infants they had no pity. Children were forced to die before it could be said that they had begun to live; and little ones not realizing their miserable fate might be seen smiling in the hands and at the weapons of their enemies. It was generally agreed that the goal of the invaders was Jerusalem and that it was their excessive desire for gold which made them hasten to this particular city. Its walls uncared for in time of peace were accordingly put in repair. Antioch was in a state of siege. Tyre, desirous of cutting itself off from the land, sought once more its ancient island. We too were compelled to marl our ships and to lie off the shore as a precaution against the arrival of our foes. No matter how hard the winds might blow, we could not but dread the barbarians more than shipwreck. It was not, however, so much for our own safety that we were anxious as for the chastity of the virgins who were with us. Just at that time also there was dissension among us,⁴ and our intestine struggles threw into the shade our battle with the barbarians. I myself clung to my long-settled abode in the East and gave way to my deep-seated love for the holy places. Fabiola, used as she was to moving from city to city and having no other property but what her baggage contained, returned to her native land; to live in poverty where she had once been rich, to lodge in the house of another, she who in old days had lodged many guests in her own, and-not unduly to prolong my account-to bestow upon the poor before the eyes of Rome the proceeds of that property which Rome knew her to have sold.

⁴The Origenistic controversy in which Jerome, Paula and Epiphanius took one side, John bishop of Jerusalem, Rufinus, and Melania the other.

9. This only do I lament that in her the holy places lost a necklace of the loveliest. Rome recovered what it had previously parted with, and the wanton and slanderous tongues of the heathen were confuted by the testimony of their own eyes. Others may commend her pity, her humility, her faith: I will rather praise her ardour of soul. The letter (Letter XIV) in which as a young man I once urged Heliodorus to the life of a hermit she knew by heart, and whenever she looked upon the walls of Rome she complained that she was in a prison. Forgetful of her sex, unmindful of her frailty, and only desiring to be alone she was in fact there⁵ where her soul lingered. The counsels of her friends could not hold her back; so eager was she to burst from the city as from a place of bondage. Nor did she leave the distribution of her alms to others; she distributed them herself. Her wish was that, after equitably dispensing her money to the poor, she might herself find support from others for the sake of Christ. In such haste was she and so impatient of delay that you would fancy her on the eve of her departure. As she was always ready, death could not find her unprepared.

10. As I pen her praises, my dear Pammachius seems suddenly to rise before me. His wife Paulina sleeps that he may keep vigil; she has gone before her husband that he remaining behind may be Christ's servant. Although he was his wife's heir, others-I mean the poor-are now in possession of his inheritance. He and Fabiola contended for the privilege of setting up a tent like that of Abraham⁶ at Portus. The contest which arose between them was for the supremacy in showing kindness. Each conquered and each was overcome. Both admitted themselves to be at once victors and vanquished for what each had desired to effect alone both accomplished together. They united their resources and combined their plans that harmony might forward what rivalry must have brought to nought. No sooner was the scheme broached than it was carried out. A house was purchased to serve as a shelter, and a crowd flocked into it. "There was no more travail in Jacob nor distress in Israel" (Num 23:21). The seas carried voyagers to find a welcome here on landing. Travelers left Rome in haste to take advantage of the mild coast before setting sail. What Publius once did in the island of Malta for one apostle and-not to leave room for gainsaying-for a single ship's crew, (Acts 28:7). Fabiola and Pammachius have done over and over again for large numbers; and not only have they supplied the wants of the destitute, but so universal has been their munificence that they have provided additional means for those who have something already. The whole world knows that a home for strangers has been established at Portus; and Britain has learned in the summer what Egypt and Parthia knew in the spring.

11. In the death of this noble lady we have seen a fulfillment of the apostle's words:-"All things work together for good to them that fear God" (Rm 8:28).⁷ Having a presentiment of what would happen, she had written to several monks to come and release her from the burden under which she labored;⁸ for she wished to make to herself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness that they might receive her into everlasting habitations (Lk 16:9). They came to her and she made them her friends; she fell asleep in the way that she had wished, and having at last laid aside her burthen she soared more lightly up to heaven. How great a marvel Fabiola had been to Rome while she lived came out in the behavior of the people now that she was dead. Hardly had she breathed her last breath, hardly had she given back her soul to Christ whose it was when Flying Rumor heralding the woe (Virg. A. 11:139) gathered the entire city to attend her obsequies. Psalms were chanted and the gilded ceilings of the temples were shaken with uplifted shouts of Alleluia.

The choirs of young and old extolled her deeds and sang the praises of her holy soul (Virg. A. 8:287, 288). Her triumph was more glorious far than those won by Furius over the Gauls, by Papirius over the Samnites, by Scipio over Numantia, by Pompey over Pontus. They

⁵i.e. in the desert where many women lived as solitaires.

⁶Like that in which Abraham entertained the angels. See Letter LXVI. 11.

⁷Note that Jerome substitutes fear for love.

⁸The remnant of her fortune.

had conquered physical force, she had mastered spiritual iniquities (Eph. 6:12). I seem to hear even now the squadrons which led the van of the procession, and the sound of the feet of the multitude which thronged in thousands to attend her funeral. The streets, porches, and roofs from which a view could be obtained were inadequate to accommodate the spectators. On that day Rome saw all her peoples gathered together in one, and each person present flattered himself that he had some part in the glory of her penitence. No wonder indeed that men should thus exult in the salvation of one at whose conversion there was joy among the angels in heaven (Lk 15:7; Lk 15:10).

12. I give you this, Fabiola, (Letter LXXVIII) the best gift of my aged powers, to be as it were a funeral offering. Oftentimes have I praised virgins and widows and married women who have kept their garments always white (Eccl 9:8; Rev 3:4) and who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth (Rev 14:4). Happy indeed is she in her encomium who throughout her life has been stained by no defilement. But let envy depart and censoriousness be silent. If the father of the house is good why should our eye be evil? (Mt 20:15) The soul which fell among thieves has been carried home upon the shoulders of Christ (Lk 10:30; Lk 15:5). In our father's house are many mansions (Jn 14:2). Where sin hath abounded, grace hath much more abounded (Rm 5:20). To whom more is forgiven the same loveth more (Lk 7:47).

Reference:

1) The Letter of St. Jerome (399 AD). Letter 77 to Oceanus (article 6). https://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/NPNF2-06/Npnf2-06-03.htm#P3201_835203 (accessed January 19, 2022).