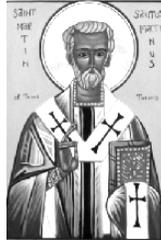


The Legends of Bishop Martin Of Tours



Martin, called "the glory of Gaul," was born about the year 316 of pagan parents in Pannonia, a province comprising northern Yugoslavia and western Hungary. His father was an officer in the Roman army who had risen from the ranks. While Martin was still a child, his father was transferred to a new station in Pavia, north Italy. Here the boy learned of Christianity, felt drawn to it, and became a catechumen. As the son of a veteran, at the age of fifteen he was required to begin service in the army. Though never shirking his military duty, he is said to have lived more like a monk than a soldier.

Young Martin was stationed at Amiens, in Gaul, when the incident occurred which tradition and art have



rendered so famous. As he rode towards the town one winter day, he noticed near the gates a poor man, thinly clad, shivering with cold, and begging alms. Martin saw that none who passed stopped to help the miserable fellow. He had nothing with him but the clothes he wore, but, drawing his sword from its scabbard, he cut his great woolen cloak in two pieces, gave one half to the beggar, and wrapped himself in the other. The following night, the story continues, Martin in his sleep saw Jesus Christ,

surrounded by angels, and dressed in the half of the cloak he had given away. A voice bade him look at it well and say whether he knew it. Sulpicius Severus, the saint's friend and biographer, says that as a consequence of this vision Martin "flew to be baptized."

When Martin was about twenty, some Teutonic tribes invaded Gaul, and with his comrades he went before the Emperor Julian to receive a war-bounty. Suddenly he was moved to refuse it. "Up to now," he said to Julian, "I have served you as a soldier; allow me henceforth to serve Christ. Give the bounty to these others who are going out to battle. I am a soldier of Christ and it is not lawful for me to fight." Julian, angered, accused Martin of cowardice; the young man replied that he was ready to go into battle the next day unarmed, and advance alone against the enemy in the name of Christ. He was

taken off to prison, but discharged as soon as a truce had been made. He then went down to Poitiers, where the renowned Hilary had been bishop for many years. Hilary gladly received this early "conscientious objector" and ordained him deacon.

Having heard in a dream a summons to revisit his home, Martin crossed the Alps, and from Milan went over to Pannonia. There he converted his mother and some other persons; his father he could not win. While in Illyricum he took sides against the Arians with so much zeal that he was publicly scourged and forced to leave. Back in Italy once more, on his way to Gaul, he learned that the Gallic Church was also under attack by the Arians, and that his good friend Hilary had been banished. He remained at Milan, but soon the Arian bishop, Auxentius, drove him away. Martin took refuge with a priest near Genoa, and stayed there until Hilary returned to Poitiers in 360. It had become Martin's desire to pursue his religious calling in solitude, and Hilary gave him a small piece of land in central France, now called Liguge. He was joined by other hermits and holy men, and the community grew into a monastery, the first, it is said, to be founded in Gaul. It survived until 1607; in 1852 it was rebuilt by the Benedictines of Solesmes.

For ten years Martin lived there, directing the life of his disciples and preaching in outlying places. At this time, many miracles were attributed to him. About the year 371, Lidorius, bishop of Tours, died, and the people demanded Martin in his place. Martin was so reluctant to accept the office that they resorted to stratagem and called him to the city to give his blessing to a sick person, then forcibly conveyed him to the church. When neighboring bishops were summoned to confirm this choice, they thought the monk's poor and unkempt appearance proved him unfit for the office, but they were overruled by the acclamations of the local clergy and the people. Even as a bishop, Martin lived an austere life. Unable to endure the constant interruptions, he retired from Tours to a retreat that was later to become the famous abbey of Marmoutier. The site was enclosed by a steep cliff on one side and by a tributary of the Loire River on the other. Here Martin and some of the monks who followed him built cells of wood; others



lived in caves dug out of the rock. In a short time their number grew, with many men of high rank among them. From this time on bishops were frequently chosen from Marmoutier, for the holy Martin took the greatest pains in the training of priests.

Martin's piety and preaching resulted in the decline of paganism in that part of Gaul. He destroyed temples and felled trees which the heathen held sacred. Once when he had demolished a certain temple, he proceeded to the cutting down of a pine tree that stood near. The chief priest and other pagans there offered to cut it down themselves, on condition that he be tied and placed on the side towards which the tree was leaning. Just as it seemed about to fall on him, he made the sign of the cross, at which the tree fell in the other direction.

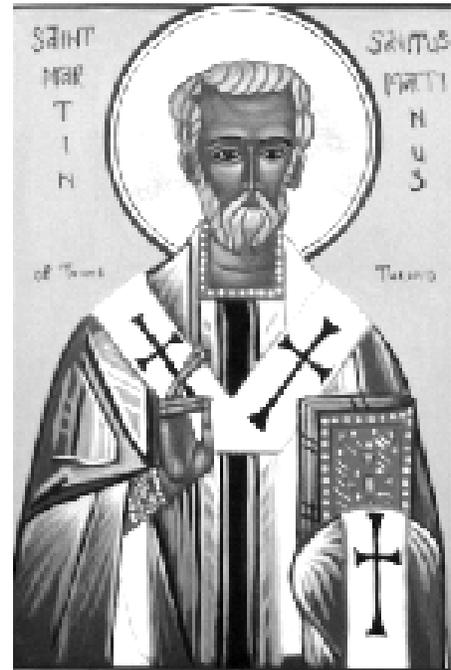
Once a year the bishop visited each of his parishes, traveling on foot, or by donkey or boat. He continued to set up monastic communities, and extended the bounds of his episcopate from Touraine to such distant points as Chartres, Paris, Autun, and Vienne.

Martin had premonitions of his approaching death and predicted it to his disciples, who besought him not to



leave them. On November 8, 397, he died, and three days later was buried at Tours. Two thousand monks and nuns gathered for his funeral. His successor built a chapel over his grave, which was replaced by a fine basilica. A still later church on this site was destroyed during the French Revolution, but a modern one has since been built there. Throughout the Middle Ages, the knightly Martin, who shared his cloak with a beggar, was the subject of innumerable anecdotes, which expressed the love and veneration of the people. His tomb became a national shrine in France, of which country he is patron saint, and one of the most popular pilgrimage places of Europe. His emblems are a tree, armor, a cloak, and a beggar.

By the way, the building where Martin's cloak was preserved as a precious relic came to be known as the *Capella*, from the Latin word for cloak, *Cappa*; and from this is derived our word "chapel."



The Legends of Bishop Martin of Tours

Told by Eldrbarry

Lord of Hosts, who clothed your servant, Martin the soldier with a spirit of sacrifice, and set him as a bishop in your church to be a defender of the faith: Give us grace to follow in his footsteps, that at the last we, clothed in righteousness through Jesus Christ our Lord may be also be faithful, humble and merciful servants.

**Christmas 2002 ---- Barry McWilliams (eldrbarry)
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