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STYLITES OR PILLAR-SAINTS¹

BY HERBERT THURSTON, S.J.

IT may freely be admitted, though the matter has sometimes been exaggerated for controversial purposes, that the early Irish Church and the other Celtic Churches exhibited not a few points of marked resemblance with the Churches of the East. This likeness was not confined to the liturgy alone, but it extended to their practices of devotion and to the whole spirit of their asceticism. To take one striking instance, the *slectana* or *slectain* (a word obviously borrowed from the Latin *flectenæ* which occurs in the Book of Armagh), *i.e.*, the prostrations or profound inclinations, continually reiterated by Irish ascetics as an exercise of penance, evidently impressed their contemporaries on the Continent as something new and unfamiliar. Walafrid Strabo, Abbot of Reichenau, tells us in 841 that:—

While the whole Church maintains the practice of kneeling, more especially do men of Irish nationality (*Scotorum natio*) lay stress upon this observance, many of whom—some with more, some with less, but in any case with genuflexions during the day or night which are fixed and counted—persist in this exercise of bending their knees not only to bewail their past sins, but also for the discharge of their daily devotions.²

Similarly in the early *Codex Bernensis* of Virgil, a gloss makes reference to the kind of prostration “which the Irish use.” The practice, no doubt, became much more general as time went on, but, so far as Germany

¹ *Les Saints Stylites* par Hippolyte Delehaye, Bollandiste. Bruxelles : Société des Bollandistes, 24 Boulevard Saint-Michel, 1923.

² *De Exordiis* ; Migne, P. L. cxiv. 953. Cf. also Mabillon, *AA. SS. Benedict II* 38 : “consuetudo est hominibus hujus gentis (Scoticæ) centies et eo plus genuflectere per diem.”

and Northern Italy were concerned, its introduction was traced to Ireland. On the other hand this observance of counted genuflexions was familiar in the East from quite primitive times. Hegesippus writing before A.D. 167 declares that the kneelings of the Apostle St. James, "the brother of our Lord," were so frequent that his knees grew hard like those of a camel, whilst amongst the most famous practitioners of this form of asceticism was St. Simeon of Stylites, the elder,—

I, 'tween the spring and downfall of the light,
Bow down one thousand and two hundred times
To Christ, the Virgin Mother and the Saints.¹

Neither are these figures a mere exaggeration of the poet. Theodoret, the Church historian, who knew Simeon well and who wrote his account while the Saint was still living on his pillar, affirms with conviction:—

As the Atlantic Ocean cannot be fathomed, so the works daily accomplished by him [Simeon] exceed all description He is marvellous at one time for the long periods during which he stands upright, at another for his bowings to earth as he offers adoration to God. Many spectators have counted these inclinations (*προσκυνήσεις*) of his. On one occasion a companion of mine, after counting 1,244 of them, gave up the attempt in despair. Moreover every time the Saint bent down he bowed his forehead to his feet, for since his stomach takes nourishment but once in the week, and then but very little in quantity, it allows his back very easily to bend.²

Not the least valuable section in the exhaustive monograph which Father Delehaye has just published upon the Pillar-Saints is that in which he deals with the origin of this strange development of ascetical practice. Refuting the contention of Holl and Toutain that the idea was borrowed from certain obscure pagan observances in honour of the Syrian goddess Atargatis or Derketo, in which according to Lucian (*De Syria dea* 28–29) a man once a year climbed to the summit of a

¹ Tennyson, "St. Simeon Stylites."

² Migne P. G. lxxxii, 1480-1.

gigantic stone phallus at Hierapolis and remained there a week without descending, Father Delehaye shows overwhelmingly that the form of austerity adopted by the Pillar-Saints was no more than a fortuitous evolution of the penitential discipline of the *στάσις*. In the passage of Theodoret just quoted, the Bishop historian contrasts two forms of rigorous penance, the prolonged periods of standing upright (the *στάσις*) and the reiterated deep inclinations (the *γονυκλισίαι*). Simeon the elder (who died in 449, being then of 70 years of age) was undoubtedly the originator of this mode of life and probably ascended his first column, which was only nine or ten feet high, in 412. But before he hit upon this device for securing himself from the importunities of his admiring clients, he, like many ascetics before him in Syria and Egypt, had been practising the *stasis* in various forms for a long period. Three years he spent at Tell-Neschin, a few miles from Antioch, walled up in a miserable hut, and here for the first time he passed the whole of Lent without eating and drinking, though the effort nearly cost him his life. So long as his limbs would support him he remained upright, but when his strength was exhausted he fell upon the ground unable to rise to his feet or even to move. This experience did not prevent him from following the same course in every recurring Lent during the forty-three years which remained to him on earth. Moreover he so hardened himself in these practices of austerity that later, when occupying the little platform of his column, he was able for the whole forty days and nights to stand upright upon his feet. But the final expedient which took the form of this pillar hermitage did not suggest itself at once. He tried first a natural fastness among the rocks.

Three winters, that my soul might grow to Thee,
I lived up there on yonder mountain side.
My right leg chain'd into the crag, I lay
Pent in a roofless close of rugged stones.

Even in this seclusion the people found him out, brought him their sick to be healed and cut off pieces of his clothing for relics. It was then at last that the idea occurred to him of placing himself physically out of their reach by having a small pillar built, and in the course of years he occupied successively four such columns, each higher than the last.

Then, that I might be more alone with Thee,
 Three years I lived upon a pillar, high
 Six cubits, and three years on one of twelve,
 And twice three years I crouched on one that rose
 Twenty by measure; last of all, I grew
 Twice ten long weary weary years to this,
 That numbers forty cubits from the soil.

Throughout, the central idea was the *stasis*, the restriction of movement accompanied by a posture almost uniformly upright and by exposure to all the rigours of a climate which varied from scorching heat to intense cold. This, as Father Delehaye proves by a great number of examples, was a form of austerity practised in all parts of the Christian East before Simeon had reached manhood. Palladius tells us of more than one such ascetic; for instance of Adolius who at Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives "regularly continued on his feet all night singing psalms and praying, and whether it snowed or rained or there was a white frost, he remained undaunted"; so also of Elpidius who "during his twenty-five years' life used to take food only on Sunday and Saturday and would spend the nights standing up and singing psalms"; and again of Sisinnius who "shut himself up in a tomb for three years, praying constantly, sitting down neither by night nor day, neither lying down nor walking out."¹

It is interesting to notice that while the *στάσις* never met with the same vogue and developments in Ireland which marked the practice of *γονυκλισίαι*, still

¹ *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, Ed. Butler, chs. 43, 48, 49.

it was not unknown, at any rate in idea. Of St. Coemgen we are told by a native hagiographer :—

In the time of Lent Coemgen went into a wattled hut erected on a bare stone ; standing in cross-vigil for six weeks for the sake of God. A blackbird perched in the saint's hand, and built a nest, remaining there until she hatched her young. The angel told Coemgen to leave the hut. Coemgen said : " It is no great thing for me to bear this much pain for the sake of Heaven's King, who bore every pain on behalf of Adam's deed upon the cross of suffering." ¹

It is to be noted, however, that the Latin Life of the Saint, while speaking of the self-chosen seclusion to which he retired for seven successive Lents, and also of the birds that thronged about him there, is discreetly silent concerning the nest which was built in his hand. The one form of *stasis* which seems to have been commonly practised by Irish ascetics is that of standing immersed in icy-cold water up to the waist. There is, however, also the case St. Findchua of Bri-Gobann, of whom the Life in the Book of Lismore tells us :—

So there came seven master-smiths, who dwelt near him, and they made for him seven iron sickles, whereon he might abide to the end of seven years, so that he might get a place in heaven . . . Findchua spends seven years on his sickles, save one night only . . . So he went out at the hour of refection to converse with Ronan, although he was sorely ashamed that his perforated body, pierced and holed by chafers and by beasts, should be seen by anyone else. ²

The repetition of the number seven would alone be sufficient to warn us here that the hagiographer cannot be treated as an historian chronicling the facts which he has gleaned from documentary evidence. Are the astounding feats of endurance recorded of the Eastern Pillar-Saints of a more reliable character? Father Delehaye in the opening sentence of his Introduction tells us frankly that " the first impression left by the

¹ Plummer, *Lives of Irish Saints*, II, pp. 123-4 and cf. pp. 136-137.

² *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, Stokes, p. 235-6.

story of St. Simeon Stylites is that of a work of the imagination set out in vivid oriental colouring and having no point of contact with anything that actually happened." None the less the learned Bollandist, despite his well-known critical attitude towards all that savours of the marvellous, finds no difficulty in treating the narrative of Theodoret—and, speaking generally, most of the other biographies of the more famous Pillar-Saints—as serious historical sources which must claim respectful consideration even when they seem to make rather extravagant demands upon our credulity.

However much we may have to enlarge our ideas of the powers of physical endurance of which the human frame is capable, there can be no reasonable doubt that Simeon the elder did live for 37 years continuously upon a little platform, probably not much more than six or seven feet in diameter, while exposed to sun and cold and rain and all the winds of heaven. Simeon the younger, we are told more than once, began his experience as a pillar-hermit while yet a little child before he had lost his milk teeth. He died at the age of 75 in 592, having spent 68 or 69 years upon his different columns, for like his namesake he more than once changed the scene of his penitential existence. Both the Simeons began and ended their days in northern Syria. St. Daniel, who in point of time came nearest to the elder Simeon, was also a native of Syria, but his life as a stylite was passed at Constantinople, where he died in 493 at the age of 84. Two other ascetics who adopted the same form of penance were even older. Alypius is stated to have lived until he was 99, and St. Luke, at a somewhat later date, was a centenarian.

It is clear that exposure, lack of exercise and abstemiousness pushed almost to starvation point, do not at once prove fatal to all constitutions. With regard to the deprivation of food, it is not easy to decide how far we may accept without qualification the statements

of the various biographers. There seems to be no question that, under exceptional circumstances and in a warm climate, complete inedia may without fatal results be prolonged much further than used formerly to be supposed. The evidence of such reliable witnesses as Palladius, Ætheria and Epiphanius make it certain that in the fourth and fifth centuries quite a number of persons during Lent habitually went without food in these Eastern regions for five or six days at a time, eating only on the Sunday and the afternoon of the Saturday. Personally I am inclined to accept the statement that St. Simeon the elder for forty-three successive years passed his Lent without eating or drinking. Of St. Simeon the younger we are told, on the authority of a confidence which he made to his disciples towards the end of his life, that in his latter years God had relieved him of the necessity of taking any food at all. It is also affirmed that when comparatively a young man he passed thirty days without sleeping, though his prayer to be exempted altogether from the need of sleep was not entirely granted.

Father Delehaye justly points out that even the most conscientious biographers, credulous of the marvellous, may easily misinterpret and generalise statements of this sort, and it is noteworthy, as he shows, that the biographer himself speaks of certain shoots of a shrub growing on the hill-side which chanced to fall on his little platform and served him for food and drink. But with regard to the extreme rigour of the penance of most, if not all, the Pillar Saints whose lives are recorded in any detail, no doubt is possible. The standing position, which all maintained as long as strength remained, commonly involved very serious consequences in the way of bodily infirmity. Daniel suffered from terrible ulcers in his legs, of which his biographer gives a harrowing description, and when the Saint on one occasion was induced to leave his pillar for a brief space he could not walk a step, but had to be carried by his disciples. Most of the other

stylites seem to have been similarly afflicted, as for example Alypius, and indeed this must have been the almost inevitable result of the kind of life they led. The Indian fakirs suffer in the same way, as we may read in J. Fryer's description penned at the end of the seventeenth century:

Another devotee [he writes] had made a vow not to lye down in sixteen years, but to keep on his feet all that while. This one came accompanied with two others under the same oath, the one had passed five, the others three years. All three of them had their legs swoln as big as their bodies, with filthy running ulcers exposed to view for the greater applause. Standing, they leaned on pillows hung in a string from the Banyan tree and had a pompous attendance of such ragged fakirs, their admirers.¹

The pillar-saints were also, as can well be imagined, exposed to many other mischances. The cold at times was intense, and one winter's night when a terrible blizzard was blowing St. Daniel had his rough coat of skin carried away by the wind, leaving him exposed almost naked to the icy blast and the whirling snow. So violent was the gale that even when the day dawned it was impossible for a long time to erect a ladder and to come to his relief. When at last they reached him they found that he had fallen into a state of lethargy and it was only with the greatest difficulty that they brought him back to life. Still even then there was no question of carrying him down from his pillar if only for a few hours. He would allow no mitigation in his manner of life except the erection of a little shelter on his column to protect him from the rough weather. On another occasion, towards the middle of the seventh century, the Chronicle of George Hamartolus tells us of a great gale that uprooted many trees and blew down the columns of many Stylites.² In the time of St. Luke, the pillar-saint, the winter of 933-934 was of terrible severity—a fact attested independently by secular chronicles. The frost lasted 120 days and Luke narrowly

¹ Fryer, *New Account of East India*, p. 196.

² Migne, P. G., ex, 861.

escaped with his life.¹ His column stood on the shore of the Bosphorus, and it was overthrown by an earthquake in 986 followed by a tidal wave. St. Luke was then dead, but his place had been taken by another ascetic who fell into the sea and was drowned. Another danger to which their manner of life was exposed was that of starvation. Being dependent upon others to procure for them the modicum of necessary provisions which they hauled up to the top of their pillars in a basket, these Stylites, especially in remote districts, were sometimes forgotten by their attendants. St. Lazarus one day accidentally upset his pitcher of water and nearly died of thirst before the accident was discovered. Paul of Latros, when a herdsman who usually looked after his needs went off harvesting, only saved himself from starvation by drinking a small quantity of oil which was left in his lamp.

None the less this strange manner of existence, despite its incredible hardships and dangers, became in a measure popular amongst those who were in pursuit of high perfection. For many centuries there must have been scores of stylites settled in the regions which are now vaguely designated as "the Near East." Of the vast majority of these no record survives, but their way of life, as Father Delehaye abundantly proves, was recognised as a distinct vocation, and we even find traces of a special liturgical benediction for such aspirants, similar to that which was provided in the Western Church for anchorets and *inclusi*. The last stylite of whom Father Delehaye has been able to discover any mention was living in Georgia about 1848, but in the 16th and 17th centuries we hear of such ascetics at Novogorod, in Mesopotamia and among the Ruthenians.

The institution, if it can be so described, was never able to obtain any foot-hold in the West. Indeed there seems to be no record of more than a solitary attempt

¹ Vanderstuyf in *Papologia Orientalis*, xi, 214.

to establish it there. St. Gregory of Tours, however, when passing through Yvoi in the Ardennes about the year 585, met a certain deacon named Wulflaicus, a Lombard by birth. This man told him that shortly before this date he had built a column there and had taken up his position on top of it barefoot. In the depth of winter, however, his sufferings had been almost unendurable. The nails of his feet fell off and icicles hung from his beard. Though he seems to have preached with success to the crowds of pagans who gathered to wonder at the spectacle, certain bishops who passed that way gave him no encouragement. They taxed him in fact with presumption in attempting to copy the way of life of St. Simeon Stylites, especially in such a climate. In the end he complied with their order to descend from his pillar, and they with the aid of crowbars and hammers had it thrown down and broken into pieces.

Although many theories have been propounded in connexion with the building of the Round Towers in Ireland, I do not think that any antiquarian has seriously suggested that they were constructed as pillars for stylite ascetics to dwell in. Father Delehaye¹ seems consequently to have read a little hastily the footnote in Abbot Butler's *Palladius* (I. 240), who only suggests that a particular monophysite hermit, mentioned in the *Book of the Governors*, must have inhabited a pillar resembling an Irish Round Tower. Although undoubtedly the majority of the columns used by the stylite ascetics were of solid masonry and had no inner staircase. I do not know any evidence which requires us to believe that they were all of this type. As Father Delehaye himself shows, there was a good deal of diversity as regards the amount of shelter afforded to the occupant on the summit. Some had a little hut, others were without any kind of canopy, though all seem to have had a trellis or railing to prevent the solitary from the consequences

¹ *Stylites*. p. clix.

of an accidental slip or false step. But after all it is only the paragons of this strange asceticism who have had their lives written in any detail, and it seems unlikely that their more humble imitators can all have soared to the same heights of self-crucifixion. Consequently it would seem to me unsafe to generalize and to assert too absolutely that the same kind of solid pillar must everywhere have been used by those who were commonly reckoned Stylites.

The exhaustive introduction and carefully edited Greek texts which make up the contents of Father Delehaye's admirable monograph provide certain problems for the theologian as well as for the historian and the student of comparative religion. The ideas of some of these pillar saints seem to have been bizarre in other ways besides the form which they selected for their practice of asceticism. St. Luke, the most famous stylite of the tenth century, was a man of vast charities. During a time of famine—this was before he mounted his pillar at Constantinople, though he was already a priest—he distributed to the poor all the stores of wheat he was able to lay his hands on in the granaries of his wealthy parents, without apprising them of the fact until afterwards. They approved what he had done, but he was not satisfied that he had yet done enough. Accordingly he told his father that he wished to secure for himself the bishopric of Sebaste, which was then vacant. For this purpose, he said, a hundred gold pieces would be required. The father gave the money, which was at once spent in relieving the poor. His biographer's only comment is to the effect that, instead of an earthly bishopric, he had set his heart on the metropolis of heaven. It is the same St. Luke who on one occasion sent from his column to a sick man at a distance a verbal absolution for all the sins he had committed and confessed.

Still more astonishing is the account given of the ordination of St. Daniel to the priesthood, against his

own wish and without imposition of hands—though, as Father Delehaye points out (p. lvi.), several strange parallels can be quoted from the literature of the same period. The archbishop Gennadius at the instance of the Emperor Leo, came to ordain St. Daniel, but dissembling his real purpose asked the holy man to have the ladder placed against the pillar in order that he might pay him a friendly visit. Daniel, however, was wary, and gave no direction to have the ladder brought. It was a very hot day, and the archbishop and all his attendant clergy waiting in vain and being parched with thirst, Gennadius at last directs his archdeacon to begin the service while he himself “ordains the holy man priest by means of prayer.” Finally the archbishop cried out from the foot of the column: “Bless us, my lord priest, for priest you are henceforth by the grace of Christ. Whilst I recited the consecratory prayer God laid His hand upon you from on high.”¹ Then, it appears, the ladder was brought. The archbishop mounted it, “taking with him the sacred Body and precious Blood of our Lord,” and the prelate and the priest thus newly ordained, embracing in a holy kiss, mutually administered Communion to each other. I can only imitate Father Delehaye in leaving the question of the validity of this curious ordination service to the judgment of theological readers.

Not the least valuable portion of this interesting essay is that in which Father Delehaye sets out a temperate plea in mitigation of the harsh judgments which it is easy to pass upon the ascetical extravagance of the pillar saints. I believe that he is right in his contention that the vogue of this peculiar manner of life was mainly due to the extraordinary personality of its first inventor. St. Simeon the elder was a most remarkable and lovable man, and there can be no question as to the profound

¹ *Vita Danielis Stylitæ*, c. 43 (Delehaye: *Les Stylites*, p. 40).

impression which he produced upon his contemporaries of every class and order. We must never forget that the stage upon which his life drama was enacted was an oriental stage. The bishops of Gaul who so unsympathetically nipped in the bud the attempt of Wulfaicus to create a similar tradition in the West were undoubtedly right. It was suited neither to the climate nor to the habits of thought of the people. But in the East, emperors, ecclesiastics, high dignitaries of the Court, and above all the rude and unlettered tillers of the soil were attracted and impressed by just these violent ideals of renunciation. It is easy to caricature Simeon and his imitators as no better than Christian fakirs, but the spirit which animated them was in no sense one of display and self-glorification. Renunciation for Christ's sake was the motive power of all, and speaking of the greater and nobler amongst them, they had no other aim than to draw souls to Him who had died in torment to redeem mankind.

HERBERT THURSTON.