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Chapter 1

OUR LITTLE BRETON



I weep over my sins.

Words of the Sister when but a child.

It is to Catholic Brittany, that ground so fruitful in virtuous and heroic characters, that we are indebted for Sister Mary of St. Peter. She was born at Rennes, in 1816, of worthy and honest parents of whom but little is known. Her father, whose name was Peter Eluere, was a locksmith by trade, and married Frances Portier, a lady worthy by her piety of such a husband, who, as we shall see, was a Christian of the old school. Some years after their marriage this virtuous woman was carried off by death. Being thus left a widower with twelve children, Peter Eluere had to endure many privations and sufferings, and to labor assiduously to be able to bring up his children, and provide for them in their sickness which, for the most part, was long and fatal; for he beheld them all, one after the other consigned to the tomb, with the exception of one son and one daughter, who survived him. His glory before God and man was to have given to Carmel and to the Church the child of benediction, whose life we have undertaken to narrate.

When Sister Mary St. Peter had become a religious, she was obliged by obedience to write her own life, even the most

minute details of the early years of her childhood. We shall make an extensive use of her letters and other writings during the course of our narrative, preserving as much as possible the simple and unassuming style so natural to her. She thus enters upon the task set before her.

“Notwithstanding the great repugnance I experience in writing of matters concerning myself, I will not hesitate to submit to the orders of obedience. I shall perform what I have been commanded with the assistance of the child Jesus, into whose revered little hand I have placed my pen, entreating him to write an account of the precious graces which he has accorded me, and my malice in so often offending Him, that thereby God the Father may be glorified for having by his almighty power produced such abundant fruit for the glory of his Holy Name,¹ from such sterile ground covered with the brambles and thorns of sin and imperfection. At the feet of the child Jesus in the manger, I now commence my narrative, in obedience to you, reverend Mother.”²

“I was born on the 4th of October 1816, a day rendered memorable by the death of our holy Mother, St. Theresa; it was also the feast of St. Francis of Assisium, whose name my mother bore. I was baptized in the church of St. Germain, at Rennes, receiving for patrons St. Peter and St. Francis of Assisium. My poor, dear mother received on this,

¹ She alluded to the work of reparation for blasphemies with which our Lord, himself, inspired her, and which really contributed to the glory of his Holy Name.

² The Mother Prioress of the Carmelite Monastery of Tours, Mary of the Incarnation, of whom we shall speak farther on.

her birthday, a sad bouquet, in presenting to the world a little girl who was to cause her so many anxieties, and such solicitude, by her ill health and her wilfulness. She confided me to the care of a nurse, who was a most excellent person. But about a month after my birth, an accident occurred, which would have caused my death, had it not been for the special protection of God. My nurse, having gone out for a moment, left me in my cradle. One of her little girls took me in her arms and carried me to the fireplace to keep me warm; but I fell from her hold into the fire: I have always retained the marks of this accident even to this day. My mother, much grieved at the occurrence, dismissed this woman from her service.”

“I will now give an account of one of the first acts of malice which I can remember. When I had grown a little older, someone told me of the accident, which had happened to me. To my surprise, my good old nurse came one day to see me. I received her coldly, remarking with much asperity: ‘You have already burned one of my cheeks, have you come today to disfigure the other?’ At four years of age, I was attacked with scarlet fever, which brought me to death’s door. My parents have often told me that I had been in great danger for nineteen days, having been unable to take nourishment of any kind, save a small glass of cider. The very recollection of this often made my father laugh, when speaking of my illness, during which, a beverage so contrary to my condition, should have been the means of preserving my life.”

“From the moment my reason commenced to develop itself, my virtuous parents gave me the advantage of a pious education; but I was naturally very disagreeable and obstinate. My pious mother took me often to church with her, but here I was thoughtless and giddy, and kept turning my head in every direction to see what was going on around me. After manifesting such a want of reverence and decorum in the House of God, and failing in fidelity to my mother’s counsels, I was severely punished on my return home. When I was a little over six years of age, I was taken to confession to accuse myself of all my faults. I was so jealous of my little sister that my parents were obliged to separate us and send her away for some time. Besides these exterior defects, which rendered me so disagreeable to others, my heart was filled with pride and self-love. On one occasion my mother said to me in the presence of my father, for the purpose of mortifying me: ‘Surely, this is not our little girl, if so, she must have been transformed by her nurse; it is impossible that our child could be as perverse as this little one.’ Such reflections coming from the lips of my mother, were not very flattering. But I soon gained quite a victory over my pride. Every day a poor, blind, old man, shabbily dressed, passed our door. On approaching the corner of the street he required the assistance of some kindly hand to conduct him to the right path. My kind-hearted parents frequently requested me to render him this necessary assistance; but I was so excessively proud, and manifested so much repugnance that they did not insist. Finally, one day I determined to overcome my pride. I ran from the house and took the poor old man gently by the hand, and

led him to the right path. It seemed to me then that I had performed a most heroic act. Whenever I was reprehended for my misbehavior by my parents, I did not rebel against their authority for I perceived that it was for my benefit they corrected me, and my wayward heart was touched at times by the voice of God, which reproached me for my ingratitude.”

“I received particular instructions concerning the ever Blessed Virgin; most wonderful examples of her protection and power were related to me; my heart was touched, and I commenced to pray fervently to this good mother, and I soon became better. I began to love prayer and no longer received admonitions on my return home from High Mass and the other religious services of the Church, for I had become more sedate. When anything repugnant to my inclinations occurred, I offered it to God, saying, ‘My God, I offer Thee this in expiation of my sins.’ ”

Let us for an instant interrupt this artless narrative, and insert two incidents which we have learned from another source. These trifling imperfections which she considered as serious faults, were nothing more than the result of that forgetfulness common to childhood, yet which, at so tender an age, had impressed her with the most lively horror. Several times, her eldest sister found her alone, weeping bitterly. When asked the cause of her tears, the dear little one replied, “I am weeping over my sins.” She feared even the slightest appearance of sin to such an extent, that at eight years of age, having had some scruples with regard to a book which had been lent her, she repaired to the parish

priest before ever opening it, to ask his opinion regarding its perusal; when she learned that the book would do her no injury, yet, that it was only a frivolous story from the reading of which nothing profitable could be gleaned, she returned it to the owner immediately, without even having read the first page.

“My good parents,” said she, “sent me to catechism with the other little children of the parish. I enjoyed the instructions greatly, and my conduct soon becoming more edifying, flattery succeeded the reproaches which I had been in the habit of receiving. On one occasion, a lady said to my mother in my presence: ‘Madam, your little girl conducts herself in church like a person of forty years of age!’ But I think that these flattering remarks only increased my pride and self-love. I commenced about this time to practice the devotion of the Holy Way of the Cross. The reflections on the sufferings of our Divine Lord affected my heart in a very sensible manner, for I felt that my sins had been the cause of his sufferings, and full of contrition, I said: ‘Oh! my Saviour, didst thou not perceive during thy dolorous Passion that one day I would be converted and would belong entirely to Thee?’ I kissed the ground, and humbled myself to the earth at each station. When I returned home, it often happened that my face was all covered with dust, and our Lord permitted that this act of devotion should draw upon me a humiliation, for whenever my sister was displeased with me she would taunt me with the appellation: ‘dirty nose,’ which frequently put my feeble virtue to a severe test.”

“The grace of God was attracting me strongly, yet, I was inconstant in the practice of virtue, alternately rising and falling. I know not how it happened, but I remember having heard of a sort of prayer called mental, which was much more agreeable to God than vocal prayer. I had an ardent desire to pray in this manner, and I said to myself: I shall recite no more words in saying my prayers; for the future I shall pray mentally. But when I finished my prayers according to my new method, I was seized with doubts and scruples for not having said my morning and evening prayers as had been my custom. Our Lord, beholding my desire, inspired me to contemplate his sufferings caused by my sins and infidelities, over which I wept sincerely; and He permitted, a little later, that I should hear a sermon treating entirely of meditation. I opened both my ears and my heart to receive this beautiful instruction, for I was so anxious to learn how to make so delightful a prayer.”

This attraction for prayer in a child of such tender years, prognosticated the wonders which would result. When the favored child had attained the age of ten and a half years, she prepared herself for her first Communion, by making a good general confession.

“By the mercy of God,” said she, “my heart was truly touched by grace. I received with great devotion this Divine Saviour whom I had so often offended in my childhood, and I offered myself entirely to Him. On the same day I received the sacrament of Confirmation, and was invested with the scapular, thereby placing myself under the protection of my tender mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom I owed

my conversion. My confessor, observing that I was entirely changed, permitted me to receive holy communion again during the course of the ensuing year. He was surprised at the marvelous change which grace had operated in my soul, and did not hesitate to tell me so; but after saying many fine things on the subject, he commenced to ridicule and humble me. As I was not very humble, I would have much preferred not to have received these flatteries and thus to have avoided the humiliations which followed. Our Lord, who watched over me, sent me at this time spiritual trials, well adapted to humble and purify my soul.”

“The devil, seeing that his prey had escaped him, made a last effort to regain an entrance into my soul. Having been driven from his hold he went, as the Gospel relates, to seek seven other spirits more wicked than himself, to aid him to regain his prey. Then I was attacked by a thousand temptations: my mind was enveloped in darkness, my soul tormented with scruples, and I believed that I was committing sin every moment: I had not a minute’s peace. If I listened to a sermon the demon whispered imprecations and blasphemies in my ear, and my mind was harassed with evil thoughts. I was then but twelve years old. The sins of my past life returned to my memory with redoubled force; it seemed that I had never confessed them. Confession appeared to be something impossible for I lost myself in lengthy examinations, and never believed myself sufficiently prepared. When my turn came, I entered the confessional with my soul filled with doubts, sorrow and anxiety; I no longer found any consolation in my prayers, for I feared I recited them without the proper dispositions,

and I repeatedly commenced over and over again the same prayer.

“This repetition was as absurd as it was fatiguing. My confessor did all in his power to console me; but being so young, and having had no experience in this kind of temptation, I did not make him sufficiently acquainted with the nature and extent of my sufferings; during this time of trial our Heavenly Father was only purifying my soul. I was then far from entertaining notions of pride and self-love.”

“Our Lord afflicted me in a most sensible manner, by depriving me of my good mother, whom I loved most dearly. When she expired, I recalled to my mind that St. Theresa was but twelve years of age when she lost her mother, and like this great saint, I also implored the Blessed Virgin Mary to become a mother to me, and to fill the place of my own dear mother who had been just taken from me. Our Blessed Lady, indeed, heard my prayer, for I have always experienced, in a very special manner, the effects of her maternal protection.”

“I continued to attend the catechism class for several years. The priest in charge of the Sunday School, was a very competent and worthy person. He is now a most zealous Bishop.³ I believe he saw clearly the sad condition of my soul, but as he was not my confessor, he could not give me the consolation of which I stood so much in need. However, it was he who taught me the method of making

³ Mgr. de la Hailandière, who became Bishop of Vincennes in America. He afterwards returned to Rennes.

mental prayer by the sermon to which I have already made reference, and later on he rendered me great service.”

“The fête-day of the Catechism class was approaching. Three little girls had been chosen to recite a piece in the form of a dialogue. I was one of the number; each one received her role to memorize. My two companions were to discuss with me on the pleasures of the world, which they were to laud highly, whilst I was to represent their vanity and nothingness. At the termination of the piece one of the two concluded by saying, that my discourse had convinced her that I had made a vow of poverty, and that perhaps I would become a Carmelite. May our Lord be blessed! for I really received this vocation some time later: the other two remained in the world and were married.”

“Finally, it pleased God to deliver me in the following manner from the torture of my mental sufferings. A pious young companion of mine, aware of my spiritual condition, had the charity to speak of it to my confessor, who was also hers. One day I entered the confessional after her, but feeling that I was not sufficiently prepared, I arose to retire. What was my astonishment, when I heard my confessor open the door of the confessional and order me to return immediately, and commence my confession without delay. I excused myself saying, that I was not sufficiently prepared, that I had not finished my examination of conscience, and that I felt no contrition for my sins: but he would not listen to my reasoning. I submitted to obedience, made my confession and received absolution; my confessor then said to me: ‘My child, be assured that this confession has been one of the

best of your life.' He then expressly forbade me to recite my prayers over and over again; and he gave me a rule to follow respecting the scruples which tormented me so terribly. Our Blessed Lord granted me the grace to submit to the counsels of my director, and the devil was overcome by obedience. All my inquietudes vanished like smoke, and a holy peace returned to my weary heart. Then approaching our Divine Lord in the sacrament of his love with a humble confidence and a holy peace of mind, I soon experienced its marvelous effects; my soul was inundated with consolation. I also received many graces while assisting at the holy Sacrifice of the Mass. When the moment of consecration approached it was with difficulty I could conceal my transports of joy from the observation of those present. I kept myself in the Divine Presence continually, and my union with God was uninterrupted."

As she lived at home with her father, her brothers and sisters, Perrine, (feminine for Peter, her baptismal name,) cheerfully joined in all their amusements. Having assisted at Mass and the other offices of the Church on Sundays, they assembled in a party and walked to the country. On these occasions they took with them some little refreshments, and each one diverted himself as he thought proper. Our little Perrine knew well how to pass these hours of pleasant recreation piously, and to the edification of all. We have learned these particulars from one of her cousins of the same age, Jennie Benoit, who generally formed one of the number on these little fêtes. Having arrived at the place where they proposed passing the remainder of the day, Perrine would draw her cousin aside and then they would

entertain themselves, conversing on the Blessed Virgin and on the benefits bestowed on them by their heavenly Mother.

The education of our little Breton was exceedingly limited, she having had but two years regular attendance at school: reading, writing, grammar, and arithmetic, such, at that period, was all the instruction considered necessary for persons in her sphere of life. The daughter of the mechanic Eluere, although naturally gifted, received no further educational advantages than those afforded by the times to persons in her position.

Two of her paternal aunts kept a dressmaking establishment of considerable importance, and to them our little Perrine was confided to learn the business.

“My good aunt,” said she, “placed me in a corner near her where I worked as if I were in a little cell, separated from the other young persons employed in the establishment. I was not disturbed by them, nor they by me, for they never for a moment perceived the operations of divine grace which were going on in my soul. Nothing could divert me from the intimate conversations which I held with our Divine Lord. I often made spiritual communions, which so enkindled in my soul the fire of divine love, that in the midst of my occupations I was so transported from this earth, that at times it became difficult to control myself. Our Divine Lord granted me the favor of being admitted into the Congregation of our Blessed Lady, of which one of my good aunts was the directress.”

This Association had been established by some holy missionaries in 1817, to maintain and preserve piety and the

practice of Christian virtue among the youth of the city. At that time the association numbered several hundred members, it continued to flourish for many years and was the means of doing much good at Rennes; it still exists, though not so flourishing. The ordinary reunions take place in the same isolated little chapel where but very recently an image of the Holy Face was installed with great devotion and solemnity in honor of the former member whose life we are now narrating.

“After the ordinary period of probation,” said she, “I was received as a member by the council, and made my act of consecration. Oh! what a day of consolation! The ceremony recalled to me my first communion. I was, as on that day, attired in white, with a lighted candle in my hand, and kneeling before the director and another ecclesiastic, and in the presence of over five hundred of my new sisters, I renewed my baptismal vows, and I promised faithfully to observe the rules of the association. I then consecrated myself to the most Blessed Virgin, my good mother. This association had been established for the working classes, who were bound to it by no vow; the rules and regulations were well adapted to preserve a religious spirit and the love of piety in the hearts of the young; every two weeks the director gave an excellent and instructive discourse to the members.”

The Divine Master, having nourished his little servant with the spiritual milk of consolation for a sufficiently long period, now wished to strengthen her soul by more solid

and substantial food, that she might be fortified to pass, as she herself expressed it, “from Thabor to Calvary.”

“Consolation gave way to aridity and spiritual barrenness, this condition seemed strange to me. What! to feel that I was no longer loving and serving God! Being ignorant of the ways of grace, I imagined that by force of application, I could again taste the ineffable delights of those transports of love with which I had been favored; but these vain efforts only wearied me and made me sick. I spoke of the state of my soul to my confessor, who did not seem to be at all moved by what I related to him. He only said that by degrees I would again enjoy the same consolations. I continued in the same state of aridity, and in my ingratitude to my heavenly benefactor, I relaxed in the path of perfection; my weary, miserable heart turned to creatures for consolation. I had no peace of mind, and although my faults were not grievous yet they were injurious to my soul, for our blessed Lord demanded of me a greater degree of generosity.”

In this painful state of mental suffering she took a step which might have compromised her whole future. Imagining that her confessor seemed indifferent to her faults, Perrine, docile and confiding as she had ever been, asked permission of her virtuous father to consult another confessor. Being a discreet person, he doubted the prudence of assenting to his daughter’s request, and before so doing, consulted the same priest whom she wished to leave. This was the curé of the parish for whom he entertained the greatest esteem. Perrine’s father represented to him that perhaps she might feel better under the direction of another confessor, who

was then held in great repute by the pious. The good curé readily gave his consent to the desired change; but our little penitent soon had cause to repent of her inconstancy.

“Although,” said she, “I received the most excellent counsels from my new director, yet I became no better. At the age of seventeen the vain attractions of the world began to entice me, and growing lukewarm in the service of God, I soon gave myself up to the foolish vanities of the world. But what was most disastrous of all at this time, was my neglect of prayer, a means so necessary to the soul in vanquishing her passions, and in strengthening her against the attacks of the Evil One.”

“After the death of my mother, the care of the house devolved upon my eldest sister and proud ‘T’ was not always disposed to submit to her authority, and was thus, often the cause of much trouble and dissension. My conscience often reproached me for my infidelities: I recalled to mind the happy days of my childhood when, faithful to the God of mercy and love, I was filled with ineffable delights; I longed to return to Him, but my soul was, as it were, enchained by my evil propensities; finally I had recourse to Her who is never invoked in vain, to Mary, my tender mother, to whom I had consecrated myself forever.”

“The feast of the Purification was approaching, and I prepared myself by a novena. I passed this beautiful day in great devotion, offering a taper to be burned before the altar of the Blessed Virgin. The chains, by which I had been so long bound, were severed, and my heart was entirely changed. Some invisible power seemed to impel me

to return to my old confessor. As soon as I beheld him I exclaimed, 'Oh! my good father, virtue fled from my soul when I left your direction. I implore you to number me once more among your many penitents.' He received me as did the father of the Prodigal son, with great charity. Soon after this, I made a retreat of eight days in a religious house where there were missionaries preaching. It was there that divine mercy awaited me. I had most earnestly besought the Blessed Virgin to obtain a happy result to my retreat, and my prayers were heard. The grace of God, together with the instructions of the good missionaries produced the most salutary effects in my soul. I made a general confession, and beholding all my sins and the infinite mercy of God which I had so long despised, and contemplating the wounds of my crucifix, I felt my heart penetrated with contrition, my eyes shed torrents of tears, and I promised for the future an inviolable fidelity to God."

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