

This story of the life of Saint Martin of Tours is taken from a two volume work titled *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*. The work was originally compiled by Jacobus de Voragine around 1260. The text in this two volume work was translated from Medieval Latin by Monsignor William Granger Ryan, who at the time was a visiting scholar at the Yale University Divinity School. It was published in 1993. A previous translation of *The Golden Legend* was done by Ryan and Helmut Ripperger and was published in 1941 as a single volume. Msgr. Ryan was a long time and very good friend of Steven and Teresa Kauffman.

St. Martin, Bishop of Tours

Martinus is like *Martem tenens*, one who makes war, namely, against vice and sin; or the name is like *martyrum unus*, one of the martyrs, because Martin was a martyr at least by desire and by his practice of mortification. Or the name is interpreted as one who angers or provokes or dominates; and Martin, by the merit of his holiness, angered the devil and made him envious, provoked God to be merciful, and dominated his body by continuous penances. Reason, or the spirit, ought to dominate the flesh, as Dionysius says in his letter to Demophilus, just as a master dominates his slave, a father his son, and a mature person a frivolous adolescent.

The Saints life was written by Severus, surnamed Sulpicius, whom Gennadius numbers among illustrious men.

Martin was born in the town of Sabaria in Pannonia but grew up in Pavia, Italy, with his father, who was a military officer. Martin served in the Army under the caesars Constantine and Julian, but a military career was not his own choice. Even in childhood he was inspired by God, and at the age of twelve, against his parents' wishes, he fled to a church and asked to be accepted as a catechumen. He would have become a hermit, but his youth and lack of bodily strength forbid it. Then the caesars decreed that the sons of veterans should take their fathers' places in the legions. Martin was pressed into service at the age of fifteen, with only one man to serve him, although more often it was Martin who took off his man's boots and cleaned them.

Once, in the wintertime, he was passing through the city gate of Amiens when a poor man, almost naked, confronted him. No one had given him an alms, and Martin understood that this man had been kept for him, so he drew his sword and cut the cloak he was wearing into two halves, giving one half to the beggar and wrapping himself in the other. The following night he had a vision of Christ

wearing the part of his cloak with which he had covered the beggar, and heard Christ say to the angels who surrounded him: “ Martin, while still a catechumen, gave me this to cover me.” The holy man saw this not as a reason for pride, but as evidence of God’s kindness, and had himself baptized at the age of eighteen. Moreover, he stayed in the Army for two years more at the urging of his superior officer, who promise that when his term of office expired, he too would renounce the world.

At that time the barbarians were breaking through the empires frontiers, and Emperor Julian offered money to the soldiers would stay and fight them. Martin had had enough of soldiering and refused the proffered bonus, saying to the emperor: “I am a soldier of Christ and I am forbidden to fight.” Julian was indignant and said that Martin was refusing not for motives of religion but because he was afraid of getting into a war. Martin, who knew no fear, retorted: “If my refusal is attributed not to faith but to cowardice, I will stand forth tomorrow morning at the line of battle, unarmed, and, in the name of Christ, protected not by shield or helmet but by a sign of the cross, shall walk safely through the enemy’s lines.” He was put under guard immediately to ensure that he would face the barbarians unarmed, as he had said. But the next day the enemy sent legates to convey their surrender of all men and materials, so there can be no doubt that this bloodless victory was due to the holy man’s merits.

After resigning from the Army Martin went to Hillary, Bishop of Poitiers, and by him was ordained acolyte. Then the Lord ordered him in a dream to visit his parents, who are still pagans. Setting out, he predicted that he would suffer many ordeals on the way. As he crossed the Alps he fell among robbers, but when one of them aimed a blow at Martin’s head, another robber held back the hand that wielded the sword. The Saints hands were tied behind his back, and he was given into the custody of one of the brigands, who asked him if he was afraid. He answered that he had never felt so safe, because he knew that God’s mercy was at hand especially in times of trial, and then went on to preach to the robber and converted him to the faith of Christ. The converted robber put them back on the road and afterward finished his days in praiseworthy living.

When Martin was passing through Milan, the devil met him in the form of a man and asked him where he was going. He replied that he was going wherever the Lord called him to go, and the devil said: “ Wherever you go, the devil will be there to oppose you!” Martin answered him: “The Lord is my helper, I will not fear what man can do to me!” The devil vanished instantly!.

Martin converted his mother, but his father clung to his error. The Arian heresy, however, was advancing everywhere, with Martin almost alone to resist it, and he was beaten in public and cast out of the city. He went back to Milan and founded a monastery there, but was driven out by the Arians and went to the island of Gallimaria with a single priest as companion. There he happened to eat hellebore, a poisonous herb that was mixed in with other herbs. This made him so ill that he felt close to death, but he dispelled all pain and danger by the power of his prayer.

Learning that blessed Hilary had returned from exile, Martin went to Poitiers and established a monastery near the city. In the monastery there was an unbaptized catechumen. Martin came back to the monastery after a short absence and found that the catechumen had died without baptism. He had the body brought to his cell and prostrated himself upon it, and by his prayer recalled the man to life. The same man used to say that when he had died, he was sentenced to remain in a place of darkness, whereupon two Angels reminded the Judge that this was a man for whom Martin was praying at that moment, and the Judge ordered the Angels to take them back and return him alive to Martin. The saint also restored to life another man who had fallen into a pit and died.

The people of Tours were without a bishop, and they begged Martin, reluctant though he was, to be ordained as their bishop. Some among the assisting bishops disapproved of his choice on the ground that he was small of stature and unattractive in appearance: the most outspoken among the objectors was a bishop named Defensor, a name that meant defender. Since there was no lector present, one of the bishops took the Psalter and read from the first Psalm he opened to: "Out of the mouth of infants and of sucklings thou hast perfected praise, to destroy the enemy and the defender." No one rose to support Bishop Defensor's objection. Martin was ordained bishop but could not abide the tumult of the city, so he built a monastery about two miles outside the walls and lived there in strict austerity with eighty disciples. No one drank wine there unless illness compelled him, and soft garments were considered a crime. Many cities chose their bishops from among these men.

A cult began to develop around an unknown who was alleged to be a martyr. Bishop Martin could learn nothing about his life or his merits; so one day he stood at the tomb and prayed the Lord to make known who was buried there and what had been his merits. Turning to his left he saw a pitch black shade standing there. The shade, challenged by Martin, said he had been a robber and had been put to death for his crimes. Martin therefore ordered the immediate destruction of the altar that had been raised beside the tomb.

We also read in the *Dialogue* of Severus and Gallus (Where many details are supplied which Severus omitted in his *Life* of St. Martin) that at one time Martin went to Emperor Valentinian about something he needed; but the emperor knew that the bishop was going to ask for something that he did not want to grant him, so he had the palace doors closed and barred. Martin, having been repulsed once and again, wrapped himself in sackcloth, sprinkled ashes on his head, and denied himself food and drink for a week. Then, bidden by an Angel, he went to the palace and made his way to the emperor, no one interfering. Valentinian saw him coming and, angry because he had been admitted, did not rise to acknowledge his presence until flames burst out from the royal throne and set the imperial posterior afire. At that the emperor, though still irritated, rose to greet Martin and admitted that he had felt the power of God. He granted all the bishop wanted before the latter had time to speak, and offered him any gifts that Martin did not accept.

In the same *Dialogue* we read how he brought a third dead man back to life. A young man had died, and his mother, weeping, pleaded with Saint Martin to revive her son. Martin was standing in the middle of a field surrounded by a multitude of pagans, but he knelt down and prayed, and the boy arose in the sight of all. Thereupon all those pagans were converted to the faith.

Inanimate, vegetable, and nonrational beings also obeyed this holy man. Inanimate beings like fire and water did his bidding. Once, when he had set fire to a temple, the wind was blowing the flames toward an adjacent house. Martin went up on the roof of the house and faced the approaching flames. Immediately the fire turned against the wind, so that there seemed to be a conflict between the two elements. We also read in the same *Dialogue* that a ship was sinking, and a merchant who was not yet a Christian exclaimed: "May the God of Martin save us!" A great calm settled over the sea at once.

Vegetable creatures likewise.... In a certain place Martin had seen to the demolition of a very ancient temple, and he wanted to cut down a plane tree that was dedicated to the devils. The country people and the pagans objected, and one of them said to him: " If you have so much confidence in your God, we will cut down the tree, and you let it fall on you. If your God is with you as you say, you will escape injury." He agreed. They cut through the tree and it began to fall in the opposite direction, almost crushing the people who had taken a place they thought was safe. At the site of the miracle they were all converted to the faith.

As for non-rational animals, they very often obeyed the saint, as again we read in the *Dialogue*. Once he saw a pack of dogs chasing a rabbit. He called to the dogs and they stopped their pursuit, halting in their tracks as if they were tied there.

Another time he had gone to bathe in a river where there was a water snake, and he said to the snake: “In the Lord’s name I command you to go back where you came from!” At the saint’s word the reptile turned around and crossed to the opposite bank. Martin groaned: “Serpents listen to me and men do not!” A dog was barking at one of the saint’s disciples, and the disciples said to the dog: “In Martin’s name I order you to be quiet!” The dog stopped as if his tongue had been cut out.

Martin was a man of deep humility. In Paris he once came face-to-face with the leper from whom all shrank in horror, but Martin kissed him and blessed him, and he was cured. His dignity was great: he was said to be equal in dignity with the apostles, and this due to the grace of the Holy Spirit, who descended upon him in the appearance of fire to strengthen him, as had happened to the apostles. The aforesaid *Dialogue* tells us that once, when he was sitting alone in his cell and Severus and Gallus, his disciples, were waiting outside, they were struck with wonder at hearing several voices speaking in the cell. Later they asked Martin about this, and he said: “I will tell you, but I ask you not to tell anybody else. Agnes, Thecla, and Mary came to talk with me.” And it was not only on that day, but frequently, that, as he admitted, the Saints came to visit him, and the apostles Peter and Paul often came as well.

He was very just, giving to each his due. Once when he was invited to dine by Emperor Maximus, the cup was offered first to Martin, and everyone expected that he in turn would pass it to the king. But he passed the cup to the priest who was with him, considering no one more worthy to drink after the bishop, and deeming it unjust to put the king or the king’s close associates ahead of a priest.

His patience was inexhaustible and was maintained in all circumstances. Even though he was the priest highest in rank, his clerics often treated him rudely without being reprimanded, nor did he for that reason exclude them from his charity. No one ever saw him angry, nor grieving, nor laughing. Nothing was heard from his lips but Christ, never was aught in his heart but piety, peace, and mercy.

We read in the same *Dialogue* that once, clad in a rough garment and a long black cloak, he was riding along a road on his donkey. A troop of cavalry rode toward him and the horses took fright and bolted, throwing their riders to the ground. The soldiers made for Martin, whom they pulled from his mount and beat soundly. The saint said nothing and turned away from them, and they were all the more incensed because he did not seem to feel their blows or to have any high regard for themselves. Then their own mounts still as if rooted in the ground, immovable as boulders despite spur and whip, until the men went back to the bishop and confess

the wrong they had unwittingly done him. Then he gave them leave and their horses started off at a lively trot.

He was assiduous in prayer. Indeed, we read in his legend that no hour or minute pass which he did not devote either to prayer or two sacred reading. Whether at work or at reading he never took his mind from prayer. As the smith, while working the iron, strikes the anvil from time to time to ease his labor, so Martin, whatever he might be doing, made all of it a prayer.

He lived a very austere life. Severus, in a letter to Eusebius, tells how Martin once stopped overnight at a villa in his diocese, and the clergy there prepared for him a bed with a mattress filled with straw. When he laid down on it, he shuddered at the unaccustomed softness, since he usually slept on the floor with only a single hair cloth over him. Unhappy at this unintended misunderstanding, he rose, threw aside all the straw, and stretched out on the bare ground. In the middle of the night all that straw burst into flame. Martin, awakened, tried to get out of the room but could not, and the flames caught him and set his garments afire. He returned to his wonted refuge of prayer, made the sign of the cross, and stood untouched amidst the flames; and whereas moments before he had felt the pain of their burning, now they seemed as refreshing as dew. The monks were awakened by the fire and came running, expecting to find Martin burned to death, but instead let him out unharmed.

His compassion for sinners was unbounded. He took to the bosom of his merciful understanding all who wish to repent. The devil himself took issue with Martin for admitting to penance those who fell once, and Martin answered: “ If you yourself, poor wretched being, would stop trying to bring men down, and repent to your deeds, I, trusting in the Lord, would promise you Christ’s mercy!”

There was no limit to his compassion for the poor. The *Dialogue* tells us that Martin was on his way to the church for the celebration of some feast and was followed by a poor man who was just about naked. The bishop asked the archdeacon to find some close for the man, but the archdeacon deferred doing this, and Martin wind into the sacristy, took off his tunic, gave it to the beggar, and told him to be off. The archdeacon then advised the bishop to proceed with the ceremony, but Martin said that he could not go ahead until the poor man – – meaning himself – – got some clothes to wear. The archdeacon did not understand, since the bishop was wrapped in his cope and the other could not see that he had nothing under it, and anyway, he observed, there was no poor man there. “Fetch me a tunic,” said Martin firmly, “and then there will be no poor man here looking for clothes!”

The Archdeacon, resentful, went to the marketplace and for five coins bought a cheap, short tunic – – the kind called *paenula, pane nulla*, almost nothing. Angrily he threw the garment at Martin’s feet. The bishop went behind the screen, put the tunic on – – the sleeves coming only to his elbows and the lower edge only to his knees – – and, so vested, went on to celebrate the mass. While he was celebrating, a globe of fire appeared over his head and was seen by many people. (For this reason Martin is said to be on a par with the apostles.) To his account of this miracle Master John Beleth adds that when the bishop raised his hands to God, as is done in the mass, the tunic slipped back, since his arms were not thick or fleshy and the tunic reached only to his elbows, so his arms were left bare. Then, miraculously, angels brought him gold armlets set with jewels, and the bare arms were decently covered.

The saint once noticed a sheep that had been shorn, and said: “That sheep has obeyed the Gospel mandate. She had no tunics and gave one of them to someone who had none. You should do likewise!”

Martin displayed such power in driving out demons and often did expel them from the possessed. In the aforementioned *Dialogue* we read that there was a cow that was possessed by the devil, and she roared and raged and gored many people. Once this cow rushed in a fury at Martin and his company as they passed on the road. Martin raised his hand and ordered the cow to hold. Halt she did, and he saw a demon sitting astride her. Martin rebuked the demon, saying: “Get off your back, O evil one, and stop tormenting this timeless animal.” The spirit departed immediately. The cow then fell to her knees at the bishop’s feet and then, at his behest, ambled peaceably back to the herd.

Martin had a subtle sense for discerning demons. No matter what form, image, or disguise they assumed, he saw them openly and uncovered. Sometimes they presented themselves in the person of Jove, frequently as Mercury, occasionally as Venus or Minerva, but he berated them all by their proper names. Mercury gave him the most trouble. He said that Jove was brutish and dull. Once the devil appeared to him in the resemblance of a king, clothed in purple, wearing a diadem and golden shoes, serene and smiling of mien. For a long time neither one spoke. Then the devil said: “Martin, acknowledge him whom you adore! I am Christ and am about to come down upon the earth, but I chose to manifest myself to you in advance.” Martin marveled at this but maintained his silence, and the Spirit spoke again: “Martin, why do you hesitate to believe, since you see me? I am CHRIST!” Then the saint, instructed by the Holy Spirit, said: “The Lord Jesus Christ did not predict that he would come empurpled and wearing a glittering crown. I will not

believe that Christ has come unless he is as he was when he suffered, unless he bears the stigma of the cross!” At these words the devil disappeared, leaving the cell filled with a horrid stench.

Martin knew the time of his death well in advance and revealed it to his brothers. Meanwhile he visited the diocese of Candes, to reconcile some differences there. On the way he saw diving birds watching for fish and catching some, and he said: “This is the way demons work. They trap the unwary, they catch some before they know it, they devour their catch and can never get enough.” So he ordered the birds to go away from the water and seek some desert place, and off they flew in a great flock toward the hills and the forests.

When he had spent some time in the above-mentioned diocese, his strength began to fail, and he told his disciples that his days were numbered. They wept and asked him: “ Why are you deserting us, father? To whom are you leaving us, orphans? Fierce wolves will ravage your flock!” Moved by their entreaties and tears, Martin wept with them and prayed: “ Lord, if I am still needed by your people, I do not refuse the labor! Thy will be done!” He really was not sure when she preferred, because he wanted neither to leave these people nor to remain separated from Christ any longer. Therefore when fevers racked him for some time and his disciples asked him to let them put some straw in the bed very late in sackcloth and ashes, he said: My sons, the only proper way for Christian to die is in sackcloth and ashes. If I leave you any other example, I shall have sinned.” His eyes and his hands he kept always pointed to heaven, and never let his unconquered spirit slacken in prayer. He lay always on his back, and when his priests make him to let them ease his poor body by turning him on his side, he said: “ Leave me as I am, brothers! Let me keep my eyes on heaven rather than on earth, so that my spirit may always be directed towards the Lord!” Even as he said this, he saw the devil standing by and said: “ What are you here for, bloody beast? You will find nothing deadly in me, and Abraham’s bosom will welcome me!” And with those words, in the reign of Arcadius and Honorius, which began about A.D. 395, in the eighty-first year of his life, he yielded his spirit to God. His face shone as though he was already glorified, and many heard choirs of Angels singing around him.

At his death the people of Poitiers and the people of Tours came together, and that a bitter altercation broke out between them. The people of Poitiers said: “He is our monk, we want him back responded: “From you he was taken by God, to us he was given!” In the middle of the night, the Poitiers people being sound of asleep, the men of Tours passed the saint’s body through a window and ferried it by the Loire city of Tours, where there was a great rejoicing at reception.

Blessed Severinus, bishop of Cologne, was making the rounds of the holy places after matins on Sunday as was his custom, when, at the hour of Saint Martin's passing, he heard angels singing in heaven. He called his archdeacon and asked him if he heard anything. The archdeacon said he heard nothing, but the archbishop told him to listen intently. He stretched his neck upwards and strained his ears, raising himself on his toes and steadying himself with his staff while the archbishop prayed for him, and he said he heard some voices in the heavens. Said the archbishop: "it is my lord Martin who has migrated from the world, and now the Angels are carrying him to heaven!"

There were demons there, too, and they tried to hold Martin back, but they found nothing with which to charge him and withdrew nonplussed. The archdeacon took note of the day and the hour, and learned that this was indeed the time when Martin and breathed his last. The monk Severus, who wrote his life, had fallen into a deep sleep after matins, and, as he states in a letter, Martin appeared to him clothed in white robes, his face alight, his eyes shining like stars, his hair purpled, holding in his right hand the book that Severus had written about his life. Martin blessed him and he saw the saint rising to heaven, and Severus, wishing he had gone with him, woke up. After that, messengers came with the news that Martin had died that same night.

On that day Saint Ambrose, bishop of Milan, was celebrating mass, and he fell asleep at the altar between the reading of the prophecy and the epistle. No one presumed to awaken him, and the subdeacon would not dare read the epistle without his order. Two or three hours past before they aroused Ambrose, saying: "Time is passing and the people are getting tired of waiting. May it please your lordship to have the clerk read the epistle?" "Don't be upset," Ambrose said, "my brother Martin has gone to heaven, and I have been at his funeral and was leading the final prayers, but you disturbed me and I could not sing the last response." They noted the day and the hour and found that that was when Saint Martin had departed to heaven.

Master John Beleth says that the kings of France used to carry Martin's cappa, or cloak, into battle; where the guardians of the cloak were called *cappellani* or chaplains.

In the sixty-fourth year after Martin's death, blessed Perpetuus enlarged his church magnificently and wished to rebury the saint's body there, but, despite fasts and vigils and several futile efforts, they could not move the sarcophagus. They were about to leave it where it was when the beautiful old man appeared to them and said: "What are you waiting for? Don't you see Saint Martin ready to help you as

soon as you put your hand to the task?" Then, with them, he put his hand under the stone, and they lifted the sarcophagus with ease and speed and set it where it is now venerated. The old man did not appear again.

Odo, abbot of Cluny, relates that when the transferral took place, the bells in all the churches rang though no one pulled the ropes, and all the lamps and candles came a light though no one touched them. It is also said that there were two partners, one of whom was blind and the other paralyzed, and the blind man hauled the cripple around in a cart and the cripple told him where to go. By baking this way they made a good living. Then they heard that many infirm people work your when they came close to Saint Martin's body, and especially when the body was carried around the church, and they began to fear that the said body might be carried close to the home where they lived, and they by chance might be made whole – – which they did not want to happen, because it would deprive them of their income. So they moved their domicile to another street, thinking that the sacred body was never carried that way. But as they were moving, they met the body being carried in procession, and since God bestows blessings even on those who do not ask for them, the two partners found themselves completely cured against their will and were sorely aggrieved at various turn of fortune.

Ambrose has this to say about Saint Martin: “ Blessed Martin destroyed the temples of pagan error, raised the banners of piety, restored the dead to life, drove wild demons from the bodies of the possessed, and raised up those who suffered from various maladies with the remedy of good health. He was found to be so perfect that he clothed Christ in the poor beggar and dressed the Lord of the world and a garment that he himself had received as an alms. O happy largess, by which divinity was clothed! O glorious dividing of the cloak that clothed a soldier and a King! O priceless gift, that was worthy to be worn by divinity! Rightly, Lord, did you confer on this man this reward for confessing your name! Rightly did the savagery of the Arians bow before him! Rightly did the love of martyrdom arm him against fear of the persecutors torments! What shall he, who deserved to clothe God and see him in return for the half of a cloak, receive for the offering of his whole body? So he brought medicine to the hopeful, to some by his prayers and to others by the mere sight of him!”