CLASSICS OF LATE ANTIQUITY • ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The Life of Saint Martin

De vita beati Martini

Sulpicius Severus



Complete edition in contemporary English, with historical context by the Narrator and 14 illustrations

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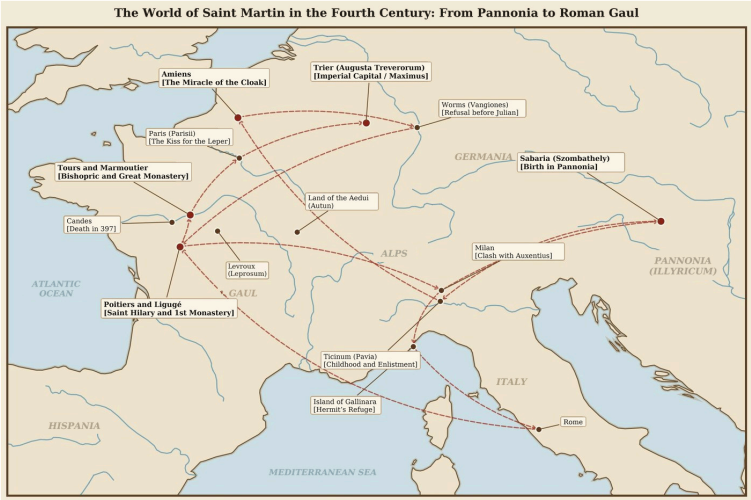
INTRODUCTION

The Narrator's Opening Note: The Man behind the Legend

Across much of Europe, the 11th of November only has to come round for the name of Saint Martin to return to everyday conversation, bringing with it the smell of roasted chestnuts, the new wine, the lantern processions and those mild, sunny, out-of-season days that so many peoples call "Saint Martin's Summer". Almost everyone knows the image of the young Roman soldier on horseback who, on a freezing winter's day, cut his cloak in two with his sword to wrap up a beggar shivering with cold.

What few people know is that Saint Martin of Tours (c. 316/336 – 397 AD) is no hazy figure out of medieval legend. On the contrary: he is one of the best-documented personalities of the late Roman Empire. His biography — *The Life of Saint Martin* (*De vita beati Martini*) — was written while he was still alive, by a man who knew him personally, ate at his table and talked with him at length: **Sulpicius Severus**.

Sulpicius Severus (c. 363 – c. 425) was a brilliant lawyer, a renowned orator and an aristocrat from Aquitaine, in the south-west of what is now France. When he decided to write this book, around 396, the Western Roman Empire was going through a profound change. Christianity had ceased to be a persecuted religion and had become the official faith of the emperors; in the cities, influential bishops were multiplying, dressed in silk and used to dining at court, while in the villages of the countryside (*pagi*) the rural population went on venerating sacred trees and the old Celto-Roman gods.



Historical Map: The World of Saint Martin in the Fourth Century — from his birthplace at Sabaria (Pannonia) and his military youth at Ticinum, Amiens and Worms, to the monasteries of Ligugé and Marmoutier and the diocese of Tours.

In the middle of that changing world, Martin was a real scandal to the elites: a former officer of the imperial guard who refused to fight, face to face with the future emperor Julian; who was tricked by the people into being carried off to become bishop of Tours, yet never agreed to live in a bishop's palace, preferring a wooden hut and a rough tunic of camel hair. He was a man who kissed lepers at the gates of Paris, stood up to emperors in Trier, unmasked charlatans and went so far as to shock the strictest theologians by saying that even the Devil himself would be forgiven by God if he were capable of repenting.

In this edition, the complete text of Sulpicius Severus has been rewritten in **clear, natural, contemporary English**, faithfully keeping every episode and detail of the Latin original. At the end of each chapter, I join you as narrator to explain Roman military customs, the geography of the period, the political background and the culture of the fourth century — details that were obvious to readers in Sulpicius's day, but

which now help us enormously to grasp the extraordinary force of this story.

DEDICATORY LETTER

The Author's Letter to his friend Desiderius on the Life of Saint Martin

Severus sends warm greetings to his dear brother Desiderius.

My brother and great friend: I had decided to keep in a drawer, shut away within the four walls of my own house, this little book I wrote on the life of Saint Martin. Being insecure by nature, I wanted to spare myself people's criticism. I was afraid — and I still think this is what will happen — that my unpolished writing would displease readers and that everyone would reproach me for having had the nerve to take on a subject that deserved writers of quite another talent. But you pressed me so hard that I could not bring myself to say no. After all, what would I not do for our friendship, even at the risk of my reputation?

So I have handed this little book over to you, trusting in your promise that you will not show it to anyone else. Even so, I confess my fear that you will be the one to open the door to the world for it — and once it is out, there is no way of calling it back.

If that happens and you see that some people are beginning to read it, please ask them to give more weight to the events than to the style, and to be patient if some less elegant sentence jars on their ear; after all, the Kingdom of God rests not on the art of fine speaking but on faith. Let them remember, too, that the salvation of the world was announced not by great orators but by fishermen — although God, had He thought it

served any purpose, could perfectly well have done it through orators as well.

The truth is that when I decided to set to work, feeling it would be unforgivable to let the qualities of so extraordinary a man fall into oblivion, I promised myself not to be ashamed if some grammatical mistake slipped through. I was never a great expert in the art of letters and, even the little I once studied, I have forgotten for lack of practice after so many years.

Still, to spare me the nuisance of having to justify myself, if you do want to publish the book, erase my name. You need only scrape the signature off the first leaf so that the page falls silent — or rather, and this is all that matters: let the book speak only of the story it tells and keep quiet about the name of the man who wrote it.

> **Narrator's Context: The false modesty of a great lawyer and "scraped" books**
>
> Let us not be taken in by Sulpicius Severus's literary modesty! When he apologises for his "unpolished writing" and for possible "grammatical mistakes" (*soloecismi*), he is using a classic technique of Roman oratory called *captatio benevolentiae* — the art of winning the reader's sympathy by feigning humility. In reality, Sulpicius was one of the most cultured jurists and authors of Roman Gaul, so much so that the humanists of the Renaissance called him the "Christian Sallust" for the quality of his Latin.
>
> There was, however, a very real debate behind these words: at the end of the fourth century, the Roman elite trained in the classical schools looked down on the texts of the Bible because they were written in a plain, direct Latin, a long way from the sophisticated prose of Cicero. By recalling that the Gospel was announced "not by great orators but by fishermen", Sulpicius argues that historical and spiritual truth counts for far more than literary brilliance.
>
> Notice, too, the practical detail at the close of the letter: *"you need only scrape the signature off the first leaf"* (*titulum fronti erade*). In Late Antiquity there was as yet no printing press; publishing a book meant sending a parchment

manuscript to a well-connected friend — here Desiderius, another Christian aristocrat from Aquitaine — so that the copyists of his household could make new copies. Since parchment (treated animal skin) was expensive and very tough, erasing the author's name was done literally by scraping off the dry ink with a blade or a pumice stone. Of course, Desiderius scraped off no name at all: he spread the book far and wide, and the work became the first great bestseller of Western Christian literature!

CHAPTER I

Why a holy life is worth more than the fame of Hector or Socrates

Many people, obsessed with worldly studies and the desire for prestige, have convinced themselves that they could immortalise their own name by writing the biography of famous figures. It is true that this effort did not give them eternity, but it did bring them a little of what they were after: on the one hand, they left their name remembered in the world, little as that is worth; on the other, by telling the lives of remarkable men, they stirred in their readers a great wish to follow those examples. Only none of this was any use for attaining the truly happy and eternal life.

What good, in the end, did the fame of their books do them, doomed as it is to vanish along with this world? And what did later generations gain from reading about the battles of Hector or the philosophical discussions of Socrates? Wanting to imitate them is foolish enough; not opposing those ideas firmly is sheer folly. Since they measured human life only by what is done here on earth, they placed their hope in legends and handed their souls over to the grave. They believed it was enough to survive in people's memory, when the true aim of a human being ought to be to seek eternal life, not eternal fame — something that is won not

by writing, waging war or philosophising, but by living with uprightness, goodness and faithfulness to God.

That mistake, passed down from generation to generation through books, was so powerful that it led a great many people to imitate now that empty philosophy, now that false ideal of warlike bravery. For that very reason, I think it well worth writing the biography of a truly holy man, one who may serve as an inspiration to others in the future. Who knows whether, on reading it, many will not feel called to true wisdom, to the service of God and to an upright life. And in doing so I am also thinking of my own good: I do not expect to become famous among men, but to receive from God a lasting reward. For even if I myself have not managed to live in such a way as to set an example, I have at least done what was in my power to make known someone who really does deserve to be imitated.

I shall begin, then, to tell the life of Saint Martin, showing who he was both before he was a bishop and after he took charge of his diocese. Of course I have not managed to find out everything he did: the episodes that he alone witnessed remain secret, because Martin never looked for praise and, had it been up to him alone, would have preferred to hide all his good deeds. Indeed, even of what did reach my ears I have left a great deal out, for I thought it enough to choose the most striking moments — not least so as not to tire the reader with too many cases. I ask readers only to trust what is written here and to be sure that I have put nothing on paper without first checking it very carefully. Had I had any doubts, I would rather have kept silent than tell lies.

> **Narrator's Context: Hector, Socrates and the invention of a new model of hero**
>
> In this opening chapter, Sulpicius Severus speaks directly to the educated public of the Roman Empire. In the Roman school of the fourth century, all education revolved around two great points of reference: the warrior epic of

Homer — represented by **Hector**, the Trojan hero of the *Iliad* — and the Greek philosophical tradition — represented by **Socrates**.

By setting them against Martin, Sulpicius is launching a small cultural revolution: he proposes replacing the war hero and the ancient philosopher with a new human model — the man of faith who enlists in the *coelestis militia*, the "military service of Heaven". Note, too, the commitment at the end of the chapter: as a former lawyer used to proving facts in court, Sulpicius guarantees that he has included only accounts gathered from trustworthy eyewitnesses or heard from Martin's own lips.

CHAPTER II

From Pannonia to Italy: The boy who ran away to church and was taken to the army in chains

Martin was born at Sabaria, a town in the province of Pannonia, but grew up in Italy, at Ticinum. His family had a good social standing by the standards of the time, but his parents were pagans. His father had begun his military life as a simple soldier and had later risen to the rank of military tribune.

In his youth Martin himself followed the career of arms, serving in the cavalry of the imperial guard during the reign of the emperor Constantius and then under the command of the Caesar Julian. It was not, however, by his own choice: from a very early age that extraordinary boy thought of nothing but serving God. He was only ten years old when, against his parents' wishes, he ran away to a church and asked to be accepted as a catechumen. A short time later, already wholly turned towards the things of God in a way that was striking for his age, at twelve he dreamed of going to live as a hermit in the desert — and he would have done so had he not still been so young and frail. Even so,

with his mind always on monasteries or the church, he already carried in his heart as a child what he would later carry out with such dedication.

Meanwhile, the emperors issued a decree obliging the sons of veterans to enlist in the army. Martin's own father — who could not bear to see his son's religious leanings — denounced him and handed him over to the authorities. That is how, at just fifteen, Martin found himself arrested, put in chains and forced to take the military oath. He took with him only one slave to attend him, but he completely reversed the usual roles: it was the master who served the servant. More often than not it was Martin himself who took off the man's boots and cleaned them, and the two of them sat down to eat together at the same table, almost always with Martin serving the meal.



At Ticinum (Pavia), the young soldier Martin, just fifteen years old, turns the Roman hierarchy upside down and kneels in the tent to take off and clean his own servant's military boots.

He spent almost three years in the army before being baptised, but he always kept well away from the vices into which soldiers usually fall. He

treated his comrades-in-arms with immense kindness and uncommon generosity, and he had a patience and a humility that seemed beyond human strength. As for the simplicity with which he lived, there is no need even to praise it: he led so austere a life that, even then, he seemed more like a monk than a soldier. With this way of being he so won over his fellow soldiers that they all felt enormous respect and affection for him.

Even without yet having received baptism, he was already living in practice as a true Christian by the works he did: he helped those in difficulty, came to the aid of the most wretched, gave food to the hungry and clothes to those who had nothing to wear. Of his army pay he kept nothing for himself beyond what was needed to eat each day; even then he took the words of the Gospel seriously and did not worry about tomorrow.

> **Narrator's Context: Elite troops, forced recruitment and the officer who cleaned his slave's boots**
>
> There are several fascinating historical details here about the fourth century:
>
> 1. **Geography: Sabaria**, where Martin was born (in 316 according to the traditional chronology, or around 336 according to more recent studies), is the present-day city of Szombathely, in Hungary, which was part of the Roman province of Pannonia. **Ticinum**, where he grew up, is today **Pavia**, in northern Italy, at that time an important military town.
>
> 2. **The tribune father and the denunciation at home:** Martin's father had worked his way up through the Roman army: he had started as a common soldier (*miles*) and had reached the rank of **military tribune** (*tribunus militum*), a senior officer with equestrian status and a good income. In the late Roman Empire, since there were never enough men to defend the frontiers, the State created hereditary laws obliging the sons of veterans to follow the career of arms. For an old pagan officer, devoted to the gods of war, seeing his 15-year-old son want to be a Christian monk was an unacceptable

disgrace — and so it was the father himself who handed him over to the recruiters to be led away in shackles!

3. **The Palatine Guard (*scholares alae*):** Martin did not end up in an ordinary infantry unit, but in the *Scholae Palatinae*, the elite cavalry that formed the personal escort of the Emperor (**Constantius II**, son of Constantine) and of the Caesar (**Julian**). These were prestigious troops, well paid and entitled to a personal servant.

4. **What was a "catechumen"?** In the fourth century, babies were rarely baptised. Anyone who wanted to become a Christian first entered the *catechumenate* — a stage of several years of spiritual preparation and moral testing.

5. **The reversal of roles with the slave:** In Roman society, pulling off the heavy military boots (*caligae* or *calciamenta*) and scraping the mud from them was a slave's lowest task. To see a young officer of the imperial guard clean his own servant's boots and wait on him at table was something completely unthinkable to the mentality of the time.

CHAPTER III

The cloak cut in two at the gates of Amiens and the vision of Christ

Once, at a time when he had nothing left with him but his weapons and a simple military cloak, in the middle of a winter far harsher than usual — with a cold so fierce that many people were freezing to death in the streets — Martin came across a poor man, completely naked, at the gates of the city of Amiens. The beggar was asking passers-by to take pity on him, but everyone walked on without paying him the slightest attention. That young man full of faith understood at once that, if no one else was coming to the wretch's aid, God had left him in his care.

But what could he do? He had nothing left but the military cloak he was wearing, because he had given everything else away to others in need. So he drew the sword he wore at his waist, cut the cloak exactly in half, gave one half to the poor man and put the remaining piece back over his shoulders. Around him, some of those watching the scene burst out laughing, finding the figure of a soldier with half his cloak cut away ridiculous; many others, however, with more conscience, felt deeply ashamed at not having done anything of the kind, when they had more than enough means to clothe that man without going cold themselves.



At the gates of Amiens, in a freezing winter, Martin cuts his white and scarlet Palatine Guard cloak in two with his sword to wrap up a naked poor man in the snow.

The following night, after falling asleep, Martin saw Christ in a dream, dressed in the very half of the cloak he had given the beggar. He felt he was being asked to look closely at the Lord and to recognise the garment he had given away. Straight afterwards he heard Jesus say in a clear voice to the multitude of angels around him: “Martin, who is still only a catechumen, has clothed me with this cloak!”

True to the words He Himself had spoken in the Gospel — *"Whenever you did this to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me"* — the Lord was showing in this way that it was He Himself who had been wrapped up in the person of that poor man; and, to confirm the worth of that gesture, He chose to appear dressed in the exact piece of cloth the beggar had received. In spite of this vision, Martin did not become full of vanity. On the contrary: recognising in all this the goodness of God, as soon as he turned eighteen he hastened to be baptised. Even so, he did not leave the army at once, because he gave in to the insistent pleas of his tribune, who was a close friend and tent-mate of his; for this commander promised him that, as soon as his own term of military service was over, he too would leave the life of the world. Holding on to that promise, Martin stayed in the army for almost two more years after his baptism, though by then he was a soldier in name only.

Narrator's Context: The military cloak, the origin of the word "chapel" and Saint Martin's Summer

We have just read the most famous episode in the life of Saint Martin, which took place at the gates of *Samarobriva Ambianorum* — the present-day city of **Amiens**, in northern France — during a freezing winter in the 330s or the 350s. Three curious facts bring this scene even more to life:

1. **Why did Martin cut the cloak in half instead of giving the whole of it?** In the Roman imperial guard, the white or scarlet military cloak (*chlamys*, often lined with sheepskin in winter) was part of the regulation uniform: half belonged to the Roman State and the other half was paid for by the soldier. If a soldier turned up on parade with no cloak at all, he was punished for losing equipment! By cutting it in half with his sword, Martin gave away everything that was his and kept the compulsory part — and was left looking so comical (*truncatus habitu*) that passers-by laughed.

2. **How Martin's half-cloak gave rise to the words "chapel" and "chaplain":** Centuries later, this half-cloak of Saint Martin (called in late Latin the *cappa*, "little cloak") became the most precious relic of the Frankish kings, who even took it into battle with them. The small shrine where they kept Saint

Martin's *cappa* came to be called the *capella* ("the place of the little cloak"), and the priests charged with looking after it were the *capellani*. That is the direct origin of the words **chapel** and **chaplain**!

3. **And "Saint Martin's Summer"?** As you can see from Sulpicius Severus's original text, in the fourth century there was as yet no legend of the sun breaking through the clouds at that moment. That popular tradition arose centuries later, when the feast of Saint Martin's funeral (on **11 November**) came to coincide with the usual weather pattern of mid-November — a run of days of warm sun and clear skies before winter — joining for ever the human warmth of the gesture of the cloak to the autumn sun.

CHAPTER IV

Face to face with Julian at Worms: "I am a soldier of Christ; I cannot fight"

Meanwhile, the barbarian peoples invaded Gaul. The Caesar Julian then gathered his army near the city of the Vangiones and began to distribute a special cash bounty to the soldiers. As was the custom, the men were called up one by one by name, until it came to Martin's turn.

Realising that this was the right moment to ask for his discharge from the army — not least because he thought it dishonest to accept the money knowing that he was not going into combat — Martin spoke directly to Julian: "Until today I have been in your service; let me now serve God. Let the man who is going into battle keep your bounty; I am a soldier of Christ, I cannot fight."



At Worms (356 AD), before the military tribunal and the gold chests of the Caesar Julian, Martin refuses the campaign bounty: "Until today I have been in your service; let me now serve God. I am a soldier of Christ, I cannot fight."

On hearing this, the tyrant flew into a rage and threw it in his face that it was not out of faith that he wanted to leave the army, but out of fear of the battle set for the following day. Martin, refusing to be intimidated — and indeed growing firmer in the face of those threats — answered him: "If you think this is cowardice and not faith, tomorrow I will present myself unarmed in the front rank, ahead of our troops; and in the name of the Lord Jesus, with neither shield nor helmet, protected only by the sign of the cross, I will advance without fear through the midst of the enemy lines."

Julian had him arrested at once, to force him to keep his word the next day, facing the barbarians and unarmed. But first thing in the morning the enemy sent envoys to sue for peace, surrendering unconditionally and handing over everything they had.

In view of this, who can doubt that the victory was due to Martin, spared in this way by God from being thrown unarmed into the front line? Of

course the Lord, in His goodness, could perfectly well have kept His soldier safe and sound amid the enemy's swords and spears; but He chose to avert the battle itself, so that Martin's eyes should not even have to witness the death of other men. After all, what other victory would Christ give His soldier but this: to defeat the enemy without shedding a drop of blood and without anyone dying?

> **Narrator's Context: The gold bounty, Julian the Apostate and one of the first conscientious objectors**
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> We are in the year **356 AD**, at *Borbetomagus*, the city of the people of the Vangiones — present-day **Worms**, on the banks of the river Rhine, in Germany. Germanic tribes (Alamanni and Franks) had crossed the Rhine and sacked several cities in Gaul.
>
> At the head of the Roman troops is **Julian Caesar**, nephew of Constantine, who a few years later would become emperor and go down in history as **Julian the Apostate** (361–363), for having tried to restore paganism in the Roman Empire and strip Christians of their privileges — which is why Sulpicius harshly calls him "the tyrant" (*tyrannus*).
>
> To measure Martin's courage, it helps to understand what this military bounty (*donativum*) was: on top of the normal pay (*stipendium*), on the eve of an important campaign the commander handed a generous sum in gold coins to each soldier in person. Accepting the *donativum* amounted to renewing one's pledge of honour to fight to the death in the coming battle. Had Martin taken the gold and then refused to take up his sword, he would have been executed for desertion and theft; by refusing the money in public, with the whole army drawn up on parade, he openly defied Julian's authority, in one of the most celebrated cases of conscientious objection in Antiquity.

CHAPTER V

Saint Hilary of Poitiers, the office of exorcist

and the robbers' ambush in the Alps

As soon as he left military life, Martin went to find Saint Hilary, bishop of Poitiers, a man whose faith and religious wisdom were at that time admired by everyone, and stayed with him for a while. Hilary wanted to keep him close and bring him into the clergy of the diocese by ordaining him deacon. But Martin refused time after time, insisting that he was not worthy of so great an office. Hilary, who was a man of enormous insight, saw that there was only one way to persuade him: to give him a role so modest that it would look almost like a demotion. So he proposed that he become an exorcist; and this time Martin accepted, so as not to give the impression that he despised the post for being too humble.

A short time later, he felt warned in a dream that he should go and visit his homeland and his parents, who were still attached to paganism, to try to help them towards the faith. He set off with the permission of Saint Hilary, who let him go only after extracting from him, with pleas and tears, the promise that he would return. Martin is said to have taken to the road with a heavy heart, warning his companions that he was going to meet with many hardships — which the journey quickly confirmed.

To begin with, while taking some lonely short cuts on the crossing of the Alps, he fell into an ambush of bandits. One of them actually raised his axe to split his head open, but another robber checked his arm at the last moment. Even so, they tied his hands behind his back, robbed him of what he was carrying and left him in the charge of one of the men of the gang. This man took him to an out-of-the-way spot and began to ask him who he was. Martin answered that he was a Christian. The robber asked him whether he was afraid. Perfectly calmly, Martin assured him that he had never felt so safe in his life, because he knew that God's protection never fails, above all in moments of greatest danger; and he

added that he felt sorry rather for him, who, by being mixed up in a life of crime, was cutting himself off from the mercy of Christ.



In the gorges of the Alps, his hands tied behind his back, Martin speaks serenely of the Gospel to the robber guarding him, axe in hand, and ends up converting him.

There and then he began to explain the Gospel to him and to speak to him of the word of God. There is no need to spin the story out: the thief believed what he heard, accompanied Martin until he had left him safely back on the main road, and took his leave asking him to pray for him. Later it became known that this man had changed his life completely and entered the religious life — indeed, this whole episode is said to have come down to us from his own lips.

> **Narrator's Context: Saint Hilary's shrewdness and why being an "exorcist" was a modest post**
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> **Saint Hilary of Poitiers** (c. 315–367) was the great intellectual authority of the Church in Gaul — a remarkable theologian and Martin's true spiritual master.
>
> There is a detail in this chapter that tends to puzzle anyone who watches horror films today: why did Martin refuse to be a **deacon** because he thought

himself unworthy, but accept being an **exorcist** because it was a humble role? In the fourth-century Church, **deacons** were the bishop's right hand: they managed the accounts of the diocese, organised support for the poor and carried enormous social weight. The **exorcist**, by contrast, belonged to the so-called "minor orders": it was a discreet, subordinate task, devoted to accompanying the catechumens, looking after the church and attending to disturbed people, or those held to be possessed, who lived on the margins of the community. Hilary used brilliant psychology: he saw that a prestigious office would make Martin run away, but that he would never refuse the lowest rung of the church, for fear of seeming proud!

CHAPTER VI

The encounter with the Devil on the road, the public flogging and the poison on the Island of Gallinara

As he continued on his way, after passing through Milan, the Devil appeared to him on the road in the form of a man and asked him where he was going. When Martin answered that he was going where the Lord was calling him, the Devil warned him: "Wherever you go and whatever you attempt, the Devil will always stand in your way!" Martin answered him at once with the verse of the Psalm: *"The Lord is on my side; I am not afraid of what men can do to me."* And at that very instant the enemy vanished before him.

Having at last reached his homeland, he managed to accomplish part of what he so longed for: he led his mother to leave paganism and embrace the faith, although his father stubbornly refused to change his life. Along the way, however, Martin's example led many other people to convert.

At that time the Arian heresy had spread throughout the Empire and was dominant above all in the region of Illyricum. Almost alone, Martin

stood up with enormous courage to the local bishops who defended that doctrine. He paid dearly for that outspokenness: he was harshly persecuted, beaten with rods in the public square and, in the end, driven out of the city. He then went back to Italy, but on learning that in Gaul, too, the Church was going through great difficulties because the heretics had succeeded in sending Saint Hilary into exile, he decided to establish a small monastery in Milan. Even there he had no peace: Auxentius, the chief leader of the Arians in the city, launched a ferocious persecution against him and, after subjecting him to every kind of insult and abuse, threw him out of Milan.

Thinking it wiser to wait for the storm to pass, Martin withdrew to a small island called Gallinara, in the company of a priest of great virtue. There he lived for some time feeding only on roots and wild herbs. One day, without realising it, he ended up eating hellebore, a very poisonous plant. When he felt the poison spreading through his body and realised that he was at death's door, he began to pray with all his strength: the danger passed and the pains disappeared completely. Shortly afterwards, he learned that the emperor, repenting of his earlier decision, had authorised Saint Hilary to return from exile; Martin set off at once for Rome in the hope of catching him on his journey home.

> **Narrator's Context: The Arian crisis and Martin's desert island**
>
> To understand why Martin was **flogged in the public square** in the Balkans (the province of *Illyricum*, which took in Pannonia and part of present-day Croatia and Serbia) and expelled from **Milan**, we have to look at the greatest religious controversy of the fourth century: **Arianism**.
>
> Arius, a priest of Alexandria, taught that Jesus Christ was not eternal God, equal to the Father, but rather the first and most perfect creature created by God. Although the Council of Nicaea (325) had condemned that idea, the emperor **Constantius II** took the side of the Arian bishops: he sent into exile the bishops faithful to Nicaea (such as Saint Hilary of Poitiers, banished to

present-day Turkey in 356) and handed important sees, such as the imperial capital of Milan, to Arian bishops like **Auxentius**.

With no room for him in the cities controlled by the Arians, Martin sought refuge on the **Island of Gallinara** (*Isola Gallinara*), a small rocky islet off the coast of Liguria (near Albenga, in northern Italy). There he lived as a hermit eating wild roots — until the day he mistook a root for **hellebore**, a toxic plant capable of causing cardiac arrest.

CHAPTER VII

The monastery of Ligugé and the first miracle: The catechumen who came back to life

Since Hilary had already passed through Rome by the time he got there, Martin followed in his footsteps to Poitiers. Hilary welcomed him with immense joy, and shortly afterwards Martin founded a small monastery on the outskirts of the city. Before long he was joined by a young catechumen who wanted to learn to live under the guidance of so admired a master; but after a few days the young man took to his bed with a raging fever.

Unfortunately, Martin had had to go away on a journey and was absent for three days. When he came back, he found him already dead: the illness had been so sudden that the young man had gone without even having had time to be baptised. The body was laid out in the middle of the room, surrounded by the monks in tears as they prepared the funeral, when Martin came running in, weeping bitterly.

Guided by a deep inner inspiration, he asked everyone to leave the little cell where the body lay, locked the door from the inside and stretched himself out on the lifeless brother. He remained like that, praying

intensely, for some time, until he felt, in the depths of his soul, that the power of God was at work. Then he raised himself a little and kept his eyes fixed on the young man's face, waiting, full of confidence, for the fruit of his prayer and of the Lord's mercy. Not two hours had passed when he saw the whole body begin, very slowly, to stir and the eyelids to tremble, opening once more to the light. Deeply moved, Martin burst out thanking God in so loud a voice that the cries of joy filled the whole cell. Hearing this, the monks who were waiting outside by the door rushed straight in — and were left speechless at seeing alive the one they had left dead!



At the monastery of Ligugé — the oldest in Europe — after two hours of Martin's intense prayer, the young catechumen who had died unbaptised opens his eyes and comes back to life, to the astonishment of the monks.

Restored to life, the young man was baptised straight away and lived for many years more, becoming among us the first living witness to Martin's miracles. He himself used to tell what had happened to him after he left his body: he had been led into the presence of the supreme Judge and, since he was not yet baptised, had just heard the harsh

sentence sending him to a gloomy place amid a nameless crowd. At that instant, however, two angels informed the Judge that this was the very young man for whom Martin was praying. By order of the Judge, the same angels brought him back, handed him over to Martin and restored him to life. From that day on, Martin's fame spread everywhere: the man whom everyone already regarded as holy came to be admired also for the power of his wonders and compared to the Apostles themselves.

> **Narrator's Context: The oldest monastery in Europe and a fourth-century near-death account**
>
> The small community that Martin created near Poitiers around **361** is **Ligugé** — considered by historians to be **the oldest monastery in Western Europe**, founded more than a century and a half before Saint Benedict!
>
> Notice two curious details in this episode:
>
> 1. **The gesture of the ancient prophets:** When Martin shuts the door of the room and lies down on the dead young man, he is repeating exactly the gesture of the prophets Elijah (1 Kings 17:21) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:34) in the Old Testament.
>
> 2. **The fear of dying unbaptised:** Why does the young man say that he was about to be sent to a "gloomy place" (*obscuris locis*)? For fourth-century Christians, to die while still a catechumen, before baptism, left the soul deprived of full entry into the light — and this description is also one of the oldest accounts in Western literature of what we would today call a near-death experience.

CHAPTER VIII

Lupicinus's young slave saved from death

A short time later, as he was passing through the estates of Lupicinus, a very important man of high standing in society, Martin heard in the distance the cries and desperate weeping of a crowd. Concerned, he

went up to the house to ask what had happened, and was told that a young slave of the estate had just taken his own life by hanging.

As soon as he learned of it, Martin went into the little room where they had laid the body, asked everyone to leave, stretched himself out on the young man and remained praying for some time. Shortly afterwards, the colour began to return to the young man's cheeks, and his eyes, already dulled, recovered their brightness and fixed themselves on Martin's face. Making a slow effort to raise himself, the young man grasped Martin's right hand, got to his feet and walked out on his own two feet, hand in hand with him, as far as the entrance courtyard, before the disbelieving eyes of all those people.

> **Narrator's Context: Compassion for the most vulnerable on the great Roman estates**
>
> Lupicinus was what the Romans called a *vir honoratus* — a great landowner of the senatorial aristocracy, master of a huge agricultural estate (*villa*) where dozens or hundreds of slaves worked (the *familia*, in the Roman sense of the word).
>
> What makes this short chapter so touching is Martin's reaction to the suicide of a poor slave (*servulus*). Whereas in the following centuries the laws of the Church would come to condemn suicide with enormous severity, going so far as to forbid Christian burial, Martin preaches no sermon and is not afraid to touch a young man who has ended his life in despair: he goes into his room, prays over his body and leads the young man by the hand out to the courtyard, in front of the master and all the servants of the house.

CHAPTER IX

The "kidnapping" to make him bishop of

Tours and the humiliation of Bishop Defensor

At about that time, the people of the Church of Tours began to want Martin as their bishop. Since they knew it would be anything but easy to get him out of his monastery, an inhabitant of Tours called Ruricius came up with a ruse: he pretended that his wife was at death's door and, throwing himself on his knees at Martin's feet, begged so hard that he persuaded him to come away with him. Along the way, several groups of townspeople were already posted by arrangement; they surrounded him on the road and took him, almost under escort, to Tours.

Waiting for him was an impressive crowd, come not only from Tours but from the neighbouring towns, to vote on the choice of the new bishop. Among the people there were no two opinions: everyone wanted the same thing and said with one voice that no one deserved to be bishop more than Martin, and that happy would be the diocese with such a man at its head. There was, however, a small group against — including some of the bishops summoned to the city for the ceremony of ordination — who tried to block the choice at all costs. They said openly that Martin was nothing but a figure of no standing, that he did not have the appearance to be a bishop, that he went about badly dressed, with dirty clothes and unkempt hair. But the people, with far more good sense than they, laughed at the obstinacy of those prelates who, in trying to belittle so admirable a man, were only singing his praises. In the end they had no choice but to consecrate him, pushed by the will of the people and by the plans of God.

It is said that, among the bishops present, the one who fought hardest against Martin was a man whose name was, of all things, Defensor — and that on that very day he ended up publicly humiliated by what everyone saw as a prophetic sign. It so happened that the reader charged with reading the Scriptures at the ceremony could not push his way through the crowd and was stuck outside. While the priests at the

altar waited, flustered and not knowing what to do, one of those present picked up the book of Psalms, opened it at random and began to read aloud the first verse that met his eyes. And the Psalm said this: *"Out of the mouths of children and little ones you have brought forth perfect praise against your adversaries, to defeat the enemy and the defender."*

No sooner had these words rung out in the church than the whole people burst into an immense shout, leaving the opponents completely disarmed and covered in shame. No one doubted that that Psalm had come up by the will of God, so that Bishop Defensor might hear there and then the condemnation of his intrigue: through the voice of simple folk, God's praise in Martin was confirmed and, at the same time, the adversary's mask fell.

> **Narrator's Context: Popular elections in church, high-society bishops and the pun on "Defensor"**
>
> The date is **4 July 371**, the day Martin was consecrated bishop of Tours (*Caesarodunum Turonum*). This episode perfectly portrays three very vivid aspects of the fourth-century Church:
>
> 1. **How a bishop was elected:** In Antiquity, bishops were not appointed from a distance by Rome; they were chosen directly in open assembly by the Christians of the city (*ad suffragia ferenda*), together with the local priests and the bishops of the neighbouring dioceses. When a monk much loved by the people did not want to accept the office, the inhabitants sometimes resorted to a "friendly kidnapping" — just as Ruricius did!
>
> 2. **The clash between the refined bishops and the unkempt monk:** Why did the other bishops turn up their noses at Martin's worn clothes and long, untidy hair? Because, in the second half of the fourth century, being bishop of a Roman city was already a position of great social prestige, held above all by former senators, high officials and great landowners used to immaculate tunics and the good manners of the aristocracy. The appearance of a poor hermit, with beard and hair uncut, offended against every rule of etiquette of that group.

3. **The explosive coincidence of Psalm 8:3:** Why did that reading bring the house down? In today's translations of the Bible, the verse is rendered *"to silence the enemy and the avenger"*. But in the *Vetus Latina* — the old Latin translation used in Gaul in Martin's day — the word used for "avenger" was literally **defensorem** (*"ut destruas inimicum et defensorem"*)! Since the leader of the opposition to Martin was called **Defensor**, hearing someone read out at random *"to defeat the enemy and the Defensor"* sounded to everyone like a direct answer from God, naming names!

CHAPTER X

The bishop who lived in a wooden hut: The founding of Marmoutier

Once he had become bishop, I can hardly find words to describe the greatness of soul that Martin showed. He went on being exactly the same man he had always been: the same humility of heart, the same poverty in his way of dressing. Full of natural authority and grace, he carried out the responsibilities of a bishop to the full without ever giving up the simple, austere life of a monk.

In the early days he still lived in a small room adjoining the city's church. But since he could not stand the constant stream of people coming to knock at his door, he decided to found a monastery about three kilometres from Tours. The spot was so quiet and hidden that it seemed like the desert itself: on one side rose the sheer wall of a rocky cliff; on the other, the river Loire embraced the little plain in a gentle curve. There was only one path to get there, and even that was very narrow.



The Abbey of Marmoutier, on the outskirts of Tours: between the limestone escarpment hollowed out into caves and the bend of the river Loire, the youngest disciples devote themselves to copying manuscripts.

Martin built himself a simple hut of wood and woven branches, and several monks did the same; most, however, dug their shelter directly into the soft rock of the hillside. Eighty disciples lived there, all committed to following the example of their master. No one owned anything; everything belonged to everyone, and it was forbidden to buy or sell anything whatsoever, contrary to what many other monks were already doing.

No one there practised a manual trade, with one single exception: the copying of books — a task given to the youngest, so that the older ones could devote themselves full-time to prayer. Hardly anyone left his cell, except at the hour of praying together. They all took a single meal in common at the end of the day, once the fast was over, and no one drank wine unless he was ill and needed it as medicine. Almost all wore rough tunics of camel hair; wearing soft fabrics was considered a serious fault there — which is all the more impressive if we remember that many of those monks came from noble families, had been brought up in comfort

and chose this hard and humble life of their own free will. Later we saw several of them become bishops; after all, what city or what diocese did not dream of having at its head a priest trained in Martin's monastery?

> **Narrator's Context: The caves of the river Loire and the cradle of the medieval copyists**
>
> The refuge that Martin created two Roman miles (about 3 kilometres) from Tours, wedged between the limestone hillside and the river Loire (*Liger*), would become the famous Abbey of **Marmoutier** (*Maius Monasterium*). The rock of that bank of the Loire is *tuffeau*, a white limestone that is easy to dig, where you can still visit today the caves opened by Martin's monks!
>
> There are two details in this chapter with an enormous impact on European history:
>
> 1. **Exclusive dedication to the copying of books (*scriptores*):** While the monks of the Egyptian deserts wove baskets or ropes to earn their bread, Martin created at Marmoutier a rule that was new in the West: the only manual work of the monastery was **copying books by hand**. By setting the youngest monks to transcribe manuscripts, Martin sowed the seed of the future medieval *scriptoria* that would save a large part of ancient and Christian culture during the fall of the Roman Empire.
>
> 2. **A nursery of new bishops:** By attracting young men of the Roman aristocracy (*nobiles*) to a life stripped of possessions and devoted to the study of the Scriptures, Marmoutier turned into a real spiritual school from which came many of the bishops who renewed the Church in Gaul.

CHAPTER XI

The false martyr unmasked: The criminal's spirit beside the altar

Let us now turn to other admirable things that Martin did as bishop. Not far from the city, very close to the monastery, there was a grave

where the people had got into the habit of going to pray, convinced that Christian martyrs were buried there — so much so that earlier bishops had even had an altar set up on the spot.

Martin, however, was not a man to believe lightly in half-told stories. He began asking the oldest priests and clerics of the diocese who that martyr had actually been and when he had died, admitting that he found it very hard to accept a cult about which the ancients had not left a single reliable record. For some time he even avoided setting foot there: since he had no certainty, he did not want to offend people's good faith, but he also refused to lend official cover, by his presence, to a devotion that might be nothing more than superstition. Until one day he decided to go to the place, accompanied only by a few monks.

He stopped in front of the grave and prayed to God, asking Him to show him who was buried there and what kind of life he had led. No sooner had he turned his head to the left than he saw, standing right there, a dark figure of fierce appearance. Martin ordered it to say what its name was and what it had done in life. The spirit gave its name and confessed everything: he had been a highway robber, executed for the crimes he had committed, and was being venerated through the sheer mistake of the uninformed people; he had absolutely nothing to do with the martyrs, because while they were in the glory of God, he was serving his punishment there. The most striking thing is that the monks accompanying Martin could hear the voice answering perfectly well, although they saw no one.

Martin then told them what he had just seen and ordered the altar to be removed from that place at once, freeing the population from being deceived any longer by that false devotion.

Narrator's Context: Martin's critical sense and the relic fever of the fourth century

At the end of the fourth century, devotion to the martyrs soared throughout the Roman Empire: every town wanted to have the tomb of a hero of the old persecutions, and an old grave had only to turn up by the side of a road for the people to start making pilgrimages to it.

Martin's attitude is astonishingly clear-sighted for the period: instead of turning a blind eye because "it was good for the people's faith", he behaves like a demanding investigator. He questions the oldest priests, looks for historical records — the name of the martyr and the date of the martyrdom (*acta martyrum*) — and refuses to validate a cult without evidence. Note also a symbolic detail typical of the ancient world: the criminal's shade appears **on the left** (*ad laevam* — *sinistra* in Latin), the side which, both in Roman culture and in the Gospel of Saint Matthew (25:33), was associated with condemnation.

CHAPTER XII

The pagan funeral frozen in the middle of the fields

Some time later, on one of his journeys through the countryside, Martin came across, in the distance, the funeral of a pagan, on its way to the burial surrounded by superstitious rituals. As they were still more than seven hundred metres away, Martin stopped to try to work out what that gathering was, unable to make out clearly from afar what was going on.

He saw, however, that it was a large group of peasants, and noticed some white linen sheets fluttering in the wind above what they were carrying on their shoulders. He was at once convinced that they were holding a pagan procession, because the country people of Gaul had the

old habit of parading the statues of their gods through the fields, covered with white cloths.

Martin then raised his hand, made the sign of the cross in their direction and ordered them to stop where they were and set down what they were carrying. What followed was extraordinary: first, those men all stopped dead, motionless as stone statues; then, however hard they strained to move on, they could not take a single step forward and began turning round and round on the spot in a perfectly ridiculous manner, until, exhausted, they had no choice but to lay the body on the ground. Bewildered, they looked at one another in silence, not understanding what was happening to them.

Meanwhile, seeing the scene from closer up, Martin realised that this was only a funeral procession and not a procession of idols. He raised his hand again and left them free to pick up the dead man and go on their way. And so, when he wished, he made them stop; and when he saw fit, he let them go in peace.

> **Narrator's Context: Where the word "pagan" comes from and the farming processions of Gaul**
>
> This episode — almost comic in its image of the men going round in circles, unable to get away from the same spot — helps to explain the origin of the very word **pagan**!
>
> In Latin, a village or rural district was called a *pagus*, and whoever lived there was a *paganus* — the country dweller, the villager (whom Sulpicius also calls *rusticus*). While Christianity spread quickly through the Roman cities (*civitates*), in the rural areas of Gaul the farmers long kept up the old Celto-Roman rituals. One of the most popular took place in spring (similar to the Roman festival of the *Ambarvalia* and the cult of Cybele or of the ancient Celtic mother goddesses): they carried images of deities, covered with white linen cloths, in procession around the cornfields to ask for good harvests. At a distance of 500 Roman paces (about 740 metres), Martin mistook the shroud for the veils of one of those farming processions — but as soon as he saw that

> it was only village people going to bury a dead man, he let them get on with their lives.

CHAPTER XIII

The challenge of the sacred pine: Tied up beneath the falling tree

On another occasion, in a village where he had just demolished a very ancient pagan temple, Martin was preparing to have a great pine tree that stood right beside the shrine cut down as well. This time, however, the local pagan priest and all the inhabitants came out to stop him. Incredible as it may seem, those same people who, by the will of God, had stood quietly by while the stone temple was pulled down would on no account allow the tree to be touched.

Martin tried patiently to explain to them that there was nothing divine about a wooden trunk: let them rather worship the true God whom he served, for that tree had to come down because it was consecrated to a false spirit. Until one of the villagers, bolder than the rest, threw down a challenge: “If you have that much trust in this God you say you serve, let us make a deal: we will cut down the tree ourselves, but you stand under it and catch it as it falls! If your Lord really is with you, you will escape alive!”

Without batting an eyelid and full of trust in God, Martin accepted the bargain. On hearing this, the pagans all agreed on the spot: for them, it was well worth losing their sacred tree if, in exchange, it crushed in its fall the man who was going around destroying their shrines.

Since the pine already grew leaning well over to one side, no one had the slightest doubt about the exact spot where it would fall. The villagers

then tied Martin up and placed him precisely at the point they chose, right beneath the lean of the trunk. Then they took up their axes and began to cut the pine down themselves, full of enthusiasm and satisfaction. All around, a sea of people gathered to watch from a distance, holding their breath. Little by little the enormous pine began to sway and crack, on the point of coming down. Far off, the monks accompanying Martin turned white as a sheet: terror-stricken at the imminent danger, they lost all hope and even their faith, convinced that they were about to see Martin crushed to death there.

He, however, remained completely serene, surrendered into the hands of the Lord. And when the trunk cracked with a crash and at last began to topple straight towards him, about to crush him, Martin raised his hand and traced the sign of the cross in the air. At that very instant — as though a furious gust of wind had struck it head-on — the pine swung back and fell on the opposite side, almost catching beneath it the peasants who had placed themselves in the spot they thought safest!



Tied up by the pagan villagers at the exact spot where the enormous sacred pine was going to fall, Martin raises his hand in the sign of the cross and makes the tree fall the other way.

An immense shout went up at once: the pagans could not believe what they had just seen, the monks burst into tears of joy and everyone acclaimed the name of Christ with one voice. That day it became evident that the faith had won that land: in all that crowd there was hardly a single pagan who did not come and ask Martin to lay his hands on him so that he might become a catechumen, leaving the old beliefs behind to follow the Lord Jesus. The truth is that, before Martin arrived there, almost no one in that region was a Christian; but the impact of his miracles and his example was so great that today there is no village thereabouts without churches full of people or monasteries. For whenever he pulled down a pagan shrine, Martin made a point of building a church or a small monastery at once on the same spot.

> **Narrator's Context: Why did the Gauls defend a pine tree more than a stone temple?**
>
> Did you notice a curious detail right at the start of this chapter? The population of the village let the stone temple be demolished without reacting, but when Martin wanted to cut down the **pine tree** they came close to killing him! Why?
>
> The explanation lies in the ancient religion of the Celts (the Gauls): before the arrival of the Romans, the Celts did not pray inside closed buildings; for them, the true dwelling of the gods was in centuries-old trees and sacred groves (*nemora*). The stone temple was no more than a fashion brought by the Romans, but that old pine was the religious soul of the village!
>
> Notice, too, the disarming honesty of Sulpicius Severus, who does not hide the panic of Martin's own monks, trembling in the distance, having lost "all hope and even their faith". And notice the last sentence of the chapter: this habit of Martin's of raising a chapel or a monastery exactly on the site of the old shrines and sacred trees lay at the origin of the network of rural parishes all over Europe!

CHAPTER XIV

The fire that drew back against the wind and the two armed angels at Levroux

At about the same time, in a similar case, Martin was at the centre of another striking event. In a village where he had set fire to a very ancient and famous pagan shrine, the wind began to drive the flames straight towards a neighbouring house that stood right up against the temple. As soon as he saw the danger, Martin scrambled at a run up onto the roof of the house and placed himself directly in front of the advancing flames. What happened next left everyone open-mouthed: the fire was seen to bend backwards, against the very direction of the wind, as though the forces of nature were fighting one another! In this

way, thanks to Martin's intervention, the blaze consumed only what was meant to burn and left the house intact.

In another place, called Levroux, Martin also tried to demolish a great temple, very rich and surrounded by enormous pagan devotion, but a furious crowd gathered against him and drove him from the place with insults and blows. Martin then withdrew to a spot nearby and spent three whole days dressed in a rough penitential tunic and covered in ashes, without eating and praying all the while, asking God that, since human hands had not managed to pull that shrine down, the divine power itself should do so.

At the end of those three days, two angels suddenly appeared to him with spear and shield in hand, like soldiers of the heavenly army. They told him that they had been sent by the Lord to put the crowd to flight and protect him while the temple was demolished: he could go back to the village with his mind at rest and finish what he had begun, because no one would lay a finger on him.

Martin returned to Levroux at once and, before the eyes of all that pagan population — who stood looking on, completely unable to react — razed the shrine to its foundations and smashed all the altars and statues to pieces. Realising that only a divine power could have left them paralysed like that and filled with fear, unable to stop the bishop, almost all the inhabitants of the place were converted to Jesus Christ, proclaiming aloud that only the God of Martin deserved to be worshipped and that those idols, which could not even defend themselves, were worth nothing.

Narrator's Context: Saving the neighbour's house and the great shrine of Levroux

The ancient settlement of *Leprosum* is today the town of **Levroux**, in central France (the Berry region), where archaeological excavations have confirmed the existence of a great Gallo-Roman religious centre.

It is worth noticing two very revealing traits of Martin's way of acting:

1. **Fight the idol, protect the people:** In the first episode, as soon as he sees the wind throwing the flames of the temple onto the thatched or wooden roof of the house next door, Martin risks his own skin by climbing onto the burning roof so that the neighbour should not be left homeless.

2. **Penance instead of troops:** When he is beaten out of Levroux, Martin does not go and ask the Roman authorities for soldiers to impose the law by force (as several bishops of his time were already doing). He prefers to withdraw for three days of fasting, dressed in a **hair shirt** (the *cilicium*, a rough tunic of goat or camel hair worn next to the skin) and with ashes on his head, just as the ancient prophets of the Bible used to do.

CHAPTER XV

The neck bared before the sword in the land of the Aedui

I also want to tell what happened in the region of the Aedui. While Martin was having a local temple pulled down, an enraged band of pagan peasants hurled themselves at him. One of them, more hot-headed than the rest, drew his sword and went straight for Martin to kill him. Without falling back a step, Martin threw his cloak back from his shoulders and held out his bared neck to him. The man did not even hesitate to strike; but at the exact moment when he raised his arm high to bring the sword down, he lost his balance, fell flat on his back on the

ground and, filled with an inexplicable terror, began begging for forgiveness.

Very similar to this was another case: a man tried to stab him with a large knife while he was breaking up some pagan statues, but at the instant he was about to drive in the blade, the iron flew out of his hands and vanished without trace.

Most of the time, however, when the rural populations tried to stop him demolishing their shrines, Martin spoke to them with such kindness and conviction that he disarmed their hearts — and, as he opened their eyes to the truth, it was the inhabitants themselves who ended up pulling down their temples.

> **Narrator's Context: The land of the Aedui and the power of the word**
>
> The territory of the **Aedui** (*pagus Aeduorum*) lay in present-day **Burgundy**, around the city of Autun (ancient *Augustodunum*). The Aedui were one of the oldest and proudest Gallic peoples, famous since the time of Julius Caesar and with very deep druidic roots.
>
> Look closely at the last sentence of this chapter, which often goes unnoticed: Sulpicius makes a point of clarifying that, in spite of these tense moments with swords and butcher's knives (*culter*), *"most of the time"* (*plerumque*) Martin overcame the resistance of the villages not by force but by patient conversation and preaching, until the residents themselves took the old altars apart.

CHAPTER XVI

The paralysed girl healed at Trier with blessed oil

As for the gift of healing the sick, it had such extraordinary power in Martin that hardly anyone came to ask him for help without going away

cured on the spot — as can be clearly seen from the case I am about to tell.

In the city of Trier there lived a girl struck by a paralysis so severe that for a long time she had not moved a single muscle of her body: she was practically dead from head to foot and it could barely be seen that she was still breathing. The whole family had gathered around the bed in tears, by now only waiting for the end in order to see to the funeral, when the news ran through the city that Martin had just arrived in Trier. As soon as he heard of it, the young woman's father ran out of the house, almost breathless, to go and beg his help for his daughter.

By then Martin had already gone into the church. There and then, in front of all the people and of many other bishops, the old father threw himself to the ground, clasped his knees and implored him, sobbing convulsively: "My daughter is dying of a terrible illness and — worse even than death itself — she has only a thread of breath left in a body that already seems dead! I beg you by everything to go to the house and give her your blessing, because I have absolute faith that by your hand she will be made well!"

Flustered by such a request in public, Martin tried to draw back, greatly embarrassed: he said that this was completely beyond his powers, that the poor man was mistaken about him and that he had no merit at all for God to work such a miracle through him. But the father would not let go of him, weeping more and more and insisting that he come and see his daughter before she died. In the end even the other bishops present pressed Martin to go, and he finally went to the girl's house. Outside, at the door, an immense crowd gathered to see what the man of God was going to do.

First, turning to his usual weapons on these occasions, Martin knelt down until his forehead touched the ground and remained in prayer. Then he looked at the girl and asked for a little oil; he blessed it and

poured a few drops of that sacred liquid into her mouth — and at that same instant she recovered her speech. Then, little by little, as Martin touched her, her arms and legs came back to life again, until the young woman stood up with a firm step before the whole people.

> **Narrator's Context: Trier, the imperial capital, and the blessing of the oil**
>
> The story here takes place in **Trier** (*Augusta Treverorum*, the present-day German city of **Trier**, also known by its French name, Trèves). In the fourth century, Trier was not just any city: it was the **capital of the Western Roman Empire**, where the Emperor lived and the imperial court sat. That is why we see Martin in the church surrounded by "many other bishops", come from various provinces to deal with the affairs of their dioceses at the palace.
>
> For anyone who studies the history of Christian traditions, this episode is also a very valuable document: it is one of the oldest testimonies in the West to the blessing of oil (*oleum*) by a bishop to heal the gravely ill — a gesture inspired by the Letter of Saint James (5:14) which lies at the origin of the present-day sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

CHAPTER XVII

The former proconsul Tetradius and Martin's fingers in the mouth of a possessed man

At about the same time, a slave of Tetradius, a former proconsul and a figure of great political weight, fell into a violent state of possession that made him suffer horribly. They came to ask Martin to lay his hands on him and cure him, and he told them to bring the young man to him. Only no one could get him out of the room where he was shut up: he hurled himself about with such fury, trying to bite whoever opened the door, that nobody dared to go near him.

Tetradius then went in person to throw himself on his knees at Martin's feet, begging him to come to his house himself to help the young man. Martin answered that he could not enter the house of a pagan — for Tetradius, at that time, still followed the traditional Roman religion. The former proconsul promised him there and then that, if the evil spirit left that slave, he himself would become a Christian. So Martin went to the house, laid his hand on the young man's head and freed him at once from that torment. Seeing this with his own eyes, Tetradius kept his word: he believed in the Lord Jesus, enrolled at once as a catechumen, was baptised shortly afterwards and for the rest of his life felt immense gratitude and esteem for Martin, whom he regarded as the one responsible for his salvation.

In those same days and in the same city, as he was entering the house of another gentleman, Martin stopped dead right at the door and warned that he could see a hideous demon in the inner courtyard. No sooner had he ordered it to be gone than the spirit entered the body of a servant who was at the back of the house, in the kitchen. The poor man went completely out of his mind and began screaming, grinding his teeth and violently biting everyone who came in front of him. Chaos took hold of the whole house: the other servants panicked and everyone fled into the street.

Martin went straight up to the raging man and began by ordering him to keep still. As the man went on grinding his teeth and opened his mouth wide, threatening to tear him apart with his bite, Martin put his own fingers into his mouth and challenged him: "If you have so much power, bite them!" As though a red-hot iron had been pressed to his throat, the possessed man at once drew his jaws back as far as he could, so as not even to graze Martin's fingers. And since the divine punishments were forcing him to leave that body, but he could no longer go out through the mouth, the unclean spirit ended up expelled in a violent discharge of the bowels, leaving a filthy trail on the floor.

Narrator's Context: A high-ranking Roman senator and the unfiltered realism of Antiquity

There are two very curious details in this chapter:

1. **Tetradius, a *vir proconsularis*:** To have "proconsular" status meant belonging to the top of the Roman Senate and having already governed a great province of the Empire. By refusing at first to enter the house of a pagan (recalling Jesus's initial dialogue with the Canaanite woman or with the centurion in the Gospels), Martin leads that proud aristocrat to take a personal step of faith — and all this to save a mere household slave!

2. **The raw realism of the second exorcism:** Anyone reading this chapter today is often surprised by the very graphic ending of the episode! To the religious mentality of the fourth century, since the bishop's consecrated fingers had been inside the servant's mouth, the evil spirit could no longer leave by a passage that had been blessed — and so Sulpicius tells us, without beating about the bush, that it had to leave "from below", by way of a violent intestinal crisis (*fluxu ventris*).

CHAPTER XVIII

The false rumour of the barbarian invasion, the kiss for the leper in Paris and the threads of the tunic

On another occasion, the rumour suddenly spread through the city that the barbarian peoples were on the move to attack, throwing the whole population into panic. Martin then had a possessed man summoned to the church and ordered the spirit to tell the whole truth about that news. It ended up confessing that ten demons together had set that rumour going through the streets, in the hope that the fright would make Martin flee the city; as for the barbarians, attacking had not even crossed their

minds. After this confession, made aloud in the middle of the church, the whole city breathed a sigh of relief and recovered its calm.

In Paris, meanwhile, as Martin was passing through one of the gates in the city wall surrounded by an enormous crowd, a leper appeared with his face completely disfigured by the disease. While everyone drew back full of revulsion, Martin went straight up to him, kissed him on the face and blessed him. The man was cured that instant and, the very next day, appeared in church with his skin clean and healthy, thanking God for the health he had recovered.



At the entrance to the gates of Paris (Lutetia of the Parisii), while the crowd draws away in horror, Bishop Martin goes up to a leper with a disfigured face and tenderly gives him a kiss.

Nor can I fail to mention that even mere threads pulled from his clothing or from his camel-hair tunic cured sick people on countless occasions: it was enough to tie them round the fingers or wear them round the neck to drive illness away from those who were suffering.

Narrator's Context: Rumours of war in the fourth century and the kiss at the gates of Paris

This chapter brings together two very expressive episodes:

1. **A war of rumours on the Roman frontier:** In the Gaul of the late fourth century, with no rapid communications, it took only talk that Germanic tribes had crossed the Rhine for a whole city to take flight. Martin uses an interrogation in the middle of the church to unmask the false rumour and calm the whole population!

2. **"Apud Parisios" — The birth of the name of Paris:** Notice the Latin expression Sulpicius uses to set the scene: *apud Parisios* ("in the land of the Parisii"). We are at the very historical moment when the old Roman name of *Lutetia* is falling out of use to give way to the name of the local Gallic tribe — **Paris**! The gate in the wall where Martin kissed the leper stood at the entrance to the *Île de la Cité*, very close to where the Cathedral of Notre-Dame rises today. In a society where leprosy struck terror and lepers were driven off with stones, the sight of a bishop embracing a disfigured man and kissing him on the cheek was engraved for ever in the memory of the city.

CHAPTER XIX

The letter that cured Arborius's daughter, the eyes of Paulinus of Nola and the fall down the stairs

Arborius, a former Roman prefect and a man of very deep and sincere faith, had a daughter at home wasting away with terrible attacks of quartan fever. It so happened that in those days he received a letter written by Martin; at the exact moment when the fever began to rise again in the girl, her father laid the letter on her chest and, that very second, the fever went down and never came back. Arborius was so struck by what he had seen that he decided there and then to consecrate

his daughter to God, in a life of chastity for ever. He then set out to go and find Martin, took the young woman with him — living proof that he had cured her even at a distance — and absolutely insisted that it should be Martin himself, and no one else, who gave her the veil of consecrated virgins.

Paulinus, for his part — a man who would later become an extraordinary example of Christian life for everyone — began to suffer horrible pains in one eye, to the point where a thick film formed over the pupil and was blinding him. Martin gently passed a small medical brush over his eye, took away all the pain in an instant and gave him back his sight, as perfect as before.

As for Martin himself, he one day had the misfortune to fall from an upper floor and tumble down a broken staircase full of crooked steps, ending up all cut and bruised from head to foot. He was lying in his cell almost at death's door, in unbearable pain, when during the night an angel appeared to him, washing his wounds and spreading a soothing balm over his whole battered body. The next morning, Martin got up so well and so restored that it seemed as though he had never had any fall at all.

But if I set about telling every case here one by one, we should never be done; let us stop at these few examples chosen from among so many others. They are quite enough to show the truth about the most admirable things that happened, without wearying the reader with too many stories.

> **Narrator's Context: Malaria, eye problems and two great names of the Roman aristocracy**
>
> Here we cross paths with two historical personalities very well known from other sources of the period:

1. **Magnus Arborius and the "quartan fever":** Arborius was a high imperial official (*vir praefectorius*, prefect in Rome around 379–380) and nephew of the famous poet Ausonius, of Bordeaux. The "quartan fever" that had attacked his daughter was a serious form of **malaria** (*Plasmodium malariae*), characterised by violent peaks of fever and chills that returned every three days (every "fourth day" in the Roman way of counting, which included the first and the last day).

2. **Saint Paulinus of Nola (354–431):** The "Paulinus" cured of a serious eye complaint (probably a corneal ulcer or a traumatic cataract, touched with a *peniculus*, a small sponge or brush used by ancient doctors) is none other than **Pontius Meropius Paulinus**, an immensely rich senator born in Bordeaux, governor of Campania and the best friend of our author, Sulpicius Severus! Paulinus himself left an account of this cure in his writings; shortly afterwards he sold his immense fortune to give to the poor and went to live at Nola, in southern Italy, becoming one of the greatest Christian poets of Antiquity.

CHAPTER XX

The banquet of the emperor Magnus Maximus: The cup passed to the priest before the emperor

I now come to an episode that may seem smaller beside such great miracles — although, in the degraded and corrupt times we live in today, to see a bishop not bend to the flattery of the imperial court is almost a greater miracle than all the others! When a great many bishops from various provinces gathered at the court of the emperor Maximus — a hard man, full of arrogance after winning the civil war — it was pitiful to see the servile way in which they all did his bidding, lowering the dignity of bishops to the role of mere flatterers of power. Martin alone kept intact the firm bearing of an Apostle! Even when he had to ask the

emperor for clemency for someone, he spoke with such authority that he seemed to be giving an order rather than asking a favour. And however often Maximus invited him to dine with him at the imperial table, Martin always refused, saying bluntly that he could not sit at the table of a man who had removed two legitimate emperors — taking the throne from one and his very life from the other.

Maximus tried to justify himself by every means: he assured him that he had not taken power out of personal ambition, but had been pushed by the soldiers, by the will of God, to govern and to defend himself by force of arms; he added that a victory as swift as his could only have the hand of God behind it, and that none of his enemies had been killed off the field of battle. He insisted so much, between justifications and entreaties, that Martin ended up agreeing to go to the dinner — leaving the emperor overjoyed at having finally persuaded him.

The banquet looked like a great feast day and brought the greatest figures of the Empire together at table: Evodius was there, prefect and consul at the same time, one of the most just men who ever lived; and there were also two counts with the very highest military powers, who were the emperor's brother and his paternal uncle. Between these last two they seated the priest who was accompanying Martin; Martin himself was seated on a low stool placed right beside the emperor's place.

Halfway through the dinner, as court protocol required, the cup-bearer brought a cup of wine to the emperor. Full of deference, Maximus ordered it to be taken first to the holy bishop, for he was most anxious then to receive the cup directly from Martin's hands. Only Martin, after taking a sip, held the cup out to the priest who had come with him! He judged that no one in that room had greater dignity to drink straight after a bishop, and that he would betray his conscience if he put the emperor himself or his relatives ahead of a priest.



At the imperial banquet in Trier, seated on a small stool beside the emperor Magnus Maximus, Martin drinks from the royal cup and passes it first to the priest accompanying him before giving it to the sovereign, to the astonishment of the court.

Incredible as it may seem, both the emperor and all the guests were so impressed by that freedom of spirit that they liked the very gesture that had pushed them into second place! In a short time nothing else was talked of in the whole palace: at the emperor's own table, Martin had had the courage to do what no other bishop dared to do even at the dinners of second-rank governors.

Later, and long before war broke out, Martin warned that same Maximus of what would happen to him if he went ahead with his plan to invade Italy and attack the young emperor Valentinian: he would win the first battle against him, but would die a short time afterwards. And that is exactly what we ourselves saw happen: as soon as Maximus entered Italy, Valentinian had to flee; but after about a year he reorganised his army, besieged Maximus within the walls of Aquileia, captured him and had him executed.

Narrator's Context: Roman high politics and the breach of protocol at Trier

Set in the imperial palace at Trier around **385 or 386**, this scene is one of the most celebrated moments in the relationship between political power and the Church in Antiquity:

1. **Who were the "two emperors" Martin spoke of? Magnus Maximus** was a general born in Hispania and proclaimed emperor by the troops of Britain in 383. He crossed the English Channel, defeated and had killed the young legitimate emperor **Gratian** (*from whom he took his life*) and put pressure on his half-brother, the adolescent **Valentinian II** (*from whom he took part of the Empire*). All the figures seated at the table are historical: **Flavius Evodius** was Praetorian Prefect of Gaul and Roman Consul in the year 386.

2. **The scandal of the cup (*patera*):** Under the rigid rules of the imperial court, to drink first from the Emperor's cup and hand it back to him in person was the greatest distinction a guest could receive. By passing the cup to his simple priest (*presbyter*), over the heads of the Emperor, the Consul and the imperial Counts, Martin affirmed without saying a word that the things of the spirit do not bow before military or political power.

3. **What had Martin gone to Maximus's court to do?** From another book by Sulpicius Severus (the *Chronicle*), we know that Martin had gone to Trier to try to save from death the Hispanic bishop Priscillian and his disciples, accused of heresy by other scheming bishops — fighting to the limit to prevent the State from executing people over religious questions.

CHAPTER XXI

Conversations with the angels and the Devil with the ox horn covered in blood

It is also known for certain that Martin often saw angels, even conversing directly with them. As for the Devil, he saw him so clearly before him that he could never slip past unnoticed, whether he appeared

just as he was or took on the most varied disguises in order to do harm. Realising that there was no trick capable of deceiving Martin, the Devil took his revenge by turning up left, right and centre just to insult him, since he could not set traps for him.

One day he burst into Martin's cell letting out a hideous roar, holding in his right hand, all smeared with blood, a bloodstained ox horn. Delighted with the misfortune he had just caused, he shouted at him: "Where is your power now, Martin? I have just killed one of yours!"

Martin immediately called the monks, told them what the Devil had just said and sent them to go through all the cells one by one to see who was missing or who had met with some misfortune. They came back shortly afterwards to say that the monks were all well, but that a peasant hired by the day to bring firewood in a cart had gone to the woods that morning. Martin at once asked some of the brothers to go and look for him with all speed. Not far from the monastery, they came upon the poor man stretched out on the ground, already almost dead. With the little breath he had left, he explained to the monks what had happened: as he was tightening the leather straps that had worked loose on the yoke of oxen, one of the animals tossed its head hard and drove a horn into his groin. A few moments later he died.

It is for each reader to reflect on the reasons why God allowed the Devil to have a hand in a misfortune like this. What was astonishing in Martin was the clarity with which, both in this case and in many similar ones, he knew of things long before they happened, or at once received an inner warning to tell the brothers what was going on at a distance.

> **Narrator's Context: The firewood day-labourer and Sulpicius's frankness in the face of tragedy**
>
> There are two very beautiful human details in this chapter:

1. **"One of yours":** Since the monks of Marmoutier lived withdrawn in prayer (and the youngest spent their days copying books), the monastery hired rural workers from the area (*mercede conducti*, paid by the day) to fetch firewood from the woods in ox-carts. Even though he was not a monk, that humble worker was part of Martin's spiritual family.

2. **No easy answers to suffering:** Faced with the tragic death of that man in an accident at work, Sulpicius Severus does not try to invent a moralising lesson or to blame the victim. He has the honesty to leave the question open: *"It is for each reader to reflect on the reasons why God allowed the Devil to have a hand in a misfortune like this"* (*Viderit is, quo judicio Domini…*).

CHAPTER XXII

The disguises of Jupiter, Mercury and Venus — and the promise of forgiveness to the Devil himself

On many other occasions, trying to catch the saint out with a thousand ruses, the Devil appeared before his eyes in the most diverse guises: now he took the form of Jupiter, far more often that of Mercury, and not infrequently he also turned up with the features of Venus or Minerva. Never losing his serenity, Martin always defended himself with the sign of the cross and with prayer.

Bands of demons were also frequently heard shouting insolent insults at him; but since he knew that all this was nothing but lies without rhyme or reason, Martin paid no attention to the accusations. Some monks even told of having once heard a demon confront Martin in an arrogant tone, asking him why he had accepted into the monastery some brothers who, in the past, had stained the grace of baptism with grave errors and sins before repenting — and he set about reeling off, one by one, the old sins of each of them.

Those monks said that Martin answered him flatly that the mistakes of the past are wiped clean when someone sincerely changes his life and that, by the mercy of God, whoever stops sinning has a right to forgiveness. When the Devil countered that great sinners do not deserve clemency and that God does not forgive again those who fall after baptism, Martin is said to have given him this extraordinary answer:

“If you yourself, wretched one, were to stop persecuting humanity and repent of the evil you have done, even now, when the day of the Last Judgement is so near, I have such trust in the Lord Jesus Christ that I would promise you the forgiveness of God!”

What admirable boldness of trust in the goodness of God! Even without having the authority to guarantee such a promise, Martin showed in those words the immensity of his heart. And since we are speaking of the Devil and his snares, it is worth telling here an episode that took place very close by: even though it did not happen directly to Martin, it clearly reveals his spiritual strength and deserves to be recorded, so that everyone may be on their guard if a similar case should ever arise.

Narrator’s Context: The old Roman gods and Saint Martin’s boldest sentence

This chapter holds two striking moments of fourth-century spirituality:

1. **Jupiter, Mercury, Venus and Minerva:** For the Christians of Antiquity, the gods of the Roman pantheon were not merely poetic figures of mythology; they were seen as deceiving spiritual forces that used those masks to tempt people — Jupiter through the ambition for power, Mercury through cunning and money, Venus through seduction and Minerva through intellectual vanity.

2. **Promising forgiveness to Satan himself:** In Martin’s time there were very rigid circles within the Church which held that anyone who committed a grave sin after being baptised could never again be forgiven. Martin not only welcomes men with a difficult past into the monastery with open arms, but goes so far as to tell the Devil himself that even he would be forgiven by Christ if he repented! It was so bold an affirmation of the infinite mercy of God

(close to the thought of the theologian Origen) that Sulpicius Severus feels the need to add a prudent caveat at once for his more orthodox readers: *"Even without having the authority to guarantee such a promise, Martin showed in those words the immensity of his heart."*

CHAPTER XXIII

The story of Clarus, the false prophet Anatolius and the tunic that vanished into thin air

There was a young man from a very distinguished family called Clarus — who was later ordained priest and today rests in the peace of God after a holy death — who had left everything behind to go and live near Martin, quickly attaining a deep faith and an exemplary life. Clarus had built a small hermitage near the bishop's monastery, where several monks were already living with him. One day a young man called Anatolius knocked at their door: he said he was a monk, passed himself off as the humblest and most innocent person in the world, and ended up staying to live there in community with the others.

After some time, he began telling his companions that he received regular visits from angels who came to talk with him. Since no one believed it, he found a way of impressing several monks with a number of strange phenomena. Before long he was openly declaring that the angels were constantly coming and going with messages between him and God, and demanding to be treated as a true prophet. Clarus, however, never let himself be taken in. Furious at not being able to convince him, Anatolius began to threaten him with the wrath of God and with imminent punishments for doubting the word of a saint.

Finally, one day he came out with this solemn announcement: “Know that tonight the Lord is going to send me a white tunic from Heaven! Tomorrow I shall walk among you wearing it, and there you will have the proof that I carry within me the power of God, dressed in a garment that comes from the hands of God Himself!”

Needless to say, the whole community was in a state of great excitement, waiting for what would happen. Now, around midnight, the entire monastery seemed to shake to its foundations, as if people were stamping hard on the ground. From Anatolius’s cell came repeated flashes of bright light, accompanied by the noise of hurried footsteps going to and fro and by a confused murmur of many voices. Suddenly there was silence; Anatolius opened the door, called over one of the monks outside, named Sabatius, and showed him the tunic he was wearing.

Open-mouthed, Sabatius ran to wake the others. Clarus himself came at once to see what was going on; they brought a lighted lamp and all set about examining the garment in detail. The fabric was extraordinarily soft, pure white and edged with bands of brilliant purple — but however hard they looked, no one could tell what fibre or what wool it was made of. Even so, both to the eye and to the touch of the fingers, it seemed beyond a shadow of doubt to be a real tunic.

Prudently, Clarus asked the brothers to spend the rest of the night praying that God would show them clearly what lay behind all this; and so they remained until dawn, singing hymns and psalms. As soon as the sun came up, Clarus took Anatolius by the right hand, determined to bring him before Martin, quite certain that no trick of the Devil’s could deceive the bishop’s eyes. At that instant the wretched man panicked: he began digging in his heels and shouting that he had express orders from Heaven not to appear before Martin! And when the other monks seized

him to take him by force, the tunic vanished into thin air in the blink of an eye, right between the hands of those who were holding him.

Who can doubt that here, too, Martin's spiritual power was seen, to the point where the Devil could not even keep up his deception once he realised he would have to face the bishop's gaze?

> **Narrator's Context: Hidden vanity and the tunic of the Roman senators**
>
> **Clarus** was one of Martin's best-loved disciples (he would die a few days before his master, in November 397, and Sulpicius remembered him with great emotion in his letters). Notice a revealing detail of Anatolius's "heavenly" tunic: it was *"pure white and edged with bands of brilliant purple"* (*candore eximio, micanti purpura*). In Roman society, the white tunic with purple stripes (*tunica laticlavia*) was the exclusive dress of senators and high magistrates!
>
> In other words, even shut away in a poor monastery, Anatolius's repressed desire for importance gave itself away when he imagined that God was dressing him like a Roman senator. And notice how everything is cleared up at Marmoutier: neither the eyes nor the hands of the monks, by the light of the lamp, managed to catch the illusion out, but the mere prospect of facing Martin's calm, clear gaze was enough for the whole performance to collapse!

CHAPTER XXIV

The false Christs in Hispania and the Devil dressed as Emperor: "I will not recognise Christ without the marks of the Cross"

As it happens, it was noticed that in those same years there appeared in Hispania a young man who, after winning fame among the people with various wonders, became so puffed up with vanity that he began by saying he was the prophet Elijah. As many people believed him without asking questions, he took a further step and started declaring that he

was Christ himself — deceiving so many that even a bishop called Rufus knelt to worship him as though he were the Lord, a scandal that later cost him his office as bishop. Several brothers also told us that, at exactly the same time, another man had arisen in the East claiming to be Saint John. Seeing false prophets of this kind appear everywhere, one can well understand that the coming of the Antichrist cannot be far off, and that he is already preparing the ground through these figures.

But I cannot fail to tell here how subtly the Devil tried to deceive Martin himself at about that same time. One day, while Martin was praying alone in his cell, there appeared, standing before him, a figure bathed in and surrounded by a blaze of purple light — designed down to the last detail to dazzle the onlooker with that false brilliance. He was wearing an imperial robe, on his head a crown of gold set with precious stones, on his feet shoes overlaid with gold, and he had so serene an air and so radiant a smile that he looked like anything but the Devil.

Coming face to face with that dazzling apparition, Martin was at first left without reaction, and for a good while no one said a word. In the end it was the Devil who broke the silence: “Recognise, Martin, who it is that stands here before you! I am Christ: as I am about to come down to earth, I wanted to appear to you first.”

Martin remained silent, answering him nothing. The Devil then returned to the charge, bolder still: “Martin, why do you hesitate to believe, when you see me with your own eyes? I am Christ!”

At that point, enlightened inwardly by the Holy Spirit to understand that he had before him the Devil and not the Lord, Martin answered him: “The Lord Jesus never said that he would return dressed in purple and with a royal crown on his head. I will never believe that Christ has come unless I see Him with the appearance and the features with which He suffered in the Passion, bearing on His body the marks of the Cross!”



In the half-light of his cell, before the Devil wrapped in purple light, royal robe, golden shoes and a crown of precious stones, Martin answers: "I will never believe that Christ has come unless I see Him with the appearance with which He suffered in the Passion, bearing on His body the marks of the Cross!"

No sooner had he heard these words than the figure dissolved in a second like smoke, leaving the cell filled with so nauseating a stench that there remained not the slightest doubt that it really was the Devil. And so that no one should think this is some invented legend, let me say at once that I heard this story, exactly as I have just told it, from Martin's own lips.

> **Narrator's Context: The high point of the book — Against a Christ dressed as Emperor**
>
> For many historians and thinkers, this Chapter XXIV — told directly by Martin to Sulpicius Severus — is the most profound and topical page of the whole biography.
>
> Notice first the mention of **Hispania** (the present-day Iberian Peninsula): at the end of the fourth century an intense end-of-the-world atmosphere

prevailed in the Iberian provinces, to the point where a local bishop called Rufus let himself be carried away by a charlatan who claimed to be Christ.

But notice above all **the clothes the Devil chooses in order to pass himself off as Jesus**: a purple robe (*vestis regia*), a diadem of gold and precious stones (*diadema*) and footwear covered in gold (*calcei auro illiti*). Piece by piece, it was the ceremonial dress of the Roman Emperors of the fourth century! As the Empire became officially Christian, many bishops used to palaces were beginning to imagine Christ as an Imperial Monarch, all gold and earthly triumph. Martin's answer crosses the centuries like a flash of lightning: a Christ full of luxury and power, cut off from those who suffer and without the wounds of the Cross, is a forgery. For Martin, the true face of Christ remains that of the poor, freezing man to whom he gave half his cloak at the gates of Amiens.

CHAPTER XXV

The Author's visit to Saint Martin: The bishop who washed his biographer's feet

Indeed, I had long been hearing about Martin's faith, his way of life and his inner strength, and I carried within me an immense wish to meet him in person; so I took to the road with enormous joy, on a journey made expressly to visit him. And since I was already nursing the desire to write his biography, I took the opportunity to ask him directly about some of these things — as far as his modesty would let me ask — and gathered the rest from those who had witnessed the episodes or knew of them at first hand.

You would hardly believe the humility and affection with which he received me on that occasion! He was sincerely moved and full of joy in the Lord to see that we held him in such esteem that we had set out on purpose just to see him. Poor sinner that I am — I am almost ashamed

to tell it! — after doing us the honour of inviting us to eat at his table, it was he himself who poured water over my hands before the meal; and, as evening fell, he himself knelt down to wash our feet! I did not even have the courage to refuse or to stop him: such great moral authority made itself felt in him that to disobey him seemed to me almost a grave fault.



At the end of the afternoon at Marmoutier, the elderly bishop Martin kneels on the stone floor to wash with his own hands the travel-weary feet of his biographer and friend, Sulpicius Severus.

In all the conversations he had with us, he spoke to us of one thing only: how necessary it was to let go of the illusions of the world and the burdens of this life in order to follow the Lord Jesus with free hands and a light heart. And he held up to us again and again, as the best living example of our days, the great Paulinus — of whom I spoke a little while ago — who had sold endless estates to follow Christ and had been almost the only man of our generation to carry out to the letter everything the Gospel asks. It was to him that we should look, Martin insisted, it was his path that we should follow! He said that our age was

enormously fortunate to have a living proof of such faith and courage: by selling everything to give to the poor as Jesus had asked, an immensely rich man like Paulinus had shown in practice that it was possible to do what everyone thought impossible.

And what firmness, what nobility there was in Martin's words and conversation! What impressive lucidity, what quickness and what clarity he had in explaining the most difficult passages of the Bible! Since I know that many people are sceptical about this — I myself have seen people turn up their noses even when I was the one telling them — I swear before Jesus and the faith we share that never in my life have I heard from anyone's lips so much wisdom, so much intelligence or speech so clear and so pure. It is true that, beside Martin's moral greatness, praising the way he spoke seems a small thing; but it is astonishing all the same that a man who never attended the great schools should not have lacked even that gift.

Narrator's Context: When the visit changes the writer's life

In this chapter, **Sulpicius Severus** himself enters the story in the first person! Between **394 and 396 AD**, Sulpicius — at the time a young widower from a very rich family of Aquitaine, trained in Law and Oratory at Bordeaux — travelled to Tours to meet the old bishop Martin (who would by then have been about 60 or 80 years old).

For a Roman aristocrat, to arrive from a journey and see the master of the house — a venerated bishop at that — kneel on the floor to wipe the dust from his sandals and wash his feet (a service reserved for the humblest slaves!) was an inner upheaval that changed his life for ever: back home, Sulpicius too left his public career to found a religious community on his estate at Primuliacum.

Notice, too, Sulpicius's passionate defence of Martin's intelligence: the elitist bishops of Gaul looked down on him for being a *homo illiteratus* — an "unlettered man", that is, a former soldier raised in the barracks who had not studied classical rhetoric in the great Roman schools. Sulpicius, who was one

> of the most brilliant writers of his time, makes a point of swearing to his readers that he had never heard anyone express himself with such clarity, purity of language and depth as that old soldier!

CHAPTER XXVI

The inner portrait: The blacksmith's anvil and his patience with his own priests

This book is nearing its end and it is time to conclude — not because there is nothing more to tell about Martin, but because I myself, like those bad poets who run out of breath on the final stretch of their work, feel crushed by the greatness of the subject.

For if the visible episodes of his life can still be put into words, well or badly, when it comes to his inner life, his silent daily routine and that heart permanently joined to God, I say it in all frankness: there are no human words that suffice to describe them. That calm, balanced constancy in his fasts, that endurance in the nights spent awake praying as though it were day, never wasting a single minute away from the service of God, never falling into idleness or losing himself in worldly matters, eating and sleeping only the bare minimum for the body to stay on its feet — I confess without exaggeration that not even Homer himself, as the saying goes, were he to return from the world of the dead, could portray all this as it deserves, so far does Martin's life exceed what a book can hold.

Not a single hour, not a brief moment went by without his being at prayer or immersed in reading; indeed, even when he was reading or had some other task in hand, he never disconnected his heart from prayer. He brought to mind the habitual gesture of blacksmiths who, while shaping the red-hot iron, now and then give a light blow on the

empty anvil to rest the arm without losing the rhythm: so too Martin, even when he seemed busy dealing with other matters, went on praying inwardly all the time.

What an extraordinary, luminous man, incapable of pretence or malice! He never condemned anyone, never paid back in kind those who did him harm. He had acquired such great patience in the face of insults that, although he was the bishop of the diocese, even the lowest-ranking clerics often treated him with disrespect and nothing happened to them: never on that account did he remove any of them from his post or cease to treat them with all affection.

> **Narrator's Context: The beat of the anvil and the insults inside his own church**
>
> This chapter leaves us one of the most beautiful images in ancient literature: the **blacksmith's anvil** (*incus fabrorum*). In the old forges (and still in traditional workshops until very recently!), while the smith turned the piece of iron in the fire with his tongs, he let the hammer give a loose, rhythmic tap directly on the iron of the anvil so as not to break the cadence of his arm. For Sulpicius, praying was not, in Martin, a separate task: it was the constant beat of the heart in the midst of the whole of life.
>
> And who were these "lowest-ranking clerics" (*infimi clerici*) who insulted Martin within the diocese of Tours itself without his punishing them? The most famous case (told later by Sulpicius in his *Dialogues*) was that of a young priest called **Brictius** (*Brice*), who mocked Martin's visions and poor clothing out loud. When the indignant monks asked the bishop to throw him out, Martin answered only: *"If Christ put up with Judas, why should I not put up with Brictius?"* — and added that one day Brictius would repent and would succeed him as bishop of Tours, which did indeed happen in 397!

CHAPTER XXVII

Conclusion: A luminous face and the answer to the envious bishops

No one ever saw Martin lose his temper, no one ever saw him out of control, cast down by sadness or helpless with laughter: he was always the same serene man, with so luminous a joy stamped on his face that he seemed to be living already beyond the human condition. On his lips there was only the name of Christ; in his heart there was room for nothing but goodness, peace and compassion. Often he would even weep for the sins of those who said the vilest things about him behind his back and who, while he lived quietly in his corner doing no one any harm, bit him with the venomous tongues of vipers.

The truth is that we ourselves came to know some of those men full of envy of his life and his integrity — people who hated to see in Martin the qualities they did not have in themselves nor had the courage to imitate. And the saddest and most shameful thing — it is painful even to write it! — is that those few persecutors were almost all bishops! But there is no point in giving their names here, however much they go about barking around us: it is quite enough that, if any of them reads these pages and sees that the cap fits, he should be filled with shame; for if he starts shouting and flies into a rage, he will be confessing all by himself that it was he we were talking about — when perhaps we actually had others in mind!

For the rest, if there are people of that sort who come to hate us too for defending a man like Martin, we accept that hostility as an honour. I am absolutely certain that this little book will bring joy to all good people of sincere faith. As for the others, if anyone reads these pages with ill will and disbelief, let him settle it with his own conscience. For my part, my conscience is quite at ease: I wrote this book moved only by the

certainty of what I ascertained and by love of Christ, I related well-attested facts and I told the truth. And I very much hope that God has a reward in store not only for those who read this story, but above all for those who let themselves be touched by it and believe.

> **Narrator's Context: A book written to defend a man who was still alive**
>
> We have reached the last line of Sulpicius Severus's work — and there is an extraordinary fact here: when Sulpicius lays down his pen at the end of this Chapter XXVII, in the first months of the year **397**, **Saint Martin was still alive!**
>
> That is why these final chapters speak of him in the present: the book was born as a passionate defence of Martin against the worldly bishops of Gaul who despised him in the corridors of power. Notice the fine irony of the final thrust — worthy of a great courtroom lawyer: Sulpicius does not write the name of any envious bishop so that, if one of them protests in public on reading the book, he will end up putting the cap on in front of everyone!

NARRATOR'S EPILOGUE

What happened next: The death of Saint Martin and the origin of the 11th of November

Why does Sulpicius Severus's book end without telling of the death of Saint Martin? For the simplest reason of all: when the manuscript was finished and went off to Desiderius's house, in the spring or summer of 397, Martin was still walking the roads of Gaul.

The end of his journey, however, was just around the corner — and it was Sulpicius Severus himself who told of it shortly afterwards in three unforgettable letters (the *Letters to Eusebius, to the deacon Aurelius and to his mother-in-law Bassula*).

At the end of October or in the first days of November of that same year **397**, already very worn by the years, Martin learned that the priests of the parish of **Candes** (today *Candes-Saint-Martin*, where the river Vienne flows into the Loire) were at odds with one another. True to his principle of never leaving a conflict unhealed, he set out at once to make peace between them.

After managing to reconcile the clergy of Candes, as he was preparing to return to his beloved monastery of Marmoutier, he suddenly felt his strength fail him, struck down by a very high fever. His disciples gathered round his pallet bathed in tears: *"Father, why are you leaving us? To whom are you entrusting us, orphans as we shall be? Ravening wolves will fall upon your flock!"* Torn between the wish to depart at last to God and sorrow at leaving his monks unprotected, Martin then spoke one of the most famous sentences of his life: **"Lord, if your people still need me, I do not refuse the work (*non recuso laborem*); your will be done."**

In the last days of the fever, he would not even allow a simple straw mattress to be put under his body: he insisted on dying stretched out on his back on the ground, on a layer of **ashes and a rough penitential tunic**, saying to his disciples: *"A Christian should not die otherwise than on ashes."* When the priests wanted to turn him a little on his side to ease the pains of his body, he asked them: *"Let me be, brothers, let me go on looking at heaven rather than at earth, so that my spirit may already be getting used to the road it is going to take to the Lord."* In his very last moments, sensing the presence of the Devil standing beside him, he confronted him for the last time: *"What are you doing here, cruel beast? You will find nothing of yours in me, accursed one: I am going to be welcomed into the arms of Abraham!"* And so he departed in peace, on **8 November 397**.

The body was taken by boat up the river Loire to the city of **Tours**, accompanied by a crowd such as had never been seen — Sulpicius tells us that the monks alone numbered close to two thousand, besides countless consecrated women and the entire populations of the towns and villages, who walked along the banks singing psalms as the boat passed.



A November morning in 397 on the river Loire: the boat carrying the body of Saint Martin from Candes to Tours is accompanied on both banks by thousands of monks and townspeople with torches in their hands, under the golden light of "Saint Martin's Summer".

The solemn burial in Tours took place three days later, on **11 November 397**. It was exactly that date — the day when Martin's body was laid in the earth on the threshold of the European winter, at the time when work in the fields was coming to an end, the new wine was being tasted in the cellars and the season's chestnuts were being roasted — that was engraved for ever in the memory of the whole of Europe as **Saint Martin's Day**.

About this illustrated digital edition

This edition in contemporary English presents, complete and in a fluent and accessible form, the original Latin work of **Sulpicius Severus**, *De vita beati Martini* (*Patrologia Latina*, vol. 20, ed. J. P. Migne, 1845 / Wikisource).

Besides the contemporary version of all 27 chapters and of the Dedicatory Letter to Desiderius, the book includes 14 illustrations (one historical map and 13 historical paintings) and the Narrator's notes on the historical, social, geographical and spiritual context of the late fourth century.

The English translation was made from the contemporary Portuguese edition, *A Vida de São Martinho*, and is published under the same licence.

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