

Reflections on the Life of St. Arsenius, Anchorite.

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ON the 17th of July the Church celebrates the Feasts of two Saints, who form a striking contrast to each other, and exemplify the two extremes of the active and contemplative life. St. Vincent de Paul appears to us as the very type of active charity, while St. Arsenius withdrew himself as far as possible from the world, and during fifty-five years, which was more than the latter half of his life, took no active part in the affairs of this world. There was a marked difference between the careers of these two great men. The one, St. Vincent, was born in obscurity, but gradually rose to the highest distinction by the practice of that virtue which shed such brilliant light before the world; the other, born in distinction and placed in the highest honors, flies from the world and buries himself in obscurity.

Both appeared at the courts of sovereigns, the one to draw all men to God, the other to make the sacrifice of earthly dignities; the one finds the sphere of his activity in conversation with men, the other shuns, as much as possible, the society of his fellow-creatures.

But, in spite of these differences, both St. Vincent and St. Arsenius practice the same virtues. In both, the motive power that impels them is the love of God and the desire of eternal salvation; both are eminent for the practice of humility; both shun glory, which, nevertheless, follows them in spite of themselves.

These two saints, so different from each other in their exterior life, and yet so like unto each other in their inner virtues, are both the products of the same supernatural society, both the children of the same mother, the Church of Jesus Christ. Their lives show how grace works upon nature, and how circumstances affect the lives of saints as well as of ordinary individuals. They teach us also that God conducts His saints along different roads to the same glorious end.

The life of the silent, contemplative

Saint Arsenius, will form the subject of this essay. We know that the Saint was a Roman by birth, and that he was highly connected, but of his life little has been handed down to us. He was educated in learning and piety, and was well skilled, not only in the Holy Scriptures, but also in the profane sciences, and versed in Latin and Greek literature. From an early period of his life he seems to have been inclined to solitude, for we find him leading a retired life at Rome with his sister. He was then in deacon's orders. This obscurity, however, did not last long, for he was summoned thence, at the recommendation of the Pope, by the Emperor Theodosius the Great, to become the tutor of his children. Arsenius was received at the Byzantine court with all marks of distinction, raised to the rank of senator, and loaded with honors. No one at the court wore richer apparel, none had more sumptuous furniture than he. He had at his disposition no less than a thousand richly clad servants. Arsenius spent eleven years at the Court of Theodosius. But earthly honors could not satisfy him. His inclination for a retired life had always continued, and he had for a long time earnestly prayed to know the will of God. One day he heard a voice saying to him: "Arsenius, flee the company of men, and thou shalt be saved." At that time the Egyptian deserts were peopled by a host of solitaries, who drew upon themselves the admiration of the world. The fame of an Anthony and a Pacannius had gone abroad, and those who desired higher perfection fled to the great masters of the spiritual life in the deserts of Nitria, Scete and Palestine. St. Arsenius, tired of the world, and obedient to a higher call, sailed to Alexandria, and proceeded to the desert of Scete, where he embraced an anchoretical life. He was then in the fortieth year of his age. Fifty-five years he spent in this obscurity, conversing as little as possible with men, and leading a life of penance until his death, about the year 449.

Here we have before our eyes the example of a man of learning and talents, a man highly esteemed by the world, who suddenly leaves all that was most desirable to human nature, in spite of the wish of emperors to retain him at their court, in order to plunge into the depths of a wilder-