

MAXIMS AND EXAMPLES OF THE SAINTS.

Continued from our last.

But to return to my narrative : We knocked at the convent gate, whereupon a venerable monk, with a long silvery beard and cheerful look, came out to receive us. He saluted us right graciously, bowing himself to the ground, which reminded us of the simplicity of patriarchal times. Then he conducted us to the church, where we saw many of the hermits kneeling, with their hands joined, in profound meditation. The stillness pervading every thing was sublime : one had left the noisy world, one beheld men living a life of angels upon earth. Oh ! how blessed is this form of divine life ! how enviable is the lot of those, who have received from God the grace to embrace it ; what peace, what tranquility, what recollection, what union of the soul with God ! O, angelical state ! O, heaven upon earth ! what tongue can ever praise thee as thou deservest ?

But in describing the holy inmates of this sacred cloister, the beauties of the church itself must not be passed by. It is a noble building of considerable size, the interior is entirely encrusted over with marbles, and adorned with precious stones, the gifts of faithful nobles and princes. There are many side chapels with splendid altars, adorned with flowers, and over them devout pictures. The massive candlesticks and lamps of silver form no mean ornament in this solemn temple. But who shall describe the grandeur of the sacred chant ? the pealing of the organ, the sonorous voices of the monks, the clear high notes of the angelical novices, whose youthful beauty and devout faces beamed with the joys of Heaven ? O, how blessed are they who thus bear part with the heavenly choirs, in the unceasing praise of the Eternal ? And thrice happy the land, that has received the grace to present so lovely an offering to the Lord of the universe ? This suggests an objection often advanced by those unfortunate souls, who have had the misery to be born out of the fold of the holy Catholic Church ; they continually ask of what use to the world are such monastic institutions ? Of what use indeed ? Let him, who has been taught by the sacred scriptures the efficacy of prayer, answer this question. Does not the book of Genesis record the power of Abraham's intercession, and the gracious promise that ten just souls should save even the guilty Sodom ? How often was not Jerusalem pardoned for the sake of holy king David ? What was not the force of king Hezekiah's prayer ? And did not the temporal prosperity of the people of God depend upon the merits of the prophet Elias ? And does not S. James declare that the fervent prayer of the just man availeth much ? And shall we presume to question that Christian states have

owed their safety and prosperity to the prayers of these holy recluses, of men who endeavour to live only for God, and who seek to serve his Divine Majesty with the purity of angels, and the most sublime perfection ? And can it be doubted that such a state of life is pleasing to God and conducive to sanctification ? Those, at least, who have read of Elias, who have heard of S. John the Baptist in the desert, or who have remarked how the holy gospels record that our Lord used to retire for the purpose of prayer to solitary places, to mountains and gardens, will not doubt it. In the primitive ages of the church, with what fervour was the monastic state embraced ! All ages, sexes, and ranks, eagerly entered into a rule of life, which was so calculated to secure salvation. The deserts of Egypt were peopled with recluses ; and all over the east and west, wherever the gospel was received, crowds of holy souls attested the faith of the church on this point. Even before the birth of Christ, men, who were guided by the sole light of reason, confessed the force of this truth ; many of the heathen philosophers taught the excellence of a solitary life, and that the perpetual contemplation of the chief good was the most sublime employment for man. The objection of some misguided sectaries against celibacy and abstinence from flesh meat, as fulfilling the prediction of S. Paul, that seducing spirits should arise forbidding to marry and to eat meats, is really too childish to reply to. The more learned commentators of the Church of England have ever interpreted that text, as referring to sects of heretics, who in the early ages of the church declared that marriage was unlawful, and that certain kinds of meats were unclean. That profound divine of the Anglican church, Mr. Robert Nelson, in his learned works on the Fasts and Festivals, admirably refutes this objection. "It cannot be supposed," says he, "that by abstaining from meats, S. Paul should mean the duty of fasting : because that was observed by devout men, and acceptable to God, both under the Old and New Testament ; and our Saviour himself hath given directions concerning the performance of it, in his admirable Sermon upon the Mount. And our apostle practised it also upon several occasions. Therefore, it is most probable he doth therein condemn the opinions of some ancient heretics, that departed from the faith, who as they excluded those from salvation that engaged in matrimony, so they held the eating the flesh of any living creatures unlawful ; a doctrine very likely borrowed from Pythagoras and his followers, being defended with such variety of learning by Porphyry."* Nor indeed is any other interpretation of those words of S. Paul consistent

*Nelson's Fasts and Feasts Part II. Inq. concerning Fasts p. 367.