

LIFE OF BLESSED PEREGRINE OF FORLÌ

in the humanist transcription of Nicholas Borghese (1483)

Introduction

The most authoritative life of Saint Peregrine is without doubt his *Life* or *Legenda*, written about 1350, shortly after his death which tradition places about 1345. With all probability it was written by a Servite friar who knew Peregrine personally or who had gathered information from eye witnesses.

At the present time we do not have the original text of this *Legenda* of Saint Peregrine. It was written in medieval Latin which was in use in the fourteenth century. We do, however, possess a transcription of this *Legenda* in classical humanistic Latin written not later than 1483 by Nicholas Borghese (1432-1500), a noted statesman and humanist of Siena. Besides the life of Saint Peregrine he became interested in the lives of other Servite saints and blessed. He composed a biography of Blessed James Philip of Faenza, through whose intercession he was cured of a type of dark depression. And since the friars in Faenza had given him such warm hospitality he agreed to write also the lives of Saint Philip Benizi, Blessed Joachim of Siena, and Blessed Francis of Siena.

1. From detailed analysis of the manner in which Borghese used his sources it is possible to reach the following conclusions. The subject matter is given substantially in its entirety and in the same order as the original.

2. For the sake of brevity, the author makes frequent omissions. For example:

a. The miracles which the saint or blessed worked during his lifetime, which are quite numerous in the original texts, are reduced to one or two. No more than four of the miracles worked after death are given.

b. Elements of Marian theology are frequently omitted or notably abbreviated.

c. Even biblical quotations are often omitted.

3. Out of reverence for a classical outline, Borghese organizes the material chosen from the sources into three periods. The first period is that preceding birth, with information about his place of origin and parents, and at times the future holiness of the child is foreseen. Second, the period of his life, with episodes of his infancy, adolescence, signs foretelling his greatness, entrance into the Order, testimony of his holiness as proven by signs and miracles, and his death, usually announced by divine omens. Third, the period after death, characterized by miracles.

4. Borghese transcribes his sources in a sober, faithful, even servile way, using various synthetic and literary devices. For example: a series of episodes or long sentences are summarized on the basis of qualitative value; or they are synthesized with recourse to relative clauses and participles, to indirect discourse rather than direct.

In conclusion: Borghese follows his sources scrupulously, adding nothing, even the smallest amount of his own. The omissions, as we have said, impoverish the biblical and Marian aspects. Nevertheless, what he conserves of his original texts is interpreted accurately according to the texts themselves. His is simply a literary dressing. The medieval Latin of the sources given to him were thought at that time to be outdated and little attractive to the renewed tastes of the Renaissance, and so the medieval Latin was converted into the harmonious and bright Latin of classical antiquity. Once this conversion was made, it often happened that the original texts fell into disuse, even to the point of disappearing.

Unfortunately, the original text which Borghese used for the life of Saint Peregrine is still unknown to us, but I would like to reiterate the judgment I formulated years ago: the scrupulosity,

which Borghese shows when we can check his work, is such as “to guarantee morally the same carefulness of method in transcribing even a source unknown to us, such as the one from which he wrote the life of Saint Peregrine”.

That Borghese had a written source before him can be seen from external and especially internal arguments.

Two external arguments are of noteworthy importance: the commitment of Prior General Christopher Tornielli of Giustinopoli, who died 16 June 1485, thanks to whom many compositions about the saints of the Order were written at this time; and the comparison of the life of Saint Peregrine by Nicholas Borghese with that written by Pino di James Cedri of Forli in 1528, using an authentic text of the same medieval life which at that time was found in the Servite priory of Forli. This text was lost about 1594 “because of the negligence of the fathers”. The life by Cedri, as can be determined by an internal examination, depends in fact on a written source. And since the life by Cedri is very similar to that of Borghese, one may deduce indirectly (but validly) that Borghese also depended upon a written source.

The second type of proof, founded on internal evidence, is based on a comparison with the life of Blessed James Philip, written directly by Borghese from oral information. There are numerous differences between these two texts. A few are:

1. Direct discourse and supernatural intervention is very frequent in the life of Saint Peregrine; but rather sporadic in the life of Blessed James Philip.
2. The life of Saint Peregrine is sprinkled with numerous biblical quotations (about thirty), while there are only two references to the gospels in the life of Blessed James Philip.
3. But the most important difference is the complete absence of Marian elements in the life of Blessed James Philip. On the contrary they are of great importance in the life of Saint Peregrine, which from start to finish is imbued with a Marian Christocentrism and a Christocentric Marianism.

The Mother of Jesus, in fact, performs a role of utmost importance in the journey of Peregrine toward Christ. From the beginning to the end she is present as the “way” which leads to her Son. In a motherly way, Mary is most attentive to the events of Peregrine’s life. On his part, Peregrine lives in all sincerity that Marian devotion which was found in all the faithful at that period. He knows that he is the spiritual “son” of the Mother of Jesus after whom he patterns his actions. As a true Servant of Mary, he reproduces in himself the evangelical traits of the Virgin, his Lady.

To demonstrate Peregrine’s choice of life, the source used by Borghese follows a literary outline frequently found in medieval lives of saints. These authors often like to parallel the episodes of the life of a saint with those of the life of Christ or Mary. It is a technique of composition used to prove the thesis that the saint is one who patterned his life on that of Christ and his Mother.

The life of Saint Peregrine applies this hagiographical canon in a captivating manner. We see that the apparition of Mary to Peregrine and the subsequent journey of Peregrine to Siena are patterned respectively on the apparition of the angel to Mary (*Lk* 1, 26-38) and on the journey of Mary to Zachary’s house (*Lk* 1, 39-56). The principle that rules this literary pattern is rather evident: the role of the angel Gabriel is taken by Mary; and vice versa, the role of Mary is assumed by Peregrine.

We have listed a series of clear external and internal arguments to show that Nicholas Borghese followed the pattern of a written text when he wrote the short biography of Saint Peregrine. Now we want to say more: *The source which he had before his eyes was the ancient legenda of the saint, written by a confrere shortly after his death, that is, about 1350.* This conclusion is based on the biography’s solid biblical foundation, its clearly medieval flavor, and especially the extraordinary richness of its Marian doctrine and spirituality, which is so similar to that of the Servite lives of saints of the fourteenth century.

In other words, in the life of Saint Peregrine written in 1483 by Nicholas Borghese we certainly hear the echo of the flowing and incisive testimony of the confrere who knew the Saint. Even more, because of its rich biblical and spiritual orientation and the exceptional Marian

inspiration which enriches it, the *Legenda* of Saint Peregrine can be called an authentic pearl of the hagiographical literature which flourished among the Servants of Mary in the first century and a half of their existence.

Editions

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TEXT

LIFE OF BLESSED PEREGRINE OF FORLÌ OF THE ORDER OF SERVANTS OF SAINT MARY

1. Forlì, renowned city of Romagna, was the birth place of blessed Peregrine. His father was a wise man, of the illustrious and ancient house of Laziosi, a man richer in gifts of the Spirit and virtues than in material goods.

Peregrine was the only child of his parents and therefore tenderly loved by them. He had already decided to put aside the vanities of this world in order to follow the way of virtue and if he would keep to the right way during life, death itself would be gain¹. He used to say that the condition of this mortal life is illusory and vile².

2. Strengthened by this firm and holy decision, he went one day to the Church of the Holy Cross. He remained for a long time kneeling before the image of the Virgin Mary. He then besought her to show him the way to his salvation. Immediately the Blessed Virgin, adorned with precious and festive clothing, appeared quite openly to him and made this reply: "It is also my wish, my son, to direct your steps along the way of salvation".

Considering within himself this vision and these words, he feared that, like an ingenuous dove, he might have been deceived by the great deceiver and enemy of the human race. Seeing him thus doubtful and dismayed, the Virgin Mary spoke more gently still: "Do not fear, son, I am indeed the Mother of him whom you adore crucified, and I have been sent by him to show you the road of future happiness". Peregrine answered her in this way: "I am ready to follow your commands, for in my heart I have always desired above all other things that in no way would I turn from your precepts³. You therefore shall command, O Queen; I shall promptly and willingly obey". Then the glorious Virgin said, "Do you know the religious called the friar Servants of the Virgin Mary?". Peregrine replied, "I recall having heard many speak of them with great praise for their Order and their holy life, but I do not know where they live". He said this because there was not yet a monastery of the friar Servants of the Virgin Mary at Forlì. Immediately the Virgin Mary replied, "You are called Peregrine. Therefore you shall be a pilgrim in fact as well as name, for you must go to Siena. When you get there you will find those holy men intent on prayer. Ask to be admitted among them".

3. When he had heard these things, Peregrine immediately set out and, accompanied by an angel⁴, went to Siena. When he arrived at the monastery he immediately knocked at the door. An old porter came out and asked him, "Whom are you looking for?". He added that it was now the prescribed time of silence. When the porter had thus spoken, Peregrine prostrated himself at the porter's feet, as if he were excessively tired. He humbly begged the old man not to forbid him entrance, especially since he wished to reveal some secrets to the prior. The porter then let him in and at the end of the silence period brought him to the prior. The prior looked him over carefully and inquired where he was from. Peregrine replied, "I am from

Forlì". The prior listened to Peregrine's account and his decision; then he and the friars who had gathered together were easily persuaded to believe Peregrine was sent to them by the Virgin Mary. They regarded the fact as a miracle of the Virgin Mary, who often enlightens her faithful and with great concern makes them sharers in happiness. Therefore the friars willingly accepted

¹ *Phil* 1, 21.

² *Ps* 39, 7; *Wis* 2, 5; 5, 9.

³ *Ps* 119, 20. 40. 60. 127.

⁴ *Tb* 5, 1 ff.

Peregrine and invested him in the holy habit of the Virgin Mary's widowhood. As soon as this was done, an amazing brilliance encircled his head as if to testify he would faithfully keep the chastity, obedience, and poverty which he had professed.

4. By the age of thirty he was an example to all of virtue and a holy life. Afterwards, by command of his superior, he returned to his own city, Forlì, to observe and keep the precepts of the Lord. He mortified his flesh in an extraordinary way, keeping vigils and fasts, beating his body and (unbelievable as it is) for thirty years was never seen seated. He always stood while he ate; he prayed on his knees. If he were overcome with fatigue or sleep he would rest for a short time on a rock, or if he were in choir, on the benches. At night he did not sleep in a bed, but he spent almost the whole night reading hymns and psalms. He meditated continually on the law of God⁵. He sought to imitate the example of Christ with all his energy.

Each day he would examine his actions, shedding tears for the offenses and mistakes which he thought he had committed. And these he revealed daily to a priest and confessed with many tears. The holy man accused himself of many things because of his burning desire to observe fully the law of God.

5. The most good and merciful God, who usually tests and by testing strengthens those who burn with super natural love⁶, gave Peregrine a most grievous kind of disease. One leg was so swollen and eaten away that all those who came to take care of Peregrine could not restrain their tears.

The putrefying and extraordinary swelling of the leg induced that terrible disease they call cancer. From this came forth such a foul smell that it was unbearable for those who came near him. For this reason he had been abandoned by the others, and he even had a great loathing for himself. He was called another Job, so afflicted and decayed did he appear. Nevertheless, reduced to such great and distasteful suffering, he did not complain about his lot. Rather he endured this wasting away and torment with tranquil spirit, trusting in the words of the Apostle, who says that virtue is made strong in weakness⁷.

6. A fellow townsman and physician named Paul de Salaghi, grieving over Peregrine's sickness, came to see the suffering servant of God at home. He examined the leg, and sought more detailed information about the extent of the disease. Finally, with the consent of all, he came to the conclusion that no remedy now remained for Peregrine to regain his health except that the swollen leg be immediately amputated, for the disease would soon spread and infect the rest of his body. All agreed and it was decided to carry out this decision. They thought it was better to sacrifice one limb than lose the entire body.

7. On the night preceding the operation, Peregrine meditated long on that decision and he decided to seek refuge in Jesus Christ his Savior. He therefore arose, as best he could, and unassisted dragged his body with great difficulty to the chapter room, in which there was an image of the crucified Jesus Christ. He humbly spoke these words to him: "O Redeemer of the human race, you willed to undergo the torment of the cross and a most painful death to wipe away our sins. While you were on earth among mortals, you healed many afflicted by various diseases. You cleansed the leper, you gave sight to the blind man when he said, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me'⁸. In the same way, deign, O Lord my God, to free this leg of mine from this incurable disease. Unless you do this, it must be cut off". When he had said this, he fell asleep in great pain from his disease and while asleep saw the crucified Jesus come down from the cross and take away all sickness from the leg. Soon he awoke, and felt the leg healed. It was as strong as if it had never been diseased. Then he gave thanks to the most kind God for so great a gift, and returned to his cell.

⁵ *Ps* 1, 2.

⁶ *Tb* 12, 13; *Wis* 3, 5-6.

⁷ *2Cor* 12, 9.

⁸ *Mt* 8, 2 and parallel passages.

8. In the morning, when day brought its light, the doctor arrived with his instruments and ointments to amputate the leg. Peregrine said to him, “Go home, you who have come to cure me. That doctor who restored me to perfect health spoke thus to me: ‘I am he who gives and takes away both health and sickness⁹. I undertake the care of both soul and body together. I am he who gave sight to the blind; I cleansed lepers; I cured the paralytic; I brought the dead back from the lower world. Behold, I am he who refused no effort, no shame, nor the cruelest kind of death for your salvation’. He who spoke thus has completely freed me, doctor”.

When the doctor heard this, he thought Peregrine had become delirious because of the disease and said, “Show me your leg so that I can free you from this contagion which is spreading to your whole body”. Peregrine replied, “Doctor, cure yourself. I do not need your skill. The prince of medicine and author of human salvation has by his divine power taken away all my sickness”. Then he showed the doctor his leg. “See with your own eyes” he said, “and understand whom I have had as my doctor”. The doctor was amazed beyond belief when he saw the leg thus healed and well, for no signs of the great swelling, no scars of the devouring cancer could be seen, and he said to his companions, “What a great miracle!”.

He then left and spoke about the wonderful work of God in his servant to all he met and spread the word throughout the entire city. Report of such great happiness quickly spread in all directions, and brought with it a great veneration of all toward the friend of God, Peregrine.

He was made even more pleasing to God after this and followed the way of the Lord with all his strength, longing for the heavenly joys prepared for all who keep the life-giving commands of the Lord¹⁰.

9. He died at the age of almost eighty, consumed by a burning fever. The Virgin Mary accompanied by blessed Philip of Florence and blessed Francis of Siena of the same Order conducted his soul to the dignity of the heavenly kingdom. Immediately after his death, his lifeless body gave off a most fragrant odor, so that those present wondered in amazement at this sweetness.

The holy body which had covered the now triumphant soul lay, as is the custom, on a litter in the choir. Then as if the death of the holy man had been announced by a trumpeter, it was on the mouths of all the townspeople and they rushed to see the remains venerated in the choir.

Likewise the inhabitants of the countryside poured through all the city gates, drawn by the report of the death of the holy servant of God. Indeed that night the gates of the city could not be closed because of the multitudes coming in.

Nor was Blessed Peregrine lacking the heaven-sent confirmation of his holiness by means of miracles. We shall content ourselves here to mention two or three, while in the church of the Servants of the Virgin Mary in Forlì the memory of many others is conserved with authentic writings and notarized documents.

Miracle of the blind man who saw.

10. While the body of Blessed Peregrine was lying in state in the choir, a poor blind beggar approached the holy remains and from the depths of his heart asked that his sight be restored.

O the infinite power and grace of God who manifests himself in his servants! Then the body of Blessed Peregrine rose up and, in front of an innumerable crowd, blessed the blind man with a sign of the cross and immediately scales were seen to fall from his eyes¹¹. The man who had been blind shouted for joy and before all declared that he could see well; then, after having thanked God and Blessed Peregrine, went away a happy man.

⁹ *Job* 1, 21.

¹⁰ *Mt* 25, 34; *Phil* 1, 23; *2Tim* 3, 7-8.

¹¹ *Tb* 11, 8.12-13.

Healing of a possessed woman.

A woman of Forlì was possessed by one or many of the worse type of demon. She was so filled with anger and enraged that she could not be restrained by fetters or chains. On the contrary, she had such great power that she would break the bonds or escape from them. Since the renown of the miracles had spread rather widely, her family members dragged her to the sacred relics of Blessed Peregrine which had been placed in the church. As soon as she touched them, the evil spirit was expelled with a horrendous shriek, while those present saw many animals being spewed from the mouth of the possessed woman and they heard these words: “Your prayers, O Peregrine, have tormented me most harshly”. The woman, freed from all power of the devil, gave great thanks to God and to Blessed Peregrine, and then she returned happy with her family to her home.

Healing of a man who fell from a tree.

A man had climbed a rather tall tree; but then he slipped and fell to the ground. Because of this his intestines burst forth and there was no hope that he could live. But then, through the intercession of Blessed Peregrine, he regained perfect health. Mindful of this grace, he gave due thanks