

## St. Scholastica

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Perhaps if there was no St. Scholastica she had to be invented. Most of the great monastic founders had sisters who became saintly monastics also: Antony, Pachomius, Basil, Caesarius of Arles, to mention only a few. Others had mothers who became monastics when they were widows. Still others, like the legendary Mary of Egypt, were closely associated with a male friend--in her case the monk Zosimas. According to Adalbert de Vogüé Scholastica represents deep faith and trust in God, a love which is more important than regulations and convention. Her name, Scholastica, comes from schola; Benedict wished to establish a school (schola) of the Lord's service. She embodies the deepest truths taught in that school.

Later tradition would make Benedict and Scholastica twins. It would say that when Benedict settled at Monte Cassino, Scholastica moved to Plombariola, about five miles south. Gregory elsewhere says that Benedict governed women, so it has been inferred that Scholastica was abbess of this convent under his direction. These accretions tend to subordinate Scholastica and seem to reflect male bias.

The only mention of St. Scholastica in book II of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great is the story of her visit with Benedict not long before her death.<sup>1</sup> Oddly, there was no entry for her in the Latin original of the *Legenda aurea*, the widely influential 13th century lives of the saints. She was included in a later supplement, but that account simply repeated the story from the Dialogues and added the story of Benedict's death, perhaps because he and Scholastica were buried in the same grave. A fifteenth century French version of Scholastica's life, in a collection called the "*fetes nouvelles*" which is thought to be based on the supplement, adds one detail. Long after her death and burial, her body was taken to Le Mans. During the translation, one of her bones was placed upon the corpse of a girl who was thereby raised from the dead. Then Scholastica's remains were taken to Le Mans and a church was built in her honor in which many powerful deeds are worked through her prayers.

Between Gregory and "*fetes nouvelles*" there were a number of poetic embellishments of the story of her meeting with Benedict and her subsequent death. Aldelm, Bishop of Schireburn, wrote a poem telling about their meeting. In it he said:

The faithful brother is not moved by any pleas,  
Nay he disdains his holy sister in his words.  
Then the virgin urged the good Christ in her heart  
To deign to heal her wound of sorrow.

.....

So God heeds those who ask with devout hearts  
Even when no one offers them words of consolation.

A poem attributed to Paul the Deacon contains an ornate tribute which speaks of her apotheosis after her death: now from heaven she wages war on the devil. He says that she left her native place with Benedict, out of desire for the kingdom of heaven. When he established himself on the

mountain of Cassino, she set up a place on the plain. According to Paul, Benedict went each year to visit her (!). They met in the morning and talked through the day. In their final meeting, while Benedict was eating, she was hungering for holy conversation. She hesitates to ask him to stay. He said, don't even bother to ask. The Lord was her hope and so she asked the Lord. Three days later when she had died, Benedict saw her in the form of a dove, seeking the heights, the heavens. Paul concludes this poem by emphasizing that the two saints grant favors primarily at the sites of their monasteries, though they also grant them everywhere. Another poem, also attributed to Paul, puns on her name; she is a vessel of counsel, an advisor. Her prayers were strong enough to overcome her brother's resolve, which no else could budge.

Leaving aside these florid embellishments, let's look at Gregory the Great's account:

They devoted the whole day to the praises of God and to holy conversation (*laudibus sacrisque conloquiis ducentes*). As the shades of night were falling, they ate their meal together... His sister, the holy nun, put this request to him: "I entreat you, do not leave me tonight so that we may talk on till morning about the joys of heavenly life." ... When she heard her brother refuse her, the nun (*sanctimonialis*) placed her hands on the table with fingers intertwined and rested her head on her hands to pray to the Lord almighty. When she raised it up again, such violent thunder and lightning and such a downpour of rain broke out that neither the venerable Benedict nor the brothers who were with him could put a foot outside the door.... For the nun, while laying her head on her hands, had spilt streams of tears (*lacrimarum fluvios*) on the table, and this was how she changed the serenity of the sky to rain.... The man of God, amid the lightning, thunder and immense downpour of rain, seeing that he could not return to the monastery, began to complain, sadly: "May God almighty pardon you, sister! What have you done." "See," she replied, "I asked you (*rogavi*) and you wouldn't listen to me. I asked (*rogavi*) my Lord and He listened...." He was not willing to remain freely in the place so he had to stay unwillingly. And so it happened that they passed the whole night in vigil and each fully satisfied the other with holy talk on the spiritual life (*sacra spiritualis vitae conloquia vacaria relatione satiarent*).... By the power of almighty God, he found a miracle coming from a woman's heart (*ex feminae pectore*). Nor is it any surprise that the woman who wished to see her brother for a longer time was on this occasion stronger than he, for according to the words of John, "God is love," and by an altogether fair judgment, she was able to do more because she loved more." ... Three days later, as he was in his cell, he raised his eyes to the skies and saw the soul of his sister leaving her body and penetrating the secret places of heaven under the form of a dove (*in columbae specie caeli secreta penetrare*). Overjoyed by her glory, he thanked almighty God in hymns of praise (*hymnis et laudibus gratias reddidit*).

In telling this story Gregory aimed to answer the question whether the saints are able to do everything they wish; do they obtain all that they desire? The story shows that Benedict didn't receive what he desired. However, Scholastica who prayed for a miracle received it--and what she desired.

Scholastica's burning desire seems to suggest that she had a premonition of her death. This is a final conversation between friends, like those of Socrates with his friends in the *Phaedo*, of Jesus and the disciples at the Last Supper, of Augustine and Monica at Ostia. In all these cases, the speakers' thoughts turn to heaven.

The story is framed by praise of God and by reference to heaven. Within this frame there are entreaties--of God and of each other. Scholastica prays with tears; and the heavens rain down. There is a certain erotic aura: "satisfied each other;" "penetrated the secrets of heaven." Both go outside the "rooms" (cellae) and meet in a place, which though roofed, is outside from both their points of view. When they parted, Scholastica returned to her room (cell) and Benedict to his monastery. Three days later he sees Scholastica leave her body [and her cell] and penetrate into the secrets places of heaven. Perhaps one could say that all human places are unimportant when compared to the place of meeting between those who love each other and God, and even more, when compared to heaven.

The passage can be seen as a commentary on the verses from the Song of Songs which are used as the first reading on Scholastica's feast:

Place me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm. Strong as Death is love; intense as Sheol is ardor. Its shafts are shafts of fire, flames of Yahweh. Deep waters cannot quench love, nor rivers sweep it away. Were one to give all his wealth for love, he would be thoroughly despised (Song 8.6-7).

The point of this passage is that death is relentless and inescapable, but love is still more tenacious. Scholastica's love--both for God and for Benedict--is also tenacious. As de Vogüé comments: "her love was personal rather than regular," and we can be glad of that. The miracle came from her heart, because her love was in harmony with the heart of God. Benedict's love for her endures beyond death, and her love for God carries her beyond death. Because of her love she penetrates into the secret place of heaven. Her love, expressed in rivers of tears, cannot be thwarted by Benedict's reluctance. Her love is a force stronger than the storm with its flames of lightning. Their conversation is single-minded, holy conversation; as long as it lasts they have given up thought of all else but God. Death does not separate them, but unites their bodies in a single tomb and their souls in God.

The passage recalls the anointing of Jesus by the sinful woman (Lk 7.36-47). In one way, Benedict is like the scandalized Pharisees, but in another he is like Christ, who was the object of the woman's love. Scholastica, like Mary of Bethany (whom Gregory identified with the sinful woman) longed to hear his words.