

Synesius of Cyrene.

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READERS of Kingsley's *Hypatia* are acquainted with the figure of the bishop Synesius of Ptolemais, the pupil of the heathen teacher of philosophy. Many, no doubt, will be interested in this peculiar personality among the fathers of the Church, and desirous of having an historically reliable account of his life and character based on his works and his letters. The object of this article is to give such an account. The most remarkable feature in his career was not that Synesius, the enthusiastic pupil of the heathen philosopher Hypatia, was, while still unbaptized, in 409 A.D. raised to the bishopric of Cyrene. Ambrose of Milan also had not been baptized when the people and clergy chose him as their bishop. It will seem to us much more remarkable that Synesius was a convinced Neoplatonist when the bishopric was offered him. In a letter of that period to his brother, Euoptius, he writes: 'I will never convince myself that the soul comes into being only after the body, nor that the world in all its parts can ever pass away. The resurrection, which is in every one's mouth, I regard as something sacred and mysterious, but I am far from holding the popular view regarding it.' Our interest is aroused to find, in an age in which the slightest deviation from ecclesiastical orthodoxy was most keenly persecuted, that the episcopal office was offered to a man holding opinions so utterly opposed to the fundamental dogmas of the Church, and that such a man as Synesius could make up his mind to accept the office. Perhaps it is only an historical accident that Synesius seems to stand quite alone in the Catholic Church of his time. Hundreds of educated heathen converts may in all probability have shared his opinions, but they did not defend them by word and act. Many adherents of Neoplatonism had become Christians, not because they accepted all the Christian dogmas as their own, but only because they recognized in Christianity their own world of ideas. In this way Synesius is not to be regarded as an individual holding a position absolutely unique in the Church at the beginning of the fifth century, but as a typical representative of certain circles, that, while not very numerous, yet in that wonderful picture of

that remarkable age of transition in the evangelizing of the ancient world attract our attention in a very special way.

In the beginning of the seventieth year of the fourth century, Synesius was born in Cyrene as the son of one of the noblest families in the land. With pride he traced his ancestry back to Eurysthenes, one of the Heracleidae, who had led the Dorians to Sparta. In Alexandria, the seat of Greek, Latin, and Egyptian culture and learning, Synesius had sat at the feet of Hypatia, whom he regarded with feelings of tender affection. Even as bishop he wrote her as follows: 'Although the dead in Hades forget everything, yet will I think on my beloved Hypatia. For thee alone would I despise my fatherland, and, as soon as I have the opportunity, wander to a land of exile.' On returning to Cyrene, Synesius was entrusted with the honourable commission, on behalf of the five cities of Cyrenaica, of procuring an abatement of taxation for the impoverished province at the court of the Emperor Arcadius in Constantinople. At the end of the year 397, he set out on his journey, and remained three years in the capital. The dreaded minister Rufinus had already been overthrown, and a eunuch and former slave, Eutropius, ruled the weak-willed monarch. He held the emperor, as Zosimus says, like an animal on a chain. At the end of a year Synesius was at length able to obtain an audience of the emperor, to hand him the golden wreath of his native town Cyrene, and lay his request before him. We still possess the speech on the monarchy which Synesius delivered at the court of Arcadius. He boasts that he then spoke more boldly than ever Greek had done. In truth, his speech is a testimony to his princely courage, although it is possible that his expressions may have been made more pointed when he committed his speech to writing. He warns Arcadius that the king must be the shepherd of his subjects. The law must define the will of the king. The true ruler ought to be the copy of the Divine Providence. As God, the source of all good, freely imparts life and spirit, so the king must shower on his subject cities the fulness of his gifts and provide happiness for every

one of his subjects. The patriotic lament on the danger from the Goths which threatened the empire is a powerful appeal to a degenerate Romanism at last to rouse itself. The youthful idealist had hoped that his manly pride which had been displayed before the princes would have made the deepest impression, but in that he was mistaken. His words fell dead as soon as they were spoken in a court of deceivers. He had spoken in the bold speech of wisdom and virtue to a well-meaning but weak ruler. Synesius had bewitched himself by his eloquence, but the doom of the empire could not be averted by his elevated philosophical considerations. For that, a strong will was necessary, and that did not exist in the enervated Greeks, but in the barbarians with the vigour and freshness of a young race. During his sojourn in the capital Synesius had to witness a shameful humiliation of the Greek emperor. Gainas, the leader of the Goths in the pay of the emperor, made common cause with the Goth Tribigild, and the two threatened the city. Arcadius had to hand over to Gainas three of his most outstanding statesmen, among whom was Aurelian, the friend of Synesius. Owing to the intercession of the princely Chrysostom they escaped execution and were banished. Gainas was almost on the point of becoming ruler of the capital, when the majority of the Goths in Constantinople were murdered, and it was only after the head of the accursed Gainas had been sent to Arcadius, that the emperor felt himself free from the most overwhelming anxiety. Synesius has related these experiences at Constantinople in a remarkable allegorical and historical romance.

After remaining three years in Constantinople, and having obtained favourable terms for his native province, he turned homewards. After a short visit to his brother Euopius in Alexandria, he sailed for Cyrene. On the voyage he was shipwrecked. With overflowing humour he describes to his brother the dangerous journey. The majority of the ship's crew were Jews, an accursed race, as Synesius says, who thought they were doing a pious work by taking the life of as many Greeks as possible. Synesius relates humorously how the Jewish pilot at the beginning of the Sabbath, in accordance with Jewish law, gave up steering the ship, and returned to his duty only when the crew were in extreme danger of their lives. The following years were spent by

Synesius in Cyrene, or on an estate in the south of the province. A feeling of loneliness took possession of him here amid his philosophical studies: 'I have never in Libya heard a philosophical voice, unless it were my own echo.' With good-humoured sarcasm he describes for us the characteristics of his country neighbours. They probably knew that there was an emperor, because they were yearly reminded of the fact by the tax-collector. What his name was they did not know. Some believed that even at the present day their ruler was Agamemnon, son of Atreus, who once upon a time marched against Troy, the handsome and the brave hero, for 'from our youth up we have heard people calling him king.' Synesius led the ideal life of a philosopher in contented retirement without the oppressive duties of a public office. But the troubles of the time again and again disturbed the philosophic dreamer. The wretchedly governed province was frequently exposed to disaster at the hands of a native Libyan tribe, the Maietæ. As a rich and energetic citizen Synesius took an active part in the defence. Synesius, the humanist of antiquity in the noblest sense of the term, enthusiastic for everything good, true, and beautiful, appears at the same time as an enthusiastic patriot, who was compelled by a tragic fate to witness, in part at least, the destruction of his beloved fatherland. As a philosopher he was not particularly productive, but his philosophical essays *Dion ; or, Regarding his own Life*, and *On Dreams* show his passionate love for the fine arts and for philosophical speculations. In fact, the treatise *On Dreams* shows us the character of Synesius from a remarkable side. He was a dreamer in the midst of a passing world, and he devoted himself to his dreams and speculations. His dream-life meant more to him than his waking existence. He strove to obtain pure and holy dreams. Dreaming was, for him, an act of religious devotion.

Besides these serious works we have also from the pen of Synesius a work of playful wit in the *Praise of Baldness*. He celebrates the bald-headed by telling us that all holy and wise men such as the philosophers Diogenes and Socrates were bald, that the Egyptian priests shaved the head, and the visible gods the sun and the moon are bald. The perfected literary style of Synesius is here seen at its best.

In the year 409 when the Episcopal Chair of

Ptolemais became vacant, he was chosen by the people and clergy to fill the vacant see. After prolonged hesitation he accepted the influential position, and shortly before his ordination was baptized. We have alluded to the letter which he wrote to his brother Euopius shortly after his election. Just as he had on a former occasion spoken to the emperor with all the courage of the free-born Greek, so now he lays before the domineering and intolerant bishop Theophilus of Alexandria—for the letter is intended for him—with regardless and daring love of the truth, his philosophic doubt with regard to certain Christian dogmas. He will not interfere with the beliefs of the people, but he claims for himself the right to interpret these beliefs philosophically. With in-born tact he declares that he will not polemize against the dogmas, but outwardly hold fast the mystical shell, for he was well aware that the pure truth is hurtful to the masses, just as the full light injures the weak eye. But along with these intellectual doubts there were ethical considerations. He felt himself unworthy of the almost divine honour of the Episcopate. The bishop must be a godlike man. Synesius, however, knew himself to be a child of the world, a lover of weapons and horses, a devotee of the chase, inclined to every kind of fun, and by no means spotless, as a priest who absolves others from sins ought to be. Still another point, 'God, the law, and the blessed hand of Theophilus,' he writes, 'have given me a wife, and I will not separate myself from her, nor have secret intercourse with her like an adulterer, for the one course is inconsistent with piety, and the other with justice. It is rather my desire to be presented with many noble children by her.' It is characteristic that Synesius in an age in which virginity was so highly praised, regarded it to be impious for a bishop to give up his wife and unjust to keep up intercourse with her secretly. The house of the bishop ought to be the home of a model Christian family life. Notwithstanding all his opinions, Theophilus of Alexandria consecrated Synesius to the bishopric. We do not know if Synesius had made any concessions or whether he had given up living with his wife on becoming bishop. Theophilus, with his keen knowledge of men, was not deceived in the case of Synesius. He knew that the new bishop, in spite of all his courageous truthfulness in confessing his disagreement with Christian

dogmas, would never come forward as an ecclesiastical reformer. His hymns, in which his rich and tender soul has made its confessions, show how he sought to combine Neoplatonism and Christianity in a unity. The longer he lived as a Christian bishop, the nearer did he approach the Christian teaching of the Church. The person of the Saviour was specially dear to him, and in the Gospel of John he found his picture most clearly reflected. By the side of high-sounding philosophic speculations there is to be found in his hymns a true Christian piety. He praises Christ, the Son of the Virgin, as the Physician of soul and body.

The Episcopal office did not bring Synesius the peace he had hoped for. His letters are full of depressing complaints. He attended to the duties of his office with the utmost care, he reconciled opposing factions, cared for the poor, and in a dignified manner defended the Church from the governor Andronicus. When Andronicus refused to give up his hateful practices, the mild bishop saw himself compelled to solemnly expel him from the Church. But when the governor was made the object of persecution from every side, the bishop obeyed the most exacting of all the commands of his Lord and forgave his enemy. He interceded in his behalf: 'Andronicus had formerly acted unjustly; now he is suffering unjustly. It is the custom of the Church to humble the arrogant, and to exalt the lowly.' Synesius was a Christian whose genuine brotherly love reminds us of the Good Samaritan in his Lord's parable. Still he had not forgotten that he was a son of his native land. The spirit of the ancient still breathes in the Christian bishop. In the good of his fatherland he saw at the same time the good of the individual. The approaching doom of his country was the greatest sorrow of his heart. 'Ill-fated Ptolemais,' he laments, 'I will be thy last bishop. I will remain at my post in the Church. I will remain there as long as I live, and there I will fall down dead. I am the servant of God and it is perhaps necessary that I should bring Him the sacrifice of my life.' All his three sons sank into the grave before him, and he bore his lot with resignation. When his third son died, he wrote: 'Woe is me—yet I only suffer a fate common to man. My third and last son is dead. But the conviction that nothing except what lies in our own power can be either a good or an evil remains always firm, or, to speak more exactly, this

