

A Bishop Unafraid of Beauty

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Saint Pelagia lived in Antioch in the third century. As a young woman she was the most beautiful, desirable and best-known harlot in the city, a person who couldn't help attracting attention. With her fabulous jewels worn as part of everyday dress, her exotic scents that perfumed the air as she walked, and the cosmetics she artfully applied to enhance her beauty, Pelagia was an unforgettable figure.

Her story is closely intertwined with that of Bishop Nonnos, who was also well-known in Antioch for his gentle manner and his excellent sermons steeped in profound knowledge of the Scriptures and the Church's Tradition. Most of all he was renowned and respected for his ability to bring sinners to repentance by loving them and never humiliating them.

One day Bishop Nonnos and other bishops were meeting in a garden to discuss Church matters. As they talked together, Pelagia rode by, accompanied by servants and doting admirers. Several bishops turned their heads away to avoid the sight of the bold, laughing woman whose beauty only seemed to emphasize her immodesty. But one of them, Nonnos, did not turn away. He looked after her as she rode by, and it was clear to his companions that he was deep in thought.

Later, he told the other bishops what he was thinking. Pelagia was so diligent about adorning her outward self, he said, in order to please men. But how much time or energy did he and others who claimed to love God spend in adorning their souls, in order to please Him? Why, Nonnos asked, were they so easily distracted from what should have been their only purpose: to make themselves a fitting habitation for their Lord? That night he prayed with tears that God would not condemn him, even though his soul was so poorly adorned.

A few days later, Bishop Nonnos was delivering one of his wonderful sermons to a large gathering. Pelagia, out shopping, found herself in the crowd. She paid little attention to the bishop's words, but in spite of herself she was drawn to what he was saying about God's judgment and the beauty of each person's immortal soul. She began to long for the true, pure love of the divine Bridegroom. What she'd had with her lovers seemed empty and ugly.

Troparion - Tone 4

Like a fragrant rose growing from thorns,
You were revealed to the Church through your virtuous deeds
Becoming a source of joy for the faithful.
You offered your life in sweet-smelling fragrance
To him who made you wonderful.
Entreat him to deliver us from every soul-destroying passion,
O righteous Pelagia!

Pelagia's desire for closeness to God grew, and she sent a letter to Nonnos requesting baptism. He hesitated, but seeing her sincerity he granted her wish. She gave him her numerous possessions to be used for the poor, and then quietly left for Jerusalem. There she lived in deep seclusion, disguising herself as a man to avoid attention, near the Mount of Olives. Nearby monks came to know about the pious "Father Pelagios" and when she died they buried her, after overcoming their surprise that she was a woman, with great respect. The beauty that Bishop Nonnos was not afraid to look at had become even more beautiful, having been turned toward the Lord.