

Saint of the Month for September 2013

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint Jerome, Priest and Doctor of the Church
Monday, September 30

Saint Jerome ranks very high in the list of saints who were expert in the Holy Scriptures, both for translation and commentaries. He was also a fierce opponent of those who went against official teachings. Jerome managed to make enemies and friends, and was not necessarily the gentlest of apologists and explicators of church teaching. He wrote letters and larger works against heresies of his day, and was not shy about his opinions!

His actual name was Eusebius Hieronymus; his literary name was Sophronius.

Jerome was born in Dalmatia around the year 340 in what was once called Yugoslavia. His father took pains to have his son instructed in religion and in letters (now we would probably say literature). Later he studied in Rome with Donatus, a famous grammarian, and became a master of Greek and Latin, the two major languages of his time for learned works (Jerome's native tongue was Illyrian), and learned oratory. However, Donatus was not a Christian, and Jerome drifted away from the piety he had been brought up with. He was baptized in Rome, but was a catechumen until at least age 18, something much more common then than now- Saint Augustine was baptized even later in life! While in Rome he would often visit the tombs of martyrs and apostles with his friends on Sundays.

He traveled a lot for his day, and he deepened his learning and had his religious spirit awakened.

He became acquainted with a monk who had been a Jew, and from him learned Hebrew, a most difficult task, said St. Jerome. With this language Jerome had become expert in the three important languages he needed- Hebrew, the language of almost all the Old Testament (there are small sections in Aramaic, which was the everyday language of Jesus's day in Palestine), Greek, in which the New Testament was written, and Latin. Latin was the official language of the Roman Empire and of the Church (and still is).

He chose the life of a monk, and spent several periods mostly alone with God in the desert, beginning in Syria; he was ordained a priest while living in the East. After attending an early church council he was kept in Rome by Pope St. Damasus (reigned as pope 366-384), who retained Jerome as his secretary. Jerome was set to work revising the Latin text of the Gospels, in accordance with the Greek text, and he worked on a first revision of the Psalms. He also promoted the monastic life.

When Damasus died Jerome left Rome, partly because some of his actions had made enemies. He moved to Bethlehem where he continued on his translations. There he applied to a famous Jewish master, Bar Ananias, for additional lessons in Hebrew. The Jewish master came only by night to Jerome, since he didn't want other Jews to know of these lessons! (At this time Aramaic and Greek were living languages, but the Hebrew of the Old Testament was not, and Jerome felt he needed help to prepare for translating the

Old Testament into Latin.) By the time of his death he had translated or worked over all but five of the books in the modern Catholic Bible.

This great work of Jerome became known as the Vulgate, and is still the official version of the Bible for the church. Butler says “St. Jerome’s Vulgate was declared by the Council of Trent to be the authentic or authoritative Latin biblical text of the Catholic Church, without thereby implying any preference of this version above the original text or above versions in other languages. In 1907 (Saint) Pope Pius X entrusted to the monks of St. Benedict the duty of restoring so far as possible St. Jerome’s text of the Vulgate, which during fifteen centuries of use has become considerably modified and corrupted.” The first common English version done at Rheims and Douay towards the end of the sixteenth century was based on the Vulgate.

Jerome wrote many other works, including many commentaries on the books of the Bible.

He suffered much during his life, including strong temptations during his years in the desert, but persisted in his faith.

Saint Jerome died in 420 in Bethlehem, and was originally buried under the church of the Nativity, but years later his remains were moved to somewhere in the Church of Saint Mary Major in Rome.

The commemoration is given the rank of Obligatory Memorial. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); Butler’s **Lives of the Saints, 2nd Edition** (Ave Maria Press); **Magnificat**, September 2013; **Encyclopædia Britannica, 15th edition**; **Catholic Dictionary, Revised** (Our Sunday Visitor).)

Collect from the Mass of Saint Jerome:

O God, who gave the Priest Saint Jerome
a living and tender love for Sacred Scripture,
grant that your people
may be ever more fruitfully nourished by your Word
and find in it the fount of life.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

All of us can probably find a bit more time to read and meditate on the Word of God, using some of the enthusiasm and interest of Saint Jerome. We also ask for perseverance in faith when God seems far away or we seem tempted beyond our power to resist. Saint Jerome, pray for us!