

“HELP!” St John Cassian in The Liturgy & in Devotion (with footnotes *)

A short article by Fr. Martin Birrell, Oblate Master of Pluscarden Abbey.

Every time we begin the Divine Office in our singing of the psalms here, at Pluscarden Abbey, Scotland, seven times a day & once at night*, we begin with these or very similar words “O God come to our aid, O, Lord make haste to help us!” Or, you could say that every time we pray to God we begin with the prayer, “ HELP!” This we have received from the Desert Fathers of monasticism, passed on by St. John Cassian. What follows he says in his Conferences, so dear to St Benedict:-“This was delivered to us by a few of those who were left of those who are really keen. And so for keeping up continual recollection of God this pious formula is to be ever set before you. "O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me, "for this verse has not unreasonably been picked out from the whole of Scripture for this purpose. For it embraces all the feelings which can be implanted in human nature, and can be fitly and satisfactorily adapted to every condition, and all assaults. Since it contains an invocation of God against every danger, it contains humble and pious confession, it contains the watchfulness of anxiety and continual fear, it contains the thought of one's own weakness, confidence in the answer, and the assurance of a present and ever ready help. For one who is constantly calling on his protector, is certain that He is always at hand. It contains the glow of love and charity, it contains a view of the plots, and a dread of the enemies, from which one, who sees himself day and night hemmed in by them, confesses that he cannot be set free without the aid of his defender. This verse is an impregnable wall for all who are laboring under the attacks of demons, as well as an impenetrable coat of mail and a strong shield. It does not suffer those who are in a state of moroseness and anxiety of mind, or depressed by sadness or all kinds of thoughts to despair of saving remedies, as it shows that He, who is invoked, is ever looking on at our struggles and is not far from His suppliants. It warns us whose lot is spiritual success and delight of heart that we ought not to be at all elated or puffed up by our happy condition, which it assures us cannot last without God as our protector, while it implores Him not only always but even speedily to help us.

This verse, I say, will be found helpful and useful to every one of us in whatever condition we may be. For one who always and in all matters wants to be helped, shows that he needs the assistance of God not only in sorrowful or hard matters but also equally in prosperous and happy ones, that he may be delivered from the one and also made to continue in the other, as he knows that in both of them human weakness is unable to endure without His assistance.” (St John Cassian. Conference Ten ix2-xi..)

Which Benedictine monk or Oblate does not have a special devotion*** to St. John Cassian whose Conferences, “Collationes”, all agree our Holy Father St Benedict lauds in Chapter 73, the last in his Rule?***

Some years ago I was privileged to be very temporarily in a position to have St John Cassian inserted liturgically into the Divine Office & Mass for July the 23rd (with the approval of the Monastic Superior) at Kristo Buase Benedictine Monastery, Techiman, Ghana, West Africa.

This may come as a supreme surprise to some who have not realized that many ***Benedictines***, remarkably enough, (most?) do not give S. John Cassian *any* liturgical place in the Divine Office or Mass of his liturgical day****, the 23rd July, in the Western Church!. Nor is this because St Bridget of Sweden has been assigned the 23rd of July as a co-patron of Europe & a

feast day that “knocks out” a memoria. He was not kept before by most Benedictines*****, that is even before her day was made a feast. I have heard it said that the Cistercians, our co-followers of the Rule, are (I think) in better case, in that they do keep him liturgically?(I cannot check this effectively before “going to press”)

We relegate him simply to a mention in the martyrology read out the evening before the 23rd.

He who enabled for us the sevenfold, seven times a day, opening of the Divine Office, as envisaged by St Benedict, is given no special place of honour in that Office by most of us.

The Eastern Churches are even more ambivalent in honouring him on the 29th of February!!– every four years!–Faint praise?

Nor do we (at least here in my own Abbey) transfer him to a nearby free day as , I think, is permissible(nor is that only with mandatory memorials****). For Benedictines should St John Cassian of the Conferences & the Institutes be an *optional* memoria?(& indeed he is not even that in our Benedictine Calendar)

Why should this ever have been so?

- ★ It is thought that if he is a “Saint” it is only for his local church in the South of France (as if noone in the rest of the world knew of his Conferences , Institutes or prayed the Divine Office seven times a day!) The Catechism of the Catholic Church (both unrevised & revised editions have him listed (as for the universal Church) p. 645 in the index of citations as(bold lettering) “ **John Cassian, St.**” between “**Joan of Arc, St.**” & “ **John Chrysostom, St.**”
- ★ *People think he was condemned by name by a Pope but then even Owen Chadwick, Church & monastic historian, who carried no particular torch for St John Cassian conceded that the Council of Orange does not mention him by name & that equally by the same anonymous ascription St Augustine could be considered condemned “by name” in that predestination of the evil to damnation from all eternity (as sometimes espoused by the great Doctor) is specifically condemned.. No one suggests that this disqualifies us from liturgically keeping St Augustine of Hippo as a memoria!”(see “John Cassian” by Owen Chadwick published 1950, p.150)*
- ★ *He condemns as a delusion the idea that the semblance of outward purity is commendable while inner spiritual life spins off somewhere else, at least for a time. This is not popular nor ever has been to the worldly-minded (which is most of us, at least some of the time) We don ’t like being pulled back to the “hard & difficult things”*
- ★ *Some might fear that as a one time, putative , “Semi-Pelagian”, devotion to St John Cassian might lead Pelagian -minded, spiritual bootstrappers astray.*
- ✓ **Whereas, contra all this, can we really be saying that the patriarch of Western monasticism, S.P.N.B., was led astray!–surely not! Is the Rule itself not a gloss to Saint John, if any were needed?**
- ✓ **He is recognized in East & West & therefore a point of dialogue & contact. Similarly he is respected by all branches of the sons & daughters of St. Benedict (“reformed”**

& “unreformed !”)

- ✓ His writings provide a beautiful choice of readings (as e.g. at Kristo Buase Monastery) for the Office of readings of his memoria, were it kept
- ✓ Can one doubt that he intercedes for his brethren here below?

Are there any other sympathisers for poor Saint John Cassian out there? Perhaps there are learned defenders & devotees, more capable than I, of rendering the Saint liturgical assistance, that he the more readily might render us his?

Appended Notes:-

- ▶ 1)* Vigils, of course, not being one of the “seven times” a day but at night, does not begin with St John’s formula, but “O Lord open my lips...”; another way of saying, “HELP!”
- ▶ 2)** More could be made of the references in Ch. 73, & the general influence of St John Cassian on RB, & the very considerable contemporary interest in & revival of his teaching (See e.g. Columba Stewart , Augustine Cassidy & Richard Goodrich on St John)
- ▶ 3)***When we think of “devotion” to someone as a saint we are looking upon them less in the light of knowledge of facts about them & more in the mode of a member of the family we “know” more Hebraically, as a person we relate to in the Communion of Saints.
- ▶ 4)****As members of the Order of St Benedict we are bound to follow the Proper Calendar of the Confederation approved in 1970 & currently being revised. In that calendar St John Cassian does not feature.
- ▶ .5)***** The norms governing calendars are complex. Experts tend to disagree. But important is the 1970 Instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship, Calendaria Particularia (Latin text p. 681 of Enchiridion)

According to no. 30 of the 2004 2nd ed. Of Martyrologium Romanum any saint in the M.R. can be kept on a free day. According to no. 33, if impeded, he or she can be kept on the nearest free day. Roman approval for such a public practice may well be required.