



## WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED THE LORD

*This month: St. Melanie*

We often have the impression that wealth and Christian living are impossible together. And while it is true that to pursue money as the most important goal of life hardens us and destroys us, there have been wealthy saints. After all, the New Testament tells us that “the love of money,” and not money itself, is the root of all evil. If God has seen fit to give us wealth, it is our attitude toward it and use of it that matters. It is surely possible to destroy ourselves with it, by coveting it and giving it great importance. But it is also possible to use it for His glory and to give it where it is needed.

Melanie, a saint of the fifth century, was born in Rome of wealthy Christian parents. They arranged for her to marry a young nobleman named Pinian, and she gave birth to a child about a year after their marriage. Melanie loved her husband and child, but also felt a strong urge to live a life of monastic dedication to God. While pregnant with her second child, she became very ill and was healed only when her husband agreed to live with her as a brother in the future.

Melanie and Pinian’s children both died early, and it was then that the couple decided to use their wealth for the Church, the monasteries, and the poor. They travelled widely, finding people in need and helping them everywhere they went. But they did not only feel that others needed help; they had enough humility to know that they still needed guidance and help, too. So they visited and learned from the spiritual leaders who were scattered throughout Upper and Lower Egypt. In addition, they fasted and prayed, making a practice of reading the Bible from beginning to end every three years.

Finally, this pair of ascetics settled near the Mount of Olives. Though we often think of men as the ones who became monastic hermits living in isolation from other people, Melanie herself became one, giving herself over to prayer, fasting, and devotion to God for fourteen years.

It was only after these long years of spiritual effort and growth that Melanie felt ready to help others toward

salvation. Leaving her simple dwelling near the Mount of Olives, she went out and founded monasteries for both men and women. So strong was Melanie in her faith, in fact, that she was able to achieve something the great Augustine could not do. She visited a pagan kinsman named Volusianus in Constantinople. Volusianus knew Augustine, who tried very hard to bring his friend to the Christian faith but never could. Melanie, however, was able to convert him by the power of her example.

Like most people who take on the monastic life seriously, Melanie did not wish to stay out in the world for too long. She returned to her cell near the Mount of Olives, and died there in the year 483. Though she was only fifty-seven when she died, she had had a great impact on many people’s lives. Most important, perhaps, she had been a person of wealth who refused to let the money rule her life. Instead, she made it serve her purpose, which was to live for the glory of God.

In the *Prologue from Ochrid*, put together by Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic of the Serbian Orthodox Church and containing lives of saints for every day of the year, we read another interesting story about St. Melanie.

When St. Melanie visited the hermits in Egypt with the intention of giving them some financial help, she was astounded at their utter scorning of goods and wealth. Thus, she visited one monk, Ephestion, and saw nothing in his cell but mats, a bowl for water, a little dry bread and a salt pot. Discovering in advance that the elder would not take money from her, she seized the opportunity to hide several gold pieces in the salt pot. But as she was on the way back, she heard the elder running after her and calling her to stop. She stopped. The elder held out the gold to her on his palm, saying, “I don’t need this; take what is yours.” Melanie said to him, “If you don’t need it, give it to someone else.” He replied, “No one around here would have any use for it.” When Melanie would not take the gold back, the elder swung his arm and threw the coins into the river, and then returned to his cell.

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