

Pelagius: *To Demetrias*

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Introduction

Few churchmen have been so maligned as Pelagius in the Christian West. For nearly 1,500 years, all that anyone has known of the British monk's theology has come from what his opponents said about him — and when one's opponents are as eminent as Augustine and Jerome, the chance of getting a fair hearing is not great. Consequently, it has been easy to lay all manner of pernicious heresies at Pelagius's doorstep. Only in the last couple of decades have scholars been able to recover and examine Pelagius's works directly. What they have found is that very little of what has historically passed for "Pelagian" heresy was actually taught by him.

This "rehabilitation" of Pelagius by Western scholars calls for an Orthodox Christian response. Indeed, through ecumenical contact and dialogue with Western Christians, Orthodox theologians have come to appreciate the immense impact that Augustine has had in shaping the landscape of Western Christianity; and the divergence of the Augustinian trajectory of theology from the Apostolic and Patristic Tradition has been carefully charted. It is surely time, then, for an evaluation of Augustine's chief opponent, Pelagius. We may even find in the British monk's criticism of Augustinian ideology a voice sympathetic to Orthodox concerns.

There is no denying that Orthodox Christians have traditionally called Pelagius a heretic. Yet no Eastern Fathers were acquainted with him, and condemnations of Pelagianism were included in the Oecumenical Synod of Ephesos only under Western influence. As we shall see, on the couple of occasions during his lifetime that Pelagius was actually tried at local councils in the East, the evaluation was positive. This paper picks up where those councils left off, though a thorough evaluation of Pelagius lies well beyond its scope. We shall begin the process by analysing herein the *Letter to Demetrias*, in which many of Pelagius's principal views are set out.

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A Brief Life of Pelagius

Tracing the life of Pelagius is not easy. No one wrote his biography, nor are there many autobiographical details in his works. There are no accounts of the controversies from an objective historian, and little commentary exists from friendly or neutral sources. Nonetheless, scholars are confident they have pieced together an accurate portrait of Pelagius's life.

The first we know of Pelagius is in Rome where he came in early 380s. He was almost certainly from Britain, where he was born around 350.^[1] There he received a very good education, with extensive training in the Scriptures, as well as in both Latin and Greek Patristic writings. He inherited in his theological formation the Romanised Celtic tradition, "with its emphasis on faith and good works, on the holiness of all life and the oneness of all."^[2] Consequently, once in Rome, he became impatient with the moral laxity that surrounded him. The Christianisation of the Empire was not making true Christians of people, he believed, only "conforming pagans." He began preaching with the fervent desire to lead everyone to live an authentic Christian life according to the Gospel. Pelagius believed that the grace and renewing power of baptism had brought the opportunity to struggle on the path to perfection; but instead, he saw Christians squandering their baptism and "lapsing back into their old, comfortable habits of self-indulgence and careless pursuit of Mammon."^[3] The main focus of his preaching was never theological, but practical moral advice.

In Rome, Pelagius gradually gathered around himself a large and influential circle of loyal adherents, including educated aristocrats, many of them women, as well as many clergy. Though he did not belong to any religious community and never sought ordination, Pelagius was often called a monk, a testimony to his holy life. Even Augustine described him as "a holy man, who, I am told, has made no small progress in the Christian life."^[4] Gleaning what they could from his writings, commentators have described Pelagius as "a cultivated and sensitive layman," "an elusive and gracious figure, beloved and respected wherever he goes," always "silent, smiling, reserved," certainly a "modest and retiring man."^[5]

The first hint of theological controversy came around 405, when Pelagius heard someone reading from Augustine's *Confessions*, "Give me what you command and command what you will." This verse annoyed Pelagius very much; he believed this and other Augustinian teachings contradicted the traditional Christian understanding of grace and free will, turning man into a "mere marionette, a robot."^[6] Soon after, he wrote his famous *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles*, in which he set out his opposition to such Augustinian doctrines as the inherited guilt of original sin, rigid predestination, and the necessity of baptism to spare infants from hell.

With Alaric the Visigoth threatening Rome with attack in the year 409, Pelagius departed for Palestine, where he was greeted with hostility by Augustine's theological ally, Jerome. Jerome had been busy fighting Origenism, and when he heard that Pelagius was teaching that a baptised Christian was able to live a sinless life, if he so willed, he reacted strongly.

For him, this doctrine of *impeccantia* (sinlessness) sounded like the Stoic notion of *apatheia* which Origen had adopted. So Jerome managed to have Pelagius formally charged with heresy, and the British monk was brought before Bishop John of Jerusalem at the Synods of Jerusalem and Diospolis in the year 415. At these two synods, Pelagius admitted to having taught this doctrine, but disassociated himself from the more extreme views of Celestius, a lawyer whom he had met in Rome. He quoted Scripture on the necessity of grace and anathematised those who denied that it was essential. The Synod of Diospolis therefore concluded:

Now since we have received satisfaction in respect of the charges brought against the monk Pelagius in his presence and since he gives his assent to sound doctrines but condemns and anathematises those contrary to the faith of the Church, we adjudge him to belong to the communion of the Catholic Church.^[7]

After his acquittal, Pelagius wrote two major treatises which are no longer extant, *On Nature* and *On Free Will*. In these, he defends his position on sin and sinlessness, and accuses Augustine and Jerome of being under the influence of Manicheanism. Their doctrine of original sin restored evil to a Manichean status, and their predestinarianism was tantamount to Manichean fatalism.

Unsurprisingly, Jerome and Augustine were not convinced by the conclusions at Jerusalem and Diospolis. They decided to direct all their energies to attacking Pelagius and the British monk soon found himself "out-manoeuvred and out-gunned."^[8] Under the influence of Augustine, the bishops of Africa appealed to Pope Innocent I, and after some time, he declared that Pelagius and Celestius were to be excommunicated unless they renounced their "heretical" beliefs. Innocent died a month later, and his successor Zosimus reversed the judgement. The African bishops stood fast, though, and between 416 and 418, several councils of Carthage passed numerous canons against the tenets of what had become known as "Pelagianism."^[9]

Today, historians of the Church realise that Pelagius was not condemned simply on theological grounds. Rather, Pelagius's teaching was seen as a threat, a "potentially dangerous source of schism in the body social and politic."^[10] His central message that there is only one authentic Christian life, the path to perfection, left no room for nominal Christians. If he had gone off into the Syrian or Egyptian desert, he would probably have been a revered "abba." Instead, he clashed with the comfortable Christianity which had become the basis of unity in the Imperial Church, and, as a result, he has gone down as the West's chief heresiarch.

Around the time of his condemnation by the councils of Carthage, Pelagius disappeared. He is thought to have died not long after 418 somewhere near the Eastern Mediterranean, possibly in Egypt, though some have speculated that he may have returned to Britain.^[11]

At the Oecumenical Synod of Ephesos in 431, those who failed to disassociate themselves from "the opinions of Celestius" were excommunicated. This canon clearly resulted from the direct influence of Cyril of Alexandria and other African bishops, rather than from the theological reflection of the whole Church. Thus, as one commentator has

said, it was as "a matter of courtesy rather than a result of reasoned debate" that the Eastern Church overruled the earlier decisions in favour of Pelagius at local Eastern Synods at Jerusalem and Diospolis.[12]

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The Letter to Demetrias: History and Text

Pelagius was in Palestine when, in 413, he received a letter from the renowned Anician family in Rome. One of the aristocratic ladies who had been among his followers was writing to a number of eminent Western theologians, including Jerome and possibly Augustine, for moral advice for her daughter, Demetrias. The latter was a young woman of 14, who, though recently engaged to be married, had chosen to take a vow of virginity. Demetrias's mother wanted her to receive the very best instruction as she began her new life. Evidently, the request was fervently made, for in his response, the *Letter to Demetrias*, Pelagius admits to having been persuaded by the "remarkable force of her heartfelt desire" (1:2).[13]

Pelagius rose to the dual challenge of not only writing for an aristocratic audience but doing so in direct competition with his illustrious theological adversaries. The *Letter to Demetrias* has been called "one of the jewels of Christian literature." [14] One modern commentator describes the impression given by the letter, the impression which Demetrias herself must have received, as that

of an older, wiser friend, writing with deep feeling and sincerity from his own lifetime of experience and commending the values and obligations which he himself prizes above all else in other words, of that same simple, devout Christian teacher whom she had once known as a child in Rome and heard expounding the mysteries of the scriptures to her elders, one whose judgement she could respect and trust, one who believed what he said and practised what he preached, one whose sole concern was to be about his Father's business. And as she read his advice, no doubt she would have in her mind's eye a picture of a rather eccentric, distinctly overweight, elderly gentleman, dressed in the simple habit of a monk, strict in his teaching and his behaviour, but capable of impressing the elite of Rome by his enthusiasm and example.[15]

In addition to giving us insight into the practical moral advice which was the centre of Pelagius's teaching, this letter provides us with the "most complete and coherent account" of his views of natural sanctity and man's moral capacity to choose to live a holy life.[16]

As with all of Pelagius's writings, the textual history of the *Letter to Demetrias* is complicated by his condemnation as a heretic. After the Synod of Ephesus in 431, it became a crime to be in possession of any Pelagian works, so they were transmitted under others' names. The great irony of this letter is that for centuries it was considered to be one of the works of Jerome and was included in his corpus of writings.[17] Later, the letter would be ascribed to various followers of Pelagius like Celestius and Julian of Eclanum. Today, however, the authenticity of the *Letter to Demetrias* as a work of Pelagius is not seriously questioned. Textual analysis indicates that its style and

vocabulary are typically Pelagian. Moreover, modern scholars point out that Augustine himself knew the letter to have been written by Pelagius, something he mentions in his refutation of it in his work of 417, *On the Grace of Christ*.[\[18\]](#)

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The Letter to Demetrias: Content and Analysis

The first half of the *Letter to Demetrias* is an exposition of Pelagius's views of human nature. The monk explains why he begins this way:

Whenever I have to speak on the subject of moral instruction and the conduct of a holy life, it is my practice first to demonstrate the power and quality of human nature and to show what it is capable of achieving (2:1).

The moral life of purity, for Pelagius, can only be achieved by drawing upon both "the good of nature and the good of grace" (9:1); this will be the dominant theme of his exhortation.

Pelagius's reflections on the human person are not unlike those of the Eastern Fathers. They share the same starting point of moral reflection, that is, the innate goodness of man because God has created him in His image and likeness. Pelagius writes, "you ought to measure the good of human nature by reference to its Creator" (2:2). For Pelagius as well as the Fathers, creation in the image of God means creation with free will, as free, self-determining persons:

Moreover, the Lord of Justice wished man to be free to act and not under compulsion; it was for this reason that 'he left him free to make his own decisions' (Sir 15:14) and set before him life and death, good and evil, and he shall be given whatever pleases him (2:2).

As with the Fathers, Pelagius has contempt for that "ignorant majority" which believes that because man is able to do evil, he has not been created truly good. In fact, Pelagius says, if man were created to do good "on compulsion and without possibility of variation" — as these people would have preferred — there would be no real humanity, and no real virtue or goodness (3:1). Here we can see that the heart of Pelagius's objections to Augustine and Jerome is not a question of abstract theology, but practical spirituality: those who deny the free will of man make futile the moral life.

This innate goodness of the human person, Pelagius argues, was not destroyed in the Fall. Man continues to carry in his nature the goodness of creation, a kind of natural grace or "natural sanctity" (4:2). Pelagius goes to great lengths to demonstrate this, offering first as evidence the fact that many pagans have been "chaste, tolerant, temperate, generous, abstinent and kindly, rejecters of the world's honours as well as its delights, lovers of justice no less than knowledge" (3:3). His central argument, though, is from the Old Testament; he produces a lengthy roll-call of the patriarchs and Old Testament saints (5:1ff) whose examples of holiness prove that it is possible to follow the commandments. Again, Pelagius emphasises the practical moral implications of this doctrine of human goodness:

We can never enter upon the path of virtue, unless we have hope as our guide and companion and if every effort expended in seeking something is nullified in effect by despair of ever finding it (2:1).

There is nothing that Pelagius abhors more than people forsaking the path to life because it is too hard or difficult, because "we are but men, we are encompassed by frail flesh" (16:2). To deny, as Augustine and Jerome did, man's innate goodness and capacity to live a holy life is not only moral pessimism, it is real blasphemy: for it means that God does not know what he has done or commanded, or that he does not remember the human frailty which he created, or that God has "commanded something impossible" and therefore seeks not our salvation but our punishment and damnation (16:2).

Pelagius also argues against the Augustinian view of the Fall and man because it undermines the reality of sin as a moral choice. The view of his opponents that there is something in nature which *compels* human beings to sin strikes Pelagius as "blaming nature" for what is really the choice of free human persons. He writes:

If it should be thought to be nature's fault that some have been unrighteous, I shall use the evidence of the scriptures, which everywhere lay upon sinners the heavy weight of the charge of having used their own will and do not excuse them for having acted only under the constraint of nature (7).

For Pelagius, in the "books of both Testaments [...] all good, as well as all evil, is described as voluntary" (7). This is most easily demonstrated in the case of brothers like Cain and Abel, or Jacob and Esau, who share the same nature. The monk explains, "when merits differ in the same nature, it is will that is the sole cause of an action" (8:1).

Therefore, the Fall of man could not have corrupted nature to the point of making of the entire human race the Augustinian *massa peccati* (mass of sin) unable to do anything but sin. The effect of the Fall must rather be conceived in more "environmental" terms.

Pelagius writes:

Nor is there any reason why it is made difficult for us to do good other than that long habit of doing wrong which has infected us from childhood and corrupted us little by little over many years and ever after holds us in bondage and slavery to itself, so that it seems somehow to have acquired the force of nature (8:3).

For the British monk, it was not true to say as Augustine did that all men sinned *in Adam* and thus inherit his guilt; human beings of their own free will simply imitate Adam and re-enact the Fall in themselves.

Most of what Pelagius argues against Augustine and Jerome can be found in the teaching of the Eastern Fathers. Certainly, the assertion that it is possible to live a holy life after the Fall, as evidenced by the saints of the Old Testament, is a familiar Patristic theme.

Moreover, the Eastern Fathers nowhere teach the necessity of sin, emphasising, as Pelagius does, the rôle of human free will. Nor do any of the Fathers propose a doctrine of original sin like that of Augustine which disturbed Pelagius so much. Nevertheless, in his polemics against those who denied human moral freedom, Pelagius develops perhaps too high a view of human free will. As the Orthodox moral theologian, Fr Stanley Harakas, has noted, the Fathers generally distinguished between the innate self-determination (*autexousion*) of rational beings and the freedom (*eleutheria*) which is a

property only of the "condition reached in Theosis where there is no conflict or struggle in acting in a fully human, divine-like fashion."[\[19\]](#) Pelagius does seem to confuse these two, anticipating a little too much of real freedom in human self-determination. Furthermore, in his argument against human moral depravity, Pelagius neglects somewhat the effects of mortality and corruption after the Fall which, as the Fathers insist, evoke a tendency (though not a compulsion) towards sin. Finally, to bring it totally in line with Patristic teaching, Pelagius's understanding of sin would need to be broadened to encompass the concept of "involuntary sin" — the evil acts and events in which we participate, yet do not will.

Still, contrary to caricatures drawn of him, Pelagius does not have a naive and overly optimistic vision of human perfection.[\[20\]](#) The great effort he expends in defending the goodness of human nature is only to show what a wonderful creation has been wasted by sin, to demonstrate "how great is that treasure in the soul which we possess but fail to use" (6:3). It is instructive to recall Pelagius's response, at the Synod of Diospolis, to one of the principal charges brought against him by Jerome — the belief that "a man can be without sin, if he wishes." Pelagius answered:

I did indeed say that a man can be without sin and keep the commandments of God, if he wishes, for this ability has been given to him by God. However, I did not say that any man can be found who has never sinned from his infancy up to his old age, but that, having been converted from his sins, he can be without sin by his own efforts and God's grace, yet not even by this means is he incapable of change for the future.[\[21\]](#) While he was totally committed to the possibility of a completely sinless life, Pelagius was thus reluctant to admit anyone had ever achieved it.

Despite the oft-cited charge of his critics that he denied the need for redeeming grace,[\[22\]](#) Pelagius clearly emphasises its necessity for the moral life. The first step in the path to moral perfection is baptism, which is a genuine rebirth.[\[23\]](#) After his long roll-call of Old Testament saints, Pelagius writes:

Even before the law was given to us, as we have said, and long before the arrival of our Lord and Saviour some are reported to have lived holy and righteous lives; how much more possible must we believe that to be after the light of his coming, now that we have been instructed by the grace of Christ and reborn as better men (8:4).

This theme of baptismal rebirth is taken up again as a direct exhortation to the young Demetrius:

Consider, I beseech you, that high rank with which you have been made glorious before God and through which you were reborn in baptism to become a daughter of God (19:1). Like the Fathers, Pelagius teaches that redemption in Christ enables man to co-operate with God in the ascetical struggle toward deification.[\[24\]](#) Yet he departs somewhat from the Patristic Tradition in failing properly to indicate how the grace of redemption works. While Augustine clearly teaches that grace works within the heart of man, Pelagius is never definite about an infused grace. He speaks of being "instructed by the grace of Christ," of being "purified and cleansed by his blood, encouraged by his example to pursue perfect righteousness" (8:4). These kinds of statements, along with his tendency

sometimes to write about "meriting" grace (cf. 25:3), have left Pelagius open to the charge that his understanding of grace is too rationalistic and external.[\[25\]](#)

Notwithstanding possible deficiencies in his theology of grace, Pelagius's vision of the moral life is far from restricted to external holiness; he directs a lot of his attention to the development of the interior life. Virtues, he writes, "do not come from outside but are produced in the heart itself" (10:4). Nor is it acceptable simply to perform virtuous acts; they must transform the inner person so that we "desire righteousness as strongly as we desire food and drink when hungry or thirsty" (12). Furthermore, Pelagius says that

the habit of doing good must be exercised and strengthened by the practice of constant meditation; only the best things must occupy the mind, and the practice of holy conduct must be implanted at a deeper level (13).

This focus on the interior life must begin at the outset of the path to holiness, with a thorough self-examination: "Let us approach the secret places of our soul" (4:1), Pelagius exhorts his reader.

In the second half of the *Letter to Demetrias*, Pelagius proceeds to give the young virgin practical advice on the spiritual path she has chosen. It is in this practical realm that Pelagius shines most brightly: his spiritual direction is traditional, yet sharply relevant; the medicine is tough, but administered gently. The spiritual fervour and depth of the teaching are clear evidence of his advanced degree in the ascetical life. This is inspirational teaching at its very best, the kind one only finds in the great Fathers of the Church.

As with all of the Fathers, Pelagius's writing is permeated with quotations from and allusions to the Bible. It is no surprise that one of his main pieces of advice for Demetrias is to attend to the Scriptures. He tells her: "Read the holy scriptures in such a way that you never forget that they are the words of God" (23:2). Many of Pelagius's themes are familiar ones from Scripture and the early Fathers. He presents the moral life as a choice between two ways, the path to life and the path to destruction. He writes:

You must avoid that broad path which is worn away by the thronging multitude on their way to their death and continue to follow the rough track of that narrow path to eternal life which few find (10:3).

Another dominant theme from Scripture is Pelagius's stress that progress in the spiritual life is all-important. There is no standing still, he says; so "if we do not want to go back, we must run on" (27:4). Commenting on the parable of the talents, he writes:

He who hides in a napkin a talent which he has received is condemned by the Lord as a useless and good-for-nothing servant: it is culpable not only to have diminished that talent but also not to have increased it (15).

No hour should go by for a Christian, he insists, without some measure of spiritual growth (23:1).

Pelagius also warns Demetrias about numerous traps and pitfalls in the spiritual life. He tells her carefully to distinguish between vices and virtues: for while they are always

contrary to each other, they are "linked in some cases by such resemblance that they can scarcely be distinguished at all" (20:1). This problem often afflicts neophytes who are anxious to live the virtuous life. Pelagius writes:

For how many reckon pride as liberty, adopt flattery as humility, embrace malice instead of prudence and confer the name of innocence on foolishness, and, deceived by a misleading and most dangerous likeness, take pride in vices instead of virtues? (20:1) He tells her most especially to be wary of false humility. It is easy, he says, to look humble through "verbal fictions" and "feigned gestures," but "endurance of insult reveals the truly humble" (20:1). "Let there be no sign of pride, arrogance or haughtiness in you" (20:2), he exhorts. "Beware of flatterers like your enemies" (21:1), he goes on to say, for they lead people to think of their reputation rather than their conscience. These are wise words indeed, reminiscent of the advice of the desert Fathers, for they are the product of the same authentic spiritual experience.

Pelagius also shares the maximalistic approach of the Fathers to the spiritual life. "Do everything," he says bluntly. "We are not to select some of God's commandments as if to suit our own fancy but to fulfil all of them without exception" (16:1). But as any good elder, he gears himself to the special needs of his novice, tempering his message with pastoral dispensation and concern. At one point, for instance, he urges her to combine her fasting with works of mercy; but he then excuses her for a time from the works of mercy, directing her grandmother and mother to do them for her, so that she can devote all her "zeal and care" to the ordering of her spiritual life (22:1). Elsewhere he urges her not to go to extremes with any of her spiritual disciplines: "immoderate fasting, overenthusiastic abstinence and vigils of extravagant and disproportionate length are [...] evidence of lack of restraint," he says; the result may be that "it becomes impossible thereafter to perform such works even in a moderate way" (23:3). Thus, "with good practices as well as bad whatever exceeds the bounds of moderation becomes a vice instead of a virtue" (24:1). The reason for moderation is clear: "the body has to be controlled, not broken" (21:2). Furthermore, simplicity in the spiritual life guards the heart against feelings of pride and success. He writes: "Poor clothing, cheap food, wearisome fasts ought to quench pride, not nourish it" (21:2). Throughout the letter, this tempering of severe demands with loving moderation displays Pelagius's genuine empathy with his spiritual child.

Pelagius's discussion of virginity in the Christian life is further demonstration of his spiritual maturity. To be sure, he betrays at times the Western tendency to divide the spiritual life into ordinary commandments and "counsels of perfection." He says that in the Scriptures, "evil things are forbidden, good things are enjoined; intermediate things are allowed, perfect things are advised" (9:2). For instance, "marriage is allowed, so is the use of meat and wine, but abstinence from all three is advised by more perfect counsel" (9:2). But unlike many Western theologians, he vigorously stresses the fundamental unity of the spiritual life. He writes:

In the matter of righteousness we all have one obligation: virgin, widow, wife, the highest, middle and lower stations in life, we are all without exception ordered to fulfil

the commandments, nor is a man released from the law if he proposes to do more than it demands (10:1).

Pelagius tells Demetrias that her vow of virginity does not exempt her from the fullness of demands of the Christian life; he warns her not to be deceived by those who adopt chastity "not along with righteousness but in its place" (10:2). Righteousness, he insists, "is enjoined on everyone without exception" (9:2).

The ascetical struggle towards holiness and perfection in which Pelagius instructs Demetrias to engage is a difficult path involving both overcoming the passions and battling against demonic powers. Here again his teaching is perfectly consonant with all the Fathers. In describing how to resist the enemies of our soul, he once more emphasises human free will to accept or reject their temptations:

They indeed can give counsel but it is ours to choose or reject their suggestions, for they harm us not by compelling but by counselling, and they do not extort our consent from us but court it (25:4).

Pelagius quotes from Matthew 15:19, "Out of the heart of man come evil thoughts," to show that the origin of sin is the evil image or thought in the human heart. These evil thoughts paint "every single deed on the tablet of the heart, as it were, before doing it" (26:2). Therefore, the Christian must learn to discern thoughts in his heart. The mind^[26] must become careful and watchful, trained to differentiate between bad and good thoughts, "so that it either nourishes good thoughts or immediately destroys bad ones" (26:2). When the soul is "illuminated by divine speech" and "occupied with heavenly thoughts," the devil quickly flees (26:2). The key, therefore, is to watch carefully to protect the heart against the first stirrings of evil:

All your care and attention must be concentrated on keeping watch, and it is particularly necessary for you to guard against sin in the place where it usually begins, to resist temptation at once the very first time it appears and thus to eliminate the evil before it can grow and spread (26:3).

Pelagius follows here the Patristic teaching about watchfulness (*nepsis*) and guarding of the heart, though he does not develop the mystical dimension, the healing rôle of the prayer of the heart. Indeed, the one apparent weakness of his spiritual "system" is his lack of full attention to prayer; but that is a difficult matter to judge, since we have no reason to suppose he was trying to be systematic and all-encompassing in this short letter. At any rate, prayer is certainly both the implied means and end of a spiritual life whose goal he describes as "a soul continuously clinging to God" (23:2).

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Conclusion

The great English monk and scholar St Bede once quoted several passages from the *Letter to Demetrias* saying that it contains "much excellent moral instruction but is marred by the author's failure to emphasise the need to rely on divine grace rather than free will and strength of mind."^[27] Yet if we remember that Pelagius was not a systematic theologian but a moral reformer, and that his theological argumentation was

made in reaction to writings that he believed undermined the authentic Christian spiritual life, we may perhaps more easily forgive his few exaggerations and omissions than did Bede. In fact, since on most of his points of disagreement with Augustine, Pelagius upholds the Patristic Tradition of the Church, and since in his practical spiritual advice he is entirely harmonious with Church teaching, this much-maligned British monk would appear to be no more heretical than many venerable Fathers. When that is considered along with his indisputable holiness of life — attested to not only by the depth of his spiritual writings but by Augustine himself! — can we help but to wonder if we have long-neglected a great saint of the Church?

Pelagius's lonely and thankless struggle against the novel doctrines of Augustine and Jerome was eventually taken up by monks in southern Gaul. They were alarmed to hear of the "Pelagian controversy," especially Augustine's teaching on election and predestination, which they believed to be "contrary to the opinion of the Fathers and the common view of the Church."^[28] They saw the Augustinian theological system as a threat to grace as synergy, as a partnership between God and man. Their champion was St John Cassian, a disciple of St John Chrysostom. Together with his supporters, St Vincent of Lérins and St Faustus of Riez, he upheld the Patristic Tradition against Augustinianism and its proponents, especially Prosper of Aquitaine, as well as against the extreme "Pelagians" who indeed denied the necessity of God's grace for salvation. These noble Gallic monks were later branded "Semi-Pelagians," and their doctrine of synergy was condemned at the Synod of Orange in 529. This council rejected Augustinian predestination but accepted much of Augustine's theology of sin and grace, definitively setting the Western Church on a path diverging from the Apostolic and Patristic Orthodox Tradition.

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Endnotes

[1] Pelagius is frequently referred to as either British or a "Scot" (a term, usually derisive, which meant "Irish"). John Ferguson, "In Defence of Pelagius," in *Theology* (Vol. 83, March 1980), p. 115. The name "Pelagius" is probably the Greek form (*pelagios*, "of the sea") of the Welsh name Morgan or Morien. H. Forthomme Nicholson, "Celtic Theology: Pelagius," in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, James P. Mackay, ed. (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989), p. 386. [\[Return\]](#)

[2] Nicholson, p. 388. [\[Return\]](#)

[3] B.R. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1988), p. 20. [\[Return\]](#)

[4] B.R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers* (The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1989), p. 2. [\[Return\]](#)

[5] Rees, *Reluctant Heretic*, p. xii. [\[Return\]](#)

[6] Ferguson, "In Defence," p. 115. He comments: "This, in the end, was the issue. Pelagius did not say that we could be saved by our own efforts. He did insist that we have still freely to turn to the saving grace of God." [\[Return\]](#)

[7] Rees, *Reluctant Heretic*, p. 138. [\[Return\]](#)

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 17. [\[Return\]](#)

[9] Ferguson, "In Defence," p. 117. [\[Return\]](#)

[10] Rees, *Reluctant Heretic*, p. 20. [\[Return\]](#)

[11] Ferguson presents the compelling idea that Pelagius found refuge first in Lérins and then in Wales (p. 392). Wherever the venerable monk ended up, it is almost certain that he remained in communion with the Church. [\[Return\]](#)

[12] Rees, *Reluctant Heretic*, p. xv. [\[Return\]](#)

[13] All references to the text of the *Letter to Demetrias* are to the translation by B.R. Rees, contained in *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, pp. 35-70. [\[Return\]](#)

[14] Georges de Plinval, as cited by Rees, *Letters of Pelagius*, p. 34. [\[Return\]](#)

[15] Rees, *Letters of Pelagius*, p. 35. [\[Return\]](#)

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 32. [\[Return\]](#)

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 33. Equally ironic is the fact that another of Pelagius's writings, his statement of faith and defence of the Nicene Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, the *Libellus Fidei*, has only been preserved because the Vatican, until recently, believed it to be one of Augustine's sermons. William E. Phipps, "The Heresiarch: Pelagius or Augustine?," in *The Anglican Theological Review* (Vol. 62, April 1980), p. 125. [\[Return\]](#)

[18] Rees, *Letters of Pelagius*, p. 33. [\[Return\]](#)

[19] Fr Stanley Harakas, *Toward Transfigured Life* (Light and Life Publications: Minneapolis, 1986), p. 34. [\[Return\]](#)

[20] As one commentator has noted, "Pelagius is not more optimistic about human nature than his opponents; he is more pessimistic. To say that there is a right way to choose and we do not choose it is 'a really harsh and bitter word for sinners'." Ferguson, "In Defence," p. 118. [\[Return\]](#)

[21] Rees, *Reluctant Heretic*, p. 136. [\[Return\]](#)

[22] We are disappointed to read that an otherwise brilliant theologian, Fr Michael Azkoul, dismisses Pelagius as having "denied the necessity of Grace and true Faith for salvation." *The Teachings of the Holy Orthodox Church*, Vol. I (Dormition Skete Publications: Buena Vista, Colorado, 1986), p. 227. Here and elsewhere Fr Azkoul fails to distinguish between Pelagius himself and later "Pelagianism." In effect, Pelagius himself was more "semi-Pelagian" than "Pelagian"! [\[Return\]](#)

[23] It must be remembered that Pelagius never disputed the necessity of baptism, nor did he reject infant baptism. What he argued against was Augustine's teaching that infants needed to be baptised in order to remit inherited guilt and that unbaptised babies were damned to hell. [\[Return\]](#)

[24] Pelagius often refers in his writings to the doctrine of "synergy" established by St Paul; cf. Romans 8:28, "We know that in everything God works for good with (*synergeo*) those who love him." This paradox of grace and free will — so misunderstood by Augustine — Pelagius championed at the Synods of Jerusalem and Diospolis (to the satisfaction of the Eastern bishops), quoting I Corinthians 15:10, "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me." Phipps, pp. 130-131. [\[Return\]](#)

[25] Cf. Vigen Guroian's statement that "Orthodoxy speaks of an *imitatio Christi* but does not accept or express in this a Pelagian rationalism. The old Adam is not capable on his own power to imitate Christ perfectly and fashion himself into a new Adam." *Incarinate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics*, p. 15. [\[Return\]](#)

[26] Pelagius surely refers to the *nous*, not the brain. [\[Return\]](#)

[27] Rees, *Letters of Pelagius*, p. 33. [\[Return\]](#)

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 6. [\[Return\]](#)

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