

## St. Pelagia<sup>1</sup>

St. Pelagia was an actress from Antioch. She was very beautiful, very wealthy and was known to live a sexually promiscuous life.

According to the Desert Fathers traditions, Bishop Nonnus of Edessa (who later became St. Nonnus) was speaking with a group of bishops outside the basilica of St. Julian, Martyr. While he was talking with these bishops, Pelagia, riding on a white horse and wearing her famous jewels and scantily dressed like the prostitutes of her day passed by. She was accompanied by many admirers and attendants.

St. Nonnus stopped speaking and watched her until she was out of sight. The other bishops however all turned away and hid their eyes. St. Nonnus asked them if they were not pleased at her beauty, but they were confused and couldn't make any response to this seemingly "strange question" coming from such a "holy" man.

St. Nonnus insisted that her beauty had delighted him, but he wept for her. When Pelagia "saw how the bishop looked at her, she was caught off guard. No man had ever looked at her with such purity. He was not lusting after her, but rather saw something in her that she did not see herself. The simple purity of that one bishop's glance marked the beginning of her conversion to Christ."<sup>2</sup>

The story goes on to tell of Pelagia being irresistibly drawn to the Church the following day where she heard St. Nonnus preach. She then repented of her dissolute life and asked to be baptized. St. Nonnus agreed, but insisted on the presence of the other bishops...

Eight days later Pelagia is said to have given all her property away to the poor, dressed in men's clothing and disappeared from the city.

"Bishop Nonnus was not afraid that the sight of her body would force him to lust. Rather, her body revealed his call to love her properly. He didn't see a prostitute walking toward him – he saw a woman, made in the image and likeness of God. Though he lived many centuries before Pope John Paul II, he truly lived out the future pope's words when he said that God 'assigns the dignity of every woman as a task to every man.'

God ultimately wants to transform our hearts so that we aren't afraid we will lust every time we see an attractive person. This is the freedom exhibited by Bishop Nonnus and offered to all of us. Similarly, God offered St. Pelagia freedom and gave her the grace to help her to grow out of the habit of allowing herself to be used. No matter how old we are, where we have been, or

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<sup>1</sup> Except where otherwise noted, this excerpt taken from <http://www.christdesert.org/cgi-bin/martyrology.dynamic.5.cgi?name=pelagia>

<sup>2</sup> Jason Evert, *Theology of the Body for Teens: Parent's guide*, (Ascension Press: West Chester, PA, 2008), 18.

what we've done, purity is possible! It may seem difficult to attain, but all things are possible with God (Luke 1:37)."<sup>3</sup>

**Small group discussion questions:**

- 1) What keeps us from truly seeing another person? What tends to get in our way of seeing people for who they really are?
- 2) There is a phrase sometimes used in the spiritual life which says, "You are what you contemplate." What do you spend your time contemplating? Do the movies, music, books, etc. that you enjoy lead you closer to God? What inspires you to become a saint? How can you purify your own gaze?
- 3) Custody of the eyes is still necessary and important for most of us, who aren't saints yet. How can we guard our eyes better? How can we protect our children's eyes?
- 4) What else strikes you about this story of St. Pelagia? How does hearing about her life inspire you to grow / change?
- 5) What strikes you about the way in which St. Nonnus treated her? How can you follow his example?

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<sup>3</sup> Evert, *Theology*, 18 – 19.