

ST BONIFACE, APOSTLE OF GERMANY

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THE Church of God, quickened by the Spirit given at Pentecost, is alive even in her past. Her saints do not depend upon any human memorial to keep their name living, for they rejoice already in an undying communion with all the faithful in whom God's grace is operative and, like a cloud of compassionate witnesses, they support by their prayers those who still struggle to live as they lived and die as they died. It is, then, to rescue ourselves from our forgetfulness that it is good to recall a great English missionary who, on 5th June, 754, twelve centuries ago this summer, was killed by a band of the people he had already given his life to convert.

Wynfrith—it was only later that he took the Latin name, Boniface—was born in the West-Saxon country beyond Selwood a little before 675.¹ Sent as a boy of four or five to a monastery at Exeter for his education, he there acquired a love of the religious life which the opposition of his father was unable to root out. Perhaps the reputation of its studies or of its abbot, Winbert, to whom he became devoted, attracted him to the monastery of Nursling, a house which lay between Winchester and Southampton, where he completed his formation in a way of life whose framework was the rule of St Benedict, much as it must have been lived at Monte Cassino in the days of the Father of Western monks. Its division of time between reading, manual labour, and the daily routine of domestic duties, the whole pervaded by the atmosphere of the psalms, was one which he was afterwards to establish wherever possible as the anchor-hold of infant Churches, and upon which he himself depended, his last wish being to be buried at the abbey of Fulda, a foundation of his own in the land

¹ The materials for the life of St Boniface are quite exceptionally ample and reliable. The following brief study is based mainly on the letters and the contemporary life by the monk Willibald. A text of these will be found in Migne, P. L. LXXXIX, but better editions are, for the letters, that of Ernst Dummlet in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, *Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi*, I (Berlin, 1892), and for the early lives, W. Levison, *Vitae Sancti Bonifatii Archiepiscopi Moguntini*, *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*, (Hanover Leipsig, 1905). A readily accessible book for the general background of the period is the excellent Pelican, *The Beginnings of English Society* by Dorothy Whitelock. Its bibliography will be a guide to anyone who wishes to go further. In the present article the quotations from the letters are given in the translation of Edward Kylic, *The English Correspondence of St Boniface* (London, 1911).

of his labours. It was not long before his talent and insight, particularly in the study of the Scriptures, found Boniface the head of the monastic school at Nursling and, indeed, it was that same love of Scripture which became the source of his power and persuasiveness as a preacher. His influence with both men and women extended well beyond the circle of his own community.

Local success, and the choice of him as representative of the Church of his region in a dispute which had to be referred to the Archbishop of Canterbury, led everyone to anticipate a distinguished future for him, but already a desire for foreign places was stirring in him. This desire his abbot wisely restrained for a time, but eventually yielded to it. In 716, with two or three companions, and funds provided by his monastery, Boniface made his way to London in search of a ship. His thoughts were turning to the German peoples across the sea.

There is nothing more mysterious than the vocation of a saint. St Paul tells us that God's true sons are those who are led by the Spirit of God. But the Spirit also drives. Indeed, the Hebrew verb for the Spirit 'moving' on the chaotic waters before the Creation is more accurately rendered 'beating', and recalls the mother bird forcing her reluctant young ones to fly. Whatever were the interior and secret impulses compelling Boniface—he later describes them in a letter to an abbess as a combination of 'the fear of Christ and the love of faring abroad'—there is also in his own monastic background a tradition which makes them intelligible. For the monasticism whose fervour was the characteristic mark of Christian beginnings in England had, from the first, been allied to a strongly missionary spirit. St Augustine, the apostle of England, was himself a monk, and he came to a country where, in the north, monasteries of the Celtic type were already in existence, largely as a result of the thirst for the sacrifice of exile, which was so frequently in evidence at that period. In one of these Northumbrian monasteries, Lindisfarne, St Wilfred, the first to be interested in the German apostolate, was trained, and the admiration for Benedictine observance with which he, and later St Benedict Biscop, returned from Rome, did not diminish the widespread feeling for missionary work in monasteries like Nursling, whose allegiance to the Holy Rule was probably due, in large measure, to them.

And so Boniface took to 'the fields of the sea'. Its waves and

storms are the image which comes again and again when in later years he writes home of his work in the mission field. The ship he found in London was returning to Wijk by Duurstede, in those days an important trading depot about twelve miles north-east of Utrecht. It was not a particularly propitious moment to arrive, for the heathen Radbod, king of the Frisians, had just recovered a considerable territory from the Christian duke of the Franks, Charles Martel, and was actively engaged in the restoration of pagan shrines. The work directed by St Willibrord, another Northumbrian monk, had had to be suspended and, after an unprofitable summer, Boniface took an autumn boat back to England. The journey had been merely a first reconnaissance.

Soon after his return to Nursling its abbot, Winbert, died, and the community did its best to persuade Boniface to consent to fill his place. Boniface, however, could not rest. He was determined, as his biographer says, 'to fulfil his predetermined purpose'. After a consultation with his friend Bishop Daniel of Winchester, an alternative appointment was made and, carrying with him the bishop's commendatory letters, Boniface set out for Rome to lay before the Pope the cause so dear to his heart. In Rome during the winter and spring of 718-19 he had the opportunity of discussing his plans with Pope Gregory II, being officially commissioned in May for the work in Germany.

Turning north, Boniface began to teach in Thuringia, but news of the death of Radbod gave him the chance to join Willibrord in Frisia and he worked there for three years. It was, we may imagine, a kind of noviciate under a man of experience. However, in 722, declining to accept consecration as Willibrord's assistant and successor, Boniface took his own area in Hesse. Here he founded a monastic cell and by the power of his preaching made thousands of converts. Indeed, the numbers were so embarrassing that he felt it necessary to refer again to Rome for further instructions. With the autumn of 722 he was in Rome a second time and, on 30th November, received consecration as bishop over the new area. He returned through the Frankish kingdom with letters of commendation addressed to Charles Martel.

Being now a bishop, Boniface's first task was to conduct a widespread confirmation among his new converts. It was not, of course, to be thought that heathen practices would disappear immediately and, indeed, even open sacrifice to trees and springs

continued. One such pagan shrine—its exact situation is uncertain—was the scene of the famous incident of the felling of the oak of Thor, from the wood of which Boniface built an oratory dedicated to St Peter. It is an incident which inevitably recalls St Benedict cutting down the groves which stood where Monte Cassino was to rise.

It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that a kind of fanatical violence characterized Boniface's missionary methods. His true approach is probably far better illustrated by his correspondence with Bishop Daniel of Winchester whom he often consulted and for whose opinions he had a profound regard. There is a balanced and gentle wisdom in the long letter in which Bishop Daniel outlines his conception of missionary procedure. He thinks it useless to enter into questions of the genealogy of false gods and similar apologetic arguments. It is much better not to discuss whether the gods really exist or not, but rather to show that if they were indeed begotten after the human manner, then they are simply men and women like ourselves, and the whole creation and government of the world has still to be explained. Boniface is to lead the people gradually to adopt for themselves an attitude of self-criticism. 'These questions . . . thou shouldst propose to them in no irritating or offensive manner, but with the greatest calmness and moderation . . . so that the heathen more out of confusion than exasperation may blush for their absurd opinions.' In answer to another letter of Boniface explaining his difficulty in avoiding public intercourse with the numerous influential priests who have lapsed into paganism or are leading scandalous lives, Bishop Daniel adopts the same moderate tone. 'You must at least bear with perseverance what you cannot cure by correction. . . . From intercourse with false brethren or priests, what counsel could avail to separate thee in bodily things, unless perchance thou art to withdraw entirely from this world.' He urges our Lord's own example in sitting down to supper with sinners, and his parable of the wheat and tares which are allowed to grow together until the harvest.

What a bond of sympathy existed between these two men on either side of the waters! 'This in your loving kindness you should know', writes the ageing bishop from England, 'that though we are separated by a wide stretch of land and the immensity of the sea, and the uneven climate of the sky, yet we are oppressed by

the same burden of suffering. Satan's activity is the same here as there. . . . They are the closing words of a reply to a letter in which Boniface had written to console the bishop on the loss of his sight and had sent him 'as a sign of true love, a coverlet, not silken, but shaggy, mixed with goats' wool, to cover your feet.' The letters and the gift are typical of the intimate and kindly exchanges which the seasonal ships facilitated between Boniface and friends in his home country. A large number of them, indeed, now came over to help him, and those who stayed in England supported him by their prayers or showered him with marks of affection, not only the handsome 'silver bowl, lined with gold, weighing three pounds and a half, and two cloaks' which came from Ethelbert, king of Kent, but the altar linen sent by English nuns, sometimes with whatever money they could spare.

The role of women in this correspondence of Boniface is, in fact, of considerable importance. It must be remembered that he had come from a country where double monasteries for men and women, often ruled over by an abbess, were not only common, but were outstanding for their learning and religious observance. Of these, the abbey of Whitby under St Hilda is probably the most famous, but there were many others besides. It was a type of religious life which Boniface strove to promote in the mission country, and one of the most outstanding women who helped him was Leofgyth, a pupil of his friend Eadburg, abbess of Minster in Thanet. Many of those who could not join him either wrote or procured the books by which, as a lifelong student, he set such store. Here an experienced abbess or a young nun would write for spiritual advice, there another would send latin verses for his criticism. He found time for them all, busy as he was, and rarely failed to comply promptly with their requests. 'I beseech thee in God's name, my dearest sister, nay, mother and sweet lady', he wrote to one, 'to pray for me constantly, because for my sins I am worn out by tribulations and disturbed much more by anxiety and mental care than by bodily toil. Be assured that the old confidence between us never fails.' It was not surprising that so many looked to him for consolation. In a neatly-turned letter, which employs a quotation from St Jerome, one nun writes: 'Therefore, believe me, not so eagerly does the storm-tossed sailor long for the harbour, nor the thirsting fields crave rain, nor the anxious mother on the curved shore await her son, as I long for a

sight of thee. . . . Wherefore, a sinner, cast at thy feet, out of my heart's inmost recesses, I have called to thee, O my father, from the borders of the world, that, as my soul requires, thou shouldst raise me upon the rock of thy prayers.'

Continuously on the road, suffering from hunger and thirst and cold, Boniface worked on for ten years. In recognition of his immense achievement Pope Gregory III sent him the archbishop's pallium in 732, and in 738 we find him in Rome a third time, this occasion being the prelude to the introduction of a regular diocesan organization in southern Germany. Boniface returned, and within a few years had founded several new sees in a country where he had started with one little chapel. Moreover Pippin, after the retirement of Carloman his brother, was left sole successor to the Frankish Charles Martel and, though he did it for political reasons, supported Boniface in a thorough reform of his own region. Church synods, unheard of even in this Christian area for many years, were once again convened and the culmination of a period of intense activity was the solemn anointing of Pippin as king of the Franks in 751.

Boniface, however, was ageing rapidly. He had long before had to send to England for a copy of the Prophets in larger writing because 'with my eyes growing dim I cannot well distinguish minute and connected letters'. He realized that he must appoint a successor. He therefore consecrated Lul, his disciple, as bishop, and at last he felt himself free to make one final act of generosity. Packing a chest of his precious books, as his habit was, but with foresight adding a shroud, he set off down the Rhine early in 754 accompanied by a band of catechists, priests, deacons, and monks, and destined for the Frisian area beyond Frankish protection. There was a brief and impressive success, and then one morning, 5th June, at Dockum, near the coast, a party of heathen broke in upon his encampment as he was about to hold a confirmation. He and more than fifty of his companions were massacred, and the attackers then turned and fought each other over the treasures they hoped to find in the chests. In their disgust at finding mainly books they scattered the contents among the marshes, but the Christians bore the body of the martyr back to the peace of Fulda.

Cuthbert, archbishop of Canterbury, writing to Lul on receipt of the news, declared that a general synod had instituted the day of martyrdom as an annual feast, and added, 'We seek him especi-

ally as our patron along with blessed Gregory and Augustine'. But perhaps Boniface's pleasantest epitaph had been written years before by a nun: 'Thou too at the resurrection, when the twelve Apostles are seated on their twelve seats, wilt have thy seat there; and over all those whom thou hast won by thy own labours, wilt thou their leader, heir to a golden crown, rejoice before the throne of the Eternal King'.



THE SYMBOL OF THE MOUNTAIN

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THE collect for the feast of St Catherine of Alexandria, having recalled the legend of the saint's body carried to Mount Sinai by angels, asks that we, by her intercession, may come to the mountain which is Christ. It is a symbol presented with the suddenness of mist clearing from a rocky summit, a dramatic image that brings one back to a consideration of the immense richness of mountain symbolism in liturgy and scripture.

It may well be that the mountain is the easiest of the great symbols of the Church for us to understand today, easier than water or fire, for instance. The townsman is too used to think of water in terms of turning on the tap, of heat and light in terms of pressing switches, but with the hills, he returns to reality; in increasing numbers more and more people are discovering the fascination of mountaineering. It would be interesting to explore the ebb and flow of appreciation of mountain beauty, of the urge to seek out the solitude and silence of the heights, for though the modern sport of climbing is a new growth of the last hundred years or less, the love of the hills is very old indeed. To contrast the language of the psalms about the hills, the attitude of St Anthony in his mountain retreat in the desert, of that of the Celtic saints and of St Francis on Alvernia, with that of eighteenth-century English writers, Dr Johnson's 'hopeless sterility' of the Scottish Highland glens in the west, is to feel that here is more than a mere