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## **St. Boniface, Apostle Among Pagans** Brennan Pursell



St. Boniface had it all: natural brilliance, formidable powers of persuasion, and unstoppable energy and resolve. He could have had a great career and high status in society, but this saintly man wanted something very different: nothing for himself and everything for Christ and His Church. Although St. Boniface's era (the seventh and eighth centuries A.D.) is far removed from ours, he remains a splendid example for Christians who wish to serve their faith in a predominantly pagan culture. He provides a timeless model for dialogue and perseverance in apostolate.

The saint was born in ca. 675 on the southern side of the island of Britain in the Kingdom of Wessex. He and his Anglo-Saxon countrymen spoke old Germanic languages, having come over from central Europe a couple of centuries ago. His parents were well-to-do farmers; they probably had a thick thatch roof over their heads, adequate woollens for clothing, and plenty of food to eat all year round. They were even able to host and support Christian missionaries who spread the faith throughout Britain. They had their son baptized and named him Winfrid.

If you can imagine it, as a little child Winfrid pressed his parents to let him become a monk and a missionary. They probably patted their five-year old son on the head and told him to go play, but Winfrid did not let up. He struggled with them until he turned seven, then they gave in to their precocious child and let him join the abbey at Exeter. There he learned to pray the Divine Office, and he studied voraciously. In just a few years, during his adolescence, he had learned all that could be taught there, and so he moved on to Nursling (Nutshalling) near Winchester. In addition to Scripture, he studied the liberal arts, including astronomy. He excelled at languages, Latin more than Greek, and the interpretation of Scripture. Later he began teaching, using a Latin grammar that he had written himself to aid his students. He was a virtuous, dedicated monk, and he shunned alcohol in any form, observing that excessive drinking of beer and mead led people to say and do things they otherwise knew they should not. He avoided and advised against drunkenness his whole life.

Winfrid was ordained to the priesthood near the age of thirty around the year 710 and took part in a synod of the

Church in Wessex. He must have made a notable impression, given his great knowledge, excellent speaking skills, and good sense, because thereafter he was asked to serve on other councils. He soon corresponded with kings and bishops throughout Britain. Just when it seemed that he might enjoy a soaring career as a man of power serving the king of Wessex, the spirit of God moved Winfrid to take a new bend in his path of life. He decided to leave Britain and serve as a missionary for Christ. His destination was Friesland, just across the English Channel (the present Netherlands and northwestern Germany), the land of his ancestors, of people that had resisted the Roman Empire for centuries and continued to challenge the Frankish kings and their armies, remaining firmly committed to their pagan gods and practices.

In 716, he left the abbey of Nursling accompanied by three friends, and they sailed in a small boat to Friesland, which was once again in uproar. Frisian warriors had started a new rebellion against their Frankish overlords. Winfrid spoke to the local Frisian prince at Utrecht and won his permission to wander through his country and preach the Gospel, but Winfrid soon saw that the time and conditions were not right. He returned to his abbey at Nursling, but his resolve was still fixed. He immediately made plans to go again, this time not as an emissary of the king of Wessex, but of the bishop of Rome, the Universal Patriarch of the Catholic Church. Winfrid's fellow monks at Nursling tried to stop him by electing him as their abbot, but he persuaded them to reconsider, choose another, and let him return to Friesland.

He made the long journey to Rome, over a thousand miles, mostly on foot in 718. He probably traveled along old Roman roads, and he endured exhaustion, exposure to the elements, and nights spent on the bare ground, wondering where the next meal would come from, praying for God's protection. After his arrival, he met with Pope Gregory II, who directed him to make a thorough study of the Holy See's liturgical and sacramental practices and the Church's code of canon law. After several months, the Pope dispatched Winfrid "to announce the mystery of the Kingdom of God to all nations. . .by imparting to them the knowledge of Christ, our Lord and God, through the persuasion of truth." The Pope gave Winfrid a new name, Boniface (Bonifatius).

Armed with his commission from the successor of St. Peter, Boniface traveled north out of Italy, crossed the Alps, and preached in what we now know as Germany. He evangelized in Bavaria, Thuringia, and Franconia, Germanic regions with little or no Christian presence, and in Hessen, which had no missionaries at all. He also returned for a time to Friesland to spread the faith there. Using his extraordinary gift for mastering languages, he spread the Gospel among German pagans through persuasion. He questioned their beliefs and practices and encouraged them to understand and accept the supremacy of God the Creator, the unseen God, who is not confined to any earthen idols and who has no need of violent sacrifices. We can only imagine the challenges he faced among these tough Germanic farmers, shepherds, and warriors, many of whom saw nothing wrong with their habits or their gods. In Germany he gathered followers, baptized them, and established a Christian community in Hessen.

Boniface, although far from Britain, did not lose contact. He wrote letters and sent them with messengers, travelers, tradesmen, and missionaries. He corresponded with his bishop in Wessex, getting his advice about methods for evangelization. He also wrote to the abbey at Nursling and other monastic communities, asking them for their unceasing prayers of support. He also kept in contact with Rome. Problems and controversies he could not resolve himself he readily referred to the Holy Father. After a couple of years, Pope Gregory acknowledged the fruit of Boniface's labors, called him to Rome, and, after a thorough examination of his orthodoxy, made him a bishop in 722, in order to enhance the success of the mission in Germany.

When Boniface returned to Hessen, he decided to make a dramatic gesture to show his followers their freedom from their prior pagan beliefs. Together they cut down a great oak tree, one deemed sacred to Thor, the god of thunder. With the wood, Boniface had a chapel built for Christ on the site where the tree had stood. This bold act was followed by the erection of several more chapels, high on rock promontories, by rivers, and in forests and fields. Boniface, working for Christ, converted and built; he did not, like the old gods, seduce and slaughter. He exhorted his followers and fellow missionaries, "Let all your actions be animated with charity, and, according to the Gospel, you will possess your souls in patience."

Problems, however, were numerous within the Church and without, among people of low and high status. Boniface's letters to and from the Holy See show papal clarity and charity in allowing lepers to attend Mass (although sitting apart), in upholding the validity of sacraments properly administered by wayward priests, in placing only one chalice on the altar during Mass (as opposed to two or three), and insisting on the discipline of monks. Most difficult for Boniface was dealing with the corrupt priests and bishops at the court of the Frankish military commander, Charles Martel. Boniface did not want to sit, eat, drink, or speak with them, but the pope told him that he must and so take the opportunity to persuade them to adopt an upright life, and true ecclesiastical discipline. The pope also told him to encourage noblemen, many of whom were often drunk and violent, to live and rule justly.

In 731 Boniface was made an archbishop, and for the next decade he set up and oversaw dioceses throughout Germany east of the River Rhine. In the 740s he was told to reform those in the Rhineland and to the west, in what is now France. He organized the Church, appointed bishops, and held synods, but pagan ways persisted everywhere. Boniface's greatest worries and fears concerned the morality of the priesthood. What should he do with so many newly ordained priests that still clung to pagan attitudes and practices, teaching falsities, or those that sought to separate themselves from the lay faithful with special privileges and entitlements? What should he do when priests he considered unworthy of the vocation were given protection, favor, and responsibilities by the reigning count or duke? On one occasion, he had to depose such a bishop, one who had committed murder. It was a dangerous thing to do, but Boniface really had no choice. He lived and worked for the correct worship of Christ and for humane, Christian culture.

All this work aside, Boniface never abandoned his evangelizing mission in central Germany. In 743 he established a monastery, Fulda, by a river in a secluded valley deep in the forests, not far from the lands of the Saxons, the pagan neighbors and rivals of the Franks. Fulda was to be a Monte Cassino for Germany, a kind of seminary for religious, and a base for the missionary efforts in the heart of Germany. Boniface wrote to the pope and asked that Fulda be answerable to no bishop apart from the pope himself. This wish was granted. Boniface also wrote of his hope to retire and to be buried there at Fulda, a wish that would only partially be fulfilled.

True to his missionary vocation, in spite of his nearly eighty years, an extraordinary age to have attained in the eighth century, Boniface set out to accomplish his initial evangelical goal: the conversion of the people of Friesland. He prepared himself for death, either in martyrdom or due to natural, bodily exhaustion, and traveled down the Rhine in 753. By 754 he was in Dokkum, near the sea coast in the north of Friesland. After baptizing local converts, pagan Frisian warriors butchered him and his fifty-two missionary colleagues, who had refused to fight in self-defense. Boniface's bodily remains were conveyed back to Fulda and interred in the newly completed basilica. Cults of veneration arose spontaneously in Britain and throughout Germany, and he is remembered to this day as "the Apostle of the Germans."

What drove this man to give his all for so many years, in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles? God gave him the gifts of intellect, facility with language, effective communication, and a unique ability to persuade. The Church gave him an excellent education and a spiritual mission. He made the mature, free decision to squander none of it and to give it all back, not for himself, not for his own personal advantage and glory, but for Christ. He chose sanctity freely. St. Boniface is proof of what God can do through people that make Him come first. He is also a model for Christians in the twenty-first century, those who want to engage in dialogue with others, so that they turn away from Thor (who is currently making yet another come-back) and every form of idolatry.

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