

Benedictine History

St. Boniface

Missionary Labors

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INTRODUCTION

What: just a general view.

Why: value for the spread of 1/ Christianity,
2/ civilisation,
3/ Benedictine Rule.How: consideration of preceding and his mission-
ary work as to 1/ preparation,
2/ commission,
3/ method,
4/ place.MISSIONARY WORK
BEFORE BONIFACEa/ Apostolic age, cf. St. Paul at the Areopagus;b/ Pre- and early monastic period: 300 - 600 AD.

1/ St. Martin of Tours in S. Gaul A.D. 360

2/ St. Patrick Ireland 450

3/ St. Remigius N. Gaul 500

4/ St. Benedict, Subiaco Italy 500

5/ Celtic monks, traveling

North, Central and West Europe 600

c/ New Missionary era, Benedictine monks,
planned by Rome.

1/ England - St. Augustine 600 AD.

2/ (Friesland - St Willibrord 700)

3/ Central Germany - St. Boniface 725 .

HIS PREPARATION

a/ Remote1/ Youth 1/ monastic life and study,
and 2/ monk - priest,
manhood 3/ teacher - preacher,
4/ successful negociator
5/ popular regional figure.b/ Direct 718 -
7221/ first contacts with Willibrord,
2/ reconnaissance of territory,
3/ journey to Rome, bishop.

HIS WORK

a/ Method1/ according to instructions of Rome,
2/ according to Roman Codes and Rite,
3/ difficult cases referred to Rome,
4/ preaches to princes and leaders, mass conversions follow,
5/ seeks support of council and prayer from England,
6/ also manpower from England,
7/ setting up monasteries in central places,
8/ use of the support of worldly powerb/ Place1/ Hessa, new mission,
2/ Thuringia, regaining, (St. Willian)
3/ Bavaria, consolidating (old Roman province)
4/ Allemannia, same (Frankish mission)
(5/ Austrasia, reorganising, Council, Ben. Rule)
6/ Friesland, again, 754 Dokkum Martyrdom.

INTRODUCTION

What: Just a general view.

Consolidation after original missionary work follows:

- 1/ organisation into dioceses and archdioceses,
- 2/ councils and metropolitan see,
- 3/ founding of Fulda as centre of this new Christian area, as seminary, as independent bulwark of Rome, of cultural and monastic life.

CONCLUSION: Boniface the Man.

Bibliography.

- 1/ Agapathic eye, of St. Paul at the Archangel.
- 2/ First and early monastic period: 500 - 600 AD.
- 3/ St. Martin of Tours in a letter to the Pope.
- 4/ St. Basil.
- 5/ St. Ambrose.
- 6/ St. Jerome.
- 7/ St. Augustine.
- 8/ St. Gregory.
- 9/ St. Benedict.
- 10/ St. Columbanus.
- 11/ St. Gall.
- 12/ St. Willibrod.
- 13/ St. Boniface.
- 14/ St. Willibrod.
- 15/ St. Boniface.
- 16/ St. Willibrod.
- 17/ St. Boniface.
- 18/ St. Willibrod.
- 19/ St. Boniface.
- 20/ St. Willibrod.

MISSIONARY WORK
BEFORE BONIFACE

HIS PREPARATION

- 1/ St. Boniface.
- 2/ St. Willibrod.
- 3/ St. Boniface.
- 4/ St. Willibrod.
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HIS WORK

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St. Boniface's Missionary Labors

INTRODUCTION

More than a millenium has passed by, and still the figure of St. Boniface stands out highly amongst the other great missionaries of Europe. By now, practically everyone agrees on his greatness as an apostle, as a monk, and as a man. If there have been less appreciative words from non-Catholic sides, then safely we may attribute them to their not understanding the spirit of that time. But, as G. Kurth in his St. Boniface remarks, at the present this trend seems to be turning (1). As far as it concerns St. Boniface and his co-workers, it was a time of young but deeply rooted and truly lived Catholicism, in which contemplation had an important place, even so that it gave them as it were the basis of and impulse for their missionary activity. (2)

When, after so many and outstanding works have been written about our Saint, we undertake to write a few words about his missionary labors, it is not because we want to add anything original, but because we want to put together as briefly as possible the influences on his work/^{so}that we may the better understand both his work and his person. We therefore want to consider the development of missionary work itself up to his time as to preparation, commission, and method, while, when we consider where it has brought the gospel, we shall in the meantime be introduced to some

of the territories where St. Boniface labored later on. Secondly, there is his own preparation that, together with his natural abilities and God's grace, has made him the great apostle of Germany. Finally, we shall see his work in the light of these considerations.

Although we shall more specifically look at his work as a missionary, it must not be understood that this only constitutes the place St. Boniface holds in history. For hand in hand with Christianizing in those days came the spread of the rule of St. Benedict, and with the monasteries rises the new and Christian civilization on the European continent at large, later as the Holy Roman Empire to become the mainstay of the Church and Christian civilization.

A MISSIONARY WORK BEFORE ST. BONIFACE

1) APOSTOLIC AGE

When the Apostles went out after Pentecost, they in a relatively short time spread the teachings of Christ all over the then known world: from India to Spain, from Abessinia to the Alps. This success both in space and numbers of conversions certainly had its special causes. Although most of these missionaries were simple fishermen of whom after their three years of training their divine Master had to admit that they did not understand an iota about the Kingdom He had come to found (Mt. 16:21-23), yet the power of the Holy Spirit for which they prayed so

ferverently in that first novena for Pentecost provided all that was lacking in them and confirmed the commission they had received from Christ: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (Mt. 28:19-20). The same Holy Spirit accompanied them on their travels, working signs to back up their enthusiastic speeches, even more, miracles of grace in the hearts of thousands.

The most important source of our knowledge of those early missionary labors, the Acts of the Apostles, also shows other instances that already come much closer to what missionary work was to be in later times. Especially the travels of St. Paul, prepared during a three years retirement in the Arabian desert (Gal. 1:17) in close contact with Christ Himself and commissioned by the Holy Spirit and the Church (Acts 13:2), clearly shows the toil, the worries, the hardship and dangers, while on the other hand several of St. Paul's letters give expression to his joys on account of his successes for Christ. Finally St. Paul at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22) presented the classical example of how to go about it in a pagan country: praising the Athenians for the good things they have, but using them in his own favor, quoting their own poets in order to fight them with their own weapons and yet not so much for the purpose of making converts but of preaching the truth to them (I Cor. 1:17). The result was rather meager: he forms a new cell around Dionysius, a counselor of the city; quite disgusted, he leaves Athens, and, in fact, we do not

hear that he ever returned there.

Yet, regardless of disappointment, persecution, personal defects or hardships, St. Paul goes on. This is the picture that we shall find in every place and century when men of faith and burning zeal have set out to preach Christ, persevering to the very last, even ~~where~~ death is a last and often a very effective plea for the divine cause they have promoted.

2/ PRE- AND EARLY MONASTIC PERIOD

This period is not so much a missionary period in the strict sense of the word. Until 313 A.D., the Church had lived and grown underground, and when granted absolute freedom by Constantine, she started spreading more rapidly. The Roman armies played an important role in this, so that soon the garrison cities in Gallia Transalpina became the centers of the new religion. Yet the countryside still was entirely pagan. In the meantime, asceticism had risen in the East and had been transplanted to the West. When later these ascetics set out from their hometowns, settled somewhere in the province, and came into contact with their new surroundings, they automatically influenced them for the better. A good example of this we have in St. Benedict at Subiaco, teaching the shepherds who have discovered his abode. (3)

In the early monastic time, St. Martin of Tours in Southern Gaul (#360 A.D.), St. Patrick in Ireland (#450),

in Northern Gaul, St. Remigius (#477) Bishop of Reims, were the great missionaries, working where the spirit guided them, however without fixed plans and without any commission other than that of Christ to the Apostles. Especially in the case of the later Celtic monks under the rule of St. Columban, who traveled all over Northern, Western, and Central Europe, this sometimes worked less effectively and created less desirable situations. The continuous traveling of these monks prevented the consolidation of the field they had labored, while succession seldom was secured. Their methods were rather destructive, too, and were more based on audacity than on prudence. In a later instance, even pressure of the secular power was used to stimulate conversion (4). It is therefore not hard to understand that after the death of these certainly valliant workers of the gospel, their work very soon crumbled down and was overgrown by pagan practices and superstitions.

Till then the Christian missions were both too fitfull and too disconnected. A general plan and organization was needed. (5)

3) MISSIONARY ERA, 600-800 A.D., ENGLAND (a)

This need was recognized more or less by Pope Gregory the Great, a former monk and later Abbot of St. Andrew's monastery under the Rule of St. Benedict, in Rome; and already in 596 he commissions Augustine and a small band

of monks of St. Andrew's to preach the Gospel in England. Yet Gregory remained the soul of the expedition by his directions and instructions which abandon the earlier destructive manner of missionary attack and show understanding and prudence (6). Augustine settled in Canterbury, and already in the year after their landing, King Aethelbert of Kent was baptized. This had great influence on the people. But the greatest influence on both King and people for their conversion were the lives of the missionaries in the Benedictine community, even more than their actual preaching (7). Augustine kept close contact with Rome, and questions he could not solve himself he sent there for a solution. This close union with Rome, then, becomes a typical trait for the Anglo-Saxon monk-missionaries later on, even for the Anglo-Saxons of that time in general.

FRIESLAND (8)

The Anglo-Saxons took up the new life seriously, and soon monasteries began to flourish. In the monasteries grew the idea of bringing the blessings of Christianity to their still pagan blood relations, the Saxons on the Continent, especially to Friesland. It is true, Frankish missionaries like St. Amand and St. Eligius had tried to do this, but the political tension between the Franks and the Saxons made this practically impossible. The first contact of the Saxons with Wilfrid of York in 678 opened new prospects, and the final result was that

Willibrord, educated by the monks of Ripon, Wilfrid's old monastic home, set out for Friesland. But he too experienced the drawback of the political situation and turned for protection to the Frankish ruler, who sent him to Rome. Here he received his official commission and was consecrated an Archbishop for both Frankish and independent Frisia. He received Utrecht as his see, and he made himself a retreat at Echternach for the times when the political tide would be too high for work.

His work has not met with great success. Willibrord in several respects was a man of the old school of destroying idols and making impressions. His work was the conversion of individuals in a cathegetic approach.

He never has been able to convert the King and the leaders, especially in the northern parts. This remained a very difficult territory which later on he had to leave, and in a short time his work there practically was undone again. It was at this time that Wilfrid - Boniface - came, 716 A.D.

B BONIFACE

// HIS PREPARATION

Now we have seen how missionary work has developed since the founding of the church and how it had only slightly touched upon some of the lands where Boniface was to preach - yet enough to cause him enormous diffi-

culties - we'll now see what made Wilfrid the great Boniface.

In all probability born in the year 675 in Devonshire, England, already at the age of seven he was offered to the Abbey of Exeter. Later on he went over to the Abbey of Nursling for higher education. This, then, has made him what he has become: his monastic training and life.

First of all, the strong element of faith in the monastic life made him the never really discouraged worker and devoted and obedient son of St. Peter. Next to this ranks his study of Sacred Scripture. From his earliest years in the monastery, this was the main source of his knowledge of the faith and of his spiritual life. It was especially the study of exegesis that made him, once ordained a priest, the teacher and preacher understood by both the learned and the simple, sympathetic to both high and low. He certainly was rated as a model monk and priest. Probably for all these reasons he was chosen to take part in negotiations of official character, and his successful work in these soon made of him a popular regional figure. All these elements will play important roles in the missionary work he felt called for (8).

The decision had fallen that he would go to Friesland. With a small group, he set out (716) to find the Franks and Frisians at war. Home again to wait for better times, he refused to be made Abbot of his own monastery, and in 718 he sailed again, now to Frankland, on a pilgrimage to

Rome, where he hoped to acquire the official sanction for his work. He arrived at Rome at the time that the Papacy was turning toward plans of organization, and he was favorably received. Here he was given the name Boniface, and, supplied with letters of recommendation to all who could be of any help to him, he turned north again and passed through Thuringia, where he was to work and where he made the first contacts. But on his way to the Frankish court, he changed plans when tidings were received of a favorable turn of events in Friesland. There he went and worked as an assistant of Willibrord. After two years, the latter wanted him as his coadjutor, notwithstanding their difference in characters and views, but Boniface had been assigned to other fields. Now he went to Hessa, a country that never had been evangelized before but more at rest than Thuringia, and met with great success. When he reported this to Rome, he was invited to come himself and was consecrated by Pope Gregory II (722). He pledged to work under papal direction and according to Roman Rites and canons and received the double mission: to bring back the nominal Christians to the Church, and to convert the pagans of present Central Germany. Provided with letters of recommendation, especially to Charles Martel, the powerful duke of the Franks, he set out again, this time a full-fledged missionary bishop.

2) HIS WORK, METHOD (a).

When we now view the work of St. Boniface, we see that it indeed shows the influence of his development in his monastic period. Dominant is his devotion to the Holy See and his loyalty to the Pope. This is typical for the Anglo-Saxon monk of his time, as we said before, and shows him a good spiritual son of St. Augustine. Indeed, in his entire work Rome dominates, not so much because of its actual power or of Boniface's servility, but as a result of his filial piety and of his monastic views on authority. This not only makes him arrange all things according to the Roman Codes and Rites, as he was commanded and bound to by his oath of consecration, but also made him seek counsel from Rome in cases of doubt or greater difficulty, as his correspondence clearly shows. But even more, it made him seek counsel especially from his friend Bishop Daniel of Winchester, who provides him with the instructions given to St. Augustine by St. Gregory the Great (9), which had proved to be such an excellent guide. Boniface has followed this pattern, although his deed of bravery to cut down the sacred oak at Geismar seems to manifest the opposite. (10)

His first work is to win the prince and the leaders of the region for his cause. The letters from the Pope to those men certainly did their work. Once the leaders had been won and converted, his preaching resulted in mass conversions, for in those times the people still followed their leaders even in matters of religion.

Sometimes also he left the conversion of the people to a certain extent in the hands of those newly converted leaders. Here again we see him as the preacher and teacher for both high and low.

A very important factor in the success of his work was his use of the support of worldly power, especially of that of the Frankish princes. His success as negotiator was of the greatest importance for his work, as his own words confirm (11).

Yet his work could not have kept growing and been kept up if Boniface had only depended on his own work and that of his small group. As his correspondence shows at large, he often asked for the advice of his good friends in the old country but even more so for their prayers. Boniface still was the popular man in England. This showed itself most clearly when he called for helpers. From that moment on for a few years, an almost constant stream of monks and nuns from England brought him the necessary manpower. For them and with them he erected several monasteries in the very hearts of his missionfields, where these houses of prayer and work soon became the religious and cultural centres, later sometimes also the episcopal sees of these countries.

A SUMMARY OF WHAT HE DID (c)

His first endeavors in 721-722 to convert Hessa, a country that had not yet seen a missionary, met with un-

expected success, and he was given land where he erected the monastery of Amoensburg. After his consecration as a bishop at Rome, he took up this field again with great success. The cutting down of the Wodan's oak at Geismar at the request of his converts and the erection of a chapel and the beginning of a monastery at the same spot form the highpoints of his work here (12).

After this, Christian communities sprang up everywhere throughout the land.

Then he turned to Thuringia, which offered problems of a different type. The country had become a Frankish province, but a part of the northern section had been subdued by the pagan Saxons, who often raided far south. Christianity had been introduced by Frankish and other priests but had been overgrown by superstition and pagan practices. In the South, near Würzburg, the residence of the Dukes, St. Killian had preached successfully, but, by lack of regular supervision and worthy succession, this work also was almost undone, with no bishops, some priests worshipping Thor, and an ignorant and misled population in this entire country. It seems Boniface has made the northern part the principle field of his activity. From 726 till 731, he worked here, backed up by the safe-conduct of Charles Martel and by the sympathetic letters of Pope Gregory II to the Thuringian people. The leaders soon made profession of the Christian faith. Finally he founded the monastery of St. Michael at Ohrdruff, for the people

a religious stronghold, for himself, their bishop, a residence. It was about this time that the need of co-laborers made him appeal to his friends in his native country. New monasteries arose: Fritzlar for men and Ochsenfurt, Kitzingen, and Bischofheim for women, the power plants of the mission.

In 731, made an archbishop by Pope Gregory III in order to further organize his mission field and to consecrate bishops where necessary, he received a new task, namely to organize also the church in Bavaria and Allemania. In Allemania the situation was rather favorable, since as a heritage of the Roman occupation, bishoprics still existed and were administered correctly. Bavaria hardly had any organization at all. Here Boniface met with difficulties similar to those he had met before in Thuringia: He won the dukes for his work, and finally four bishoprics were established. Then within the next quarter of a century, not less than twenty-five important monasteries arose, with the normal results. A council held by the Bavarian bishops and abbots, presided over by Boniface - possible the bishops of Allemania have been present too - helped to consolidate the results achieved so far.

Now also had come the time to establish dioceses in Thuringia and Hessia, but it was very hard to find suitable places. Finally Würzburg, the former centre of activity of St. Kilian, and Erfurt, then a village in Thuringia, and Buraburg in Hessia were chosen; and in 742 recognized by

Pope Zachary. Notwithstanding all political difficulties, the work went on slowly but successfully, while his constant contact with Rome took care, at least of the greater part, of the difficulties that rose when applying the Roman Canons in these new circumstances.

However, before Boniface had been able to consolidate his newly organized church in Germany, a new burden was added him, namely to reorganize the Frankish church, a task by itself more than enough for a man's full power and lifetime. Yet our toil-worn missionary, now Papal legate (742), in all obedience accepted it. The Franks had been Christians since they followed Clovis into the church in 427. The work of Boniface in Austrasia, then, cannot be rated as missionary work, yet we may spend a few words on it. For undoubtedly, to revivify an almost dead institution and to do away with abuses that have grown up in the course of time is a superhuman task. With the support of the Frankish rulers, at least for as far as their own interest in the reform went, Boniface in about ten years infused new life into this Christian territory, reestablished the hierarchy, held councils, and established a close union of the Frankish church with the Holy See. What this work has cost him in anguish of soul, his letters of that time clearly show. They show also that during his work in Frankland his heart was with his dear mission in Germany; but, notwithstanding all this, in this same time he found it necessary to stimulate a reform in the English

church, that needed it indeed (13). The influence of the Saint's work in Frankland is very evident in the Council of Cloveshoe held shortly afterwards.

In the meantime, the work in Germany had been carried on by the faithful co-workers of the Saint. There the time had come for Boniface to realize his ideal of founding a monastery at the very crossroads of the countries he had missionized, that could serve as a retreat for the missionaries, as seminary, as model of the Benedictine life for all other foundations, and as a center of Christian civilization. This ideal was realized to the fullest extent in the monastery of Fulda. The young Sturm, who upon directions of the Saint found a suited spot (742) and became its first abbot, for a year visited Italy to study the Benedictine observances at Rome and Monte Cassino. The Frankish Duke Carloman gave all assistance possible, and upon request of Boniface, Pope Zachary granted it papal immunity (15). Fulda in reality became the most influential center of religious and intellectual life in that part of Germany.

It remained for him to give his organization the finishing touch of establishing canonical archdioceses; Boniface himself had been an archbishop without a definite see on account of his office of creator and organizer. This last step, however, met with enormous difficulties: misunderstanding in regard to this matter from the side of the princes, and from the side of the bad element of

the clergy, sheltered by the former for political reasons, the most unscrupulous opposition (15). In the end, with great humiliation both for the Pope and himself, Boniface received the see of Mainz (745), but Mainz itself remained a regular diocese (only in 780 Mainz was to become a canonical archdiocese). This was far from what Boniface had aimed at, but, regardless of his age, 70 now, Boniface continued his fight for the Church against false prophets and immoral clergy.

Finally, his strength gave out, and Pope Zachary allowed him to choose a successor. His faithful disciple Lul he consecrated and made his coadjutor. Yet he did not relax. Troads of pagan Saxons in Hessa and Thuringia gave him new work and cares. Then in 753, after having paid his homage to the new Pope, Stephen III, he wrote to Pepin, the new King of the Franks, in order to have Lul recognized as his successor and to commit him and all his co-workers to the protection of the Prince. His request was granted, and now Boniface looks back to the ideal with which he had left his country: to win the Saxons for Christ. The will of the Pope had brought him to other fields. Now once more his thoughts go back to Friesland. With all care and prudence, he arranges the affairs of his diocese, Mainz, and knowing that his life is coming to an end, takes leave of his dear ones and gives his last instructions to Lul. After having settled the dissension with Cologne

about the jurisdiction over Friesland, he sets out for the peaceful conquest of that country in 753. In the Spring of the next year, Boniface with fresh ardor resumes the mission and with good success. This, however, arouses the fanaticism of the still numerous pagans, and while near Dokkum to administer the sacrament of Confirmation to his new converts, his little group is attacked by a band of these fanatics (June 5, 754). The saint is one of the first to fall, and with him fifty-two were killed. The Christians revenged his death, buried the dead, and brought the body of the Saint and also his books to Utrecht, where everything was prepared for the burial in the cathedral. Shortly afterwards, the Saint's body was translated to Mainz and from there to Fulda, according to his own wish. There the remains still rest awaiting the day of resurrection.

CONCLUSION

When so far we have said a few words about the missionary labors of St. Boniface, we realize that we shall not understand his person and his work unless we understand what Faith means in the life of him that lives it. For Faith was the motive of his every action.

Although we have mentioned the part of Faith in his monastic training, yet we would do injustice to this man of God if we did not mention that it has been Kurth's special aim in his book Saint Boniface to make its influence in Boniface's life appreciated, as he states in his conclusion. (16)

FOOTNOTES

- (1) G. Kurth, Saint Boniface. p. 169.
- (2) Evident influence of St. Gregory the Great on the monastic ideal, cf. Dom John Stephan, "The Active and Contemplative Life," The Buckfast Abbey Chronicle. 18(Autumn, 1943)110.
- (3) St. Gregory the Great, II Dialogues. P.L. 66:132.
- (4) J.P. Whitney, D.D., "Conversion of the Teutons", Cambridge Mediaeval History. Vol. 2, pp. 532-34.
- (5) ibid.
- (6) M.G.H., Ep. Vol. 2, p. 331, letter of St. Gregory the Great to Miletus, 7/18/600. Cf. Schmitz, L'histoire de l'ordre de St. Benoit. Vol. 1, p. 50.
- (7) Whitney, op. cit., p. 516.
- (8) A lively description of Wilfrid's struggle in this regard may be found in Duckett, Anglo-Saxon Saints and Scholars, p. 362.
- (9) Kurth, op. cit., p. 25ff; Tangle, Ep. 23, p.32ff; Emerton, p. 68ff.
- (10) Cf. Kurth, op. cit., p. 37, footnote g.
- (11) Whitney, op. cit., p. 537; Tangle, Ep. 63, p. 130; Emerton, 115; Kurth, op. cit., p. 35.
- (12) Kurth, id., p. 37; Willibald, Ch. 6, p. 38.
- (13) Kurth, op. cit., p. 94; Ep. 78, p. 161-70; Emerton, 136ff.
- (14) Kurth, op. cit., p. 106; Ep. 87, p. 196; Emerton, p. 161.
- (15) Kurth, op. cit., p. 128; Ep. 58, p. 106; Emerton, p. 96.
- (16) p. 157.

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