



Moments with St. Boniface

The month of June is perhaps of all the months of the year the most beautiful time in the cycle of the seasons. Spring has well-nigh unfolded in all its splendor, while the equilibrium of summer with its sometimes oppressive heat and humidity is not yet upon us. For a moment or two our thoughts return to an earlier June long ago, when, undoubtedly, nature's grandeur also sang the praise of the Creator.

We are thinking of that day, June 5 in the year of our Lord 754 (exactly 1230 years ago), when the Anglo-Saxon missionary St. Boniface was murdered with fifty-four of his helpers by pagan Frisians near Dokkum in the north of The Netherlands.

That fateful date in June is not generally remembered and commemorated as, for example, March 17 is in connection with St. Patrick. But though no special attention is paid to the memory of St. Boniface and his assistants on that particular day in the lands of Christendom or even in those parts where he was slain, it should be otherwise. For St. Boniface, known as "the apostle to the Germans," was instrumental in bringing great multitudes of continental Teutonic pagans to a knowledge of the Christian faith and the rudiments of civilization.

No better time of the year, then, than the month of June to recall a few short episodes from the life of St. Boniface, the famous English missionary who left such an indelible imprint on the history of Christianity in Western Europe. The circumstances of his martyrdom are known to every schoolboy in the regions where he worked so long ago.

St. Boniface, at birth, was given the name Winnifred by his parents, a Saxon name if ever there was one. Young Winnifred early in life chose a church career and felt attracted to mission work. There were opportunities galore in western continental Europe in those days. Just across the North Sea, in what is now the northern and central part of The Netherlands, there still lived pagans at that time. In the Kingdom of Frisia, only sporadic efforts had been made thus far to acquaint the people with the Christian gospel. Some progress had been made by a certain monk named Willibrord, but the Frisians still largely adhered to their heathen gods, such as Woten and Thunar; Christianity, in general, did not seem to have much appeal to the heathen Frisians.

Perhaps there was a reason for this. To the south of Friesland stretched the Christian kingdom of the Franks, inveterate enemies of the Frisians. The Frisians must have looked upon the Christian religion of their enemies with misgivings, and any attempt to introduce this religion of their antagonists into Frisia itself met with fierce resistance. Against this political backdrop of the time, it is easy to understand that St. Boniface faced a difficult and dangerous task in his efforts to evangelize the people of Friesland. And yet, Boniface came and went to Friesland not once, but on three different mission trips. It was during the last trip that he fell in battle for the hearts and souls of the Frisian people. As we have already said, it was in the month of June that he yielded his life in the green Frisian countryside.

St. Boniface, well-known through his name is to the people of Holland and Friesland even after so many years, did, of course, not work exclusively among the heathen Frisians. Also in central Germany, he was extremely active and booked outstanding results. In Mayence he established his Arch-episcopal See and further north in Fulda a monastic house of great fame.

As an obedient servant of the church, St. Boniface went, of course, where the head of the church, the Pope of Rome, sent him. And the Pope saw fit to dispatch him to central Europe, where paganism was still strong. After all, the Pope and his advisers must have reasoned, there were only the Alps as a barrier against the pagan peoples to the north. Was it not much more important

to Christianize the regions of central Europe, where a vigorous and warlike Teutonic heathenism might be tempted to marshal its forces for a push to the south across the Alps into Christian Italia and into Rome?

It is, however, in Frisia that St. Boniface preferred to work, and here we see him in action when circumstances and the official missionary strategy of the moment, as prescribed by Rome, permitted.

Boniface's fame, however, does not rest solely on his activities as a missionary either in Germany or in Frisia. Contributing to it are a host of other factors. He also made his mark as a confidant and adviser of three successive popes and as an able organizer of the early Roman Catholic Church. Boniface rises before us as the most influential churchman of his times. His organizing genius and his career as a preacher in the field were decisive for all time in pushing back the forces of paganism from much of Central Europe.

Besides his spiritual qualities and organizational abilities, St. Boniface possessed still other talents. His advice in matters of church discipline or mission was eagerly sought after, and his energetic efforts to promote Christianity were matched by what must have been a prodigious physical stamina and strength. Hear what St. Willibald, his biographer, has to tell us about an incident occurring on the missionary trail in Central Germany. It shows us Boniface as a man eager to strike a literal blow or two for Christianity.

Near Geismar in Hessen, Central Germany, stood an ancient oak. In its spreading branches, supposedly, dwelled Thunar, the Teutonic god of thunder. Boniface wanted to expose the impotence of the heathen gods and, in the presence of an enormous multitude of pagans, put the ax to the venerated arbor. In horror and rage the pagan crowd witnessed this extraordinary spectacle, so the biographer continues. Fully expecting the wrath of Thunar to descent upon the bold Christian preacher, the crowd stood aghast for a long moment. But nothing happened. And then a mighty wind shook the top of the tree, all the leaves trembled and great branches came tumbling down, as if Thunar, aroused from his astonishment at the audacity of the foreign assailant, was stretching his limbs and making ready to throw his thunderbolt at the impudent intruder. But the next moment the tree trunk split from top to bottom, the four parts crashing down, narrowly missing Boniface himself, so the biographer informs us. In the general confusion Thunar must have made good his escape from the presence of the redoubtable Christian preacher. The fact is that Thunar and his fellow Teutonic deities were in full retreat now. The story — or legend, if you will — of the oak of Geismar portrays a vigorous Boniface; it shows him as a man of some muscle power and of a somewhat adventurous bent, who may not have found it beneath his dignity to grab the spokes of the wheels when some vehicle of his missionary caravan threatened to get bogged down in the mud of Europe's primitive medieval trails. The incident of Geismar happened around A.D. 725 when St. Boniface was still relatively young and strong.

Thirty years later, in June 754, much of his physical strength was gone. That was when Boniface visited Frisia for the third time in his missionary career. Historians have wondered aloud why St. Boniface time and again returned to Friesland, gospel in hand. Did he find it easier to communicate with the Frisians whose language, after all, was closely akin to his own Anglo-Saxon, more so than the Teutonic speech of Central Germany? It is possible. Or were the Frisians better listeners? Who knows.

But whatever unsuspected or hidden qualities in the Frisian national character may have impressed the missionary, time and again he felt compelled to return to their country. Far from his home in England, St. Boniface and his mostly youthful helpers died for a great, but ultimately victorious, cause. In the first week of June, we owe it to ourselves and to Boniface's memory to devote some moments of respectful attention to the Christian genius of one of the greatest Englishmen, missionaries, and leading lights of civilization that the history of mankind has brought forth. Pilgrims visit the place where he was slain; historians retrace his steps across Europe and have written volumes about his activities. In the abbey of Fulda, founded by Boniface himself, rests the ancient Bible that he held over his head to ward off the murderous blows of the pagan Frisians.

The ancient book is heavily damaged, but it is intact and complete. Modern versions of that volume are found in many languages all over the world, also in Friesland in its own Frisian language.

And that is what St. Boniface would have wanted. That is why he came to the north, to Friesland, not once, but three times. His last day was a day in June, when the buttercups and daisies were blooming and it was still spring in Friesland. May each returning spring remind us to keep ever green the memory of this stalwart ambassador of the King of kings.

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