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Saint Boniface

By L. W. SPITZ

TWELVE centuries have passed since St. Boniface on June 5, 754, died as a martyr on the banks of the Borne at Dokkum, in Friesland. Much is being made of the anniversary of his death. Roman Catholics have organized pilgrimages both to Dokkum, the place of his death, and to Fulda, where his body now rests. Protestants, too, have honored his memory with special services. Many thousands of both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians have thus paid their respects to a great man of God and to their common Christian heritage.

An extensive literature has appeared on the life and work of Boniface, beginning with a biography by Willibald, a presbyter of Mainz, which was written within ten years of the Saint's death. The chief sources from which our knowledge is drawn are, however, his own writings, particularly his letters, with the letters addressed to him which have been preserved with his own. The interpretation of his work has varied with the respective ecclesiastical interest of the writers. Since the sixteenth century Roman Catholics have been referring to him as "the Apostle of the Germans," a title now also adopted by many Protestant writers. In the days of the *Kulturkampf* he was often blamed for having imposed the Papacy on a free Christian Church in Germany. More recently National Socialists distorted the picture of Boniface in another way, regretting the fact that Germany was ever Christianized.

The mere enumeration of the facts and dates of the Saint's life fill two long columns of small print. The most uncertain thing about his life is the year of his birth. August Werner, author of *Bonifacius . . . und die Romanisierung von Mitteleuropa*, who also wrote the article on Boniface in the *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, puts the date between 675 and 683. G. F. Browne, in *Boniface of Crediton and His Companions*, narrows it down to 679 and 680. Heinrich Steitz, in an article in *Weg und Wahrheit, Evangelisches Kirchenblatt für Hessen-Nassau und Frankfurt a. M., May 30, 1954*, states that the date is somewhere between 672 and 675. The date of his death has not varied to the

same extent, though some older accounts mention the year 755. All seem to agree on June 5 as the day of his death.

The following facts and dates of his life are significant: Born at Crediton, Devonshire, the son of a wealthy Englishman of Wessex, he was given the name Winfrid, or Wynfrith. At the age of seven he began his schooling at the monastery of Adescan-castre and at fourteen continued at Nutshalling or Nursling, near Winchester. Here he won distinction for learning and practical wisdom and was soon put in charge of the training of the younger novitiates. His father frowned on the son's predilection for the monastic life and hoped that he would soon tire of the monastery; but disregarding prospects at home for a brilliant secular career, he devoted his life to missions. Later he explained his urge to do mission work as *timor Christi et amor peregrinationis*, the fear of Christ and love of wandering—indeed, two good reasons!

In the year 710, about at the age of thirty, he was ordained as presbyter. Six years later he joined the Northumbrian Willibrord in his missionary work in Friesland. After a short return to England—his first experience as a missionary had been very disappointing to him—he left his homeland for good in 718. He went direct to Rome, where in 719 he received a commission from Pope Gregory II to preach the Gospel east of the Rhine. Before executing that commission, he worked with Willibrord in his archdiocese of Utrecht for three years. Thereupon he worked among the Hessians with so much success that he was summoned to Rome and was consecrated bishop on November 30, 722 or 723. With a letter of recommendation from the Pope to Charles Martel, the Mayor of the Palace, and under the protection of this powerful official, he returned to work in Hussia and Thuringia, the latter corresponding roughly to the recent Saxony. It was at this time that he felled the sacred oak of Thor near Geismar in the neighborhood of Fritzlar. Some have attributed the conversion of Hussia to this heroic deed; others have pointed up the fact that it was not uncommon thus to destroy sacred objects of the heathen and, besides, that Boniface had a letter of protection from Charles Martel.

In 732 he received the pallium from Gregory III, the newly elected Pope, and was now an archbishop without a see. In 738 he again visited Rome, for the third and last time, and on his way

back spent some time in Bavaria and founded the sees of Salzburg, Passau, Regensburg, and Freising. In 741, upon the death of Charles Martel, whose sons and successors Carloman and Pepin greatly favored him, he established four bishoprics for Hessa and Thuringia, namely, Würzburg, Eichstädt, Büraburg, and Erfurt. At the request of Carloman and Pepin he held mixed councils of clerical and lay persons to regulate the affairs of the Church from 742 to 744. During the same period he founded monasteries at Utrecht, Fritzlar, Fulda, Amöneburg, and Ohrdruf, sending to England for monks and nuns to take charge of them.

In 744 he purposed to occupy the see of Cologne, and to make it the head of a metropolitanical province. It chanced, however, that the see of Mainz became vacant, and the ecclesiastics and laymen so pressed him that he became archbishop there, with Cologne, Spire, Worms, Tongres, and Utrecht as suffragan sees. Shortly before his death he resigned his archbishopric and consecrated Lul of Malmesburg as his successor in the see.

The mere mention of these facts of Boniface's life suggests a number of significant observations: Boniface, deeply pious and extremely able, worked in close relationship with the Popes and the Frankish Mayors of the Palace. He founded bishoprics and monasteries—a goodly number of them. This could lead one to think of him as an abject servant to Popes and rulers and an obedient ascetic, humbly subservient to those in authority. Such was not the case. At the beginning of his work in Germany he received little support from Gregory II. Boniface's letters indicate that he invariably took the initiative and had to win the Pope over to his views. Toward the close of his career he still demonstrated his independence by criticizing some of the Pope's transactions. Boniface used the Popes and the secular rulers in the interest of reorganizing the Church according to the pattern of Rome. Only a few years before his birth, at the Synod of Whitby, which met in 664, Roman customs finally prevailed over those of the Irish monks in England; and during the boyhood days of Boniface, Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury, was still engaged in organizing and uniting the Church in England in accordance with Roman usage. That observation may suggest the background for Boniface's activity as an organizer of the Church in Germany.

Boniface was not the first missionary to come to Germany. Christianity had taken its natural course from Italy across the Alps. It had spread from Gaul, or France, across the Rhine. Other missionaries had already come from England, and, before the Island was so called, from Britain. In the areas where Christianity had gotten a foothold, there were churches and monasteries. Boniface reorganized these according to the monastic and scholastic discipline and the canon law of Rome. Some of this work was commendable; some was not. He enforced the celibacy of the priests and earned himself the epithet of *Malefatus*. However, for better or for worse, his aim was always the winning of souls, his chief interest was mission. He was merely consolidating the gains of the Church on the frontier for the next push into heathen lands.

It seems that those writers are right who contend that Boniface founded his monasteries mainly to serve as theological seminaries and missionary institutes. The places chosen for them were all of strategic importance for the advancing forces of the Church. Boniface himself has been considered a striking example of militant and evangelizing monasticism. He declined to become the abbot of a monastery, preferring the hardships and perils of a missionary to the heathen to the honor which his fellow monks would bestow upon him by their election. Again, he planted the monks and nuns who came to Germany from England at strategic places to present a solid front from the militant Church of Rome. Thus Chunihilt and her daughter Berahtgit are said to have labored in Thuringia as teachers. Tecla worked at Kitzingen and Ochsenfurt. Lioba, the most famous of them all, was abbess of Bischofsheim. She was an intimate friend of Boniface, the only woman who was later admitted into the monastery at Fulda to worship at the Saint's grave. Of noble family, Lioba, or Leobgytha, educated, well bred, chaste, and energetic, was a prominent person in Boniface's mission. Her monastery was something like an academy, which educated a large number of excellent teachers and heads of monasteries. Like a wise general, Boniface knew where to place his people, choosing the right person for the right place.

Of all the monasteries which he founded the most important and the best known was the Abbey of Fulda, where his body now rests. He planned this abbey as the headquarters for the Church Militant in Germany. It was to be a religious center for all of

Germany and the base for the conquest of the North, a seminary for the training of priests and missionaries and, like the famous monasteries in England, the house of the arts and of science. In 735 Boniface brought a youth by the name of Edeling Sturmi from Bavaria and placed him under the care of Abbot Wigbert, the English head of the monastery which the Saint had founded at Fritzlar. Having completed his studies under the tutorship of Wigbert, Sturmi, ordained as a priest, for three years preached to the heathen and semiheathen along the Saxon borders. His desire, however was to become a hermit. Boniface was convinced that he had discovered the very man who could make his dream come true to found his chief monastery. He instructed Sturmi to search for a desirable location in the forest primeval on the upper Fulda, known because of its many beech as Buchonia. It was to be a monastery, not a hermitage. Sturmi left Fritzlar in the spring of 743 with two companions. The founding of Fulda may serve as an example of Boniface's methods.

The two rivers, Edder and Fulda, meet at a point not very far above Cassel, through which city they run as the Fulda, to become eventually the Weser. The valleys of these two rivers are divided by the range of the hills called the Rhön-Gebirge. Fritzlar was connected with the valley of the Edder, and Boniface aimed at finding a site in the valley of the Fulda, on the other side of the Rhön-Gebirge. Sturmi, with his two companions, no doubt went down the Edder to the spot where it joined the Fulda and then turned up the course of the latter river and pushed his way, in a boat, through the dense forest of beech, of which the Rhön-Gebirge formed the west boundary. After three days' journey through the forest, they came upon a place which seemed exactly suited to their purpose. The two companions remained there while Sturmi went back to Boniface to report their success. The Saint, however, thought it was too near to the Saxons, so dangerous to Christian enterprise, and he bade them to carry their exploration further. After considerable searching Sturmi found the site of Fulda and reported to Boniface, who sent him and his companions back to the place. He himself went to Carloman to beg for a grant of territory, a fairly level space of some four miles in diameter, with the river running through the middle of it. Carloman not

only made the grant, but also sent commissioners to request neighboring proprietors to add yet further territory, which they did.

Armed with the grant, Sturmi and seven other monks entered upon the work of clearing the forest on January 12, 744. Two months later Boniface came with an army of workers and began to build a church of stone.

In preparing a rule for the Abbey of Fulda, Boniface sent Sturmi to study the monastic rule at Rome and at Monte Cassino, whence he returned after two years, prepared to raise the tone of monks to the highest pitch of the regular life. Before his death the community consisted of no less than four hundred monks. Thus Boniface turned to Italy for the organization of his monastery, as he had turned to Rome for the reorganization of the Frankish and the Bavarian churches.

A few names of the monks who at one time or another resided at Fulda will suffice to show the far-reaching influence of this abbey in the Carolingian age. Baugulf, Ratgar, and Eigil, Sturmi's successors, promoted architecture and painting. Eigil is the author of Sturmi's biography. Einhard, a monk at the time of Baugulf, wrote the biography of Charlemagne and built the monastery school at Aachen. The fifth abbot was the famous Hrabanus Maurus, perhaps the most learned man of his time, who by his service to education earned for himself the title *praeceptor Germaniae*. His most famous pupils were Walafrid Strabo, a noted poet, Servatus Lupus, whose letters are of great value to the student of the Carolingian age, Haims of Haberstadt, the probable composer of the *Heliand*, and Otfrid von Weissenburg, whose *Krist* has secured a place for him in every important history of German literature.

In 751 Boniface applied to the Pope for a formal confirmation of his monastery. The Pope replied the same year. Pope Zachary exempted the abbey from all episcopal jurisdiction and placed it under the immediate care of the Holy See. This was something new for Germany. The Pope's document of confirmation stated in part: "Whereas thou hast asked of us that a monastery of the Savior, constructed by thee, situated in the place called Buchonia, near the bank of the river Fulda, should receive the honor of a privilege from the Apostolic See, so that, being under the juris-

diction of our Holy Church, whose servant by God's guidance we are, it be subject to the jurisdictions of no other Church; therefore we, favoring thy pious desires, carry into effect what thou hast asked. By our authority we prohibit every bishop of what Church soever other than the Apostolic See from having any authority in the said monastery. No one shall presume to celebrate Masses there except on the invitation of the abbot. It shall remain undisturbed, under apostolic privilege. Whosoever, prelate of a Church or what dignity soever, shall violate this decree, let him be anathema." It must be remembered that Boniface's reorganization of the Church made him to some priests, bishops, and laymen a *Malefatus*.

Burning with zeal to take up his work once more on his first mission field and feeling that his labors as an organizer of the Church had come to an end at the Synod of 747, he prepared to leave for Friesland. That year the Frankish bishops, with Boniface at the head, signed in due form a bill of submission in which they acknowledged the papal rights, laws, and power and promised obedience and faithfulness. By this action, says Werner, the bond between the Frankish empire and Rome was sealed. The "Prince of the Apostles" was to be head and master north of the Alps. Another monk, Martin Luther, was to cut that tie eight centuries later.

As his books were being packed for the final journey to Friesland, Boniface instructed his companions: "Include also the linens, in which one will wrap a body weak with old age." On Wednesday of the week of Pentecost a group of newly baptized were to be confirmed by the venerable aged missionary. But early in the morning a mob of heathen, determined to save their vain gods and pagan customs, murdered him and fifty-two of his companions. He was found with his head resting on his Gospel lectionary. His body was recovered by the monks of Utrecht, removed to Mainz by order of Archbishop Lul, and finally laid to rest at Fulda. A monk stated to Archbishop Lul upon oath that Boniface had appeared to him with the request to be buried there.

To appreciate the man fully, one must be mindful of the times. If the world is out of joint today, it was certainly so at that time. There was trouble between the Greek and the Latin Churches. It was the time of the Iconoclastic Controversy. The Papacy was

caught between the jaws of a political vise with theological implications. The Emperor and the Lombard kings were struggling for mastery in Italy. The Pope was a victim of that struggle. Boniface helped to strengthen the tie between the Papacy and the Frankish rulers. In doing so he may have contributed to the final estrangement of the Eastern and the Western Church. In the urgency of the immediate danger to the Papacy, which in spite of its weakness at the time was nevertheless the chief ecclesiastical authority in the West, Boniface's recognition of the Pope as arbiter in matters pertaining to the Church seemed quite reasonable. Heinrich Steitz, a Protestant writer, is prepared to say: "The organization of the Church was necessary in his time. In the 8th century the Church could be erected and secured as a Christian Church only in that way. Thus Boniface is for us Evangelicals one of the prominent fathers of our Church also in his organizational activity." That is a question which historians will continue to debate.

Back to Boniface's time once more. The year after Boniface was ordained a priest the Moors and Berbers crossed the Strait of Gibraltar at Gebel-al-Tarik, the Rock of Tarik. The year he entered upon his first term of mission work in Friesland the Arabs were besieging Constantinople. By 732, the year he was consecrated bishop, the Moors and Berbers had reached the battlefield of Tours and Poitiers. It seemed as though the Mohammedan Crescent was about to round out into a full moon, engulfing all of Christendom. Trouble within the Church, even in high places, heresy, proud paganism, dire threats from without—was there ever a darker time for the Christian Church? This year we are commemorating the twelfth century of a Christian hero's death who was not daunted by the dark clouds all about him, for he raised his eyes upward where there is always light. Rise of heathen consciousness and pride in our days? Opposition to missions? The threat of atheistic Communism? Charles Martel turned the Mohammedans back on the battlefield of Tours and Poitiers. Greek fire destroyed their ships in Bosphorus. How will God handle matters in the chaos of today? St. Boniface died a martyr's death, but Friesland was Christianized. *Christus Victor!* So it was then; so it will be always!

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