



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 11 March 2009

Saint Boniface, the Apostle of the Germans

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we shall reflect on a great eighth-century missionary who spread Christianity in Central Europe, indeed also in my own country: St Boniface, who has gone down in history as "the Apostle of the Germans". We have a fair amount of information on his life, thanks to the diligence of his biographers. He was born into an Anglo-Saxon family in Wessex in about 675 and was baptized with the name of Winfrid. He entered the monastery at a very early age, attracted by the monastic ideal. Since he possessed considerable intellectual ability, he seemed destined for a peaceful and brilliant academic career. He became a teacher of Latin grammar, wrote several treatises and even composed various poems in Latin. He was ordained a priest at the age of about 30 and felt called to an apostolate among the pagans on the continent. His country, Great Britain which had been evangelized barely 100 years earlier by Benedictines led by St Augustine at the time showed such sound faith and ardent charity that it could send missionaries to Central Europe to proclaim the Gospel there. In 716, Winfrid went to Frisia (today Holland) with a few companions, but he encountered the opposition of the local chieftain and his attempt at evangelization failed. Having returned home, he did not lose heart and two years later travelled to Rome to speak to Pope Gregory ii and receive his instructions. One biographer recounts that the Pope welcomed him "with a smile and a look full of kindness", and had "important conversations" with him in the following days (Willibaldo, [Willibald of Mainz], *Vita S. Bonifatii*, ed. Levison, pp. 13-14), and lastly, after conferring upon him the new name of Boniface, assigned to him, in official letters, the mission of preaching the Gospel among the German peoples.

Comforted and sustained by the Pope's support, Boniface embarked on the preaching of the Gospel in those regions, fighting against pagan worship and reinforcing the foundations of human and Christian morality. With a deep sense of duty he wrote in one of his letters: "We are united in the fight on the Lord's Day, because days of affliction and wretchedness have come.... We are not mute dogs or taciturn observers or mercenaries fleeing from wolves! On the contrary, we are diligent Pastors who watch over Christ's flock, who proclaim God's will to the leaders and ordinary folk, to the rich and the poor... in season and out of season..." (cf. *Epistulae*, 3,352.354: mgh). With his tireless activity and his gift for organization, Boniface adaptable and friendly yet firm obtained great results. The Pope then "declared that he wished to confer upon him the episcopal dignity so that he might thus with greater determination correct and lead back to the path of truth those who had strayed, feeling supported by the greater authority of the apostolic dignity and being much more readily accepted by all in the office of preacher, the clearer it was that this was why he had been ordained by the Apostolic Bishop" (Othlo, *Vita S. Bonifatii*, ed. Levison, lib. I, p. 127).

The Supreme Pontiff himself consecrated Boniface "Regional Bishop", that is, for the whole of Germany. Boniface then resumed his apostolic labours in the territories assigned to him and extended his action also to the Church of the Gauls: with great caution he restored discipline in the Church, convoked various Synods to guarantee the authority of the sacred canons and strengthened the necessary communion with the Roman Pontiff, a point that he had very much at heart. The Successors of Pope Gregory II also held him in the highest esteem. Gregory III appointed him Archbishop of all the Germanic tribes, sent him the pallium and granted him the faculties to organize the ecclesiastical hierarchy in those regions (cf. *Epist. 28: S. Bonifatii Epistulae*, ed. Tangl, Berolini 1916). Pope Zacchary confirmed him in his office and praised his dedication (cf. *Epist. 51, 57, 58, 60, 68, 77, 80, 86, 87, 89: op. cit.*); Pope Stephen III, newly elected, received a letter from him in which he expressed his filial respect (cf. *Epist. 108: op. cit.*).

In addition to this work of evangelization and organization of the Church through the founding of dioceses and the celebration of Synods, this great Bishop did not omit to encourage the foundation of various male and female monasteries so that they would become like beacons, so as to radiate human and Christian culture and the faith in the territory. He summoned monks and nuns from the Benedictine monastic communities in his homeland who gave him a most effective and invaluable help in proclaiming the Gospel and in disseminating the humanities and the arts among the population. Indeed, he rightly considered that work for the Gospel must also be work for a true human culture. Above all the Monastery of Fulda founded in about 743 was the heart and centre of outreach of religious spirituality and culture: there the monks, in prayer, work and penance, strove to achieve holiness; there they trained in the study of the sacred and profane disciplines and prepared themselves for the proclamation of the Gospel in order to be missionaries. Thus it was to the credit of Boniface, of his monks and nuns for women too had a very important role in this work of evangelization that human culture, which is inseparable from faith and reveals its beauty, flourished. Boniface himself has left us an important intellectual

corpus. First of all is his copious correspondence, in which pastoral letters alternate with official letters and others private in nature, which record social events but above all reveal his richly human temperament and profound faith.

In addition he composed a treatise on the *Ars grammatica* in which he explained the declinations, verbs and syntax of the Latin language, but which also became for him a means of spreading culture and the faith. An *Ars metrica* that is, an introduction on how to write poetry as well as various poetic compositions and, lastly, a collection of 15 sermons are also attributed to him.

Although he was getting on in years (he was almost 80), he prepared himself for a new evangelizing mission: with about 50 monks he returned to Frisia where he had begun his work. Almost as a prediction of his imminent death, in alluding to the journey of life, he wrote to Bishop Lull, his disciple and successor in the see of Mainz: "I wish to bring to a conclusion the purpose of this journey; in no way can I renounce my desire to set out. The day of my end is near and the time of my death is approaching; having shed my mortal body, I shall rise to the eternal reward. May you, my dear son, ceaselessly call the people from the maze of error, complete the building of the Basilica of Fulda that has already been begun, and in it lay my body, worn out by the long years of life" (Willibald, *Vita S. Bonifatii*, ed. cit., p. 46). While he was beginning the celebration of Mass at Dokkum (in what today is northern Holland) on 5 June 754, he was assaulted by a band of pagans. Advancing with a serene expression he "forbade his followers from fighting saying, "cease, my sons, from fighting, give up warfare, for the witness of Scripture recommends that we do not give an eye for an eye but rather good for evil. Here is the long awaited day, the time of our end has now come; courage in the Lord!" (*ibid.*, pp. 49-50). These were his last words before he fell under the blows of his aggressors. The mortal remains of the Martyr Bishop were then taken to the Monastery of Fulda where they received a fitting burial. One of his first biographers had already made this judgement of him: "The holy Bishop Boniface can call himself father of all the inhabitants of Germany, for it was he who first brought them forth in Christ with the words of his holy preaching, he strengthened them with his example and lastly, he gave his life for them; no greater love than this can be shown" (Othlo, *Vita S. Bonifatii*, ed. cit., lib. I, p. 158).

Centuries later, what message can we gather today from the teaching and marvellous activity of this great missionary and martyr? For those who approach Boniface, an initial fact stands out: *the centrality of the word of God*, lived and interpreted in the faith of the Church, a word that he lived, preached and witnessed to until he gave the supreme gift of himself in martyrdom. He was so passionate about the word of God that he felt the urgent need and duty to communicate it to others, even at his own personal risk. This word was the pillar of the faith which he had committed himself to spreading at the moment of his episcopal ordination: "I profess integrally the purity of the holy Catholic faith and with the help of God I desire to remain in the unity of this faith, in which there is no doubt that the salvation of Christians lies" (*Epist. 12*, in *S. Bonifatii Epistolae*, ed. cit., p. 29). The second most important proof that emerges from the life of Boniface is his *faithful communion with the Apostolic See*, which was a firm and central reference point of his missionary work; he always preserved this communion as a rule of his mission and left it, as it were, as his

will. In a letter to Pope Zachary, he said: "I never cease to invite and to submit to obedience to the Apostolic See those who desire to remain in the Catholic faith and in the unity of the Roman Church and all those whom God grants to me as listeners and disciples in my mission" (*Epist.* 50: in *ibid.*, p. 81). One result of this commitment was the steadfast spirit of cohesion around the Successor of Peter which Boniface transmitted to the Church in his mission territory, uniting England, Germany and France with Rome and thereby effectively contributing to planting those Christian roots of Europe which were to produce abundant fruit in the centuries to come. Boniface also deserves our attention for a third characteristic: he encouraged *the encounter between the Christian-Roman culture and the Germanic culture*. Indeed, he knew that humanizing and evangelizing culture was an integral part of his mission as Bishop. In passing on the ancient patrimony of Christian values, he grafted on to the Germanic populations a new, more human lifestyle, thanks to which the inalienable rights of the person were more widely respected. As a true son of St Benedict, he was able to combine prayer and labour (manual and intellectual), pen and plough.

Boniface's courageous witness is an invitation to us all to welcome God's word into our lives as an essential reference point, to love the Church passionately, to feel co-responsible for her future, to seek her unity around the Successor of Peter. At the same time, he reminds us that Christianity, by encouraging the dissemination of culture, furthers human progress. It is now up to us to be equal to such a prestigious patrimony and to make it fructify for the benefit of the generations to come.

His ardent zeal for the Gospel never fails to impress me. At the age of 41 he left a beautiful and fruitful monastic life, the life of a monk and teacher, in order to proclaim the Gospel to the simple, to barbarians; once again, at the age of 80, he went to a region in which he foresaw his martyrdom.

By comparing his ardent faith, this zeal for the Gospel, with our own often lukewarm and bureaucratized faith, we see what we must do and how to renew our faith, in order to give the precious pearl of the Gospel as a gift to our time.

To special groups:

I offer a warm welcome to the members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean. I also greet the many student groups present today. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially the visitors from England, Denmark, Vietnam and the United States, I cordially invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

APPEAL

It was with deep sorrow that I learned of the murders of two young British soldiers and a policeman in Northern Ireland. As I assure the families of the victims and the injured of my spiritual closeness, I condemn in the strongest terms these abominable acts of terrorism which, apart from desecrating human life, seriously endanger the ongoing peace process in Northern Ireland and risk destroying the great hopes generated by this process in the region and throughout the world. I ask the Lord that no one will again give in to the horrendous temptation of violence and that all will increase their efforts to continue building – through the patient effort of dialogue – a peaceful, just and reconciled society.

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Lastly, my most cordial greeting goes to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly weds*. Dear *young people*, may the Lenten journey that we are making be an opportunity for authentic conversion so that you may attain a mature faith in Christ. Dear *sick people*, participating lovingly in the very suffering of the Son of God incarnate, may you share from this moment in the glory and joy of his Resurrection. And may you, dear *newly weds*, find in the Covenant which Christ made with his Church at the price of his Blood, support for your conjugal bond and your family mission.

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