

The Legends of Bishop Boniface of Mainz



St. Boniface was one of the great missionaries of Church history. Born in England around 680 A.D. Winfrid ("friend of peace", as he was named) would become known as Boniface, the Apostle of the Germans. Legends usually have some basis in facts and the missionary accomplishments of Bishop Boniface are well established in history. Upon these known facts have grown some legends. Legends are stories about a historical figure which often embellish and expand far beyond the actual facts, though they may contain some elements of truth. Among the legends of Boniface are the story of his chopping down the great Oak Tree of Thor. Because of him people light candles on nativity wreaths and hang presents on Christmas trees.

He had left the land where he was a respected scholar, teacher, and priest because he was convinced he was called to missionary work. He had argued and pestered his abbot into letting him go because he wanted to serve God in foreign lands. He abandoned a successful, safe life in his mid-forties to win souls for God. But from the moment he stepped off the ship in 716, his trip to Friesland to join the famous missionary Willibrord had been a disaster. Winfrith and his companions had landed to discover that the ruler of Friesland had declared war on Christians, and was destroying churches and monasteries, driving Willibrord into exile, and sending what was left of the Church into hiding. He had no choice but to return to England a few short months later in defeat. It would have been easy to give up missionary work at this point. But his mistake had not been in the call but how he followed it.

He kept his enthusiasm but now directed his zeal into organization and preparation for the journey. He would go to the pagan lands, but first he went to Rome in 718 to the pope asking for the backing of the Church. Pope Gregory II talked to Winfrith all winter long before finally sending him on a test mission to Thuringia in Germany. In the pope's commission on May 15, 719, we have the first record of Winfrith's new name, Boniface. From then on he was known as Boniface to all who knew him. So Boniface journeyed first to Bavaria, but found the church well established there. He moved on. He went next to Thuringia, where he found the church established but in bad shape because many priests had lapsed into paganism. His efforts to reform the church met mixed success. Then the persecuting king of Freisland died. Boniface went to help Willibrord

for three years, but though the aging missionary tried to persuade him to stay as his assistant, his sense of call to unchurched regions caused him to move on to Hessa in 722, where he had to start from scratch evangelizing and establishing churches. After returning to Rome where he was made a Bishop without a See, he set out to convert the heathen German chieftans.

It was here that the legends begin to arise. Boniface found it difficult People were attracted by Christianity but unable to give up their old religion and superstitions, perhaps out of fear of being different or of how the old Viking "gods" would react. Much of the worship of these heathen was centered around sacred trees at which they practiced sacrifices and made offerings to the gods.

"In her voyage across the ocean of this world, the Church is like a great ship being pounded by the waves of life's different stresses. Our duty is not to abandon ship but to keep her on her course. Let us stand fast in what is right, and prepare our souls for trial. Let us wait upon God's strengthening aid and say to him: "O Lord, you have been our refuge in all gener-ations." Let us trust in him who has placed this burden upon us. What we ourselves cannot bear let us bear with the help of Christ. For he is all-powerful, and he tells us: "My yoke is easy, and my burden light." Let us continue the fight on the day of the Lord. The days of anguish and of tribulation have overtaken us; if God so wills, "let us die for the holy laws of our fathers," so that we may deserve to obtain an eternal inheritance with them.

from a letter by Saint Boniface

Knowing that the people needed a reason to let go, Boniface called the tribes to a display of power. Preaching about the nativity under a great sacred tree dedicated to Thor, he found himself facing a angry armed crowd. As the people watched, Boniface approached the giant oak of Geismar, a sacred tree dedicated to Thor, with an axe. Some of the people must have trembled with each stroke of his axe, but nothing happened. Finally with a crack, the tree split in four parts that we, are told, fell to the ground in the shape of a cross. They crushed all the trees around except a single small fir tree. There stood Boniface, axe in hand, unharmed by their old gods, strong in the power of the one God. The legend says that Boniface used the lumber from Thor's tree to make a church. And that is why Boniface is often shown with a axe.

It is said that he used that small triangular evergreen fir tree, its branches reaching up to heaven as an illustration of the nativity and the the Trinity, telling the story of how the One God had sent his Son to save the world from sin and pagan gods. Small fir trees were hung upside down from the rafters of homes and churches as a symbol of Christianity from the Twelfth Century. They later came to be decorated with apples and sweets, and tradition has it that Martin Luther put candles on a



tree for his children. Where before offerings were made to the gods and goddesses at sacred trees, Boniface stressed that the gifts now tied to the trees represented the gift of God to man in Jesus Christ.

Another pagan solstice custom was the fire wreath. Great wreaths of evergreens were set on fire and rolled down the hills on Winter Solstice (December 21st) to call the light back to overcome the darkness. Boniface took the wreaths and used their ring shape to represent the eternity and mercy of God and the evergreens, His everlastingness. He placed candles on the wreath to represent penance, sorrow, longing, and hope and joy. Church tradition has since embellished the symbolism of the wreath and it is used by a variety of Christian traditions. The Christmas tree and Advent wreath were traditions that would become beloved of the German peoples and German immigrants would bring it to America

Amplly supported by friends, many of whom joined him in the work, and the numbers of thre faithful increased wonderfully. Later, after the church was well established in HESSIA, He tried to resign his office and take the Gospel to the Saxons, but was made Papal Legate instead. In that position, he organized the first German Synods. Boniface would have a significant impart on the Frankish kingdom. It would be he that crowned Pepin, to replace Charles Martel in who founded the Carolingian dynasty that would so produce Charlemagne, a Christian emperor. Boniface was made Archbishop of Mainz by Pope Zachary III in 747.

But even in old age, Boniface was not ready to quit missions to those who had not heard the Gospel. In 754,



he landed in Freisland (Holland) with a large group of over thirty-seven missionaries. Savagely set upon by the Freisens, he and most of his companions were martyred. He lifted a Bible toward his attackers and was killed by a thrust through it with a sword. That is why he is also represented by a book pierced by a sword, a white cross or preaching from a ship. Boniface, a determined

and courageous missionary, has set an example we ought to follow.



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Told by Eldrbarry

Eternal God, the refuge and help of all your children, we praise you for all you have given us, for all you have done for us, for all that you are to us. In our weakness, you are our strength, in our darkness, you are light, in our sorrow you are comfort and peace. We cannot number your blessings, we cannot declare your love: For all your blessings we bless you. May we live as in your presence, and love the things that you love, and serve you in our daily lives: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Christmas 2000 ---- Barry McWilliams (eldrbarry)
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