

An Address
by
Metropolitan Seraphim of Glastonbury
given at
The Annual Pilgrimage in honour of St. Fursey
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“Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee” (Genesis XII: 1)

This text, recording the call of the Patriarch Abraham and the promise of great blessings which were attached to it, has been the inspiration throughout the generations of those who turned their backs on the security of family, home and friends to answer the call of God. Among those who did so was St. Antony the Great (c. 251-c. 356), the first monk and the father of monasticism, who later commented,

“Some were reached by the Word of God through the law of promise and the discernment of the good inherent in them from their first formation. They did not hesitate but followed it readily as did Abraham, our father. Since he offered himself in love through the law of promise, God appeared to him saying, “Go from your country and your kindred and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.” And he went without hesitation at all but being ready for his calling. This is the model for the beginning of the way of life. It still persists in those who follow this pattern. Wherever and whenever souls endure and bow to it they easily attain the virtues, since their hearts are ready to be guided by the Spirit of God.”¹

This vocation receives much emphasis in the Irish monastic tradition which provides another key to understanding the ministry of St. Fursey as well as the whole impetus of evangelisation in East Anglia, which owes everything to monasticism.

The Irish monks of the sixth century were restless travellers and the impulse for this wanderlust was often to seek greater solitude beyond the seas. The monastic historian, Dom Louis Gougaud, notes,

“Monks for the most part, voluntary expatriation appeared to them in the light of a supreme self-sacrifice, the fittest crown to the task of renunciation in which they had engaged. To leave their country ‘for the love of God,’ ‘for the name of the Lord,’ ‘for the love of the name of Christ,’ ‘for the healing of the soul.’ ‘in order to win the heavenly fatherland,’ such are the phrases which the biographers of these holy travellers choose to describe the motive of their wanderings.”²

They called themselves *peregrini*, but to translate that simply as ‘pilgrims’ inadequately conveys the sense of voluntary exile, often associated with vows not to return home for many years or for the whole of their lifetime, which they embraced. This ‘white martyrdom’ of asceticism became an impelling part of their spirituality. Situated as an island in an ocean, the Irish monks’ path to exile necessitated perilous sea-voyages which routes have traditionally been regarded as the ‘sea-road of the saints’. At an early date the Irish monks visited the northern seas. St. Cormac went to the Orkney islands and Irish hermits lived on the Faroe islands, from which they discovered Iceland

¹ Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism & the Making of a Saint*; Studies in Antiquity & Christianity; (Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 1995), p. 197.

² Louis Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands. A History of the Churches of the Celts, their origin, their development, influence and mutual relations* (London: 1932), pp. 129-130.

around 795, whilst St. Columba's settlement on Iona and the restless travels of St. Brendan the Voyager are notable.³

However, the motivation initially was not intentionally evangelistic,

*"In fact the conversion of the heathen seems hardly to have entered the purview of the Irish monks who at this period began to overrun the Christian communities of continental Europe ... They were monks, and the going forth into an unknown land seemed to them desirable in the first instance as being a further grade of mortification."*⁴

Some of you may be familiar with the anticlerical satirical story, *L'Île des Pingouins (Penguin Island)* written in 1908 by Anatole France. It opens with a fictitious account of an Irish missionary monk landing on a remote island in northern Europe and preaching to the local inhabitants, who flocked to hear him, after which he baptises the entire population. Unfortunately the monk was seriously short-sighted and his converts turned out to be great auks!

The historian Henry Mayr-Harting has offered a very clear explanation of how we should understand 'mission' within this context,

*"If it meant that holy men who settle in some remote place to lead a life of prayer and asceticism will attract followers, or even that they are concerned to revitalize the whole of Christian society through this way of life, then the Irish were missionaries. But if it is meant that they deliberately set out to preach to, convert and minister to pagans, this is truer of some than of others."*⁵

To illustrate his point Mayr-Harting cites St. Columbanus, the Irish monk who is regarded as the missionary *par excellence*. When he left the monastery at Bangor and travelled to Gaul his motive was for *peregrinatio* and his model was the Patriarch Abraham. The first thing he asked of King Theuderic was not to find him pagans to convert or even churches to reform, but a wilderness for himself and his monks to live in. Whilst at Bregenz he conceived a genuine mission to go and preach to one of the pagan Slav tribes but after an angel appeared to him, drew the world as a circle and showed him that it was all a wilderness in which he could continue his spiritual labours, the saint understood that he was not to take on himself the conversion of that tribe and he remained where he was.⁶

Mayr-Harting identifies two different approaches to mission in the Middle Ages,

"Of one kind Martin of Tours, as reported by Sulpicius Severus, was the classic exponent. This approach was frontal and dramatic. It was based broadly on the destruction of pagan temples, the smashing of idols, challenges to pagan priests, and the missionary's placing himself in grave danger so that his providential extrication from it might cause the benighted infidels to gape with wonder."

He likens these to the methods employed by the Irish saints and quotes the incident from Adamnan's ***Life of Columba***, describing the saint's work among the Picts, which,

"is full of contests with the magicians of King Brude – over dead bodies, over contaminated wells, and even one plain shouting match. It is also full of Columba's extricating himself from dangers to the awe of the pagans, and these include his being chased by some mysterious monster in Loch Ness! Columbanus was much the same. At

³ Vide Elizabeth Rees, ***Celtic Saints: Passionate Wanderers*** (London: 2000); Brendan Lehane, ***The Quest of Three Abbots: Pioneers of Ireland's Golden Age*** (London: 1968); John Marsden, ***Sea-Road of the Saints: Celtic Holy Men in the Hebrides*** (Edinburgh: 1995).

⁴ O.D. Watkins, ***A History of Penance: Being a Study of the Authorities*** (New York: 1920), p. 613.

⁵ Henry Mayr-Harting, ***The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*** (3rd edition, 1991), p. 91

⁶ Mayr-Harting, *op.cit.*, pp. 92-93.

Bregenz he had come upon a pagan festival at which a great pot of beer was to be offered to Woden, prior to its consumption. He breathed on it and it exploded with a loud report."⁷

The other approach, which Mayr-Harting identifies with St. Gregory the Great and later, St. Wilfrid, attempted to strike a balance and eschewed all drama,

*"For Jews he believed in mildness and persuasion, together with a little; 'blandishment' in the form of rent remission During the course of the English mission Gregory changed from a policy of stern measures and compulsion to one of mildness by which the Anglo-Saxons should be led to Christianity step by step. The old temples were now to be kept for Christian worship; Christian festivals were to be accompanied with the old feasts of cattle."*⁸

The little we know of St. Felix suggests that his was the milder, gentler approach of the ascetic visionary: raising the dead, healing the sick and converting robbers. Having founded a monastery in Galway and spent a decade preaching in Ireland, he withdrew as a hermit to a remote island before coming to East Anglia as part of his voluntary exile. This is emphasised by Bede who says "he could no longer bear the crowds that resorted to him, leaving all that he seemed to possess, he departed from his native island" and speaks of him "being desirous to live a stranger for our Lord, wherever an opportunity should offer."⁹ One presumes that he didn't just turn up in East Anglia by chance but had heard of the missionary work being undertaken under the patronage of King Sigebert and St. Felix and came to share in the work. However, he was not alone but arrived "with a few brothers" who included the priests Gobban and Dicull and two of his siblings, Foillan and Ultan. Knowing Bede's partisan bias against the non-Roman clergy, his devoting a full chapter of his history to St. Fursey and his praise of him as "a holy man ... renowned both for his words and actions, and remarkable for singular virtues" is high praise indeed. Professor Deanesley likens the work of Fursey and Felix to "*a Finnian of Clonard transported to Norfolk, while a bishop like Caesarius of Arles taught his young clerics in Suffolk: and no doubt with different Easters. But to the spatially separate groups of Christians, different Easter dates did not matter much: and both teachers had been set there by the king.*"¹⁰ The fact that King Sigebert actively supported both in their endeavours is a good indication that their relationship was harmonious.

St. Felix, as a monk himself would have undoubtedly come under the influence of St. Columban and his disciples through the monastery at Luxeuil or some of the other numerous monasteries founded by them in continental Europe. St. Columbanus has been described as, "*A sort of prophet of Israel, brought back to life in the sixth century, as blunt in his speech as Isaias or Jeremias ... For almost fifty years souls were stirred by the influence of St. Columban. His passing through the country started a real contagion of holiness.*"¹¹ It was that same contagion of holiness which underpinned the mission of St. Fursey and his fellow monastic evangelists.

It is paradoxical that St. Fursey, like so many of his contemporary monks, whilst impelled by a desire for solitude found himself establishing flourishing monastic houses and at the centre of great missionary activity. Asceticism does not require indifference to the souls of others. "*It is forgotten that inhumanity to oneself had often its counterpart in an almost divine humanity towards one's neighbour The Desert has bred fanaticism and frenzy and fear; but it has also bred heroic gentleness.*"¹² It has ever been thus and we find that St. Antony himself was in constant flight and the victim of his own success.

⁷ Mayr-Harting, *op.cit.*, p. 145

⁸ Mayr-Harting, *op.cit.*, p. 146

⁹ Bede, ***Ecclesiastical History of the English People***, Chapter XIX.

¹⁰ Margaret Deanesley, ***The Pre-Conquest Church in England*** (London: 1961), p. 82.

¹¹ Daniel-Rops (1901-1965) de l'Académie Française.

¹² Helen Waddell, ***The Desert Fathers*** (London: 1936).

The Irish monastic saints were filled with a powerful sense of the need to save souls for Christ, and a willingness to be responsive and obedient to that call, even if it took them away from their solitude. The Coptic Church preserves the ancient tradition of the bishop-elect being led to his episcopal consecration by two bishops or monks holding each hand. This was not just a way of offering support but had the more serious purpose of ensuring that the candidate could not take flight from the fate that awaited him! Equally, however, there is something in the character of the great monastic saints, which attracts souls to them: not only their sanctity but also the appeal that their spiritual joy has on those they encounter. One Russian bishop wrote:

Monks have a quiet and pure joy, happiness of a pious soul. All that chaos, all that inebriation with life which is commonly called 'delights of life' is something gloomy, something which results in saturation and painful intoxication... We monks weep out of joy, out of compunction, and we thank God... Every monk knows what tears of compunction are, and all earthly delights seem to him poor and deficient compared to these tears... I myself received monastic tonsure and I do not think that I will ever experience again the joy that I experienced then... I was full of joy for two months. My soul was so exalted, so gladdened... It is not by mere chance that in monastic tonsure, when the abbot clothes a newly tonsured monk in his new robe, the following words are said: 'Our brother... is clothed in the robe of joy and spiritual gladness, in order that all his sorrows and perplexity should disappear and be vanquished'... The farther one is from passions, the more joy has one in his heart. The purity of heart is deeply connected with gladness.¹³

The impact of St. Fursey must have been considerable as his ministry in East Anglia lasted little more than eleven years (633-644). Yet, writing from his monastery at Jarrow almost nine decades later, St. Bede the Venerable records that,

"An aged brother is still living in our monastery who is wont to relate that a most truthful and pious man told him that he had seen Fursey himself in the kingdom of the East Angles and had heard these visions from his own mouth. He added that though it was during a time of severe winter weather and a hard frost and though Fursey sat wearing only a thin garment when he told his story, yet he sweated as though it were the middle of summer, because of the great terror and joy which his recollection aroused."¹⁴

There is a popular misconception of viewing the monastic life as a retreat from the world and a detachment from humanity. A modern Orthodox monk explains,

"Monasticism is not inimical to the Body of Christ, contrary to what many would have us believe. It was and is a lay-movement with a different purpose and function within the context of the Church, the Body of Christ. Neither is the monastic life one that is separate or different from that of lay Christians. Rather is a more intensive form of the life in Christ, the life that all are called to live. It is a life based on the Gospel counsels which all Orthodox Christians must follow and exemplify in their own lives."¹⁵

Evangelism is essentially one of witnessing to the reality of the Gospel rather than active preaching. Whilst the constant theme of the Synoptic Gospels is to *go out* as in the Great Commission, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation"¹⁶, the fourth Gospel strongly resonates with the invitation *to come to Christ*. In Russian Orthodoxy there is the tradition of the *starets* or wandering holy man, which has also developed as the *poustinik*, a person called upon to live in the desert (poustinia), withdrawn from the world as a solitary yet part of the local community among which they are providentially placed. Among the central paradoxes of

¹³ St. Hilarion (Troitsky), Archbishop of Verey, 1886-1929, canonised 1999, **Christianstva net bez Tserkvi** (Christianity or the Church), pp.181-187.

¹⁴ Bede, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Hieromonk Denis Lajoie, **The Monastic Influence as Part of the Body of Christ**

¹⁶ Mark XVI: 15

monasticism is the tension between the desire for marginality and freedom from the world and the sense of responsibility to take a prophetic stance before the church and society. Withdrawal and return, flight and commitment are deeply engrained in monastic tradition and we see them exhibited in the life of St. Fursey¹⁷ as well as many other early evangelist monks.¹⁸

St. Patrick supports his missionary activity with copious biblical texts and states, *“And so then, it is our duty to fish well and diligently, as the Lord urges and teaches us, saying: ‘Follow me, and I shall make you become fishers of men;’ (Matthew IV: 19) and again He says through the prophets: ‘See, I send many fishers and hunters, says God;’ (Jeremiah XVI: 16) &c ... And so it was our bounden duty to spread our nets, so that a vast multitude and throng might be caught for God and there might be clergy everywhere to baptise and exhort a people that was poor and needy.”*¹⁹

A modern authority on Anglo-Saxon monasticism, Professor Sarah Foot, has demonstrated how early Anglo-Saxon religious houses were simultaneously active and contemplative. Her study of the institution of the ‘minster’ (the communal religious household) has led to a revision of the previously accepted but simplistic binary division between ‘active’ minsters and ‘enclosed’ monasteries.²⁰ She has attempted to refocus scholarly attention away from an unduly polarised view of the church which contrasts the Benedictine ideal (before the great Benedictine reforms of the tenth century) with a pastorally active reality and to point attention towards a more integrated view of early English monasticism. She offers examples to demonstrate that the single Latin term *monasterium* (and its Old English equivalent, *mynster*)

“were not used monolithically to denote a religious community of a particular type; rather they were deployed in a broad sense to encompass a wide diversity of houses.”

Although its core was a brotherhood of professed monks, it often encompassed a wider community, because it acted as a focus for the people dwelling in its locality; with many lay people of both sexes, often including children, widows and the disabled, mentally and physically, who were keen to share, if only vicariously, in the undeniable spiritual and material benefits of monastic living.

Like all vibrant spirituality the monastic ideal is eminently adaptable and we should avoid viewing it as something inflexible, recognising that it adjusts to different times and different places without abandoning its inherent principles. The stony deserts of Scetis and Nitria in which it first appeared, gave way to the many *dysarts* of the Irish monks, whether they were in bogs, remote islands or high on hills. Transported to Gaul, monasticism had become more integrated into society with the monks preaching, evangelising and ministering to the poor and sick. Plants and herbs grown for the community were prized for their medicinal qualities and used by the monks in tending the sick. In Ireland the monasteries became places of scholarship where manuscripts were produced to the highest artistic degree and education and schools founded. The various monastic rules and penitentials show us that monasticism in the Irish Church, like that of the Coptic Church, was extremely prescriptive and strict. The popular idea of a lax, easy-going monasticism was very far from the reality. Yet paradoxically it also allowed for flexibility. When the monk had advanced in the spiritual life, he was permitted to leave the community and follow the solitary life. From here, he might be led to return to the community or the wider world and it is worth noting that the present Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church (Shenouda III) and his immediate predecessor

¹⁷ Bernard McGinn, “Withdrawal and Return: Reflections on Monastic Retreat from the World, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 149-172.

¹⁸ Douglas Dales, *Light to the Isles: Missionary theology in Celtic and Anglo Saxon Britain* (1997).

¹⁹ St. Patrick, *Confession*, 40.

²⁰ Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England c. 600-900* (Cambridge: 2006).

(Kyrillos VI) were both monks who had lived some years as hermits. This rigorous discipline and the years spent in seclusion were not wasted time and effort, but a period of preparation through prayer and study and, sometimes, even travelling. It is little wonder that progressive kings sought their counsellors and ambassadors from among the monks and poured their riches into endowing and beautifying monastic houses.

In the modern history of the Coptic Orthodox Church the monks have also been used to extend the mission of the church. With the increase in emigration in the latter part of the twentieth century a considerable Coptic *diaspora* came into being and there was a pressing need for the church to minister to its spiritual needs. Pope Shenouda sent monks to the lands of immigration to establish churches and in time these grew and prospered. Once they reached a certain level of maturity, the monks were either recalled to their monasteries or consecrated as bishops to establish new dioceses. In time the married clergy took over the parishes and the monks returned to their lives in their monasteries. The Coptic Church's present missionary activity in Africa dates back to the middle of the twentieth century and was initially led by monks from Egyptian monasteries. The first married priest was not ordained until 1988. Two bishoprics were established in 1975 and 1995 respectively to oversee communities in Congo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

An interesting development which sprang up at the end of the twentieth century has come to be known as "New Monasticism."²¹ Although this movement differs from traditional monasticism in not requiring the traditional vows and admitting married couples, it places great emphasis on a disciplined contemplative life and community. It also includes among its 'twelve marks' relocation to the "abandoned places of Empire", which it defines as the margins of society, but which is clearly the evangelical response which motivated St. Fursey and the other missionary monastics, who brought the Gospel where it was needed most. Another 'mark' includes peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities, something which would have been integral to the ministries of Saints like St. Felix, St. Fursey.

Having briefly mentioned St. Felix as a significant figure in this monastic evangelisation of East Anglia, I need to add a third saint, Botolph of Ikenhoe, "a man of unparalleled life and learning and full of the grace of the Holy Spirit." Although he returned to England in the year St. Felix died and some two years after St. Fursey had left for France, there can be little doubt that he was part of the same evangelistic wave. Although much of his early life is unknown it is recorded that he had stayed for a time at the monastery of Farmoutier-en-Brie in Saxonia, a monastery which had been among the first wave to come heavily under the influence of St. Columbanus and his foundation at Luxeuil.²² Farmoutier was also under the patronage of the East Anglian monarchy as King Anna's daughter and stepdaughter both served as abbesses there. Botolph founded his Benedictine monastery in 654 and is reputed to have died around 680, and his significance and impact is supported by the fact that some seventy churches as well as towns and villages (such as Boston – *Botolph's town*) were named after him.

Professor Barbara Yorke sees a religious community as

"the ideal form of organisation for the nascent church in early medieval Britain for its members could provide support in an ecclesiastical equivalent of the secular kin-group. As a part of Europe where Roman towns had ceased to function as such, or had never existed, a religious community within its own enclosure was a way of creating the ideal of the 'holy city'."

²¹ Jonathan Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* (1998) and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: what it has to say to today's church* (2008).

²² Waldpert of Luxeuil composed a rule combining the precepts of Benedict and Columbanus for the nuns of Farmoutier.

She notes that various Roman sites, including fortifications (such as Cnobheresburg), islands and hill forts, were often re-utilised as new religious centres, “*in part because of the expectations of those familiar with churches based in Roman towns in other former areas of the Roman empire, but also because these sites possessed good communications with building materials to hand, and, above all, were ready-made enclosures that helped to separate the religious community from the secular world.*”²³

The link between monasticism and evangelism is integral to understanding the conversion of the British Isles. The modern parochial system, which is the basis of our church life today, largely dates from the Middle Ages²⁴, and whilst Romano-British churches centred round the episcopal seats in major cities, cemetery chapels or estate and house churches, the majority of Anglo-Saxon churches seem to have been associated with monks and monasteries. The spiritual vibrancy of the Irish contribution to monasticism was especially appealing and this *wanderlust* carried the Christian faith not just to remote and desolate islands but to the very heart of Europe.

We pilgrims of the twenty-first century come here to remember with thankfulness the ministry of an obscure Irish monk who stopped by here for a few years in a lifetime of travelling. Centuries have passed and only a little about him is known to us and the only words he has left behind him are in the *Lorica* (literally ‘body-armour’) traditionally attributed to him. Like the better-known ‘St. Patrick’s breastplate’ it invokes divine protection on all our senses. St. Fursey stands in an unbroken monastic tradition from the Egyptian desert, having answered the same call as the father of monasticism, St. Anthony the Great. In his feet he came to Norfolk ‘for the service of God and the neighbour’ with ‘the fragrance of the Holy Spirit in his nostrils’ to undertake ‘the work of God’s church’ in his hands. With gratitude we celebrate his presence in this land. May his blessings be with us all. Amen.

²³ Barbara Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain 600-800* (2006), p. 158.

²⁴ N.J.G. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish: The Culture of Religion from Augustine to Victoria* (Cambridge : 2000)