**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

1ST FEBRUARY BRIGID OF KILDARE

3RD FEBRUARY ANSKAR

4TH FEBRUARY GILBERT OF SEMPRINGHAM

6TH FEBRUARY THE MARTYRS OF JAPAN

BRIGID of KILDARE [452-524] is the second patron saint of Ireland, and the ‘Bride’ of St Bride’s Church in Fleet Street.

She was born in a small village about five miles from Kildare; became a nun and eventually abbess of the joint monastery at Kildare itself. She must have been a woman of some holiness, and of some authority to have risen to rule over the men as well as the women in the monastery, and stories abound of her kindness, mercy and miracles. Like Patrick, Bridget, as she is often called, was associated with the flame of the Holy Spirit.

Her cult was exported to Europe by the Irish pilgrims, and a church dedicated to her stands at Piacenza in Italy.

Most of her hagiographies were written a long time after her death so that it is quite impossible to authenticate any of the copious folk tales concerning her.

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ANSKAR [801-65] is commemorated for his faithful but unsuccessful efforts to evangelise the Danes.

He was born in Amiens, and educated at the monastic school at Corbie, and spent some years as a monk before being delegated to head up a mission to Scandinavia from his monastery at Corvey in Westphalia. When the king of the Franks withdrew his support the mission came to an end. Anskar returned to Corvey as abbot and in 832 he was appointed Bishop of Hamburg. Unfortunately constant raids from Norwegian Vikings brought about his retreat to Bremen where he was re-consecrated Archbishop, with jurisdiction over Hamburg and the whole of Scandinavia.

Anskar was a brilliant and powerful preacher who managed to convert one of the Danish kings and had a little more success in Sweden than in Denmark; but all his Danish converts relapsed, and it was another two centuries before Christianity can be said to have become established at all in Scandinavia. Anskar did, at least, have the good fortune to die in his bed.

There was a good deal of trade around the Baltic and through the German lands down to Rome and later to Byzantium, the latter mainly from Sweden but some of the Scandinavian tribesmen were known in imperial Roman times. The Danish peninsula was on the trade route, and Charlemagne wanted to grab both the territory and the trade.

Most schoolboys learn and quickly forget that Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in the year 800, which might give the impression that both church and empire in northern Europe were more firmly established than they actually were. The church had only been set up in the German lands for a relatively short time, and Charlemagne was still appointing missions to those that had not yet converted, and had a tendency inherited by other Europeans, to initiate military invasion under cloak of spreading the gospel.

The ’Danevirke’ was a series of walls and trading points intended to keep Frankish ambitions in check and diplomacy ruled whilst the two kings who reigned the whole of Denmark during the first decades of the ninth century, the country fell apart later, and at precisely the same time as Charlemagne’s empire began to disintegrate so that for the next two centuries northern Europe suffered from Vikings in the western lands, and from invasions of Magyars in the east.

Anskar had a tough enough task, with the Danes already mistrusting the Franks, and having their own physical defences ready against possible invasion. When the Frankish king withdrew his support for the project Anskar was left hanging. He retired to his monastery where he died in peace.

Anskar worked hard for the manumission of slaves in Scandinavia where the trade was not only practised, but, of course, many were taken as the consequence of raids. He lived austerely; wore a hair shirt and fasted on bread and water for long periods: he was clearly a man of considerable holiness, faith and courage, who fought the best he could against overwhelming odds.

By the 16th century the Baltic had settled down; the Hanse towns of north Germany became the centre of trade links that made their way right up the Norwegian coast and throughout Scandinavia, and it is no co-incidence that virtually the whole area became further united with the adoption of Lutheranism, with its roots in the German language and culture. Eventually the Danish court became the principal cultural hub of Scandinavia under King Christian V.

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GILBERT of SEMPRINGHAM [1083-1189] founded the only purely English monastic order in history.

He was the son of a Norman knight but was unable to take up arms as a profession because of a physical deformity, so he became a scholar. His father gave him two parishes from which to draw a living; West Torrington in Lancashire, where he gave the stipend to the poor, and in Sempringham, a village in Lincolnshire where he lived for a while in some poverty having appointed a priest for the parish work, as scholars at the time were only usually in minor orders.

Gilbert was taken into the household of Robert Bloet, the Bishop of Lincoln, then a major See, and his successor had him ordained priest and offered him a rich archdeaconry which he declined.

On the death of his father, Gilbert returned to Sempringham, inheriting the family estates. He recruited seven devout young women whom he set up in a house to run a small monastic order on Benedictine lines. On the advice of the Abbot of Rievaulx he appointed lay sisters, and later lay brothers to do the heavy work, and these last lived along Cistercian lines.

In 1147 Gilbert visited Rievaulx to ask that the new order be affiliated with the Cistercians, but the Pope, who had been a monk at Rievaulx, and St Bernard himself, who were present for the chapter, were unwilling to adopt another order, particularly of Benedictines, though Bernard helped Gilbert to write a constitution for them, and the Pope approved the order with Gilbert as its first abbot. In time priests were appointed as Augustinian canons, to offer the nuns spiritual direction, so that the Gilbertine Order became an amalgam of three different traditions; the Benedictine, the Cistercian and the Augustinian. It was, however, the first and only English monastic order ever to have existed.

More houses were set up, mainly in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, and Gilbert would travel from one to another assisting in any way he could with building, carpentry or copying manuscripts. Reading between the lines, however, his writings portray him as quite strict, and there is an account of a revolt against his authority presumably for that reason, which, you might recall, places him in the best company, alongside Pachomius and Benedict himself. Gilbert lived an extraordinary long life, but after his death the order continued, and there were twenty houses in England and one in Scotland by the time of the dissolution in the 1530’s. The order died out but is remembered as the sole English contribution to Latin monasticism.

As a footnote, the Gilbertines provided shelter for Archbishop Becket during his quarrels with Henry II, something for which Henry later pardoned Gilbert. The whole story is itself a footnote in the history of the English church: no mention at all is made of it in European histories, but it stands out as an example of what could be achieved with God’s help by one disabled person who played his hand wisely and well.

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THE MARTYRS of JAPAN

The situation for Christians in 16th and 17th century Japan was very different from that of the early church in Europe.

* Francis Xavier and the Portuguese Jesuits who initiated the Christian mission were foreigners landing in an island nation of well-established culture and civilisation
* However sensitive and accommodating the original missionaries were to Japanese culture – and they learned the language, treated with rulers, civil servants, Buddhist monks etc in an effort to make converts and establish good faith – their initial success was absolutely dependent on the approval of the civil authorities.
* In 1587 when Emperor Hideyoshi changed his policy towards Christians and withdrew his support, the visitors were left with the dilemma as to whether to withdraw and leave their converts in the hands of the Japanese priests and catechists already established, or to continue their work ’underground,’ in the knowledge that by doing so they put themselves and their adherents at the severest risk of utter ruin and disaster.
* In 1614 a decree was issued to expel all priests: 70 priests – Japanese as well as Europeans – were bundled into five junks headed for Macao and Manilla, but 37 more chose to wave their copies of their expulsion ‘warrants’ and remain.
* There had already been recriminations, with Japanese Christians thrown out of their homes, tortured and executed horribly, and from now on they could expect, and most certainly received, cruel treatment from the authorities, particularly in the Nagasaki area, in consequence of their decision to remain.

This said, there seems to be no record of the missionaries having achieved any change or amelioration of the Japanese peasants’ down-trodden condition or economic standing, as we find even before liberation theology, with missionaries such as the Dominican Fr Garcilaso in the Caribbean. In fact indirectly the missionaries made things worse: in 1637-8 there was a major revolt in the Nagasaki area which was primarily against extortionate taxation, but some of the banners had borne Christian symbols, which absolutely maddened the authorities to perpetrate untold massacres.

Why did the rulers change their policy towards Christian missionaries?

Originally St Francis Xavier had been a visitor with a new idea to which a minority of people chose to adhere harmlessly. At first the Jesuits were given the monopoly for mission in Japan, but a later pope authorised Franciscans, and in time more orders came in: eventually Dutch Calvinists arrived.

Trade missions are all very well, but the various contending European forces at work in their country became a matter of suspicion to authorities that had no compelling reason to try to understand what was going on. Eventually they grew suspicious that, as the number of converts grew, the missionaries were acting as an avant-garde to attempts at foreign conquests and they did what they needed to do to discourage the growth of Christianity, which they naturally viewed as the Trojan horse.

There are extremely lurid descriptions of the most spine-chilling tortures and executions in the accounts of martyrdoms written and preserved by Europeans. Kathleen Jones suggests, charitably, that the severity and inventiveness of these procedures was primarily intended to break the European instigators of this mission in order to gain a propaganda victory, rather than the fabled cruelty of the ‘oriental,’ but the Romans and most European jurisdictions ran them close enough; but the methods of torture are hardly the most important matter in hand. On the whole the European martyrs seem to have faced their executioners with extraordinary bravery, but that is not the point either.

When Christians were at last admitted freely into Japan in 1865, it transpired that Latin phrases and relics of martyrs had been passed down the generations. On the other hand, there are many ‘Fumie’ still around in Japanese museums; plaques carrying images of Mary and infant Jesus which had been worn smooth and virtually obliterated with the pressure of feet that had been forced to trample on them: as ever it was the minority who stood out for martyrdom once the authorities initiated the policy of yearly affirmations of ‘correct’ religious adherence by such repudiations of Christ, as though that achieved anything except religious guilt; neither did an atomic bomb dropped by a Christian democracy in 1945 do very much to nurture the tiny remnants of Christian culture that may have still existed around Nagasaki.

Shūsaku Endō wrote a short and deeply thoughtful novel from his own Japanese standpoint about these martyrdoms, centring on the Jesuit reaction to an apparent apostasy by their Provincial, Fr Pereira, and the desire of three of his most faithful student/disciples to establish the truth of this story: ‘How could such a great Christian have betrayed and brought shame and dishonour on the church in this way? The reluctance of the historical figure of Fr Alessandro Valignano, the Provincial in charge at Macau and former apostolic visitor in Japan, is furnished with every good strong argument as to why these young zealots should not have been allowed to go to Japan, and the working out of the story proves him right. SPOILER ALERT! It transpires that Pereira has apostatised once it was born in on him how much needless suffering the mission had brought about for the Japanese people that God could not possibly have willed.

As a direct reaction to the arrogance and indiscretion of the various religious orders and their determination to go for broke, in the face of stiff opposition from wise, experienced and prudent superiors, by mid-century all ports were closed, and the whole of Japan remained culturally, commercially and technologically isolated for the next 200 years until the Meiji restoration in 1865. Once the ports were opened the whole country went hell-for-leather in pursuit of westernisation, with a consequently serious imbalance that has, arguably, remained in the national psyche to this day.