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# THE ADVENT OF ORTHODOXY IN THE GERMAN- SPEAKING LANDS

## Orthodoxy in the West

Many Western people—both Orthodox and non-Orthodox—identify Orthodoxy with national churches of Eastern European and Middle-Eastern origin. Those who live in Western lands with holy soil under their feet may not realize that beneath them rests a vibrant Christian legacy, which for many hundreds of years was identical in spirit and almost indistinguishable in practice from the Christianity of the East.

In the lands in which German is now spoken, Orthodox Christianity was present, to a greater or lesser extent, from the earliest days of the Faith until around the time of the schism in 1054. It is still possible not only to uncover it in old writings and archeological, artistic, and other studies, but also to experience its living presence by venerating holy relics in places where they have been preserved and honored, and by reading unembellished lives of saints written by immediate disciples.

## The Coming of Christianity

The coming of Christianity to the German-speaking lands was a gradual process, spreading over 800 years. In the beginning of the first millennium A.D., much of Western Europe was populated by Celtic peoples. The Romans had conquered vast areas of the continent and begun to make inroads into “Germania,” where Germanic tribes settled around the same time. After the Romans were defeated at the Battle of the Teutoberg Forest in 9 A.D., they

*Opposite: Church of the former Monastery of St. Gall, St. Gallen, Switzerland.*

were unable to realize their ambition of conquering all of Western Europe. Forced to remain west of the Rhine and south of the Danube, they did not plant their civilization in much of present-day Germany, and this meant that the Roman territories received Christianity long before the Germanic ones, due to their greater accessibility.

It must be remembered that our modern-day German-speaking countries did not exist in the missionary period. It was in fact many centuries before population and boundary shifts, wars, and language development had done their work, resulting in a blend of Celtic, Roman, and Germanic peoples in the West who spoke Old French, and to the east, a number of kingdoms which spoke Old German, with Latin used only in church. It was several hundred years before Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg, and Liechtenstein emerged with more or less their present boundaries.

### Christianity on the Roman Frontier in the Age of Apostles and Martyrs (A.D. 33-300)

In the first three centuries A.D., Christianity spread out rapidly in all directions from Jerusalem. The first apostles and their followers transmitted what they had seen, experienced, and heard—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and His teachings. The hope this brought to those it touched, along with the way of life of the early Christians, in marked contrast to the life around them, was infectious. It spread first through family groups of Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire, then one by one and family by family through various groups of Gentiles. It came to the parts of the Roman Empire which were known as Gaul (now France and the Rhine and Moselle regions of Germany), Noricum (southern Bavaria and northern Austria), and Rhaetia (Switzerland and parts of Germany) in the same ways.

There are hints in many places that disciples of the apostles were sent into or through these territories, although we have no written records of this. In Switzerland St. Beatus is said to have been baptized in Rome by the Apostle Barnabas and then sent on mission to Switzerland by the Apostle Peter. There are similar traditions that disciples of the Apostle Peter might have come to Trier and Cologne in the Rhine region.

Many Christians came to the Roman frontier in the lands we are discussing as part of the Roman army, or were Roman civil servants; others were merchants from Greece and Syria. As there were many Germanic soldiers (and even commanders) in the Roman army, some of these may also have

adopted Christianity. The first recorded miracle in a German-speaking country resulted from the prayers of Christians in the Roman army. On June 11 in the year 172, in what is now northern Austria, the Roman army was trapped without water on a very hot day as they were fighting the barbarian Markamanni and Quadi. The army was about to succumb to the heat when, in response to the prayers of Christian soldiers, God sent a storm which refreshed the Romans and frightened the barbarians, who were then soundly defeated.



*St. Maurice, fresco from St. Innocent Orthodox Church, Redford, Michigan.*

Although the persecution of Christians was not as fierce in the West as in the East, there were periods of persecution. In 177 many were martyred in Lyons (France), and since there were almost certainly Christian communities in nearby cities along the Rhine, such as (German) Cologne and Mainz, it is quite possible that similar persecutions took place there as well. Persecution of Christians also occurred under Emperors Diocletian and Maximian at the beginning of the 4th century. Among those who gave their lives for their faith at that time were: St. Maurice and the Theban Legion, African Christians who were martyred in present-day Switzerland; members of

the same legion stationed at various other places, including Cologne, Bonn, and Xanten (Germany); the Martyr Afra of Augsburg; St. Ursula, virgin-martyr of Cologne with her companions; and the Soldier-Martyr Florian and his forty companions in Lorsch (Austria).

The importance of these early martyrs in the spread of Christianity was enormous. As soon as Emperor Constantine ended the persecution of Christians in 313, churches were built over the resting places of the martyrs, and they became important places of pilgrimage. People flocked there for con-

solation and healing, knowing they had their own spiritual heroes in these blessed ones who had been martyred in their own land.

## From Constantine to the Barbarian Invasions

At the beginning of the 4th century, the young Church was vibrant in terms of faith, but small in numbers. It was represented in every city in the Roman Empire, but met for the most part in house churches and was materially poor—its clergy often had to support themselves at secular jobs. This was to change under Constantine. After he defeated Maxentius in 312 under the sign of the Cross, which he had seen in a vision, he ceased the persecution of Christians and began to support them. During his lifetime he granted liberty, subsidies, and immunities to the Church, and in 325 called the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea to establish unity among the Christians.

For a number of years Constantine, like his father before him, was the head of the western half of the Roman Empire, and had the city of Trier (Germany) as his capital. To this fact we owe the extraordinary spiritual treasures which we find in this city today. His mother, St. Helena, having journeyed to Palestine and uncovered the True Cross, brought one of the nails of the Cross to Trier. It is believed that Bishop



*Saint Cassian the Roman.*

Antiochus, whom she had called from Antioch to serve in Trier, added to the treasure by bringing the relics of the Apostle Matthias. The head of St. Helena herself rests there, as well as the sandal of the Apostle Andrew, the relics of St. Anna, mother of the Most Holy Theotokos, and the relics of many local saints.

Although Constantine did not force anyone to become Christian, Christianity grew rapidly under him and his successors. People were drawn by the holy example of the Christians and their warm mutual support. Further

causes for conversion to Christianity were the influence of Christian spouses and the many miracles—especially of healing—which were performed through the prayers of the saints and petitions at the graves of the martyrs and ascetics. At the same time, however, some became Christians to curry the Emperor's favor, realizing that baptism could be a passport to office, power, and wealth. Yet this was an impetus for one of the purest and most truly Orthodox movements of the time—that of early monasticism.

### Monasticism in 4th- and 5th- Century Gaul

In Egypt the reaction to the legalization of Christianity and the numerous conversions was a move to the desert on the part of many men and women who wanted to preserve the otherworldly character of the Christian Faith. Before long, kindred spirits in the West read the Life of St. Anthony and those of other desert-dwellers, or the writings of those who, like St. Cassian, brought back their personal experience of the eastern ascetic life. The West also had its own great ascetics—St. Martin of Tours (397) and those from the island monastery of Lerins (beginning of the 5th century); Sts. Romanus (460) and Lupicinus (480), who began as hermits in the Jura Mountains of present-day France, founding monasteries there and in what is now Switzerland. Those parts of the future Germanic countries which were under the Roman Empire were also affected by this movement, and ardent Christians knew where they could go to dedicate themselves fully to Christ.

### The Migrations of the Germanic Tribes and the End of Roman Rule

This positive growth of Orthodox Christianity, at least as it affected the German lands, experienced a severe setback at the beginning of the 5th century, when several Germanic tribes—because of their growth, expansion, and the eastern advance of the fierce Huns—invaded Roman territory. At this time, Roman troops were withdrawn from the German frontier to protect Rome; then Rome itself fell in 476 A.D. and the Western Roman Empire collapsed. Germanic tribes crossed the Rhine and Danube Rivers, and for the Roman Christians, life was disrupted and often perilous. Churches were frequently destroyed and allowed to go to ruin, and budding missionary activity essentially ceased. Some of the Christians withdrew to Roman fortresses and even built churches within the walls; others were killed. Those in Austria held their own as long as they could, then fled to Italy.

One extraordinary saint who emerged in the midst of these turbulent times to guide the remaining Roman Christians in the region of northern Austria and Bavaria was St. Severinus, who first appeared as a humble hermit and pilgrim, praying in the local church of a small town and living in the home of an old man. On one occasion he exhorted everyone to fast, pray, and give alms if they wanted to avoid invasion. When they did not heed him, he “shook the dust off of his feet” and moved on to the next town. Later the old man he had lived with arrived at the town gates in great awe and fear—Severinus’ prediction had been fulfilled; his landlord was the lone survivor of the first town. The inhabitants of the second town followed Severinus’ advice and were spared similar destruction.

This was the beginning of an extraordinary mission, in which the entire region came to look to Severinus’ clairvoyant guidance for safety and salvation. He founded monasteries, advised kings, freed captives, and fed and clothed the people. He knew when fighting would be successful, or when it was time to flee. He taught the people



*An early depiction of St. Goar. St. Goar, Germany.*

over and over again to rely on God and not on their own powers, to be humble and generous with what little they had. In the end, all who remained were gathered in one area and escaped safely to Italy.

There were also martyrs of Christ slain by the invading barbarians, and we know a few of these by name, such as Sts. Crescens, Theonest, Aureus, and Maximus, all of Mainz.

In the larger cities the bishop and some Christians remained. They were often carriers of Roman culture to the barbarians, and were respected as such, but in the absence of Roman military and civil officials, the bishops took on more and more secular duties, and as a result the level of spirituality dropped.



## The Conversion of the Franks

The Germanic tribe known as the Franks first lived near, then inside, the Roman borders, and many Frankish men served in the Roman military and government, even in the highest positions. After the collapse of the Western Empire in the 5th century, they soon became the dominant power and conquered the rest of Gaul. Then began what might be called “conversion in reverse”: instead of the conquerors imposing their religion on the Celto-Roman population, the Franks lived alongside them and absorbed and imitated their culture and religion. In the beginning this meant adding the Roman gods to their own, later some became Christian under Constantine, and in 498/99, a large number of King Clovis’ followers voluntarily followed him into the waters of baptism, as many others would later.

Clovis’ conversion was also significant for those Germanic tribes which settled in the areas Rome had never conquered. His continuing conquest of much of present-day Germany and parts of Austria opened the door for missions in these territories, now under the protection of a Christian ruler.

## Missionaries From Gaul

The first to come to this new missionary territory were monks and priests from the kingdom of the West Franks, which had been less affected by the invasions. From the end of the 6th to the first half of the 8th centuries, they re-established Christianity along the Rhine and for the first time brought it to new territories. These missionaries included the Holy Bishop Evergislus of Cologne and St. Goar, also on the Rhine, as well as Sts. Emmeram, Erhard, and Corbinian in Bavaria.

## The Irish Missionaries

At about the same time missionaries began coming from Ireland. Ireland, which had never been conquered by the Romans or taken by Germanic invaders, received Christianity in the 5th century through St. Patrick and other missionaries, and the worship of Christ flourished there. Brave, learned, and extremely disciplined in their asceticism, Irish monks came to the continent singly or in small groups beginning in the 6th century. Some settled in the woods, in caves, or on islands, becoming local hermits or holy men; in many cases not much more than their names is now known. Others, such as St. Columbanus, founded monastic establishments of great significance. He and

twelve companions began three monasteries in France, from which monks dispersed to found others in both France and Switzerland. St. Columbanus' disciple, St. Gall, a man of great learning and humility, settled near Lake Constance and became the Enlightener of Switzerland, first bringing Christianity to the people of the mountains and valleys of the region. The famous Abbey of St. Gall was later built on the spot of his labors by another saint, this time a native of the area, St. Otmar.

St. Gall's fellow countryman, St. Fridolin, worked in a similar way in the upper Rhine region, converting the Allemanni in what is now the southwest corner of Germany. The faith and scholarship, as well as the farming and artistic skills which the Irish brought to the continent, often contrasted strongly with the level of Christianity and culture that had remained there. Schools had all but disappeared, and the Roman cities and roads had been destroyed or had fallen into disrepair. Large territories which had never been under Rome—as well as most of the new peoples who had recently settled in Gaul, Noricum, and Rhaetia—were, of course, completely unfamiliar with Christianity.

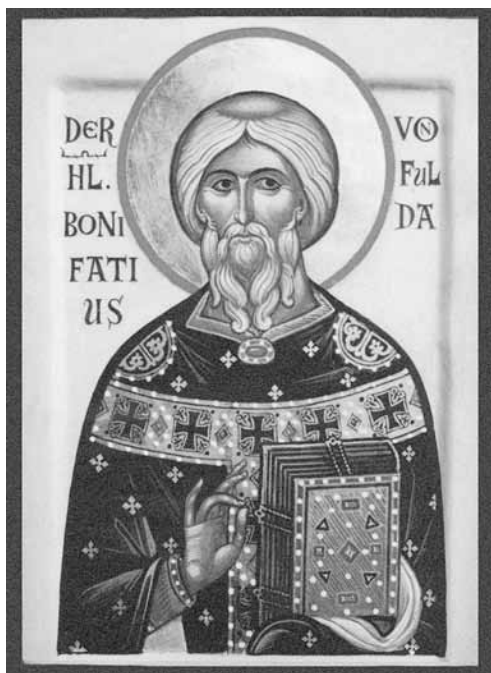
For 500 years the Irish kept coming, and often formed the backbone of Christian orthodoxy, sanctity, and revival, as well as preserving cultural treasures with their skills in art and writing. Several well-known saints in the German lands who are believed to be Irish include: Sts. Virgil and Rupert of Salzburg; St. Kilian of Würzburg, the Apostle of Franconia; St. Arbogast of Strasbourg; St. Albuin (Wittan), the Apostle of Thuringia; and St. Aldo, founder of Altomünster in Bavaria.

However, it was the Anglo-Saxons returning to the continent to convert their own Germanic brothers (the “Old Saxons” as they called them) as well as the Frisians and others, who were to complete the conversion of Germany.

### The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries and Their Disciples

The Germanic Angles and Saxons had conquered England and, through missionary efforts from Rome and Ireland, were converted to Christianity in the 7th century. Inflamed with Christian zeal, a number of them chose to return to the continent and to bring the word of God to their pagan brothers. For the area that was to become Germany, the most important of these Anglo-Saxon missionaries was the great St. Boniface, known as the Enlightener of Germany. This powerful and complex man set about correcting the errors, corruption and heresies of the remnant Christian communities. He also entered unchurched areas where the Germans still practiced human sacrifice,

divination, and demon-worship, and he established order in a Church that had been ravaged by war and missionized haphazardly by wandering monks. He had a wonderful ability to attract strong helpers to himself and three fellow-countrymen came to join him in Germany: the future Sts. Willibald,



*St. Boniface, Enlightener of Germany. Icon from St. Spyridon Skete, Geilnau, Germany.*

Wunibald, and Lull. Through his correspondence with English abbesses, he was also able to inspire a number of holy women, including Sts. Leoba and Walburga, to start convents and missionary activity in the German lands.

By the end of his life St. Boniface had established bishoprics in Mainz, Regensburg, Eichstätt, and Salzburg; he had reformed a clergy that had often been decadent and Christian in name only; and he had baptized and begun to educate large numbers of people. After appointing St. Lull as his successor, he left the main centers of his activity (the German lands of Thuringia, Hesse, and Bavaria), taking his burial shroud with him to Frisia (now the Netherlands) where, already an old man, he and forty-two others were martyred by pagans after successful missionary labors in the region. St. Boniface is buried at his monastery in Fulda, Germany.

## The Conversion of Northern Germany

The Frisians and the West Saxons were the main tribes in the north of present-day Germany.

They clung to their pagan gods, all the more since they equated Christianity with defeat by a foreign power. It is true that Charlemagne, at the end of the 8th century, had strong political motives for converting the Saxons, who, from their position on the coastlands of the North Sea, were harassing his

kingdom. But, unlike his famous predecessors the Emperor Constantine and King Clovis, he used brutal force to bring this about, which resulted in rebellion. Fortunately, true saints were also working in the area to convert the hearts and minds of the people to Christ through love and meekness.

Three of the earliest-known missionaries were St. Swidbert and the two St. Ewalds. St. Swidbert missionized the Brucktuari, a Saxon tribe later scattered by invasions. Sts. Ewald the Black and Ewald the White were Anglo-Saxon missionaries who attempted to convert the Saxons. While they waited to meet with the local leader they were murdered by his men, who did not want to give up their pagan gods.

St. Luidger, both because of his personal qualities and the later timing of his work, was by far the most successful missionary to both the Frisians and the Saxons. Through God's Providence, his grandfather had left the kingdom of the Frisians while they were still barbarians; his kindly and impartial character was incompatible with their cruel ways. He and his whole family then became Christians in the land of the Franks.

When West Frisia (the Netherlands) was conquered by the (Christian) Franks, St. Luidger's

family moved back to the region near Utrecht. Their home was open to the great Christian missionaries of the day, and as a young boy Luidger met St. Boniface there, shortly before the latter's martyrdom. From his family history and from these encounters with missionaries, Luidger was inspired to bring Christianity to the barbarians. His fluency in the Frisian language and familiarity with Frisian beliefs and customs, as well as an outstanding monastic education in Utrecht and York (England), added to his qualifications.



*Grave of St. Luidger. Essen-Werden, Germany.*

When the East Frisians in northern Germany were subdued by the Franks, Luidger received as his missionary territory five Frisian districts that previously had been violently opposed to Christianity. Now, they agreed to become Christian if they were sent a teacher who could speak their language. Despite having to leave twice because of uprisings, Luidger travelled extensively, finally converting the region through his teaching and by building small wooden churches and monasteries.

He later turned down the bishopric of the distinguished city of Trier in order to expand his missionary activities to the neighboring Saxons, who had just been conquered by the Franks under Charlemagne. Here he accepted the episcopal office and became the first bishop of Munster. Lastly he built a large monastery on the Benedictine model in Werden on the Ruhr (near present-day Essen), which drew its monks from Frisia, Saxony, and Franconia; this is also where he chose to be buried and where his relics are still honored.

A little further north, another missionary, the Anglo-Saxon St. Willehad who became the first bishop of Bremen, brought Christ's gospel to the territory of Bremen and Oldenburg.

## Prussia

The last important part of present-day Germany to be missionized was Prussia, in the East. This, however, was never an Orthodox area, for until quite late the people maintained their pagan beliefs and violently opposed Christianity, killing the first two known missionaries who came to their territory - St. Adalbert of Prague, (997) and St. Bruno of Querfort, (1009). The Prussians did not become Christian until they were forcibly converted by Roman Catholic missionaries in 1249.

## Post-Schism German Orthodoxy

Orthodox Christianity was brought to present-day Germany, Austria and Switzerland by immigrants who, with a few exceptions,<sup>1</sup> came over the past century as refugees or guest workers from Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and other Orthodox countries. There are now a number of different Orthodox churches in all the German-speaking countries, as well as a Serbian

<sup>1</sup> For instance, services have been held in Stuttgart, Germany since 1816 due to the presence of Russian royalty; a permanent church was consecrated in 1895. In Geneva, Switzerland there has been a Russian Orthodox church since 1866, and in Vienna, Austria since 1899.

monastery which has most of its services in German (St. Spiridon Skete in Geilnau, Germany). Today, German seekers are beginning to discover the Orthodox Church.

We also know of several Germans who left their own country and became Orthodox saints in Russia. The most notable of these are the Fools-for-Christ's-Sake St. Procopius of Ustiug, St. Isidore and St. John the Merciful, both of Rostov, the Royal Martyr Tsaritsa Alexandra, and the Royal Martyr Grand Duchess Elizabeth. These, along with the young martyr Alexander Schmorell, a member of the "Weisse Rose" resistance group during Hitler's regime, are greatly revered by German Orthodox Christians today. ✦

*This article is an edited version of an earlier article published in the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood Calendar: The Coming of Orthodoxy in the German-Speaking Lands.*

*Opposite: St. Fridolin of Saeckingen. Statue in Stein, Switzerland.*

