

WALES AND MONASTICISM

A BRIEF REVIEW

WALES, as a separate people of definite historical characteristics, owes its origin under God to the accidental results of an invasion of Britain by pagan peoples from overseas. From statements by Tertullian and Origen, not to mention many other later Christian continental writers, it is safe to say that Christianity had reached Britain before the close of the second century. Its introduction is not to be ascribed to any of the pious personages who figure in the earlier or later fanciful medieval tales of Glastonbury, such as Lucius, but has to be credited in sober fact to innumerable and unknown Christians, travellers and immigrants from the Continent for the most part. These travellers and those religiously influenced by them, gradually, it is clear, formed themselves into Christian communities, each with its own bishop and presbyters and deacons. These communities of simple folk sowed the seeds of the Christian religion in many parts of Britain while Rome was still a power in the land.

The members, and still more the founders, of these British Churches were not monks, for the very simple but cogent reason that the day of continental, much less British, monasticism had not yet arrived. Monasticism was a forward movement within an existing church. It originated in Egypt in the third century; it spread westwards through Italy and Spain into Gaul (modern France), and thence through the disciples of St Martin of Tours and the influence of Lérins and Marseilles, it came to Britain about A.D. 420 or soon afterwards. (Cf. *Introduction to The History of Wales*, A. H. Williams, Vol. I.)

It must be stressed that the early British Church of the Roman and sub-Roman period was not monastic but episcopal, and, as evidenced by its representation at various continental Ecclesiastical Councils, such as Arles 314 and Ariminum 359, was by no means an independent Church, as some modern Welsh Churchmen fondly maintain, but was in very truth fully part and parcel of the Universal Church, having very close relations with the portion of that Church which flourished in the territory called by us France.

This must be emphasised in order to show how extraordinarily difficult becomes the work of re-Catholicising Wales, because of the false history and distorted views of Catholicism (distortions due to malice or ignorance) which are pumped into the people's minds continually by learned book and popular pamphlet alike.

As a sample of this sort of thing one may take the following from a column in a Cardiff newspaper of a few weeks ago: 'Bangor-on-

Dee (or Bangor Iscoed) is the site of the earliest monastic foundation in Great Britain. Founded about 180 A.D., this famous establishment is said', etc. The assertion is that monasticism was already established in Britain by 180 A.D., an assertion which is palpably false. And the implication further is that the Welsh Church, which by 596 was well established as a monastic church and saw this monastery destroyed and its monks slaughtered in 613 by the barbarous pagan Aethelfrith, was from its origin a monastic church and, of course, independent of Rome. As long as the Welsh people are fed on material of this kind it is vain to hope for the rapid progress of Catholicism amongst them.

From the very sparse historical information afforded us by the monk Gildas in his *De Excidio Britanniae*, we see the Episcopal Church of early Britain in sad disrepair by the year 500. But it was still episcopal, though monasticism was filtering in. Between the years 440 and 560 that church, weakened by internal want of fervour, according to Gildas, and still more, because of the hammer-blows of pagan Saxondom, gradually collapsed, in fact vanished east of the line Dee—Wye—Severn.

In the latter half of the 5th century, monasticism under the direction of that somewhat shadowy figure, Bishop Dyfrig, had dug itself in in south-east and southern Wales, and from its houses at Henllan in Herefordshire and St Illtud's (Llantwit Major) in Glamorgan, came forth Samson, Gildas and possibly Dewi and a host of other 'men of God' in the south, who gradually completed the conversion of the natives and built up the new Welsh Church from the ruins of the Roman British Church, at least in Wales. Because of the absence of towns the new organisation was largely affected by tribal influences, and episcopal powers became vested in the monastic abbots.

The fugitives from the massacre of Bangor Iscoed fled to the region of Bangor, N. Wales, resulting in a monastery and monastic Bishop there also. A colony of holy men under Cadvan arrived soon after in Bardsey Island from Brittany.

And so the early Welsh Church, monastic in its organisation, came into being. For many of its observances it relied on Roman British Church traditions; for instance it maintained the Roman Easter date adopted by the latter in 450 in agreement with Pope Leo of Rome. But gradually this early Welsh Church became more and more isolated because of the solid Saxon bloc which had got between it and the Latin Gallic lands. It grew insular in its ways and practices: hence the misunderstanding between its leaders and the somewhat tactless Roman missionary, St Augustine, and his companions.

We need not pursue this unhappy tale further. This early Welsh

Church prospered for a while, then began to decline. Union with Rome was fully renewed in the middle of the eighth century, and for a while prosperity returned, especially in the days of Howel Dda the lawgiver. But the marauding pagan sea-rovers from Scandinavia soon appeared on the Welsh coasts, and the monasteries went up in flames.

The arrival of the Norman free-booters, known to the Welsh as French because of their language, brought a further peril. With the Normans came the Black Benedictine monks who made foundations all over South Wales in the shelter of the Norman castles. The ecclesiastical resources of South Wales passed through these monks' hands into those of foreign houses, even to France. St Peter's of Gloucester particularly profited from the Cardiff district.

But in the eleventh century came other monks from abroad—the Cistercians. The Welsh nobility, north and south, took very kindly to these, and built monasteries for them, nine in all, from Tintern in 1131 to Valle Crucis in 1200. In the meantime the two Savigny monasteries of Neath and Basingwerk adopted the Cistercian rule. Thus in seventy years Welsh Wales was covered with a network of monasticism which renewed and brought up to date the religious life of the people.

The Welsh took these monks to their hearts. Why, it is difficult precisely to say. Was it that they saw in them the authentic successors of their own earlier monks of austere and prayerful lives? Was it because these monks minded their own business of prayer and work and penance, and kept aloof from the world and its ways? These and such reasons had certainly much to do with the love of the Welsh for the Cistercians; but the lavish hospitality of the monks to all and sundry, and particularly to the bards of the 14th and 15th centuries won poems of thanks and numerous eulogies from these poets who formed and fashioned the Welsh public opinion of their day. Only one bard changed his friendship for them; but he, like many another good Welshman, was deceived by his loyalty to the new Pope Henry VIII, who, despite the fact of his descent from a Welsh family, had no particular regard for Wales—rather the reverse, for he deprived her of the last shreds of her independence.

By 1236 the Franciscan friars had appeared in Wales, for in that year Llywelyn Fawr, king of North Wales, buried his dead wife, Joan, daughter of King John of England, 'in a new cemetery on the seashore of Anglesey consecrated by Hywel, bishop of Llanelwy'. Here at Llanfaes he erected a convent and church for the barefoot sons of St Francis to pray for her soul. Soon afterwards arrived the Black Friars of St Dominic and the White Carmelite Friars. Even two establishments of military orders were made, one at Ysbyty Ifan in

the north, the other at Slebech in the south. The Augustinian Canons and the Premonstratensians also settled in Wales in this same later period.

Except for Llanfaes, the friars seem to have settled in the towns: the Franciscans were at Cardiff, Carmarthen and Llanfaes; the Carmelites at Denbigh; the Austin Friars at Newport, and the Black Friars at Bangor, Rhuddlan, Brecon, Haverford West and Cardiff. Possibly it was because of their choice of towns for their convents, and also because of their unobtrusive and quiet spiritual work, the friars did not come into the limelight of public life in Wales. There are few references to them even in the poetry of the Cywydd Bards—those of the third period of Welsh literature. In one of his poems Dafydd ap Gwilym argues, as a man of his sort would be inclined to, against the strict censure of a Franciscan confessor on the poet's somewhat loose views of chastity. In another pretty poem on his fancied burial in a woodland glade because of his death from unrequited love, Dafydd makes Nature perform his religious obsequies, and alluding to the old belief that birds once spoke Latin, he describes the chaunters of the Requiem so:

Those friars skilled in poesy,
The Brown Friars, masters of the Latin tongue.

The friars had however a very bitter critic in the person of another Cywydd bard, one of the Secular Clergy, named Dr John Kent of Gwent. It was long thought that Kent was one of the Lollard heretics; but this view was clearly wrong, as any Catholic, reading his poems, soon discovers. Kent was professedly a strong ascetic, and his thoughts were much tinged by serious considerations of the Four Great Truths of Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven. He had a salutary belief in, and fear of, Purgatory. But he was obviously of a morose and acrid disposition and he made no secret of his strong dislike of monks with their 'plentiful money, their fine walls and big houses'. For the Friars also Kent had little esteem:

The preaching friars of yore
Possessed no golden store.
Today, proud, greedy, great,
They ride all three in state.
'Their ways are harsh, man sayeth,
Those strong quenchers of Faith.

We know Kent's type: it flourishes in all lands and climes and times. And, though the second half of the 15th century was by no means the Golden Age of Christianity, and vice was rampant in high circles of Church and state, and real religion was oftentimes the exception rather than the rule, the friars as a whole, and especially in these western lands, were by no means the least religious section

of the clergy. This was proved when the would-be Tudor pope, inflamed with lust and greed of gold, proceeded to dissolve the monasteries, for even to the last, in spite of the calumnies heaped upon their heads, the friars continued to be 'particularly popular, as men of prayer, preachers and friends of the poor' (*Machlud y Mynachlogydd*, Bebb). They also did great service to Wales. Two Black Friars became bishops of St Asaph, and a Franciscan sat in the historic chair of St Davids. Some, like Thomas the Welshman and Johannes Wallensis, were famous in the Schools of Paris and Rome. One of them, Friar Madoc ab Gwallter, became one of the great Bards of the Princes' period; and the greatest of the Bards of the third period, Tudur Aled, after a life of song in praise of the Welsh nobility of north and south, ended his days as a humble Franciscan. Like the monks, the Friars became thorough Welshmen, and supported the national struggles of 'Our last ruler', Llywelyn, Madoc ap Llywelyn, Owain Lawgoch, and especially, Owain Glyn Dwr, paying a heavy penalty in consequence. Thus Llanfaes was razed to the ground by the English King Edward, because of the favour shown to it by Llywelyn Fawr and his successors. But neither their piety nor their love of the Welsh people could save the Friars any more than the monks, when Henry VIII embarked on his desperate and irreligious projects. They all had to go.

The powerful Vicar General of Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, entrusted the fate of the monks to three creatures of his own type, the three Doctors, John Vaughan, Adam Becansaw, and Ellis Price of Plas Iolyn, a man whose unsavoury reputation was crystallised in the contemptuous epithet of 'Y Doctor Coch' (The Red Doctor) flung at him by succeeding generations of honest Welshmen. By 1539 this dirty work was done, the monasteries were empty of monks and fast being sold to favourites of the royal tyrant.

The Friars fared no better, in fact even worse. They were flung adrift without a quasi-pension to their Priors. The closing of the Friaries was entrusted to another pious rascal, the quondam friar, Illingworth, who had become Bishop of Dover. He began his operations at Rhuddlan on May 17th, 1538. By mid-September he had reached Cardiff after great success. There remained now only three friaries to be closed, the Dominican and Brown Friars' Convents here, and the Austin Canons at Newport. Three or four days sufficed him to close these houses, sell up the very few bits of poor furniture, house and church, and then to ride away to his Bishop's palace in Dover. *Sic transit gloria mundi!*

The poor Catholic folk of Wales resisted the 'New Faith' as well as they could. Forced to go to the churches for the new religious services which were oftentimes given by all sorts of uneducated new

ministers of religion, the Welsh women used their rosary-beads to make such a din as prevented the ministers from carrying on the service at all. For it is abundantly clear from the bardic poems of the third period that the Dominicans had done one work at least most successfully: they had imbued the Welsh people with a very warm love of that great prayer, 'the layman's psalter', the Rosary. But the passage of time and the want of a steady succession of Welsh-speaking priests completed in due course the work of Henry and his daughter Elizabeth. And later on, ranting preachers kindled in the average Welshman's heart an unreasoning hatred of the Catholic religion of his forefathers.

But time and God's holy will work strangely too. The Friars have returned to Wales. In the first half of the last century the Capuchin Sons of St Francis were working in S. Wales, whence after founding several missions in Monmouthshire they transferred to N. Wales, where their good work is visible on all sides. About ten years ago the Carmelites returned and settled in Aberystwyth, whence they are pushing out north and south and founding missions. This year the brown-robed friars Minor, sons also of St Francis, have taken up duty in Cardiff, primarily to care for the Maltese immigrants and for such of the Italian colony in the Archdiocese as may need their service. And, at long last, after 410 years of absence the white-robed Sons of St Dominic are seen once more in Wales on their Master's service. Thanks to the generosity of the Hon. Mrs Roch of Llanarth, hard by Raglan Castle, the family seat of the Herberts until Cromwell's troopers burned it and sent up in flames a huge store of Welsh poetic literature, Llanarth Court, which kept the Blessed Sacrament lamp alight during the darkness of the penal night, has passed into the hands of the Black Friars with its attendant mission. It remains now for the Cistercians to return and with the Black Benedictines, already a century at work in Wales, to hasten the return of the Welsh people to the faith of their fathers.

As Archbishop of Cardiff and Metropolitan of the ecclesiastical province of Wales, I thank God that I have seen the return of the four orders of Friars, and I bid them fully welcome to God's work in this corner of the Lord's Vineyard.

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