

A Land of Saints Again

“When the Church in the British Isles begins to venerate her own Saints then the Church will grow.” St. Arsenios of Paros (+1877)

Can Britain ever be a land of saints again? She was once. Thousands of the friends of God once sanctified these isles. In the second millennium, barely a handful made it into Rome’s calendar. In fact, before the Reformation when Christians started killing Christians the number of British saints in a 500 year period was precisely 13. All of those lived in the first 250 years. After 1253, there are precisely none. Here is the roll call of post Conquest British Saints in Rome’s post Schism Calendar.

Margaret of Scotland	1093
Wulfstan	1095
Anselm	1109
Stephen Harding	1134
William of York	1154
Robert of Newminster	1159
Aelred	1167
Thomas Becket	1170
Edmund of Abingdon	1170
Godric	1170
Gilbert Sempringham	1189
Hugh of Lincoln	1250
Richard of Chichester	1253

Surely there is a lesson to be learned here, one that was not lost on John Wycliff.

“The pride of the Pope is the reason why the Greeks are divided from the so called faithful. It is we westerners, too fanatical by far, who have been divided from the faithful Greeks and the Faith of the Lord Jesus Christ. “John Wycliff, On Christ and His Adversary, 8 (1383)

The explanation for this apparent “drying up” of saints is not really about the absence of sanctity on British soil in the second millennium. It’s more to do with the way in which the Church nurtured and handled sanctity. The way in which this happened lied beyond the scope of this article. All we should say here is that Christianity in some sense went underground ... breaking out occasionally in spiritual renewals and reform movements.

The tragedy is that such renewals and movements ultimately proved incapable of regenerating British Christianity on Orthodox lines. The reason for that lay in the compromised spiritual foundations of even these renewals and movements. It has been rightly observed by Orthodox commentators that the Reformation didn't go far enough in the right direction ... in fact, it went half way in the wrong direction.

Wycliff's perception that the whole of Christianity in the west had departed from its spiritual roots and branches in the east was fundamentally correct but even he (like many others) failed to achieve the reforms he set out to achieve. All made the mistake of trying to apply broken tools to broken machinery. In a deep sense this "broken mending" continues to be pursued in the west; but nothing will come of it. Christianity in the west needs to return lock, stock and barrel to Orthodoxy, bringing with it the dormant fecund seed which is its Orthodox life in the first millennium for planting in the third.

Now, let us be practical and forward looking. How do we nurture holiness in Orthodox England once more?

First we need to understand how the Holy Spirit forms deep and abiding trust in God and humility in Christ-like souls. Christianity is life changing on account of its prophetic character; that is it speaks from the heart of God to man and sifts what is good and what is evil. Orthodoxy can never be simply an endorsement of a society's highest and most noble aspirations. Christianity then simply becomes a more or less useless adornment for a great human project ... a project we might as well call Babel for all the wisdom and understanding it creates. This prophetic heart in Orthodoxy has to be lived out in radical obedience to the gospel. Without exception, sanctity in the Church has been pioneered either by martyrdom or monasticism. This is NOT to say that only martyrs or monks can be true saints; far from it. But it is this costly witness to the absolute priority of God in human life that, by example, unlocks the potential of holiness in the Christian life more generally in different callings.

Since martyrdom lies outside our more direct control, how do we foster monasticism? Well first by having a strong parish life. All monks start out as ordinary young parishioners. It is here and at the home that the faith is learned and applied; that God is glorified and his friends venerated. For this to happen we need a major investment in mission and church building. It is coming, it is happening but in a way too uncoordinated, haphazard, too reactive rather than proactive. This is something that the people need to impress on the wider church. We must become even impatient for such change.

Next we need monastic pioneers ... but a few men and women who are prepared to strike new ground. Many more will follow. It might be objected that England is no place now for monks. Monasticism is an anachronism to the modern mind. There are precious few deserts in our overcrowded island. But, this misses the point entirely. Monasticism is not supposed to “fit in.” It derives its identity in part by the contrast of being, precisely, countercultural. It needs not a classic environment of sandy waste or rocky crag. It only needs obscurity, simplicity and withdrawal. This can be pursued as effectively in a council estate as anywhere more conventionally monastic.

All of this, however, constitutes what we can do right now by the grace of God. There is a crucial element missing ... born witness to by St. Arsenios of Paros. We must draw closer to the Orthodox saints of these islands. This is absolutely vital. Without it our Orthodox life will be impoverished, disincarnate. The Christian life is always a personal life; a human shape clothed in the divine. The British saints achieved this sanctity par excellence. Their fellowship and prayers is our route to the restoration of their way of life and faith in this millennium. So, let us take care to avail ourselves of every opportunity both to pray for new monastic pioneers and to honour the saints in worship and by pilgrimage. Perhaps, after a generation of such piety we shall see our first new Orthodox saint of Britain glorified. That wonderful event will, I believe, prove to be a turning point; a new future for a restored Orthodoxy in these islands. Then we will hear afresh the significance and promise of the words of Pope St. Gregory the Great who in a happier and earlier Orthodox time wrote these words to his missionary, St. Augustine of Canterbury. May they constitute a renewed prophecy for today.

'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of goodwill'; because a grain of wheat, falling into the earth, has died, that it might not reign in heaven alone; even He by Whose death we live, by Whose weakness we are made strong, by Whose suffering we are rescued from suffering, through Whose love we seek in Britain for brethren whom we know not, by Whose gift we find those whom without knowing we sought but who can describe what great joy sprung up here in the hearts of the faithful, for that the nation of the Angles through the cooperation of the grace of Almighty God and the labour of thy Fraternity has cast away the darkness of error, and been suffused with the light of the holy Faith; that with most sound mind it now tramples on the idols, which it formerly crouched before in insane fear; that it falls down with pure heart before Almighty God; that it is restrained by the rules of holy preaching from the lapses of wrong doing; that it bows down in heart to Divine precepts, that in understanding it may be exalted that it humbles itself even to the earth in prayer, lest in mind and soul it should lie upon the earth.'

**St. Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, to St. Augustine, first archbishop of Canterbury (597),
Epistle XXVIII**