INTRODUCTORY

ON THE ENTRANCE OF CHRISTIANITY INTO BRITAIN, AND THE RISE AND PROGRESS OF MONASTICISM IN THIS COUNTRY

As the historical pedigree of Dover Priory goes back two steps, over a period of more than 400 years, to the Church of St Mary the Virgin in the Castle, which was itself built on the foundations of one of the earliest Christian buildings in Britain, dating (it may be) even from the times of Diocletian, it will be necessary to say a few words on the introduction of Christianity into Britain, and the subsequent rise and progress of monasticism in this country, antecedent to the establishment of the Dover Priory of St Martin's of the New Work, which is the subject of this book.

Nothing definite is known as to how Christianity reached our shores. But it is as certain as anything can be in this world, that neither Joseph of Arimathea nor any of the Apostles or disciples of our Lord, nor St Paul, ever set foot in these islands. The tale of a certain Lucius, a King of Kent or it may be South Wales, being converted about A.D. 175 by direct request from Rome, owes such vogue as it has had to the fact that it was sponsored by Bede, but it is wildly improbable.[1] What we can say for certain is that Christianity was known in Britain by the end of the second century, for Tertullian affirmed, when he wrote, that parts of the island not reached by the Romans were subject to Christ, a statement somewhat rhetorical, perhaps, but still precise.

Yet indeed Christianity must have penetrated to our shores long before this time. Unfortunately we cannot put faith in the confident assertion of the Welsh Triads, that Bran the blessed, father of Caradoc or Caractacus, accompanied his son as a captive to Rome, and being released after seven years, during which he was converted, brought back the new religion to his native country. The silence of Tacitus, who has not a little to tell us about the British

[1] Harnack thinks that the legend is due to a confusion with Lucius Abgar of Edessa, the first king to become a Christian.

prince at Rome, is decisive against this fable. However, a Welsh monk of the sixth century, the obscure and rhapsodical Gildas, after alluding to the conquest of the island in the middle of the first century under Claudius and Nero, and the rebellion of that "deceitful lioness" (Boudicca) and its suppression, goes on, "*meanwhile* these islands, stiff with frost and cold, and in a distant quarter of the world, remote from the visible sun, received the first beams of Light, that is the holy teaching of Christ". He adds that this true Light shone for us in the latter part of the reign of Tiberius, whom he, of course quite wrongly, supposed to have been favourable to the Christians. He evidently means to say, though in a vague and incoherent manner, that Christianity made its appearance here before A.D. 61, the date of Boudicca.

There is nothing impossible in this. Christians were always to be found in the army, and soldiers passed backwards and forwards between Gaul and Britain. There were many traders also, who habitually followed the march of the legions. It may be considered certain that Christianity entered Britain from the side of Gaul, where, however, it was a plant of somewhat late growth. In any case it is certain that we hear nothing more of a definite character about Christianity in Britain till Diocletian's reign in the fourth century, during which, in the persecution called after that emperor's name, the first British martyr suffered. There is no sufficient reason to question the truth of the tradition that a certain Albanus was put to death for the Faith at this time. The great Abbey of St Alban's stands as his monument. Others no doubt perished during the persecution, and Gildas mentions the names of Julius and Aaron.

The earliest church building in the country of which we have any knowledge is the little basilica found in 1892 at Silchester.[1] It is 42 feet long, and consists of a vestibule carried along the whole east end, a nave with two side aisles, an apse at the west end, and two transepts, the southern one with an apsidal end. The vestibule and nave are paved with coarse red mosaic tiles, which point to a date soon after 313. In 314 three bishops, of London, York, and (probably) Lincoln, respectively, represented the British Church

[1] See *Archaeologia*, LXXVII, 209 (1927).

in the Synod of Arles, and we hear of British bishops also at the Councils of Sardica in 347 and Rimini in 359. While the Romans held the country, the British Church flourished, and in the latter part of this century gave birth to what was, perhaps unfortunately, branded as a heresy, namely Pelagianism, from the Latinized name of its founder, Morgan. But the withdrawal of the Romans left the Romanized British Church a prey to the inroads of the pagan Picts and Scots, whose work of extermination was so efficiently completed by the Jutes, Angles and Saxons, that the scanty remnants of the British Christians, with the exception perhaps of an isolated oasis like Glastonbury, were driven into the distant fastnesses of Wales and Cornwall. But Theonus, Bishop of London, and Thadioc, of York, did not finally give up the struggle and quit their dioceses till nearly the time of Augustine's arrival, leaving Angleland wholly heathen.

It is a Frenchman and a Roman Catholic, the Comte de Montalembert, who has said that the English nation remained even in error the most religious of all European nations, and that monasticism flourished here more than in any other country of Europe. As the object of this work is to give the history of one of the later monastic establishments which exemplify this statement, a few words must be said on the origin and spread of the conventual idea in Christian lands.

When the religion of Christ was in its infancy, and every believer was liable, as such, to torture and death, all who embraced the Faith were Christians from true and honest conviction. But a great change took place when Constantine legalized Christianity in the fourth century. Many converts came over from policy and interested motives, and lowered the standard of the whole body. The society of brethren and friends, founded by Christ, tended to rely more upon organization and centralization, and so become an institution comparable to the secular and imperial establishments around them. As the distinction, which scarcely existed at first, between laity and clergy widened, the spiritual ideals of the former began to lose their vitality, until it finally came about that in the world at large it seemed as if it were impossible to live a serious or religious life worthy of a Christian. The main activity of secular

life was war, in which, as then carried on, and in the social system which prevailed, the precepts of Christ had very little, if any, recognition. What religion there was among the masses was based upon the fear of punishment in the next world, and was seldom allowed to intrude into the affairs of this present life, till the near approach of death made it a matter of immediate concern.

Consequently all those who had longings to lead a spiritual life were brought to believe that they must sever themselves from the world around them, and live where they could give themselves up without distraction to the contemplation of divine things, and by abstinence from all pleasures and a repudiation of all human ties, not to say all humanities, enable themselves to render to God a whole-time service of prayer and praise. Even if we grant that by this alone could a man save his own soul, yet none the less was it a confession of the failure of Christianity as a religion for all men in a work-a-day world. Monks and nuns in their harbours of refuge were like soldiers of a beaten army, shut up in fortresses or entrenched camps to avoid subjugation by a too powerful enemy, while the rest of their country was left to fall a prey to their great Adversary. It may have been a counsel of necessity, but none the less was it a counsel of despair. Moreover, the celibate ideal carried to its logical conclusion meant the extinction of the society that adopted it unreservedly and wholesale. The monk has been called, falsely enough, the only true Christian, but there were as noble Christians outside the cloister as were ever found within it.

Though a Benedict, a Columban, or a Bernard, could by his personality and holiness and enthusiasm make such an unnatural institution as monachism flourish exceedingly, and live up to its high ideal—for a time, yet nothing could permanently arrest the seeds of decay inherent in such a contradiction of human nature, and of the ordered evolution of human society.

But the early forms of eremitical or coenobite life were of a character quite different from the later and better known development of it, of which we have been speaking. This kind of life was not peculiar to Christianity. There were communities of a similar character in India in very early times; and in Palestine, as is well known, a Jewish sect led an ascetic and communistic life. The

Therapeutae of Egypt were agricultural and industrial solitaries, engaged in labour, who met only once a week. Christian monasticism, that is the leading of a solitary life, for hermits or anchorites, also arose in Egypt. A certain Anthony inaugurated this phase of Christianity, destined to have so enormous a vogue in Christendom, about A.D. 270, by living for twenty years alone in the Fayum in a cell cut off from all intercourse with mankind. His fame became so great that others, wishing to follow his example, found each a cave near his, and forming a community round him forced him to emerge from his seclusion and put himself at the head of these disciples who had gathered round him. But the individuals remained separate units without organized life or rule. Similar groups of anchorites sprang up elsewhere, who, living apart and meeting only in common worship twice a week, came to be called *lauras* (so named from the alleys or λαῦραι round their cells). This idea was carried a little further by Ammon and Pachomius, two other Egyptians, who turned these eremites into coenobites by teaching them to live a common life of labour and worship.

It was Basil, however, who about 360 founded Eastern monasticism by bringing these separate coenobites under one roof, following a Rule without any undue asceticism. The monastic idea spread rapidly in the East, where many embraced it to escape, if it were possible, from the unspeakable calamities and miseries that filled the whole civilized world with wretchedness and despair.

Augustine is supposed by some to have introduced conventual life into Africa, Athanasius and Ambrose brought monasticism of a kind into Italy, and St Martin of Tours into Gaul. But this early monachism in Europe was more of the Egyptian type, freer and more practical than the one that succeeded it under the claustral Rule of Columban or Benedict. As St Martin was the patron saint of Dover Priory, and, by reason of that, also of Dover Town and Dover College, something must be set down about him before we speak of British monachism, which may be said to have sprung from him. He was a true man of God, one of the greatest; if indeed not the very greatest of medieval saints, not so rhetorical or self-conscious as Augustine, and more virile and practical and human than Francis. Unfortunately his life, though recorded by

a contemporary, a friend, and an eye-witness, is too full of incredible marvels to be taken literally. Mistaken interpretation of what actually occurred, and false inferences drawn from what really was seen, must be held to account for many of the greater marvels, such as the raising of the dead and the audible converse with angels and demons. It is undeniable, however, that Martin was able to work almost miraculous cures, especially in nervous disorders, and what was held to be possession by demons, such as even in our own day we have heard of in the life of John of Cronstadt. He certainly had a "daemonic" personality, and power went out of him to work such cures. He lived in a perfect atmosphere of supernaturalism, and for every evil or untoward occurrence he could see the demon who caused it. His interview with the archdevil himself, so naïvely told by his biographer, is well known, how Satan, transforming himself into an angel of light, of purple light in this case, royally dressed and serenely smiling, came to St Martin in his cell and announced himself as Christ, about to appear in His second advent, but, being easily detected by the saint for what he was, vanished in smoke, leaving an intolerable stench behind him that made his identity beyond question.

The incident most indissolubly connected with St Martin, and commemorated on the Dover Priory seal, and thence on the seal of Dover Corporation, is of course the well-known one, when he divided his gay military cloak with a beggar at the gate of Amiens. In the second year of his military service as a trooper in a crack cavalry regiment, and while, though even then more of a *monachus* than a *miles*, he was not yet baptized but only a catechumen, he happened to be riding with his troop in full military dress with his flowing regulation cloak and cavalry sword, when at the gate of Amiens he found a poor man without a coat to his back begging for alms from the passers-by. It was midwinter, and so cold that the ill-clad and ill-nourished were being frozen to death. In spite of the poor wretch's prayers the careless horsemen trotted by, heedless of his plight. Not so the youthful Martin, who, owing to his lavish and unfailing generosity, having nothing better by him to give, drew his sword and slicing his cloak in half threw the severed portion to the beggar, keeping for himself only the frayed

moiety. Some of his comrades no doubt laughed at this irregular proceeding, others most probably were ashamed that they had not been equally generous.

The sequel of this gracious and spontaneous act, which is depicted on the reverse of the Priory seal, is thus told by St Martin's biographer. As Martin slept that night, Christ appeared to him in a dream with the portion of the cloven cloak, which Martin had given to the beggar, upon him, and bade him look intently and see if he did not recognize the garment. Then he heard the voice of Christ saying aloud to the angels around him, "Martin, as yet unbaptized, has covered me with this cloak". Martin, in no way puffed up by this heavenly vision, acknowledging the goodness of God, was now, in his eighteenth year, baptized, and determined to leave the army, as inconsistent with the profession of a Christian.

Another act of St Martin, much less well known, but even more striking in its daring faith and lovingkindness, was that of his kissing a leper before the gates of Paris.[1]

St Martin founded his first monastery at Milan, and being driven from there by the persecution of the Arian heretics passed over into Gaul, which was to be the scene of his life labours, and though a Pannonian by birth, bestowed on this his adopted country the imperishable glory of being so closely connected with his name. Here he founded his second monastery at Lucujé near Poitiers, on the lines of the Egyptian *laura*, in which he and his followers lived in separate cells, leading an austere, ascetic, celibate life with divine service and one sparing meal a day in common. They wore the habit of oriental monks, a coarse rough shirt of woven goat's hair and a cloak with a girdle. Their work lay entirely in charity, medical assistance, spiritual consolation for the sick, and the evangelization of the heathen, for a large part of Gaul, even in this middle of the fourth century, was still pagan.

St Martin's aim in his monkish life was not to save his own soul (it was already in a state of salvation), or shelter himself from all contamination with the world, but by resolutely turning away from the seductions of a secular life to accumulate time, means and opportunity to help others, and by living with abstinence and

[1] This is told of some others, however, such as St Hugh.

self-control to teach them by his example to be true to the Christian ideal.

But Martin soon became too famous to be allowed to order his own life as he pleased, and though not yet even a deacon, and *nolens episcopari*, he was elected by popular acclamation Bishop of Tours. But as an itinerant bishop he continued his beneficent work, and in that position of authority, to his eternal honour, set his face against those, who for the first time stained their hands and seared their souls by shedding the blood of fellow-Christians in the persecution of Priscillian and his followers. In this he shewed a far greater nobility of soul than Augustine.

If ever a man lived in all essentials a Christ-life, that man was Martin. He is conspicuous throughout his career for piety, pity, charity, and humility. He persevered in well-doing, as few have done. His great weapon was prayer, in his intense capacity for which lay his spiritual strength. It made a permanent bridge for him between the seen and the unseen, between the material and the spiritual, along which he could pass from the one to the other in a moment. The even serenity of his temper was never disturbed, and he seemed exempt from anger or annoyance or grief or merriment, but his face was ever irradiated in some mysterious manner with a divine joy. Those who spoke evil of him or injured him found him still the same towards them. "O truly blessed one," says his biographer Sulpicius of him, "in whom was no guile."

He died in 397, full of years and honour, and when he had told his disciples that his time was come to die, their tears and prayers not to leave them desolate so affected him, that though he desired to depart, he was moved to tears, and praying to our Lord said, "If I am still necessary to my people, *non recuso laborem*, *fiat voluntas tua*". We can have no better motto for our work in life, whatever it be. As he had lived his life in prayer and fasting, he ended it in humility and selflessness, and had strength enough, as he was dying, to put the Devil, whom he saw sitting beside him, to a speedy rout, as in life he had ever been wont to do, and to die in peace.[1] He died on Nov. 11 at Candes, nine miles from Chinon.

[1] Our word "chapel" is derived from the sanctuary in which the *cappa* of St Martin was kept, so at least says tradition.

His obsequies, which were rather a triumph than a funeral, were attended by 2000 monks, and his bones, translated from their first resting-place in Tours to the Cathedral on 4 July, 482, remained there till the Huguenots in the sixteenth century burnt them as being superstitiously reverenced. A truer saint never lived upon earth than St Martin of Tours.

Soon after Martin's death the movement towards monasticism, which he had done so much to forward, spread through Brittany to Great Britain and Ireland. It was in this fifth century that the monastic ideal was first planted in our country, but early British monachism differed, of course, *toto caelo*, if not *totis inferis*, from the later form with which we shall have so much to do in this book. Perhaps we may attribute our first acquaintance with monasticism to Germanus and Lupus, the Gallic bishops sent over from Gaul to eradicate the Pelagian heresy in 429. Being a Breton, Germanus spoke a language still intelligible to the Britons here, and he was not only a saint and a theologian, but a skilful orator, a great administrator and, as he proved in the "Alleluia Victory", on occasion an astute commander.

Following upon his visit we find communities of a monastic character at various centres in Wales, as at Bangor.[1] The members of these lived an ascetic life of labour. Their principal work, besides learning and instruction, was to act as missionaries. It must be remembered that the early British Church was essentially a missionary Church, whose evangelizing activities extended to Scotland, Ireland, North England, and the Continent. David, the patron saint of Wales, lived till nearly the coming of Augustine. We cannot but wish that he had survived to represent the British Church in the fateful meeting at the Oak in 603, which sealed the doom of our ancient British Church.

It will be interesting to compare the life of these early Welsh monks with later forms of monastic rule. When not engaged in missionary journeys, they worked with their own hands, and ploughed without oxen. After field work followed reading, writing, and prayer. The evening bell called them in silence to the

[1] Bangor Iscoed (which means "The Great Choir" or "College below the wood") was in Flintshire. There were many other Bangors.

church, where service continued till nightfall, to be succeeded by a frugal supper of bread, herbs and salt. Then followed three hours of vigil and prayer. At last came bed, until cockcrow woke them again for prayer. They held all property in common, wore dress of the coarsest and cheapest description, lived in shelters rather than houses, and worshipped in churches of wattle and daub. Like the monks of St Martin, they went to and fro through the surrounding districts on their errands of mercy and evangelization. Most of the Christian inhabitants of these parts must have been gathered in these communities, which were rather fraternal groups, like the early Christians or Essenes, than monks in the later sense. We hear of 1200 "monks" being slain in 607 by King Aethelfrith of Northumbria, because they were present assisting his enemies with their prayers. These monks were from Bangor Iscoed.

Similar tribal semi-monastic communities soon appeared in Ireland, whose patron saint Patrick, a Briton of Strathclyde, formed a link between the Irish Church and St Martin, for he was (though not his nephew, as erroneously supposed) in some sense his spiritual disciple. And this Irish monasticism, which thus derives partly from British and Martinian sources, through its own missionary organization converted large parts of Scotland, England, Brittany, and even Germany and other continental countries. Irish saints (and Ireland gained the lofty title of the "Isle of Saints" for its fecundity in giving birth to holy men) founded many monasteries in Scotland and England, and their monasteries were world-famous for their learning and art, as well as for their holiness.[1]

Among the most renowned of the Irish missionaries were Columba and Columban, those twin "doves" of peace and good tidings, of whom the former died just when Augustine came to England and the latter in 615. The former is said to have founded one hundred centres of missionary monachism, one of these being the most famous of all such communities, that of Iona or Hy-colum-kill (the isle of Colum of the cells). This island home, off the coast of the isle of Mull, Columba received as a gift from the king of the Picts, whom he had converted, and it became known

[1] Especially in the art of illuminating. But the Irish Psalter of a later date still extant, which was in the Dover Priory Library, is more curious than artistic.