

Vereniging van Orthodoxen  organiseert:

H. Willibrord Pelgrimage

21 - 24 april 2010



St Willibrord, Apostle of the Frisians and Patron-Saint of the Netherlands

Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank Him Who is in charge of volcanoes. I caught only the third flight out of England on Wednesday morning to be here and I only discovered late on Tuesday evening that the air space had been cleared.

Secondly, I would like to thank Mark van Duijn for organising this pilgrimage and inviting me here back at the end of January. He trusted me to give this talk. This is only my second time in Holland and my first visit was nearly forty years ago.

Thirdly, I would like to say sorry. I don't speak Dutch. So I will try to speak clearly, but I know that Dutch people speak very good English and put English people to shame for our ignorance of languages.

1. East and West in St Willibrord's Time.

One of the myths of early Church history is an alleged, deep division between East and West. The division certainly exists today, but it did not exist in the time of St Willibrord. Let us look at a few facts.

Christianity began in the east, in Jerusalem. It is an eastern or Asian religion. From Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul and others took the faith to what is now Turkey, to Greece, to Malta and to Rome. He wrote that he wished to go to Spain. Tradition says that he visited London in Roman Britannia. That is why the main Cathedral in London is St Paul's.

The Church of the first centuries was international and spread from the centre in Jerusalem, to the east and to the west, uniting the whole of the Mediterranean south. And that south extended a long way north. For example, the Emperor Constantine was proclaimed Emperor in York - in what is now England. Although he had a Latin name, Constantine, he was bilingual in Latin and Greek.

In 325 he opened the First Universal Council near New Rome, now in Turkey, in both languages. This Council in Asia Minor was chaired by a bishop from the opposite end of the Mediterranean, St Osios of Cordova, and attended by delegates from much further east. The Christian Capital was fixed there in New Rome, or Constantinople, on the edge of Europe and Asia. This is why its symbol is a double-headed eagle, which looks and unites both east and west.

The East was multinational. True, Greek was a very important language, but there were and are important Orthodox Christian communities among the Semite peoples in Syria (St Ephraim the Syrian and St Isaac the Syrian) and in Armenia and Georgia. St Anthony the Great was an Egyptian and there were Christians far to the south in Ethiopia and Nubia in northern Sudan, as well as in what is now Yemen. At that time there were also many Orthodox Christians in Persia, now Iran. And on the northern shores of the Black Sea the Germanic Goths were also converted to Christ.

The West was also multinational. There were the Latin peoples, but also the unconverted Germanic peoples and Basques, then the Celts. The south of Italy was all Greek. In North-West Africa there also lived Latin peoples and the Berbers. They too were Orthodox Christians. The West, like the East, was diverse. For example, sometimes people ask me about 'the Western rite' in the Orthodox Church. I answer them, 'Which Western rite?' The Roman rite (which, like all 'Western' rites, originated in the East, in Jerusalem, but in this case came via Alexandria in Egypt), the Gallican rite, the Ambrosian rite in Milan or the Mozarabic rite from Spain? The West was varied - like the East and it is a mistake to see an East-West division in the first millennium. That would be to look at the past through the eyes of the present. Let us give some other examples:

Not so far from here, there is the town of Trier, now in Germany, then the administrative capital of the western part of the Roman Empire. This was where St Athanasius the Great was exiled from Alexandria in Egypt in the fourth century.

A great influence on St Willibrord was St Martin who also lived in the fourth century. He was born in what is now Hungary, lived in Italy and became a saint in what is now western France.

Another great St Martin was also born in what is now Hungary, lived the monastic life in Palestine and then became a bishop in what is now Portugal. This is St Martin of Braga.

A great influence on St Willibrord was Irish monasticism. He lived in a monastery in Ireland for twelve years. Let us not forget that Ireland had received its ascetic forms of Christianity above all from Egypt, through Gaul, what is now France.

When St Willibrord was in England, the Archbishop of Canterbury was a Greek, St Theodore of Tarsus.

St Willibrord was consecrated Archbishop by the Pope of Rome, Pope Sergius. (Let us not forget that the word 'Pope' is Greek, it means papa, daddy and is the word used for every Orthodox priest to this day). Pope Sergius was a Syrian from Greek-speaking Palermo in Sicily, but his family came from Antioch.

After St Willibrord, the Pope who encouraged St Willibrord's successor, St Boniface, to evangelise Germany was St Zacharias – a Greek.

In other words, the first Christian world, which we call Orthodox, was for centuries multinational. But it was also united. There was a pattern of unity in diversity and this lasted well after the time of St Willibrord in the early eighth century. The world of St Willibrord was an international one, without the nationalism of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There were no passports, no identity cards and no scanning machines. Perhaps we can reflect on the freedom that we have lost today.

2. The Germanic Context of St Willibrord's Time

We must also reflect on the racial world of St Willibrord. He was English, but not in any modern sense. He belonged rather to a common Germanic world. In this Germany did not exist, neither did Holland, nor did Luxembourg, nor did England, not in any modern sense. In fact, the English called themselves English. They spoke Old English, not modern English.

We can see this community from the modern English confusion, where English uses the word 'Dutch' for 'Nederlandisch'. But the German word for 'German' is Deutsch. It is clear that the words are the same. There were originally no divisions between Dutch and German. And for that matter there were no real divisions between Dutch, Frisian, German, Danish or English. Can you imagine a modern Englishman working as a missionary in Holland, Germany and Denmark today, and just speaking English? No. Impossible. And yet, that is what St Willibrord did and he had no language problems. Even the Danes understood him. Even today Dutch, even more Frisian, and English are very close as languages. Here is 'Our Father' in Old English:

Faeder ure thu the eart on heofonum, si thin nama gehalgod. Tobecume thin rice. Gewurthe thin willa on eorþan swa swa on heofonum. Urne gedaeghwamlican hlaf syle us to-daeg. And forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa we forgyfath urum gyltendum. And ne gelaed thu us on costnunge, ac alyf us of yvele.

As you can here, it is not like modern English. It is definitely a Germanic language.

With St Willibrord then, we enter into a world of unity which we have lost, because of modern nationalistic divisions. Let us take for example the North Sea. I live on the eastern coast of England near Harwich, 180 km due west of Rotterdam. Until 1914 the English called

the North Sea ‘the German Ocean’. And what is the North Sea? In real terms it is a lake (that is why it is not very salty) with an anti-clockwise current and it is not at all deep. In fact, 8,000 years ago it did not exist and the River Thames was a tributary of the River Rhine, flowing through what is now called ‘Doggerland’ – the North Sea.

Even today Frisian and English are the two closest Germanic languages. And, of course, the cultures are also very close. Two of the greatest companies in the world are Shell and Unilever. They are Anglo-Dutch companies. Only when you have similar cultures can you have such bi-national companies. This is also why St Willibrord came to evangelise the Frisians and is known as the Apostle of the Frisians. The Frisians cannot even be called cousins of the English. That is too distant. Really we are the same people.

The first Germanic people to be baptised were the Franks. This was because of the Roman influence in Gaul, which is now France, named after the Franks who invaded Gaul. The second Germanic people to be baptised were the English, who were converted by both the Roman mission of St Gregory the Great and the mission of the Irish. The Irish themselves had never been directly influenced by Rome, but had been influenced by the Orthodox Christianity which came to them from Roman Britain, through for example St Patrick and St David of Wales, and from Gaul, through for example St Martin and St John Cassian, and so through Egyptian monasticism.

Together with the Irish, the Franks and the English began to convert their neighbours, the other Germanic peoples of Europe. The example we have of this is St Willibrord, an Englishman who trained in Ireland and worked hand in hand with the Franks in order to bring the Frisians to Christ. And we must not forget that at that time Frisia meant all of what is now Holland, as far south as Antwerp/Antwerpen. Frisia then was modern Holland, stretching from the Scheldt to the Weser. It was not the small modern northern province of Friesland, which is why here I use the word Frisia to describe it.

St Willibrord belongs to a whole wave of missionaries coming first from Ireland and then from England, mainly between 600 and 800. The three greatest names here are St Columbanus, St Willibrord and finally St Boniface. However, we should not forget that they were accompanied by a host of monks and nuns, the latter of whom played an especially important role, especially in what is now Germany.

3. The Life of St Willibrord

a. The Preparation (658-690).

We are fortunate in having an early life of St Willibrord, written by his own relative, Alcuin of York (735-804), in 796. This was based on an even earlier Irish life which is now lost. We also have a calendar of St Willibrord with a biographical note written in his own hand and a penitential written, it seems, by the saint or at least dictated and used by him.

Willibrord was born probably on 6 November 658 in Yorkshire, near the north coast of the River Humber, which juts out into the North Sea, not far from the present town of Hull. This is directly opposite the Frisian Islands. His father was a very pious man called Wilgils. He later became a monk, founded a small monastery dedicated to the Apostle Andrew, became a hermit and was locally venerated as a saint. Willibrord was educated as a child in Ripon, at the monastery of St Wilfrid, Bishop of York. Here, aged only 15, Willibrord became a monk – an age not so uncommon in those days.

In 678 after St Wilfrid's departure from York, Willibrord left for voluntary exile in Ireland. Here he spent twelve years in a monastery of English monks, learning the ascetic life of the Irish, who had been inspired by the monks of Egypt. These ascetic practices included living in exile and reciting the Psalter by heart, with hands raised in the form of a cross. The Irish were great missionaries and considered exile to be a 'green martyrdom'. In other words, self-exile to other countries was a pilgrimage, which shows us that whatever our earthly homeland, we all have the same heavenly homeland, and that is our only destination. Separation from our earthly homeland is a form of asceticism, of separation from the world.

In this way Willibrord would learn to combine the practical organisational abilities he had obtained in England with the ascetic and spiritual practices of Ireland. We can consider that this whole period was an apprenticeship, a preparation for what was to come. In Ireland he was ordained priest and here in 690 he decided to go to Frisia.

Why this decision to go to Frisia after twelve years in Ireland? First of all, Frisia was well known in England. The Frisians were near neighbours and there was much trade between Frisia, especially the port of Dorestad near Utrecht, and London and the other ports of eastern England, where many Frisians lived. Let us not forget that Willibrord came from eastern England, from an area that juts out into the North Sea, on the same latitude as the Frisian Islands. As we have said, the language was the same. But there were other, more personal reasons too. Willibrord's first mentor, St Wilfrid, had briefly been in Frisia as a missionary in 678-79. In Ireland his Abbot, St Egbert, had long wanted to go there. A priest in the monastery, Witbert had spent two years in Frisia, though without success. Abbot Egbert was to find another volunteer in Willibrord.

In any case, it is clear that Willibrord must have heard much about Frisia as a neighbouring territory, where people spoke virtually the same language as English and yet did not know Christ. What could be more natural for the English than to want to bring the good news of Christ to their neighbours, who spoke the same language and lived in the land from where, less than 200 years, eight generations, before, the English themselves had set sail for Britain?

b. Frisia (690-714).

In the year 690, the thirty-third year of his life, Fr Willibrord set off from Ireland for Frisia via England, together with eleven disciples. These were almost certainly English monks from the same monastery in Ireland. Although several of the twelve became bishops and others were martyred, we know the name of only one other of them. This was the future St Swithbert, who would become a missionary between the Rivers Yssel and Ems and then Bishop of Kasierswerth in western Germany, not so far from St Willibrord.

Fr Willibrord and his followers crossed the North Sea, landing on the coast at Oude Rijn near Katwijk. From here, he and his companions sailed to Utrecht, the Roman Traiectum, near the trading centre of Dorestad. Here he met the Frankish ruler of the area, Pippin II, and set up camp in the old Roman fortress of Vecht, set up on the ford over the river. Utrecht itself means uit – trecht, downriver from the ford. In Roman Utrecht there was already a small church which had been built by Frankish missionaries in the early seventh century.

South of the River Rhine, Frisia was occupied by the Franks. To the north there was great nationalistic enmity between the Franks and the Frisians. In the north and east of Frisia, that is, the north and east of present-day Holland, the pagan King Radbod of the Frisians detested the Franks and all that they stood for – including, unfortunately, Christianity. However,

Willibrord understood that he could do nothing without the support of the secular authorities, that is, of Pippin.

In search of spiritual support, in 692, Willibrord paid his first visit to Rome, to the Syrian Pope St Sergius I. He knew that he needed the support of the Church authorities, just as he needed that of the secular authorities, indeed, to counterbalance them, if necessary. He received great encouragement from the Pope.

We should not be surprised by this search for support. For example, if we wanted to start a mission in, say, India, we would seek the support of our Patriarch and also that of the Indian authorities. This is what missionaries have always done, from St Augustine in England, to Sts Cyril and Methodius in Moravia, to St Nicholas in Japan. We do not begin missions without the support and approval of the Church. We do not act alone, but together, because salvation comes to us together.

Fr Willibrord returned from Rome with relics of the saints and headed for Antwerp, on the southern edge of Frisian territory. Here he found the church of Sts Peter and Paul, which existed there already, thanks to the earlier labours of Sts Amand and Eloi. Here he affirmed the Faith, before returning northwards to evangelise Frankish Frisia, Utrecht and the villages around it. From this point on Radbod had a less negative attitude towards Willibrord. Indeed, his daughter actually married Pippin's son in an alliance.

In November 695 Fr Willibrord was again in Rome at the request of Pippin. This time he was consecrated Archbishop by Pope Sergius. This took place two days before the feast of St Clement, the third Pope of Rome. Willibrord was given the new name of Clement by the Pope. This indeed is his official name, although he is still generally known by his old name Willibrord. But Clement is still a fitting name because of St Clement's apostolic fame, his writings and because of his links with the sea – something which should also link him with Holland.

Archbishop Willibrord-Clement returned to Frisia with liturgical vessels and relics, which still survive today in churches at Emmerich and Trier. The Archbishop now settled in the Roman fortress in Utrecht, gifted to him by Pippin with 10% of his revenue. The new Archbishop of Utrecht made the town into his Metropolitan see. He rebuilt the church inside the fortress, dedicating it to St Martin. Martin remains a very common name in the Netherlands to this day. He also built in Utrecht his Cathedral dedicated to the Saviour.

The choice of the dedication was and is natural to a Christ-centred mission. We are reminded that in New Rome the great Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom of God, Hagia Sophia, is also dedicated to the Saviour, the Wisdom of God. In Canterbury St Augustine had dedicated his Cathedral to Christ, Christchurch, and in the centre of Moscow today, the great symbol of the victory over Communism is the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.

In 698 the Archbishop was granted land by Pippin's mother-in-law, abbess of a convent near Trier. This land was nearby, on the site of a Roman villa in Echternach, now in Luxembourg. It was to become the largest and favourite monastery founded by Archbishop Willibrord and is famous for the Echternach Gospels. This was the place where he lived the monastic life of Ireland. After his repose and burial there, it became the centre of his veneration and pilgrimage and a centre for manuscript production.

It was during this period in the early eighth century that the Archbishop met the pagan Frisian King Radbod, who now showed him indifference rather than hostility. The Archbishop also

travelled beyond the Elbe to southern Denmark to try and convert the people there. He returned with thirty young Danes, whom he instructed and baptised. On his return from there he was driven by a storm to the island of Heligoland, where there lived pagan Frisians. He baptised three of these, but one of his monks was martyred there by angry pagans. King Radbod threatened Archbishop Willibrord, but he was fearless in his answers to the King, denouncing his idols as devils. The King respected him for his courage.

The Archbishop evangelised around his Metropolitan centre in Utrecht, building churches and monasteries, with money from Pippin. He ordained deacons and priests, among them many native Frisians, and consecrated bishops. He also travelled to Susteren, where he built a monastery, to Zeeland and to the island of Walcheren. There he destroyed a pagan idol, for which deed he was struck on the head and nearly killed. From Echternach he also served the nuns in Trier, where they still have a portable altar of the Archbishop. We can see an Irish element in the Archbishop's unceasing travels.

c. Crisis and Restoration (714-739).

Having assassinated his son-in-law, that is, Pippin's son, in April 714, the pagan Frisian King Radbod welcomed the death of Pippin in December 714. At once, in 715, Radbod turned against the Franks, destroying churches and monasteries, killing priests and driving out Archbishop Willibrord and his monks. They took refuge in Echternach and patiently waited for the tide to turn. Four years later, in 719 the Archbishop was able to return to Frisia. The new Frankish King, Charles Martel, had put down the Frisian revolt. Radbod had died and the Archbishop baptised King Charles' son, who was to become Pippin III, called 'the Short'.

Back in Utrecht Archbishop Willibrord set about rebuilding, with Charles' help. His success grew in preaching and then baptising. Now came the period of restoration and also expansion. Notably, he travelled to the east of Frisia outside Frankish Frisia, where he had never been before. St Willibrord truly became the Archbishop of the Frisians, leaving only limited pockets of paganism in the far north, what is now Friesland. He was also helped for three years by another English missionary, Boniface, who later achieved fame as a saint and as the Enlightener of many peoples who live on the territory of modern Germany.

Although the Archbishop was now in his sixties, in many ways this was his most fruitful period. But as he grew older, his strength began to fail him and he delegated more and more to others. All Frisia west of the Zuyder Zee had been converted to Christ. There were only pockets of paganism left towards Dokkum. St Willibrord started to withdraw to his favourite monastery at Echternach and it was here on 7 November 739, aged 81, that he reposed in peace. Miracles had been recorded in his lifetime and these continued after his repose. He was soon venerated as a saint.

The writer of St Willibrord's life, his relative Alcuin, gave this physical description of him in his prime: 'He was of medium height, with a dignified appearance, handsome face, he was cheerful in spirit, wise in counsel, pleasing in speech, serious in character and energetic in everything he undertook'. Alcuin also calls him 'the holiest of fathers and the wisest of teachers'.

There is no doubt that St Willibrord depended on the support of the Frankish Kings to evangelise the Frisians. Neither is there any doubt that he made use of the spiritual support offered to him by the Pope. As Patriarch of the West, it was only natural that Willibrord should have that blessing and support.

But it is also clear that without the efforts of St Willibrord himself, the story of the evangelisation of Frisia, modern Holland, would have been very different. The fact that he was not one of the Frisian national enemies, a Frank, but that he was an outsider, an Englishman, undoubtedly helped him greatly. Without St Willibrord surely the evangelisation of Holland would have been much more difficult and would have come much later.

4. Conclusion

Apart from the above, I think that there are four more lessons that we can learn from the three parts of St Willibrord's life and mission:

Firstly, we can see that for over thirty years Willibrord had been preparing, mainly unconsciously, for his mission. Here we have a sense of destiny. In his mission to the Frisians, St Willibrord fulfilled the mission that God had put in his soul. In this we achieve nothing if we are not thoroughly prepared. This is our first lesson. And we can see its practical application, inasmuch as before baptising the Frisians, Willibrord always preached to them, instructing them. He prepared the ground, sowing before harvesting.

Secondly, we can see in St Willibrord the Incarnational principle of the practical and the spiritual. And in fact these are the two sides of the same coin. In him we can see the English and the Irish, the Roman organiser and the Egyptian monk. For example, he established an operational headquarters in Roman Utrecht. But he also operated out of a spiritual base, in his beloved monastery of Echternach. St Willibrord shows us that although we are very much in the world, we are still not of it. And all those who deny this principle of balance, taking only one side and not the other, as the Franks later did, come to grief and misfortune.

Thirdly, we can see through the life of the saint that God protects his workers. Time and again St Willibrord was under threat in dangerous circumstances. He worked under Frankish patronage among the Franks' national enemies. He worked to destroy the old pagan religion and replace it with the new Christian Faith. Each time that threats came, he did not suffer, but his enemies did. He was fearless because he had faith. And what do we have to fear? The worst thing that can happen to us is death and that, for Christians, means paradise.

Fourthly, and finally, we see the patience of the saint. He thought in the long term, in terms of generations. Following the pagan reaction in 714-715, it seemed as though 25 years of work had been in vain. All was lost. However, the saint returned and began again. God was to give him another 25 years and more helpers to continue. Ultimately, we can say that he who loses is he who does not persevere but gives up. St Willibrord did not give up and therefore he won the battle. This is the great lesson to us.

To this day, in the streets of Echternach, every year on the Tuesday of Pentecost, the third day of the Feast, clergy and crowds of pilgrims perform the dance of St Willibrord. 'Heiliger Willibrord, bete fuer uns', they cry. Until the Second World War, they performed the original form of the dance, three steps forward and two steps back. Nobody knows the origin of this dance. But I could suggest a spiritual interpretation for it. It means that though we go forwards in life, we also, through our human weakness and sin, go back, but never as far back as we go forwards. This dance is then a sort of rule for our spiritual life. Let us not be discouraged when we go backwards, because we have actually already advanced even more. As long as we do not give up, the victory is still ours. Two steps back, but three steps forward.

Thank you for listening.

Archpriest Andrew Phillips

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