

# St. Boniface and the Christmas Tree

June 5<sup>th</sup> we celebrate the feast of St. Boniface (680–754), known in Church history as the Apostle to the Germans. Boniface is regarded as “probably the greatest missionary since St. Paul” for his extensive travels and successful evangelization efforts in modern-day Germany.[1] While he is well known as a great bishop and evangelizer, Catholic legend, based on actual historical events, also holds that Boniface is the founder of the use of a Christmas tree to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child.

The story of the Christmas tree begins in England, where the very young Winfrid decided to enter a Benedictine monastery over the objections of his parents. Winfrid grew in holiness and piety but yearned to leave the monastery and bring the light of Christ to the pagan Germans just as the monks had brought the Faith to England a century earlier. Winfrid heard reports that Pope Gregory II (r. 715-731) had sent missionaries to Bavaria in 716 and decided to travel to Rome to become a missionary to the Germans. Pope Gregory was delighted at the arrival of the eager Winfrid and after a period of time commissioned him to preach the Gospel in the regions of Thuringia, Bavaria, Franconia, and Hesse. In recognition of his special missionary commission the pope also changed Winfrid’s name to Boniface.

The newly named monk travelled to Hesse (central Germany) in 721 and “with his tireless activity, his gift for organization, and his adaptable, friendly, yet firm character” achieved great success, including the conversion of the twin chieftains Dettic and Deorulf.[2] Boniface also established Benedictine monasteries throughout his area of evangelization, including the great monastery of Fulda in 744.[3] News of his great achievements reached Rome, where he was recalled by Pope Gregory to provide a status report. Impressed and pleased with Boniface’s efforts, Gregory consecrated him archbishop for all Germany east of the Rhine (without a specific episcopal seat) and placed his territory under the pope’s jurisdiction. Imbued with this new authority and pontifical mandate, Boniface returned to Germany in 723.

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Boniface spent the rest of his life evangelizing the areas of modern Germany and parts of the Netherlands. He also became a friend of the Frankish court and helped reform and reorganized the Church in that area. From his missionary travels, Boniface knew that in winter the inhabitants of the village of Geismar gathered around a huge old oak tree (known as the “Thunder Oak”) dedicated to the god Thor. This annual event of worship centered on sacrificing a human, usually a small child, to the pagan god. Boniface desired to convert the village by destroying the Thunder Oak, which the pagans had previously boasted the God of Boniface could not destroy, so he gathered a few companions and journeyed to Geismar.

His fellow missionaries were scared and fearful that the Germans might kill them, so they balked when they reached the outskirts of the village on Christmas Eve. Boniface steadied the nerves of his friends and as they approached the pagan gathering he said, “Here is the Thunder Oak; and here the cross of Christ shall break the hammer of the false god Thor.”<sup>[4]</sup> Boniface and his friends arrived at the time of the sacrifice, which was interrupted by their presence. In a show of great trust in God and born from a desire to enkindle the fire of Christ in the German pagans, Boniface grabbed an axe and chopped down the Thunder Oak of mighty Thor.

The Germans were astounded. The holy bishop preached the Gospel to the people and used a little fir tree that was behind the now felled oak tree as a tool of evangelization. Pointing to it he said,

“This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree tonight. It is the wood of peace... It is the sign of an endless life, for its leaves are ever green. See how it points upward to heaven. Let this be called the tree of the Christ-child; gather about it, not in the wild wood, but in your own homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and rites of kindness.”[\[5\]](#)

Awed by the destruction of the oak tree and Boniface’s preaching, the Germans were baptized.

Boniface continued his missionary efforts into old age when in 754, he left for a trip to Frisia with fifty monks. Their work was successful and many pagans agreed to receive baptism. When the appointed time came to celebrate the sacrament, a large armed crowd of pagans approached the missionaries. Knowing his time to die was at hand, Boniface discouraged his followers from fighting and said, “Cease my sons, from fighting, give up warfare for the witness of Scripture recommends that we do not give an eye for an eye but rather good for evil. Here is the long awaited day; the time of our end has now come; courage in the Lord!”[\[6\]](#) The ferocious pagan attack left Boniface and his fellow companions dead and celebrated as martyrs for the Faith.

His later biographer, Othlo, recalled Boniface’s deep love for the people who he endeavored for so long to bring to Christ:

The holy bishop Boniface can call himself father of all the inhabitants of Germany, for it was he who first brought them forth in Christ with the words of his holy preaching; he strengthened them with his example; and lastly, he gave his life for them; no greater love than this can be shown.”[\[7\]](#)

In the centuries that followed, the Catholic tradition of using an evergreen tree to celebrate the birth of Jesus spread throughout Germany, and

German immigrants in the eighteenth century brought the custom to the New World. Although there are many stories, legends, and myths surrounding the founding of the Christmas tree, including the claim that the custom originated with Martin Luther, there is only one story rooted in a real person and a real event: Boniface, converter of the Germans, who destroyed Thor's mighty oak.

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