

The Golden Age of Christianity in Britain & Ireland and Orthodoxy Today

I. Introduction

The fourth century Church Father and bishop Hilary of Poitiers, called the 'Athanasius of the West', lived in a society not so different from our own. Olivier Clement describes the intellectual climate as a mixture of materialism and skepticism intertwined with syncretistic beliefs and an emphasis on rationalism, the individual, and self-gratification. Perhaps this description might sound familiar to you. St Hilary describes his own search for meaning in a world obsessed the things of this world. He says:

"I began the search for the meaning of life. At first I was attracted by riches and leisure...But most people discover that human nature wants something better to do than just gormandize and kill time. They have been given life in order to achieve something worth while, to make use of their talents. It could not have been given them without some benefit in eternity. How otherwise could one regard as a gift from God a life so eaten away by anguish, so riddled with vexation, which left to itself would simply wear out, from the prattle of the cradle to the drivel of senility? Look at people who have practiced patience, chastity and forgiveness. The good life for them meant good deeds and good thoughts. Could the immortal God have given us life with no other horizon but death? Could he have inspired us with such a desire to live, if the only outcome would be the horror of death?..."

Then I sought to know God better...Some religions teach that there are different families of deities. They imagine male gods and female ones and can trace the lineage of these gods born from one another. Other religions teach that there are greater and lesser deities, with different attributes. Some claim that there is no God at all and worship nature, which, according to them, came about purely by chance. Most, however, admit that God exists, but hold him to be indifferent to human beings ..."

While Hilary of Poitiers was not British, he was part of a shared culture within the *Pax Romana* that any Briton would have recognized as largely their own. Indeed, his era was prior to the invasions of either the Franks or the Anglo-Saxons and was Roman and Celtic. His search for meaning and the God of Creation was a theme repeated both in his day and in the coming centuries after the invasions had all but decimated the flame of the Christian Church in the West. But St Hilary speaks to us in the twenty-first century as well, reminding us that we are not so different from our ancestors as to our hopes and frustrations, and what path leads to ultimate fulfillment for all of humanity and, indeed, the whole of Creation.

My intent today is to speak to you about the Church in the British Isles and her connections with the greater Orthodox Church from earliest times to the present, though focusing in particular on that

great age of faith in the (roughly) sixth through eighth centuries often called the Golden Age of Christianity in Britain and Ireland. I will then turn to the theme of Orthodox mission theology and what we today can learn from our spiritual predecessors in that great missionary age. This is not to say, of course, that there were not Saints in England in the first century, nor, indeed, that there might not be future Saints amongst us here today. When I speak of the 'Saints', I am, naturally, not just referring to the saints of the Church in the sense that all those within the Church are saints consecrated for the service of God. Rather, capitalized 'Saints' refer to those great examples to us who lived lives of extraordinary holiness or in some other way left an indelible mark upon the mind of the Church. These were Saints not because they had miraculous powers (though some were termed *thaumaturgos*, or 'wonder-worker'), but rather if they were vessels for divine miracles it was because they lived holy lives pleasing to God and were far along the transformational path of *theosis*. They faced great trials in their day and they had a choice: to follow along with a materialistic society celebrating the passions, or else to seek true Freedom and Life in the Holy Mysteries of Christ.

Perhaps we as Orthodox Christians in Britain and Ireland feel isolated in our islands, as well as living in a land that is ostensibly Anglican and, in a greater sense, within the Roman Catholic sphere. We are, however, part of the one, universal holy Orthodox and Catholic Christian Faith. It is common in the formation of a people's self-identity to view ourselves according to what or whom we are not. Thus, for example, English might understand themselves vis-a-vis the French, or Irish and Scots with the English, or Canadians in relation to Americans. The history of the Church in the British Isles in the first thousand years, however, was one largely of interplay between her various tribes and peoples, including Gaul. Our own patron, St Botolph, Abbot of Ikanhoe, himself taught in England the monastic rule that he learned in Gaul, in the seventh century. In the Orthodox Church we commemorate him on the seventeenth of June, and recite his apolytikion:

*“Neither the desolation of the fens,
nor the depth of thy humility could hide the light of thy virtues,
whereby thou becamest a lamp unto the faithful,
O Botolph our righteous Father.
Wherefore, we entreat thee: do thou also enlighten us
who venerate thy blessed memory.”*

In truth, Britain has never been fully isolated, and there are numerous accounts of interaction with the greater Christian world from the very beginning to the present, and not least of all during the so-called 'Dark Ages'.

II. Pax Romana: the Early Centuries of Christianity in Britain

The origins of Christianity in the British Isles are shrouded in the mist of history, but tradition and legend places it here from the very earliest days. Did the Sainted tin merchant Joseph of Arimathea really bring the Communion cup used at the Last Supper to England and found a church at Glastonbury? Did Mary's Son, Jesus, accompany him on one of his earlier journeys? William Blake movingly enquires:

*“And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the Holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among those dark Satanic mills?”*

Some traditions place the Apostle Simon the Zealot as having preached in Britain (and even martyred), while others credit Good King Lucius for establishing Britain as the first Christian nation in the mid-second century. Eusebius of Caesarea explicitly states: *'The apostles passed beyond the ocean to the Isles called the Britannic Isles.'* While such traditions may or may not be but pious legends, Christianity was well established in Roman times, with affirmation of the Churches of the Celts and Britons from such distinguished Early Fathers as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen. The second century writer Hippolytus lists St Aristobulus, brother of St Barnabas and one of the Seventy, as the Apostle of Britain, commissioned by St Paul himself. In the Orthodox Church we commemorate him both on the fourth of January and on the sixteenth of March, when we say in the Troparion: *'Holy apostle Aristobulus of the Seventy; entreat the merciful; to grant our souls forgiveness of transgressions.'*

Writing about the same time, St Irenaeus of Lyons speaks to the universality of the Church, stating: *'For the Church, though scattered through all the inhabited world as far as the ends of the earth, carefully keeps guard as the occupier of one house...and proclaims in harmony the same things...as one possessed of one mouth...and neither the Churches among the Germans, nor among the Iberians, nor the Celts, nor those in the East, nor in Egypt, nor in Libya, nor those settled in the midst of the world, have believed differently, nor have differently handed things down.'* Tertullian, writing a few decades later, informs us that: *'The extremities of Spain, the various parts of Gaul, the regions of Britain which have never been penetrated by the Roman Arms have received the religion of Christ.'* Under the Pax Romana, trade and travel routes to Britain were generally safe and secure, bringing merchants, tradesmen, soldiers and others – many of whom were Christian. The Church was soon established enough that numerous British missionaries were sent to evangelize Continental Europe. The Irish St Mansuetus, for example, converted in Britain and was said to have preached the Gospel in France with St Clement of Rome in the late first century, while the Briton St Cadval founded the Church of Tarentum, or Taranto, in Italy in A.D. 170.

For all this promising beginning, however, British Christians were not immune to persecution, both official and unofficial. Thus, the protomartyr of Britain, St Alban (whose feast day is commemorated in the Orthodox Church on the 22nd of June) was likely martyred in the great persecution of Diocletian about 303 AD, although his martyrdom may have occurred earlier. Tradition holds that he was in his home in Verulamium (now St Alban's) near London when a Christian priest sought shelter from the Roman authorities, who were then rounding up all the Christians they could find. St Alban was intrigued and asked the priest about his religion. So impressed was he that he converted on the spot and offered to exchange clothes with the priest. When the Romans came, it was

St Alban whom they dragged away. His life in this world as a Christian was very brief, for he was immediately martyred, but he understood Christ's words: 'My kingdom is not of this world.' [John 18:36a]

The orthodoxy of the British Church is testified to by none other than Constantine the Great at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. In the latter fourth century, the age of Pelagius (who was welcomed for a time in the East and was likely not guilty of everything of which he was accused), the monks at famous Monastery of Bangor were said to have numbered over 2,100 monks. Despite St Augustine's condemnation of the 'Pelagian heresy', British orthodoxy is applauded by St Hilary of Poitiers (the scourge of the Arian heresy in the West), by St Athanasius the Great, and by St John Chrysostom in far off Constantinople. The latter writes: *'Though thou shouldst go to the ocean, to the British Isles, there thou shouldst hear all men everywhere discoursing matters out of the scriptures, with another voice indeed, but not another faith: with a different tongue, but the same judgment.'* Nor was pilgrimage unknown in these days, as St Jerome informs us that: *'The Briton, who lives apart from our world, if he go on a Pilgrimage, will leave his western sun and seek Jerusalem, known to him by fame only, and by the Scriptures.'* Theodoret of Cyrrus reports Britons visiting St Simeon Stylites on his famed pillar near Antioch in the fifth century.

So why, you may ask, are we not more familiar with the history of Christianity in the British Isles during this period? Largely, this is due to repeatedly destructive large-scale waves of invasions coupled with the fact that wood or wattle-and-daub and not stone were the favoured building elements in this period. Holy sites were also repeatedly built over, while the literary sources only occasionally and briefly refer to these islands on the far periphery of the Roman Empire. Thus while Christianity – and Romano-British culture in general – might very well have continued to flourish had the Pax Romana continued, with the large scale invasions of Europe as a whole and these British Isles in particular, the collapse of peaceful civilization was inevitable. And thus those of you who know your history will realize that this discussion of the 'British' during this period refers to those who were soon pushed into the west of Britain – that is, Wales and Cornwall – and even Brittany in Gaul. The roots of the story of Arturius – King Arthur – date from the late fifth century, and detail how at first Saxon mercenaries were invited in on the part of Vortigern and the surviving British hierarchy sans Roman support, and how they soon brought great numbers of their own people – Saxons, Angles, and Jutes – from the Continent and in fierce battles conquered the East and North of England. Pagan Picts and Irish slave-traders further attacked from the North and the West. Thus semi-Christianized England was thus reduced to a much smaller pocket in the West, while the majority again worshiped a pantheon of heathen gods and the bloodlust of battle.

III. Celts and Anglo-Saxons: the Golden Age of Christianity in Britain and Ireland

ST PATRICK OF IRELAND: OBEDIENCE AND HUMILITY

Christianity was not unknown in Ireland or Scotland in the early centuries, but it was really only in the fifth century that the great coming of Irish – or Celtic – Christianity came about. Although the Romans had never conquered Ireland or Scotland, due to their proximity to England it was inevitable

that relations of various kinds should exist. And so it was that St Patrick, Apostle of Ireland, was actually a native of Britain, from near Carlisle. His father was a deacon, and his grandfather a priest. At the age of sixteen, he was captured in a slave raid and taken to Ireland, where for six years he lived a solitary life on a mountain, caring for sheep and learning to pray to God and seek Peace in Him. Although he eventually escaped back to Britain, God soon led St Patrick back to the isle of the Gael. His *Confession* is quite revealing about the events that led to his mission in Eire, and his feelings and motivations. St Patrick was not at first willing, but had visions of the Holy Spirit praying within him, reminding him that *'the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.'* He relates that the Lord *'broke down my stubbornness, and molded me according to his will, making me fit to do work which once had been far beyond me... God often forgave my stupidity and carelessness, and took pity upon me thousands and thousands of times.'* Many were opposed to his mission due to his lack of education, but he says he was *'always honest and sincere'*, trusting in God, and through grace baptized many thousands. His trust is in the Father, Who *'has poured upon us his Spirit, so that our spirits are overflowing. Through his Spirit we receive the promise of eternal life. And in his Spirit we are taught to trust and obey the Father, and, with Christ, become his sons and daughters.'* St Patrick was not the first missionary in Ireland, nor perhaps the most skilled in his task, but perhaps he was the most effective due to his humility, his decision to live as one amongst the Irish, and his trust in God and forthrightness. The Annals of Ulster place his death in the year 493, after sixty years working as the Enlightener and Apostle of the Irish. He is commemorated in the Orthodox Church on the seventeenth of March, and his Troparion follows:

*"Holy Bishop Patrick,
Faithful shepherd of Christ's royal flock,
You filled Ireland with the radiance of the Gospel:
The mighty strength of the Trinity!
Now that you stand before the Savior,
Pray that He may preserve us in faith and love!"*

ST COLUMBA OF IONA: PENITENCE, ASCETICISM, AND THE INFLUENCE OF EASTERN & COPTIC CHURCHES

St Columba of Iona greatly lamented his exile to Scotland, for he deeply missed his homeland. But even so, he did this willingly. Perhaps he felt as did St Brendan the Navigator of Clonfert (commemorated on the sixteenth of May¹) and others seeking the self-imposed exile of White Martyrdom. Attributed to St Brendan upon the completion of his famous journey is the following poem:

¹ Troparion (*Tone 4*) of St Brendan:

The Divine Likeness has been perfected in thee, O holy Father Brendan, for taking up the Cross thou hast followed Christ, and by thy deeds thou hast taught us to disdain the flesh for it passes away, but to cultivate the soul for it is immortal: wherefore, O holy father, thy spirit rejoices with the Angels.

“Shall I abandon, O King of the Mysteries, the soft comforts of home? Shall I turn my back on my native land, and my face towards the sea?”

Shall I put myself wholly at the mercy of God, without silver, without a horse, without fame and honour? Shall I throw myself wholly on the King of kings, without sword and shield, without food and drink, without a bed to be on?

Shall I say farewell to my beautiful land, placing myself under Christ's yoke? Shall I pour out my heart to him, confessing my manifold sins and begging forgiveness, tears streaming down my cheeks?

Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach, a record of my final prayer in my native land? Shall I then suffer every kind of wound that the sea can inflict?

Shall I take my tiny coracle across the wide, sparkling ocean? O King of the Glorious Heaven, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?

O Christ, will you help me on the wild waves?”

While St Kentigern – also called Mungo – evangelized the lowland Scots around Glasgow, and St Ninian converted the Southern Picts, St Columba (accompanied by St Kenneth of Aghaboe and St Congal) is credited with converting King Brude and the Picts of northern Scotland. Columba was famous in his own day even before his arrival on the Scottish side of Dalriada, but the lasting impact of his monastic community at Iona would be felt far and wide, and for centuries to come. In the Orthodox Church, we commemorate St Columba on the ninth of June, and his Troparion goes:

*“By your God-inspired life
You embodied both the mission and the dispersion of the Church,
Most glorious Father Columba.
Using your repentance and voluntary exile,
Christ our God raised you up as a beacon of the True Faith,
An apostle to the heathen and an indicator of the Way of salvation.
Wherefore O holy one, cease not to intercede for us
That our souls may be saved.”*

The deep asceticism that St Columba sought in the Irish 'desert' reminds one of that found in the early Desert Fathers in Egypt and Palestine. Indeed, the Irish monastics were deeply influenced by St Athanasius' *Life of St Antony the Great* and also the writings of John Cassian on the cenobitic practices he encountered amongst the monastics in the Egyptian desert. Artistically as well, we find Eastern influences in the far reaches of the British Isles. The Mediterranean influences upon the seventh century *Book of Durrow* – produced either in County Offaly or Northumbria in the Insular Irish style – is readily apparent, with some arguing that it is iconographically identical to copies of the *Diatessaron* of Tatian, popular in the second and third centuries particularly in the Patriarchate of

Antioch. The famous *Book of Kells* was produced by Columban monks, likely at Iona itself. William Dalrymple relates that icons of St Antony of the Desert were a favorite motif amongst Pictish artists in Scotland and in Ireland in the early Middle Ages. Indeed, he was held to be their 'ideal and prototype', with the English monk Alcuin describing the Celtic Culdees as 'the children of the Egyptians' (*pueri egyptiaci*). Sophronius describes an accidental voyage by a young Alexandrine aristocrat to Cornwall in the early seventh century. The Irish Litany of Saints remembers '*the seven monks of Egypt [who lived] in Disert Uilaig*' on the western coast, while the seventh century Antiphonary used at the Monastery of Bangor declares:

*"This house full of delight
Is built on the rock
And indeed the true vine
Transplanted out of Egypt."*

Also about this time (in the late seventh century), a ship bound for Gaul was blown far off course and landed at Iona, carrying on board a Frankish bishop, Arculf, recently returned from Holy Pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine – now under Muslim rule – Constantinople and Rome. The current abbot of Iona, Adomnan, wrote a treatise called *De Locis Sanctis (On the Holy Places)* in which he detailed the Holy Places, based upon the descriptions of Arculf. The English pilgrim Willibald traveled to the Holy Land in the eighth century, also reporting on his experiences. While such occasions as these were not everyday commonplace, it is also true that perhaps we tend to underestimate the willingness of those who lived in the early Middle Ages to travel extensively, whether on pilgrimage or for trade reasons, despite the enormous dangers and difficulties. Given the extensive missionary activities of Irish and Anglo-Saxon monastics, it is not surprising that distant influences would resonate in the lands of their birth. St Columbanus, for example, from County Meath and a contemporary of St Columba, established numerous monasteries in France, and ended his days at his Monastery of Bobbio in northern Italy, well within range of such culturally important establishments as the Byzantine outpost of Venice. Seventh century Irish monks reported staying at a hostel in Rome alongside a Greek, a Hebrew, a Scythian, and an Egyptian, all celebrating Pascha together at St. Peter's, while there was also for a time an English Quarter in Rome, originally for defense, but later for pilgrims.

ST AIDAN OF LINDISFARNE: THE MILK OF SIMPLE TEACHING

Whereas St Columba was characterized for his asceticism and strict monastic rule, St Aidan of Lindisfarne was known for his tolerance and gentleness. The famous account is told of how King Oswald of Northumbria sent to the monks of Iona for a bishop to preach the Gospel to his people. At first they sent an austere monk who soon returned and complained that the Northumbrian people were an 'obstinate and barbarous' people who refused to listen to him. I think it likely that most of us can relate to this monk, in truth. But St Aidan, on the other hand, as the monks deliberated, spoke up, saying, '*Brother, it seems to me that you were too severe with your ignorant hearers. You should have followed the example of the apostles, who began by giving people the milk of simple teaching, gradually nourishing them with the Word of God until they were capable of greater perfection, and so could follow the more demanding precepts of Christ.*' Upon such wise words, St Aidan was sent to preach to

the English people in Northumbria, among whom he had great success. Bede describes him as *'a man of outstanding gentleness, holiness, and moderation' with a 'zeal in God, but not according to knowledge.'* His evangelistic approach was, first and foremost, to teach by his own holy example. *'He neither sought nor cared for any worldly possessions, but loved to give away to the poor whatever he had received from kings and chiefs...[A]s he walked along he stopped and spoke to whomever he met, both rich and poor: if they were heathen, he invited them to embrace the mystery of the faith, and be baptised, and if they were already believers, he strengthened their faith, inspiring them by word and action to be good and generous to their neighbours.'*

St Aidan traveled quite a lot, usually on foot, and often with traveling companions. He required them to meditate on the Scriptures, or else to learn the Psalms. Many followed his example and fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays until three in the afternoon, except during the fifty days after Easter. Where he came across people doing wrong, he spoke to them frankly, neither fearing the wealthy nor ignoring the poor. He would often invite people to share meals, but never did he try to influence people with gifts of money. In fact, if any one gave him gifts, he would distribute this wealth to the poor, or redeem slaves – many of whom became his disciples. On one occasion, he even gave away a noble steed gifted him by the king. The Venerable Bede sums up his description of St Aidan by noting that *'he took pains never to neglect anything that he had learned from the writings of the evangelists, apostles and prophets, and he set himself to carry them out with all his powers.'* In the Orthodox Church, we commemorate St Aidan on the thirty-first of August. His Troparion reads:

"O holy Bishop Aidan, Apostle of the North and light of the Celtic Church, glorious in humility, noble in poverty, zealous monk and loving missionary, intercede for us sinners that Christ our God may have mercy on our souls."

ST CUTHBERT OF LINDISFARNE: PRAYER AND PATIENCE

St Aidan's successor, St Cuthbert, who is commemorated on the twentieth of March, followed in his path of humility. When he first went to Lindisfarne as prior, he found the monks hostile and lax, but Cuthbert finally won them over by gentleness and patience. *'At chapter meetings the monks frequently hurled bitter insults at him, but he would put an end to argument by calmly rising from his chair, and walk out. The next day he would behave as if nothing had happened, showing to all the brethren the same warm friendship. Though he was often overwhelmed with sorrow at the laxness and the conflicts within the monastery, outwardly he was always cheerful. And soon it was clear to all the monks that it was the Holy Spirit who gave him strength to endure the attacks against him. So within a few years all the monks willingly obeyed him.'* St Cuthbert, like the Saints here mentioned, greatly loved prayer, and sought in his way to pray without ceasing, whether it was staying awake for three or four nights in a row, or standing up to his chest in the freezing waters of the sea. He constantly prayed for those committed to his charge, and guided them both by advice and by the example of his holy life. Additionally, *'he visited those who were sad or depressed, he persuaded the rich to give food to the hungry and clothes to the destitute. He also took delight in living simply and keeping the monastic rule amidst the pomp of the world.'* His Apolytikion is:

“While still in thy youth thou didst lay aside all worldly care and didst take up the sweet yoke of Christ, O godly-minded Cuthbert, and thou wast shown forth in truth to be nobly radiant in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Wherefore, God established thee as a rule of faith and shepherd of His rational flock, O converser with Angels and intercessor for men.”

ST THEODORE OF TARSUS AND CANTERBURY: EDUCATION AND SCHOLARSHIP FROM THE EAST

In the year AD 668, Pope Vitalian consecrated as the successor to the See of Canterbury Theodore of Tarsus, a monk from the East then in Rome, likely due to the Muslim Conquest of Antioch. Theodore is important to the whole history of the English Church, but to the Antiochian Deanery he is especially important, as he is our patron Saint, offering many lessons for us today. The first Archbishop of Canterbury, St Augustine, had arrived the year of St Columba's death, in 597, choosing Canterbury as his seat both due to the welcoming king as well as the previous establishment of a church there in Roman times. Pope Vitalian, in 668, had first offered the position of Archbishop and primate of England to the Abbot Hadrian (or Adrian), a native of Africa, who refused, but the Pope sent him along anyway to assist Theodore in teaching, as well as to ensure that he did not introduce any Greek customs contrary to 'the true Faith' (as Bede puts it). He was already aged sixty-five when he was chosen for this task, but where many would retire or think they were too old, Theodore accepted the commission as a charge from God. Before he could be ordained, he had to wait four months for his hair to grow out from the Eastern tonsure – that of St Paul – and then cut in the Roman fashion. Theodore and Hadrian both were highly educated and set about establishing a school based at the Monastery of St Augustine at Canterbury (of which Hadrian was made abbot) with foremost instruction in the Holy Scriptures, but also poetry, astronomy, Greek and Latin. They brought a number of books and manuscripts for this school, too, and into the minds of their students they *'poured the waters of wholesome knowledge day by day'*. They also began to teach sacred music, which hitherto had been taught only minorly in all of England. In 672, Theodore called a Great English Church Council at Hertford, which was the very first English Church Council, but also the first general assembly with representatives from across England. Seven years later, in 679, he called another Council to maintain the purity of Orthodox doctrine and to condemn the heresy of Monothelitism, which was then controversial in the East. Despite his advanced age, Theodore traveled the breadth of England, founding churches, consecrating bishops, and organizing the Church according to dioceses. We commemorate St Theodore on the nineteenth of September, chanting his Troparion:

“Let the inhabited world rejoice for Theodore of Tarsus, who was brought to Rome by the Spirit. He studied the law of the Gospel and carried on his shoulders the hierarchy of the Church in England. O Theodore, you carried the spirit of Paul the Apostle, from his Eastern homeland. Illumine by the radiance of the Spirit of God within you our Church and establish it, so that the angels may rejoice.”

ST BRIGID AND HOLY WOMEN OF ENGLAND

The evangelization of Britain and Ireland was not simply the domain of men. One early tradition

holds that the Claudia whom St Paul mentions in Second Timothy was a British princess, whose brother was Linus, the future bishop of Rome. She and her husband returned to Britain, sharing the Faith. Another pious legend places St Mary in England. St Patrick encouraged the establishment of women's monasteries in Ireland, which helped to solidify the Christian presence. We find the names of dozens of women Saints in England in the writings of the Venerable Bede. One such, though little known today, was the Anglo-Saxon Saint Eanswythe, abbess of Folkstone in Kent, who is commemorated on the thirty-first of August. Under her influence, and overcoming great obstructions, St Eanswythe caused the building of the first women's monastery in England, about 630, and became its first abbess. She was likely guided by monks who accompanied St Augustine to Canterbury in 597. Interestingly, her miracle-working relics were hidden from the officers of Henry VIII (during the sixteenth century dissolution of the monasteries) and rediscovered in 1885 by workmen in a leaden reliquary hidden in a niche in a wall.

The more well-known St Hilda of Whitby, whose Orthodox feast day is the seventeenth of November, became abbess of the newly-founded double monastery of monks and nuns at Whitby in Northumbria in 655, when she was summoned by St Oswy from her Monastery at Hartlepool. She had become a nun at the age of thirty-three and had intended to go into exile in France, but St Aidan had recalled her and given her land at Hartlepool to establish a monastery, which she did on the model of the Early Fathers and Mothers. At Whitby, under St Hilda's care, the Holy Scriptures were especially studied, and numerous future bishops (including St Wilfrid of York) began their monastic careers here. St Hilda's wisdom was known far and wide, and many came to seek her counsel. Less than a decade later, in 644 AD, the famous Synod of Whitby was held which sought to settle the differences between Roman and Celtic practices such as the proper date of Easter and the correct monastic tonsure. This was not simply a case of Romans versus Celts, but was much more complicated as Irish, Romans, and Anglo-Saxon monks and missionaries all worked side-by-side in many instances, and variously influenced each other. Those we call Saints were sincere in their faith and sought Truth in these matters of doctrine and practice. St Hilda herself was a combination of all three elements, blending imperceptibly.

St Hilda is equally as famous for her nurturing and encouragement of the illiterate cow-herd Caedmon. As recorded by Bede, this Father of English Poetry was so shy in public that he would leave public gatherings when it came his turn to sing. But then he had a dream-vision in which a man appeared to him and told him to sing about the creation of the world. Immediately, he sung this first of English poems:

*“Now we must praise the Guardian of Heaven,
the might of the Lord and His purpose of mind,
the work of the Glorious Father; for He,
God Eternal, established each wonder,
He, Holy Creator, first fashioned
heaven as a roof for the sons of men.
The Guardian of Mankind adorned
this middle-earth below, the world for men,*

Everlasting Lord, Almighty King.”

Thenceforth, Hilda convinced Caedmon to be tonsured and directed literate monks to read the Scriptures to him, and he composed wondrous hymns in praise of God.

The most important of the early women Saints was St Brigid, who is even today one of the three most popular Saints in Ireland, along with Patrick and Columba. In the Orthodox Church, we commemorate her on the first of February. She was born about 450 in County Louth. From her childhood, she was known for her compassion for the poor, and was subsequently called 'the Mary of the Gael.' St Brigid received a monastic tonsure at the hands of St Mael of Ardagh and soon established her famous Monastery of Cill Dara, or Kildare, which was known as the 'City of the Poor' and was the beginning of cenobitic monasticism in Ireland. This was a good century-and-a-half prior to the establishment of the first women's monastery in England. A poem attributed to St Brigid goes:

*“I should like a great lake of finest ale
For the King of kings.
I should like a table of the choicest food
For the family of heaven.
Let the ale be made from the fruits of faith,
And the food be forgiving love.*

*I should welcome the poor to my feast,
For they are God's children.
I should welcome the sick to my feast,
For they are God's joy.
Let the poor sit with Jesus at the highest place,
And the sick dance with the angels.*

*God bless the poor,
God bless the sick,
And bless our human race.
God bless our food,
God bless our drink,
All homes, O God, embrace.”*

We get a sense of St Brigid's purpose and her evangelistic method through her purity of life and simple love for the poor and infirm. One story of her closeness to God relates how she was sitting with the blind nun Dara, talking from dusk to dawn of the joys of the Kingdom of Heaven and of the love of Christ. When morning came, St Brigid was saddened that Dara was unable to see the great beauty of the earth and sky around her and, praying, made the sign of the cross over Dara's eyes, giving her sight. Dara gazed in wonder for a time, then said, 'Close my eyes again, dear Mother, for when the world is visible to the eyes, then God is seen less clearly by the soul.' St Brigid prayed again, and Dara again became blind to this world.

A hymn in St Brigid's honour pays her tribute:

*“Her heart contained no poison, no snake lurked within her breast, she nursed no grudges,
harboured no resentments.
In the spiritual field where she sowed, the weather was always right.
When she sowed the seeds of the gospel in people's hearts, the soft rain would fall, so the seeds
would sprout.*

*When she taught Christians how to grow in the image of Christ, the sun shone in the day, and
the rain fell at night, so the fruits of good works would swell.*

*When she welcomed the sick and the dying, the weather was warm and dry, to prepare their
souls for God's harvest.*

Now in heaven she intercedes for us, sending upon us the gentle dew of God's grace.”

In the Orthodox Church, the Troparion to St Brigid is chanted:

*“O holy Brigid, you became sublime through your humility,
and flew on the wings of your longing for God.
When you arrived in the eternal City and appeared before your Divine Spouse,
wearing the crown of virginity,
you kept your promise
to remember those who have recourse to you.
You shower grace upon the world, and multiply miracles.
Intercede with Christ our God that He may save our souls.”*

IV: From the Norman Conquest to the Present: Britain and the Orthodox East

As had happened upon the invasions of the Saxons in the fifth and early sixth century, so too the Viking invasions of the ninth and tenth centuries nearly erased the Christian presence in much of Britain and Ireland. The Anglo-Saxons now experienced much the same as the Britons had suffered during their entry into the isles, and the Norman invasion further hastened change. Under William the Conqueror and his son William Rufus, nearly all of the bishops, abbots, and other church leaders were replaced or succeeded by natives of France and the Continent, those fully in the then-current church reform movement. A few Anglo-Saxon church leaders held out, however, centered at Worcester, and this area became a centre for a final flowering of the Anglo-Saxon Church. From here, three monks, including a former Norman knight, Reinfrid, journeyed north on pilgrimage to St Hilda's ruined Monastery of Whitby, which had been destroyed in the Danish invasion in 867. Reinfrid was motivated by the devastation he had witnessed whilst on campaign in Yorkshire, while another monk, Aldwin, was inspired by reading the Venerable Bede to visit the tomb of St Cuthbert. In the end, these monks and

their followers re-founded the monasteries of Whitby, Jarrow and Wearmouth (where Bede had been so active), revitalizing the monastic presence north of the Humber in Yorkshire for the first time since its demise under the merciless Viking invasions of the ninth century. Additionally, English monks were the leading missionaries in the Scandinavian countries from the Anglo-Saxon period and into early Norman rule, founding monasteries there as late as the twelfth century.

Although popular perception is often that the Great Schism between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in 1054 effectively silenced all beneficial relations between adherents of the two Churches, this is, of course, patently false. In fact, one could as easily narrow the dual excommunications of this year as a battle of egos, while no one expected the division to last long at all. The theological disputes – namely the *filioque* controversy and the issue of papal supremacy – had been building for several centuries, and the gulf would continue to expand, significantly following the Crusade against Constantinople in 1204. Nonetheless, contacts and relations continued between British, Irish, and Eastern Christianity.

Most well known, perhaps, is the account of the Varangians, who were Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians forming the personal bodyguard for the Byzantine emperor. The Anglo-Saxons, in particular, arrived in significant numbers following their disenfranchisement after 1066. Although there were several Latin chapels around Constantinople and these Anglo-Saxon Varangians were assigned a special church for their usage, they could not but help be influenced, over time, by the Eastern religious rites. Further north, several English Saints found their way into the Russian sphere. An All Saints' Litany in a twelfth century Russian Prayer to the Holy Trinity lists Saints Alban and Botolph, our patron, along with several Scandinavian Saints, including Olaf and Magnus. It is thought that these must have been added about 1135 AD via contacts with Scandinavia, where these Saints were all popular and, as already mentioned, English missionaries were highly active for several centuries prior.

A prime area for interaction between British and Irish with Orthodox Christians was in the Holy Land, especially during the Crusades, but both before and after. Indeed, in an age of pilgrimage many came from across the Christian world to venerate the Holy Places in Jerusalem, Constantinople, and lands in between. This was, of course, the era when English knights carried back the Cult of St George the Great-Martyr with them. St George is even today the most popular Saint amongst Christians in the Middle East (and even amongst many Muslims), and his powerful imagery led to his adoption soon after as the patron Saint of England, albeit modified for the English setting and reflecting Edward III's needs for the new Order of the Garter. His adoption led to the lessening of devotion for the ninth century martyr-king St Edmund of East Anglia, who was till then considered by many to be the patron Saint of England.

In addition to St George, pilgrims and Crusaders brought back imagery and a new understanding of the Christian East. For example, the Chapel of Our Lady of Walsingham, built after 1130-1 by Richelde de Fervaques, was planned as a reproduction of the House of the Virgin in Nazareth of the Holy Land. Inside the chapel was a statue of the Archangel Gabriel and a famous statue of the Theotokos that was depicted on pilgrim's badges. In another vein, Godric of Finchale, a young merchant from Durham, went on Holy Pilgrimage about the same time and was greatly influenced by

the monastic life he witnessed. In fact, he soon became a monk himself, practicing in County Durham the eremitic monasticism that he witnessed amongst the Greek, Georgian, Armenian, and Syrian Jacobite monks who lived in the ancient tombs along the Valley of Jehosaphat. He even replicated as best he could their diet of locusts and honey. At this period in Palestine, however, the tradition of *locustae* was determined to be beans from the locust tree; thus Godric ate grass and wild honey.

In the year of our Lord 1400, the Byzantine Emperor, Manuel II Palaeologos [made famous not too long ago when Pope Benedict referred to his views on the peaceful merits of Islam], was entertained by King Henry IV over Christmas at Eltham in today's south-east London. The emperor was then on a fruitless tour of Western Europe seeking material and logistical aid for his besieged empire. The chronicler Adam of Usk wrote that the emperor and his suite of forty celebrated the Divine Liturgy whilst in London (as they had in Paris). *'These Greeks,'* he says, *'were most devout in their church services, which were joined in as well by soldiers as by priests, chanting in their native tongue.'* The emperor, in turn, was so impressed with his reception that, in a letter to a friend, he referred to the English Court as *'a second universe.'* The first, of course, was at Constantinople, despite its diminished state. As to assistance, the English king offered a joust in the emperor's honour, and the people of London staged a mummery, but little else. Constantinople was too far away and perhaps too abstract, whereas the king's own problems much closer to home were very real.

Two centuries later, in the early Stuart period, Greek scholars are recorded as residing in Oxford. These included Christopher Angelos, who wrote the first work about the Greek Orthodox Church for English readers, Metrophanes Kritopoulos, a future Patriarch of Alexandria, and Nathaniel Canopus, who introduced coffee-drinking to England. Theodore Palaeologos, a scion of the Byzantine imperial family, died in 1636 in Cornwall and is buried at Landulph. Metropolitan Kallistos suggests that it is unlikely that the Orthodox Liturgy was celebrated at this time in Oxford, despite two of these figures being priests. Rather, it is more likely that they simply attended Anglican services. The first Greek Church opened in 1677 in Soho in London, but soon closed as the Anglican bishop demanded the exclusion of icons and forbade the invocation of the Theotokos and the Saints. Later in the century, there was a failed attempt to establish a Greek College at Oxford, but this failed due to financial reasons. Early in the next century, between 1716 and 1725, the group of Jacobite Anglican bishops called the Non-Jurors entered into detailed proposals for unity with the Patriarch of Constantinople, which, of course, came to nothing. The first permanent Orthodox church in Britain opened in London in 1713 and became the Russian embassy chapel eight years later. Until 1837, this was the only Orthodox church in Britain, with Greek as well as Russian clergy serving. Just after the middle of the century, in 1763, John Wesley invited a Greek Orthodox bishop then in Amsterdam, named Gerasimos, to ordain his preachers, as Wesley was unable to find a willing Anglican bishop. Thus, the Methodists, in a sense, are apostolically linked with the Orthodox Church! At the end of the century, in 1791, the future Fifth Earl of Guilford, Frederic North, was received into the Orthodox Church via baptism on the Greek Island of Corfou. This is one of the earliest British converts to Orthodoxy on record, and he would remain faithful all his life, if largely in secret.

The first period of significant Orthodox immigration to Britain occurred in the 1820s during the Greek War of Independence. It is from this group that the Cathedral of St Sophia in Bayswater owes its

origins, opening in 1879. They also established the first Orthodox church in Wales, opening in Cardiff in 1903. At the First World War, there were only five Orthodox parishes in Britain. Most Russians who fled the Bolshevik Revolution settled in France, while many of the Greeks had intermarried and even become Anglicans. There is, of course, the moving account of Archimandrite Nicholas Gibbes (born Charles Sydney Gibbes), who was the English tutor to the children of Tsar Nicholas and was so moved by their piety that upon his return to England following their martyrdom he was tonsured a monk and lived the rest of his days in service to Christ and the Orthodox Church, founding a parish at Oxford in 1941.

A few years later, in 1922, the Ecumenical Patriarchate established the Metropolis of Thyateira, with the episcopal seat in London. During and in the decades after the Second World War, numerous Greeks from British Cyprus immigrated to Britain, as did Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Serbs, and Poles, these latter fleeing the clutches of the Soviet Union. Thus, by 1963, there were fifty-eight parishes in Britain, though half of these were only in occasional usage. The first Orthodox church in Scotland was founded by Greeks in Glasgow in 1944, while the first resident Orthodox priest in Ireland was ordained by ROCOR in 1967. Various national-ethnic Orthodox churches were founded in Britain in the interim, including the first Antiochian parish in just 1989. Six years later, as many of you well know, about twelve Anglican priests and perhaps two or three hundred laypeople were received together into the Antiochian Deanery under our beloved Father Michael Harper. Thus, by 2005, there were approximately 217 Orthodox churches in Britain (again, many not active every Sunday), seventy-five percent of which were founded since 1965. There were thought to be between 250,000 and 350,000 Orthodox in Britain in 2005, and of these perhaps about ten percent, or twenty-five thousand, regularly attend the Divine Liturgy.

This then brings us up to date, but where do we go from here?

V: Orthodox Missions and the British and Irish Saints

Sadly, all too often the Orthodox Church is not thought of as a missionary Church. Largely, this is due to our limited historical perception based on the reality that most of the Orthodox Churches in the twentieth century were under the yoke of atheistic Communism or in *dhimmi* status within *Dar al-Islam*. One might first all think it a veritable miracle that there is an Orthodox Church today at all, but looking closer one sees that even in such an age of rampant persecution, Orthodox Christianity has continued its missionary endeavours, particularly in Africa, but also in Asia, Europe, and the Anglophone world. In truth, we have a long and rich missionary tradition in Orthodoxy realized in the East by such Saints as Cyril, Methodius, and Herman, and, in the West, by Saints such as Patrick, Columba, and Aidan. Those like St Theodore of Tarsus bridge the two realms, bringing together the Orthodox Christian world in an age before the Great Schism.

Despite the great examples provided by our British and Irish Saints, perhaps to many they seem abstract and far separated from us here today. Many might even ask if Orthodoxy and evangelism are even compatible. In his discussion of Orthodox mission theology, Fr Alexander Schmemmann posits the question of whether a Church with a sacramental, liturgical, and mystical ethos can truly have a

missionary imperative. His answer, of course, is a resounding yes. It is, indeed, the very nature of the Church, which is *'first of all and before everything else a God-created and God-given reality, the presence of Christ's new life, the manifestation of the new eon of the Holy Spirit.'* The church is, therefore, a means of grace, the sacrament of the kingdom as realized in the Eucharist. *'For within the Eucharist, the church accomplishes the passage from this world into the world to come.'* In the Divine Liturgy every Sunday we hear the eucharistic prayer: *'And thou didst not cease to do all things until thou hadst brought us back to heaven, and hadst endowed us with thy kingdom...'* This, then, is the mission of the church as God's gift, but the church is also human response to the divine gift. The first part of the response is God-centered: 'it is the sanctification, the growth in holiness, of both the Christian individual and the Christian community, the "acquisition by them of the Holy Spirit."' The second aspect of the church as response is man- or world-centered, in that the church is left in this world, in this time, for a purpose, a mission. The church is the fullness of heaven, but sent into the world for its salvation. *'The eschatological nature of the church,'* writes Fr Schmemmann, *'is not the negation of the world, but, on the contrary, its affirmation and acceptance as the object of divine love.'* The Eucharist, offered 'on behalf of all and for all', then takes us in a mystical ascent toward the throne of God, ascending with Christ and in Christ. We are, in a sense, taken up to heaven. But then we come to the part of the Liturgy that exclaims 'we have seen the true Light and partaken of the Holy Spirit', and thus begins our descent, our return into this world. At the end, the celebrant says 'let us depart in peace' and we are sent into the world in a final commandment as Christ's witnesses to what we have seen. 'Without this ascension into the kingdom we would have had nothing to witness to.' Thus in the Orthodox Church, our understanding of mission has a decidedly cosmic and historical perspective.

Although some nay-sayers might reduce all the accounts of the early Irish and English Saints as mere hagiography, it seems to me that they were very real, even if all of the legends and miracles attributed to them may or may not have been. As Christians – as Orthodox – we believe in the miraculous. If God can become Man, and Man can arise from the dead, surely lesser miracles can also occur? Regardless, what made these Saints so effective, indeed, so holy, can be summed up in an early Irish Triad: *'In three places will be found the most of God: where He is mostly sought; where He is mostly loved; where there is least of self.'* This is the example to us laid out in the lives of the early British and Irish Fathers and Mothers, and we would be wise to heed these words in our own personal struggles towards deification. Whether it is the humility of Patrick, the compassion of Brigid, or the gentleness of Aidan, there is much that we can learn. Whether the steadfastness and faith of Alban, the administrative skills of Hilda and Theodore, or the scholarship of Bede, there is much that we might emulate. One thing all these early Saints had in common was that their evangelism – whether active or passive – began with the example of their own holy lives.

A century-old prophecy attributed to St Arsenios of Cappadocia and related by Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) states that the Orthodox Church in the British Isles will begin to grow again only when the Orthodox there once more venerate their own Saints. Many have found an answer to this charge in the Western Rite of the Orthodox Church, while others have embraced the Byzantine Rite. We have a rich heritage here in Ireland and Britain, be it at Kildare or Iona, at Lindisfarne or Canterbury, and we should again seek out these holy places once so dear to the Christians in centuries past. As Metropolitan Kallistos rightly notes, though we are a relatively small community in these Isles, yet many

Orthodox have given of their talents in witness to their faith. Some of the more visible are those involved in the translation of liturgical texts, while some are theologians, and others use their artistic talents in iconography and liturgical vestments. For every one of these, however, there are dozens more involved in the less visible areas, such as upkeep, serving, and the choir. As the Apostle Paul notes, we all have different God-given talents, and we can all use them in the service of the Church. *'There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all...'* (I Corinthians 12: 4-7). *'Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts...let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel'* (I Corinthians 14:1a and 12b). Do not hide your light under a bushel, but as it is Christ shining in you, let it shine to the world. Be confident in that it is Christ at work within you. We read in the Desert Fathers: *'Let one person be transformed, and hundreds will be saved around him.'*

Brothers and sisters, the work is great, but the workers are few. Christ has entrusted us with talents. Will we bury them in the ground from fear that he is a 'harsh master', or will we invest them in our neighbour? In these uncertain times, secularists are all too quickly learning the folly of entrusting all of their hopes and cares to material interests. But if this is all they have and they are ignorant of their ancient Christian heritage (as most are), upon what shall they fall back? Christianity is passé in so much of the popular perception as generated by the media and the intellectual classes, but they also seldom really know what it means to find Life in Christ. Their's is the superficial understanding similar to the false teaching and rumours about Christianity so rampant in the Muslim world. As to the Church of England, the low attendance numbers should come as no surprise to anyone. Even if it wanted to be true to its ancient Christian heritage, it is hamstrung by a ruling body that is indifferent to biblical and apostolic teaching. As the Anglican Church is simply a branch of a British government that is dominated by secularists and an ever-growing number of atheists, agnostics, and practitioners of non-Christian religions, it should come as no surprise that it has lost its way in the larger sense. This is not to say that there cannot be good parishes that minister to their communities and in which participants find spiritual sustenance, but rather that if the Church is an instrument of British government, how can it fail to represent the views and aims of said government?

In the public forum for ideas in England, secularist materialism is by and large the greatest draw, the wealthiest and most visible religion – yes, "religion" whether its adherents realize it or not. And even within the Church, we are all seduced to some degree or other. Amongst ethnic Orthodox in the United Kingdom, how many of the second generation have retained the holy Faith of their ancestors? Besides secularism – in my own experience – I generally see two religious groups proselytizing: Muslims and Evangelical Protestants. Imagine my shock the first time I saw a London city bus with a bus-length poster espousing the teachings of Mohammad (often against the Incarnation) with verses from the Qu'ran! As to the Evangelical Christians, I personally am sympathetic to them on a certain level – the sincerity and earnestness of their faith and their great energy in sharing it – but how much is lost in their very limited understanding of the richness and the fullness of the Christian Faith, of the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the fully-God, fully-Man, the Eternal Logos! As

Metropolitan Philip (Saliba) has written, how great are the workings of the Evangelicals when they have so little, and yet we Orthodox who have so much have but little to show for it!

Now, I am not suggesting that we should be like Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons (clearly practitioners of revived ancient heresies in new form, whom no doubt are also very present and active in this city) – and go door to door harassing the neighbours. Somehow, that does not seem very Orthodox. But what I am suggesting is that we should not hide in our houses, should not sit in our study reading the latest book by Metropolitan Kallistos and have no concern for others. *'But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves,'* says James the brother of Jesus. *'Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works'* (James 1:22 and 2:18). Faith and works, then, go together. It is habit, perhaps, that we so often expect our clergy to take care of all the religious aspects of our lives and the life of the Church, but this is simply not the case. I assure you, if you find an Orthodox priest who is lazy and not working hard, come find our Fr Alexander Tefft and he will find productive work for idle hands! In this sense, we are reminded of the Apostle Paul's admonition that we are all of the Priesthood of the Believers. We are all called to the fullness of life in the holy Orthodox Christian Faith, and this includes not only our search for holiness and our path to *theosis*. Or perhaps it is, indeed, part of our path to deification that we are called to search our hearts and determine our talents, our gifts, and use them for the glory of God and to the furtherance of His holy Church. If you are musically inclined, sing loudly, practice diligently. If you are a poet, like Caedmon (and Fr Jonathan Hemmings, I might add), write verse to the glory of God. If you are a painter, worship God through your art. It is true, of course, that not all of our gifts are so evident as these of the Arts. But one thing unites us all, whether we be in the fields of medicine or dentistry, agriculture or academia, engineering or construction or hospitality. And that is prayer. Whether you are gardening plants or gardening souls, pray in all things. Pray for those you come in contact with, and for the situations in which you find yourself. As in the ancient days of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon England when the spiritually-seeking would find a holy man or woman in the farthest reaches of the wilderness, it is humanity's calling to seek after holiness as found in the Divine, whether fifteen hundred years ago or in twenty-first century London. This is humanity's purpose: to glorify God. This is our path to deification. We should not dwell on the Golden Age of Christianity in Britain with nostalgia and lament the present while dismissing the future bereft of hope. Rather, we should look to the past for inspiration for our present work whilst building the House of God for tomorrow. Learn from the past, but live in the present. As Fr Alexander Elchaninov has written:

"Our continual mistake is that we do not concentrate upon the present day, the actual hour, of our life; we live in the past or in the future; we are continually expecting the coming of some special moment when our life will unfold itself in its full significance. And we do not notice that life is flowing like water through our fingers, sifting like precious grain from a loosely fastened bag.

Constantly, each day, each hour, God is sending us people, circumstances, tasks, which should mark the beginning of our renewal; yet we pay them no attention, and thus continually we resist God's will for us. Indeed, how can God help us? Only by sending us in our daily life certain

people, and certain coincidences of circumstance. If we accepted every hour of our life as the hour of God's will for us, as the decisive, most important, unique hour of our life -- what sources of joy, love, strength, as yet hidden from us, would spring from the depths of our soul!

Let us then be serious in our attitude towards each person we meet in our life, towards every opportunity of performing a good deed; be sure that you will then fulfill God's will for you in these very circumstances, on that very day, in that very hour."

Finally, then, I will close where I began – with the writings of a fourth century Church Father living in an age with great similarities to our own. It is namely in that search for our true calling that some find easier than others, and some do not consciously even know it, and perhaps never will, especially if we are silent. Hilary of Poitiers' quest for the meaning of life eventually brought him to the gospel espoused in the first chapter of John: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...' Of a sudden, he found that he was home after many years of fruitless searching; he had found his true calling. 'I understood,' he writes,

"that my Creator was God born of God. I learnt that the Word was God and was with him from the beginning. I came to know the light of the world...I understood that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us...Those who welcomed him became children of God, by a birth not in the flesh but in faith...This gift of God is offered to everyone...We can receive it because of our freedom which was given us expressly for this purpose. But this very power given to each person to be a child of God was bogged down in weak and hesitant faith. Our own difficulties make hope painful, our desire becomes infuriating and our faith grows weak. That is why the Word was made flesh: by means of the Word-made-flesh the flesh was enabled to raise itself up to the Word...Without surrendering his divinity God was made of our flesh...My soul joyfully received the revelation of this mystery. By means of my flesh I was drawing near to God, by means of my faith I was called to a new birth."

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