

The Communion of the Saints & Pilgrimage in the British Isles

‘Whoever has wished to go has already started on the pilgrimage. And once you have started, every step upon the road is a step towards [St Albans]¹. Even steps which seem to have no meaning are taking you by byways and lanes to the high-road. For the heart guides the steps, and has intentions too deep for the mind to grasp at once... Once we have consciously known ourselves as pilgrims on the way, then all the people and the scenes about us have a new significance. They are seen in their right perspective. Upon the pilgrim’s road our imperfect eyes come into focus for all earthly phenomena.’

With these words, Stephen Graham begins his moving account *With the Russian Pilgrims to Jerusalem*. Although he is speaking specifically of the great pilgrimage to the earthly Jerusalem, in a deeper sense he is referring to the holy journey to the Heavenly Jerusalem testified to by St John the Theologian in the Book of Revelation. And in this journey – this holy pilgrimage – we can relate to here at St Albans. And so I welcome you in fulfilling your pilgrimage pledged when first you received your invitation from the Fellowship of St Erkenwald and the Orthodox Church of St Botolph’s. I do not see any pilgrim’s staffs, broad-brimmed hats, or srips – but I do hope that you have your nifty St Alban’s pilgrim’s badge, at least.

Although pilgrimage as we think of it really had its hey-day beginning in the twelfth

¹ Originally ‘Jerusalem’.

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century, there was certainly pilgrimage activity much earlier. Indeed, even before the time of Christ's earthly Incarnation, Jews would journey to the Tombs of the Patriarchs and other shrines, as did peoples of other cultures and religions. Within the Christian world, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and even Protestants follow the practice of holy pilgrimage, though for the latter, in particular, the concepts would widely differ. Our Roman Catholic friends' understanding of pilgrimage shifted following Vatican II [as did so much else], but from the Orthodox perspective, the Catholic approach altered even more in the High Middle Ages with its emphasis on penance, purgatory, and indulgences. Within the Orthodox Church, however (and this is something that we have in common with the Oriental Orthodox), our approach is based on our understanding that God builds his relationship with us through the other members of His body. We understand pilgrimage in the light of the Resurrection of Christ, *theosis*, relics, and the Communion of the Saints as is found in the Holy Scriptures and the Church Fathers. Today I would like to briefly discuss the Orthodox understanding of Holy Pilgrimage, and then continue with a description of some of the more well-known Christian pilgrimage sites in the British Isles, focusing mostly on England. Many of the best-known sites in England are devoted to Western Saints whom we typically do not recognise in the Orthodox Church, such as Thomas à Becket, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kemp. My focus shall largely, therefore, though not exclusively, rest on the earlier period prior to the Norman Conquest.

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In the ancient world, the term *pilgrimage* – from the Latin *peregrinatio* – simply

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meant 'going abroad'. For the Early Church – and the Orthodox understanding – pilgrimage was expressed as to 'go to pray at' a place. St Gregory of Nyssa, for example, in his *Life of St Macrina*, describes it in this way. Furthermore, the Greek word often translated as 'pilgrim' is *proskynitis*, which really has a connotation of 'one who worships and bows down, i.e. before the icons, relics, and holy places.' In the Western sense, then, an essential part of pilgrimage is the journey and difficulties encountered en route. For the Eastern pilgrim, on the other hand, what matters is what he does upon arrival at the shrine – not how he got there. As Phillip Sherrard has written, 'pilgrimage is not simply a matter of getting to a particular shrine or holy place. It is a deliberate sundering and surrender of one's habitual conditions of comfort, routine, safety, convenience. ...the pilgrim breaks with his material servitude, puts his trust in God and sets out on a quest which is inward as much as outward, and is, in varying degrees, into the unknown. [T]hrough all this – and only through all this, and through his prayer and dedication and confidence – slowly an inner change is wrought, a new rhythm grows, a deeper harmony. The pilgrimage is at work.'

Our Protestant friends may challenge us and question why one needs to go and pray in a certain place or before certain deceased persons. Was this something made up in later days by half-pagan Christians? In fact, visits to martyrs tombs were one of the very earliest forms of Christian worship. The body or relics of the martyr were often arranged so that oil could be poured into the coffin or ossuary and thence into small jars. Veneration of Saints and offering the Divine Liturgy on relics embedded in the Holy Altar is derived from the early practice of serving the Liturgy in Tombs. We read, for example, in the Martyrdom of St Polycarp of Smyrna (ca. A.D. 155) that:

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We afterwards [following his execution] took up his bones which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place; where the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together, as we are able, in gladness and joy, and to celebrate the birth-day of his martyrdom for the commemoration of those that have already fought in the contest, and for the training and preparation of those that shall do so hereafter.

Although the doctrine of the Communion of the Saints and the related idea of pilgrimage were developed by the Early Fathers, their reasoning is rooted in the words of the Holy Scriptures. For example, in the Book of Revelation, St John the Evangelist witnessed ‘under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held’ – i.e. the Martyrs of the Church. The souls under the altar are related to the Jewish practice of pouring the blood (‘the physical manifestation of the life of the soul’) of sin offerings at the base of the altar, and is the basis for the Christian practice of building churches over the tombs of martyrs and placing the relics of saints in the altar when a church is consecrated.

In Hebrews chapter twelve, the Apostle Paul encourages us to ‘run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus’ because we ‘are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses’ who have gone before. He says this in the present tense – the saints are with us even now. Our goal is the ‘city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect...’ In Christ, we can ascend to this heavenly place in worship and prayer, as we do spiritually every time we

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participate in the Divine Liturgy. Indeed, as Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) has noted,

‘Worship, for the Orthodox Church, is nothing else than “heaven on Earth.” The holy liturgy is something that embraces two worlds at once, for both in heaven and on earth the liturgy is one and the same – one altar, one sacrifice, one presence. In every place of worship, however humble its outward appearance, as the faithful gather to perform the Eucharist, they are taken up into the “heavenly places”; in every place of worship when the holy sacrifice is offered, not merely the local congregation is present, but the church universal – the saints, the angels, the Mother of God, and Christ himself. [As we sing at the Great Entrance in the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified:] “Now the celestial powers are present with us, and worship invisibly” – “This we know, that God dwells there among humans.”’

In Christ, Death is defeated. If this is so, then those united in Christ are united together, whether in this world or the world to come. Thus, there is no separation. We are with them by the rite of the Liturgy, and they are amongst us, in Mystery. When we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, it is not something only physically taking place before our eyes, but mystically in Heaven. The presence of their icons reminds us that we are joined together with Christ and the Angelic Host, and with the Saints, alive in Christ. St Dionysius the Areopagite in his *Ecclesiastical History* elaborates:

[We read the names of] those who have lived holy lives and whose consistent efforts earned for them the perfection of a virtuous life. In this way we are enticed and encouraged to follow their example and to adopt a mode of living which will guarantee us both greater happiness and that happiness which comes of conformity to God. For this proclamation announces them as alive, as those who have not died but, as the word of God teaches us, who have passed from death to a more perfectly divine life [1 John

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3:14, John 5:24].

The Liturgy itself is, of course, replete with symbolism and it is no mistake that the names of the Saints are read out just as the Communion vessels ('the reverend symbols by which Christ is signaled and partaken', as St Dionysius the Areopagite refers to them) are placed on the Divine Altar. We also implore God to 'visit us' through the supplications of the Saints; their intercessory prayers are joined to our supplications. The Saints, as Fr. Emmanuel Hatzidakis reminds us, 'are present and partake in a more perfect way of the Divine Liturgy, foretasting *already* the Kingdom.' As St Maximus the Confessor wrote:

[t]he world is one...for the spiritual world in its totality is manifested in the totality of the perceptible world, mystically expressed in symbolic pictures for those who have eyes to see. And the perceptible world in its entirety is secretly fathomable by the spiritual world in its entirety, when it has been simplified and amalgamated by means of the spiritual realities. The former is embodied in the latter through the realities; the latter in the former through the symbols. The operation of the two is one.

The Church Invisible is primarily in the spiritual realm, whilst the Visible Church is 'in the World, though not of the World.' Indeed, we are 'on travel' and hastening to our 'native country in the heavenly world', as Gregory the Great reminds us. Caesarius of Arles notes that 'We ought to be pilgrims in this world, in order that we may deserve to be citizens in heaven.' This pilgrimage is not, of course, external in focus, but rather is an interior pilgrimage that we experience in our inner selves. In the Divine Liturgy, we are mystically pervaded by its heavenly nature within us, as the grace of the Holy Spirit by the Blood of the Lamb sanctifies this world through us, the Body of Christ. But God, the Heavenly Bodies and hosts of angels, and the Saints who have passed into life in its fullness are here to help us. '[T]hey keep watch

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over the slow and painful exodus of humanity towards the Kingdom,' writes Olivier Clement. 'As discarnate souls, the Saints after their death...keep watch in the light for the ultimate transfiguration of the cosmos and therewith of their bodies. They await the fulfillment of the illimitable human and divine communion when God shall be manifestly "all in all". 'We invoke [the Saints] to help us', says St Symeon of Thessalonica, 'since they too were of our same nature, taking thought for us and having power with God because they struggled for His glorification.' Indeed, we hear of this honour and high esteem for the Saints even from the earliest days of Christianity. In *The Letter of the Smyrnaeans* (ca. 155), in which is recorded the martyrdom of St Polycarp, we read: '...the Son of God, we adore, but the Martyrs, as disciples and imitators of the Lord, we cherish as they deserve for their matchless affection towards their own Kind and Teacher. May it be our lot also to be found partakers and fellow-disciples with them.' St Nicholas Caviasilas is even more emphatic, asserting that the Saints are the very reason that God became Man and thus are commemorated throughout the Divine Liturgy.

The choir of Saints is the completion and the fruit of all the benefits He has bestowed upon our race; for it heaven and earth and the whole created universe were made...Passion and Death had but one purpose – that men might be raised from earth to heaven, that they might inherit the Kingdom. The Saints are the end of all, and it is because of them that we ask for all the other things; so that when the Church gives thanks for anything, it is always for the perfection of the Saints that She is giving thanks. All that the Lord has made was made that the choir of Saints might be established; and the Church whenever She gives thanks, has the choir of Saints in mind.'

Each of us must have our own personal relationship with Christ, as our Evangelical

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friends often note, but our salvation is not an isolated event. We are all Sons and Daughters of Adam and Eve and as Christ taught us to pray 'Our Father', so we are all united together, either with those physically amongst us now or with those who are already in heaven. This is what is meant by 'the Communion of the Saints'. Sergius Bulgakov tells us that:

The saints in their totality, headed by the Theotokos and the Forerunner, form the glory of God in human creation....The saints are those who by their active faith and love have become like God, and show forth the image of God in its power, those who have obtained for themselves abundant grace. In this purification of the heart by a heroic effort of mind and body lies the road to salvation for everyone in whom Christ abides...'

Echoing the Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians (2:20): 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' Christ Himself, in the Gospel of John (14:23), said, 'If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.' ... The saints are our intercessors and our protectors in the heavens and, in consequence, living and active members of the church militant. Their blessed presence in the church manifests itself in their pictures and their relics. They surround us with a cloud of prayer, a cloud of the glory of God....The saints are not mediators between God and humans – [for] this would set aside the unique Mediator, which is Christ – [but] they are our friends, who pray with us and aid us in our Christian ministry and in our communion with Christ... Saints can help us, not by force of their deserts but by force of the spiritual freedom in love that they have acquired through their spiritual efforts. This freedom gives them the power to represent us before God in prayer, and also in effective love for human beings. God accords to the saints, as to the angels, the power to accomplish his will by active though invisible aid accorded to humans. They are the church invisible which lives with the same life as the church visible. They are the hands of God by which God performs his works. This is why it is given to the saints to do deeds of love even after their death, not as works necessary to their salvation – for their salvation is already attained – but to aid their brothers in the way of salvation.'

Whilst some view the communion of the saints as so much superstition and potential polytheism, Bulgakov warns against those Christians who abandon the saints based on these fears. ‘Those who reject [the saints] suffer great spiritual loss,’ he says. ‘[W]hile remaining near to Christ, they lose their true relation to him. They are destined to remain spiritually without a family, without a race, without home, without fathers and brothers in Christ. They traverse the way of salvation all alone, each one for himself without looking for examples and without knowing communion with others.’ ... They replace the saints of the church by turning to reading the apostles or the doctors (Early Fathers), ‘But from these latter only teaching is received; it is impossible to pray with them or to them.’

RELICS & DEIFICATION

One way that we understand our connection to our holy predecessors is through their relics. Although to many of us the idea of keeping – much less venerating – bones or belongings of a dead person seems quite strange, it is, in truth, a practice rooted in the Holy Scriptures. For example:

In Fourth Kingdoms (more often known as Second Kings) chapter thirteen (20-21), we read: ‘Now Elisha died, and they buried him. Then in the following year, the raiding bands from Moab invaded the land. And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, they beheld a lightly armed band of raiders, and cast the man into the tomb of Elisha. When the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood up on his feet.’

In the Book of Acts, chapter nineteen (11-12), we read: 'Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.'

These scriptural allusions testify to the doctrine of deification, or *theosis*: 'God became man so that we might become divine.' This is based on 2 Peter 1:4: 'Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: so that through these you might become partakers in the divine nature...' No man can see the face of God in His essence, but His energies envelop the cosmos within and without. When we cooperate, we begin the journey to the transfigured state as witnessed to on Mt Tabor. This is truly not a new life for humanity, but our true life, our true state disrupted by the Fall. But whilst you and I might feel a long way from this holy state, there are those whom the Church calls saints who are much further along, much like the Prophet Elisha or St Paul. For example, in a well-known passage from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*,

Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame.

More recently, the nineteenth century Russian *starets* St Seraphim of Sarov was noted for his experience of the divine light of the transfigured state.

The state and process of sanctification remains with the earthly remains of the saint, as

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we see in the case of the Prophet Elisha and the Apostle Paul. The sanctity of the soul is infused into the body, into the relics. Thus their very body and bones are made holy, as is their clothing and items about their person. We see these relics most readily in every Divine Liturgy, as it is celebrated on a dedicated cloth called the *antimension*, which has several small portions of relics. This is in remembrance of the ‘primitive church, where the liturgy was celebrated on the tombs of the martyrs.’

But the cult of the saints is nothing without Christ. Indeed, all things in the understanding of the Church point towards Christ. As the woman with the issue of blood touched the border of the garment of Christ and was healed [Luke 8:44], so do we in the Orthodox Church come in contact physically with Christ through icons, oil, water, bread and wine. When done in faith, the power of Christ is received. The transfigured state of the saints and their relics is the light of Christ shining through, and it is ultimately to our Saviour whom we turn when we seek the intercessions of the *Theotokos* and the saints.

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Although these doctrines of the Communion of the Saints and relics were initially developed by the Early Fathers, largely from the Byzantine East, we find that when the Irish and Anglo-Saxons first encountered Christianity, they took right to these teachings. Christianity opened up a whole new world to the Anglo-Saxons. The Communion of the Saints added a sense of ‘another dimension of life’. Thus they venerated established British saints, such as St Alban, and went to Rome on pilgrimage, but they also sought out their own

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saints. The early English Christians visited the tombs of the dead saints, collected soil from them, and expected cures there, a vivid reminder of the ‘surrounding life of heaven on earth’. Pilgrims to the Saxon church at Hexham, for example, came from the time of its founding by St Wilfrid in 674 because of the relics he had brought from Rome and placed inside the altar. St Bede writes of regular processions at Jarrow in which precious relics were always the centre piece. As Benedicta Ward puts it, ‘The bones of the founders of the Church were to enrich the soil of England with holiness; a gateway was there for men to go in and out and find pasture.’ The Venerable Bede said that the world was in the sixth and last age, and the saints – who were alongside the living – were also ‘alive and awaiting the last day.’ It was expected that the saints would help to care for the faithful till death. ‘The great cloud witnesses was still close at hand and could be asked to intervene in earthly affairs.’ Bede, in his *Commentary on Genesis*, writes: ‘Through the intercessions of the saints who shine, not through their own power but from Him, Christ will be propitious to the faithful when they raise their minds to heavenly desires and recognise His glory in the words and deeds of those who have preceded them in the fight.’ ‘The actual state of the physical remains of the new saints in England were seen more specifically as a sign of the resurrection and a pledge of the Kingdom.’ Certain saints’ bodies remained incorrupt after death: Etheldreda, Cuthbert, Fursey, and the arm of St Oswald. The Anglo-Saxon ‘converts buried their dead to await the resurrection rather than burning them, and beside these bones the poor and sick were healed.’ The power of prayer was stronger next to where the earthly remains lay, for the ‘gate was not entirely closed when the saints had passed through.’ On a practical level, saints could be great examples and an encouragement in times of difficulty. Again, Bede commends us: ‘Beseech the souls who have preceded you to heaven to aid you by their good example and by recalling to you the

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beginning, course and enduring of the road of virtue which they traveled.’ For the early English Christians, then, ‘heaven was no vague and distant future; it was an immediate and daily way of life, filled with friends.’

As to pilgrimage in the British Isles specifically, prior to the 8th century *perigrinus* (‘pilgrim’) usually referred to a monk somewhat between a hermit and a pilgrim and usually engaged in self-imposed ‘white martyrdom’ – exile from their native land. Even so, in a homily written about 1000 AD in honour of St Columba’s Feastday, all the faithful are encouraged to this pursuit:

‘God counselled Abraham to leave his own country and go in pilgrimage into the land which God had shown him, to wit, the ‘Land of Promise’...Now the good counsel which God enjoined here on the father of the faithful is incumbent on all the faithful, that is to leave their country and their land, their wealth and their worldly delight for the sake of the Lord of the Elements, and to go in perfect pilgrimage in imitation of Him.’

References to popular pilgrimage are generally scarce (as in Europe as a whole), however, as it was generally not written about unless something extraordinary happened – such as once when a lightning strike on Ireland’s holy mountain of Croagh Patrick killed thirty pilgrims on the Feast Day of St Patrick. Whilst the vast pilgrimage culture that we think of in the Middle Ages took off fervently in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, that is not to say that it was non-existent much earlier. Again in Ireland, the seventh century writer Cogitosus (ca. 675) gives this account of the Feastday of St Bridget at Kildare: ‘And so who can count the different crowds and numberless peoples flocking from all the provinces – some for the abundant feasting, others for the healing of their afflictions, others to watch the pageant of the crowds,

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others with great gifts and offerings – to join in the solemn celebration of the feast of saint Brigid ... on the first day of the month of February.’

ST ALBANS

In England proper, the first pilgrimage account that I have found is that of St Germanus, bishop of Auxerre (418-48), who came to England in A.D. 429 – just a few decades before St Bridget was active at Kildare – to preach against the Pelagian heresy. In the *Life of St Germanus*, written about 480 by Constantius of Lyons, we learn that St Germanus and his colleague, Bishop Lupus of Troyes, purposefully visited this very place, the tomb of St Alban. How fitting, then, that we, too, should be here. Constantius tells us: ‘The damnable heresy being suppressed and its authors utterly confuted, and the minds of all calmed with the purity of the faith, the bishops went to the tomb of the blessed martyr Alban to give thanks to God through the saint.’ They also credited their safe and uneventful journey home to Gaul to the intercession of St. Alban: ‘Their own virtues and the intercession of Alban, the martyr, procured for them a tranquil passage, and the happy vessel restored them in peace to their own people that longed for them.’ St Alban is, of course, the Protomartyr of Britain and the first account of his martyrdom is recorded by Gildas the Wise in about 550 AD. Gildas says that the Christians, after the persecutions were ended, constructed basilicas in honour of the martyrs, and celebrated their feast days with joyful piety. He is remarked upon not much later by Venantius Fortunatus, Bishop of Poitiers (c. 600-609) and then the Venerable Bede, whose account is much more developed. Bede provides us with two other names of those martyred in the same persecution as Alban – Aaron and Julius, from Caerleon-on-Usk in Wales. He

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also reiterates Gildas and says that, once the persecution was ended, ‘a beautiful church worthy of [St Alban’s] martyrdom was built, where sick folk are healed and frequent miracles take place to this day.’ In Bede’s account, St. Germanus came to the Tomb of St. Alban and commanded the tomb to be opened, placing within the tomb relics of all the Apostles and of several martyrs and taking away some dust stained with the blood of the martyr Alban. ‘For he thought it fitting,’ says Bede, ‘that, as the equal merits of the saints had won them a place in heaven, so their relics should be gathered together from different lands into a common resting-place.’ At one point, he was approached by a tribune beseeching him to heal his blind daughter. After offering a short prayer, St Germanus, ‘being filled with the Holy Ghost, called on the Trinity, and taking into his hands a casket containing relics of the saints that hung around his neck, he applied it to the girl’s eyes...[which] emptied of darkness and filled with the light of truth.’ A fifteenth century poem records Germanus’ visit thus:

This holy Germayn, wis & of sad age,
Cam out of ffraunce to be therat present,
Bi a maner of devout pilgrimage
Vnto seynt Albon, in al his best entent,
And at his tounge he was diligent
Certeyn reliques, with al his besi cure,
Them for to offren at his sepulture.²

St Germanus’ pilgrimage to the shrine-tomb of St Alban gives evidence that Britain was not an isolated land, but fully integrated into greater Christendom. Bede says that the bishops of Britain asked for help from the Church in Gaul, which convened a great synod to decide

² Although St Alban’s relics were destroyed in 1538 on orders of Henry VIII, part of his relics had been taken to the Continent centuries earlier. In 2002, the Bishop of Cologne returned a portion to St Alban’s Cathedral.

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what to do. Bishops from the continent were sent to preach in England, but Christians external to England knew of her martyrs and saints. John Wilkinson has compiled all the surviving pilgrimage accounts to the Holy Land prior to the First Crusade and of eighteen, four of them are from the British Isles. These are the accounts of Adomnan, Bede, Dicuil, and Hugeburc. But to say that these are purely British and Irish is still somewhat not quite on the mark. Adomnan, for example, was largely recording the pilgrimage of the shipwrecked Frankish bishop, Arculf, though he conducted a great deal of research in the monastic library at Iona, as well. Bede never traveled far from his beloved Jarrow, but he utilized his enormous monastic library, largely compiled in the many travels to Rome and the Mediterranean by the monastery's founder, Benedict Biscop. Dicuil, an Irish monk, was recording the travels of the Monk Fidelis, who spent more time in Iceland than in Egypt. And then the nun Hugeburc was recording the pilgrimage of her kinsman, St Willibald, who spent several years in Rome, in Constantinople, as a monk at Monte Cassino in Italy, and in the Holy Land. Both of them – though originally of Hampshire – ended their days as missionaries in Bavaria, Germany.

Despite the manifold dangers, Irish and Anglo-Saxon pilgrims traveled across the Christian world, often as missionaries, but many returning with books, relics, and knowledge. Pope Gregory the Great (whom Bede calls the 'Apostle to the English') wrote to St Augustine of Canterbury – his missionary – that he was sending him 'relics of the holy apostles and martyrs' along with manuscripts, vestments, sacred vessels 'all such things as were generally necessary for the worship and ministry of the church.' Later in the seventh century, Pope Vitalian sent to King Oswiu of Northumbria relics of Ss Peter and Paul, of the holy martyrs

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Lawrence, John, and Paul, and also of Ss. Gregory and Pancras. Benedict Biscop, as mentioned above, brought back a number of holy relics and other liturgical and theological items from his travels to Rome and beyond in the seventh century. About this same time, St Wilfrid, founder of the abbeys of Hexham and Ripon, spent several days going around Rome and praying before the shrines of saints. In the course of his efforts, he ‘obtained from chosen men a great many holy relics, for the edification of the churches of Britain...’ There are even many relics of the *Theotokos* by the tenth and eleventh centuries. Late Anglo-Saxon relic lists from Winchester, Bath, and Exeter list fragments of her clothing, hair, and sepulchre – relics common across Western Europe.

There were also icons in these early centuries in Britain, although likely somewhat differing from Byzantine icons. The first recorded images are in Bede’s description of the Abbot Benedict Biscop’s journeys between 675 and 686. These He describes as thirteen panel paintings hung across the church of St Peters at Wearmouth, from wall-to-wall across the central arch marking the entrance into the sanctuary – perhaps not unlike an iconostasis. Icons included were of the Virgin Mary, the twelve apostles, and scenes from the Gospels. The first surviving seventh century English depiction of the *Theotokos* is a carving on the end of St Cuthbert’s Coffin, from Lindisfarne, an image that relates both to images from the Book of Kells and from Eastern Mediterranean Greek sources, perhaps even a Hellenized Rome. There is ample evidence, then, for the presence of and interest in relics and shrines from the earliest days of Christianity in the British Isles.

PILGRIMAGE

There is a well-known prophecy attributed to St Arsenios of Cappadocia (a monk of Mt Athos at the turn of the twentieth century) in which he 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.’ It is important, therefore, that we do our part, through the Holy Spirit, to fulfill this prophecy, but where do we begin? Besides keeping icons of British saints in our homes, we can read their *Lives* or *Vitae*. If you have not yet read the Venerable Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English Speaking People*, I highly recommend it. We can also, of course – and in the tradition of countless generations of Christians – go on holy pilgrimage. There are easily hundreds of holy sites in the British Isles, and likely thousands. I could suggest to you the holy isle of Inchkenneth in Scotland, St Kenneth’s Monastery of Aghaboe in Ireland, or Llangenneth Isle of St Cennydd in Wales, but perhaps these are a bit obscure to the average Orthodox Christian. They do, however, serve to illustrate the point that there are many hundreds of localized shrines and saints, such as St. Milburga, a local saint of Shropshire who has been adopted as the patron for the Greek Orthodox Youth of Great Britain Youth Camp. But there are also many major sites.

Over in Ireland, there are about three thousand ecclesiastical structures known from the period AD 400 to 1200, compared to 40,000 secular buildings. One of the numerous medieval Irish triads goes: ‘Three steps designed for all, the best that any will ever take, a step to visit the sick, a pilgrim step, a step to a church.’ Prior to the Viking invasions, there really were no urban areas in Ireland. Monasteries filled this role, often located on the borders between neighbouring kingdoms. Perhaps the most important pilgrimage site in early

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medieval Ireland was, collectively, the Aran Islands. Whilst all of them contain monastic sites, Innismore Island alone had at least fourteen monasteries just during the lifetime of St Enda, the 'Patriarch of Monasteries', in the late fifth century. Although northwestern Ireland may seem incredibly remote to us today, in the medieval period it was a wealthy area on the trade routes with Spain. Most of the early Irish saints are known to have visited Aran, including St Patrick and St Columcille (Columba). Lay pilgrims also journeyed here, but also to many other holy places in Ireland. Some of these include: Armagh, where St Patrick was long present; Kildare, the home of St Brigid (Bridget), founder of the first women's monasteries in the British Isles; St Kevin's Glendalough; Clonmacnoise, founded by St Ciaran; and Clonard Abbey, founded by St Finian about 520 and school to those termed by early Irish writers as the Twelve Apostles of Ireland. One of these, St Columba, founded some twenty-five monasteries in Ireland, in addition to Iona in Scotland.

Back on this side of the Irish Sea, Celtic Wales and Cornwall were also filled with local shrines and monasteries, such as at St Davids in Wales. But of England proper, Ordericus Vitalis wrote in the early twelfth century: 'I steadfastly believe that the holy deeds of the Angles and the Saxons of England could be no less edifying to the Northern Christians than the deeds of Greeks and Egyptians which devoted scholars have fully recorded in lengthy narratives that are freely studied and give much pleasure.' It is interesting that this was written after the Norman Conquest, but this period saw a massive ecclesial-building campaign, and many Normans viewed the English saints as their own. For example, it was a Norman knight-turned monk named Reinfrid who helped to re-establish the Monasteries of Whitby, Jarrow, and Wearmouth in the late eleventh century. He journeyed north from

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Evesham and Worcester with an Anglo-Saxon monk named Aldwin, a prior from Gloucestershire. Reinfrid had been moved by what he had seen whilst on campaign in Northumbria, whilst Aldwin was inspired by reading the Venerable Bede.

In many ways, it is easier to discuss a route of Holy Pilgrimage in the North of England, as there are numerous well-known holy sites within a relative proximity. These include Holy Isle (or Lindisfarne), where Ss. Aidan, Cuthbert, and Colman were all abbots in the days of the martyr kings such as Ss Oswald and Oswy; the Monasteries of Jarrow and Monkwearmouth, where the Venerable Bede and Benedict Biscop were established; the double monastery of Whitby, where St Hilda ruled and which hosted the Synod of Whitby in 664; St Wilfrid at Ripon; and, of course, Durham, the Cathedral city where many of the saints' relics were transferred over several years. The very last of the Old English poems still extant was written about the transfer of St Cuthbert's incorrupt body in 1104, is about Durham. It reads, in part:

In that city, too, as men known,
lies the body of blessed Cuthbert,
and the head of Oswald, innocent king,
lion of the English; also Bishop Aidan
and Eadberch and Eadfrith, eminent men.
Aethelwold the Bishop sleeps beside them,
and the great scholar Bede, and Abbot Boisil
whose fortune it was first to teach the saint,
then still a boy; Cuthbert excelleed
in his lessons. Innumerable relics are left
in the minster by the blessed man's tomb,
scene of many miracles, as documents say.

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The man of God awaits Domesday.

The two saints most famous in Northumbria were Saints Aidan and Cuthbert. Their stories are the story of the beginnings of Christianity in the North of England. 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.

St Aidan's successor, St Cuthbert, followed in his path of humility. When he first went to Lindisfarne, the Holy Isle, 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

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attacks against him. So within a few years all the monks willingly obeyed him.' St Cuthbert was and is one of the most popular saints of Northumbria. Like St Aidan, some of his relics are at Durham Cathedral.

Many, if not most, of the great monasteries of the North were destroyed by the Norse and Danes in their invasions of the ninth century. Incidentally, later Scandinavians – and the Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries amongst them – carried veneration of British saints as far as Novgorod, Russia, where at least in the early 1100s Ss Alban and Botolph (as well as St Olaf) were on Russian prayer lists. These monasteries were often rebuilt by Irish, Anglo-Saxons, and Normans, and many survived until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the Sixteenth century. Henry's orders were not carried out so thoroughly in the North as they were in the South, however, and many relics and shrines escaped the destruction encountered in the South of England.

Closer to where we stand in the South of England are also many holy monasteries and shrines worthy of veneration. There are the shrines of St Chad at Lichfield; Ss Oswald and Wulfstan at Worcester; Glastonbury with its long connections to St Joseph of Arimathea and others; Ss Augustine and Theodore at Canterbury; St Edmund at Bury St Edmunds; St Edward the Martyr at Shaftsbury; and many, many others. I shall briefly speak on St Erkenwald, whose Fellowship this is, and then look briefly at the Shrine to St Mary, the *Theotokos*, at Walsingham, which has enjoyed its own resurrection in the twentieth century.

St Erkenwald is mentioned in Bede, who refers to his 'most holy life and conduct' and

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speaks of miraculous healing in his own time (ca. 730 AD). He was made bishop of the East Saxons (675-93) by St Theodore of Tarsus, and while very successful in strengthening Christianity amongst the East Saxons, he was also a trusted advisor of the king of Wessex, and he was furthermore instrumental in ending the estrangement of Archbishop Theodore and St. Wilfred. St Erkenwald founded two Benedictine monasteries: St. Peter's, Chertsey, in Surrey, where he was abbot, and St. Mary's, Barking, Essex (just a few miles east of London), where he installed his sister, St. Ethelburga, as abbess. Bede says that – in parallel to the wood of the True Cross – many miracles came from the wooden litter or cart that the aged saint would travel around in. Pilgrims would 'pluck splinters from it to bring healing and relief to those too ill to come to the cult center themselves.' Unfortunately, a massive fire of London in 1087 destroyed the Anglo-Saxon minster of St. Paul's, where St Erkenwald's wooden litter & relics were kept in a shrine directly behind the altar. Even at that time Goscelin of Canterbury refers to the healing power of the relics. An early eleventh century gazetteer of English saints and shrines called *Secgan be Godes sanctum* states 'rested sante Eorcenwald se bisceop on Lundenbyrig'. The 'frequent occurrence' of the saint's 30 April feastday in calendars from all over Anglo-Saxon England testifies to his importance as a 'national saint'. William of Malmesbury, in 1124, describes St. Erkenwald as 'Lundoniae maxime sanctus' – 'pre-eminently the saint of London' whose miracles were not only of 'ancient memory' but also of 'recent fame'. His Cult flourished from the end of the seventh century until the Reformation, when his relics suffered the fate of so many others.

The chief Marian shrine in England for all Christians is undoubtedly Walsingham. The traditional tale – briefly – is that a young widow named Richeldis de Faverches had a series of

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visions in 1061. St Mary appeared to her and showed her the house in Nazareth where the Annunciation took place to exact dimensions. The *Theotokos* instructed Richeldis to build a replica of this house at Walsingham. ‘Do all this unto my special praise and honour and all who are in any way distressed or in need, let them seek me here in that little house you have made at Walsingham. To all that seek me there shall be given succour. And there at Walsingham in this little house shall be held in remembrance the great joy of my salutation when St Gabriel told me I should, through humility, become the mother of God’s Son.’ Richeldis obeyed her instructions and built the ‘Holy House’. Many miracles occurred there as described in this ballad from 1465 by Richard Pyson:

Many sek ben here cured by oure ladys’s myghte
Dede agayne reuyved if this is no doubt
Lame made hole and blynde restored to syghte
Maryners vexed with tempest safe to port brought
Defe wounds and lunatyke that hyder have fought
And also lepers here recovered have be
By our ladye’s grace of their infirmyte.’

Some scholars believe that Walsingham was more accurately founded in the mid-twelfth century after a male Richeldis returned from Crusade to the Holy Land. Regardless, Walsingham was probably the most popular destination of pilgrims in England up until the Dissolution of the Monasteries by King Henry VIII in 1538, after which the shrine was destroyed. A revival of pilgrimage began only at the turn of the twentieth century with a parallel renewed interest by both Anglicans and Roman Catholics, following in the inspiration of the Oxford Movement a few decades earlier. Although the site of the shrine was first

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purchased in 1897, Walsingham only began to attract greater interest and attention in the 1920s and 1930s. Along with these Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy has had a presence there from the early years. In 1938, at the consecration of the enlarged Shrine Church, Archbishop Nestor of the Russian Church Abroad was present, along with Archimandrite Nicholas Gibbes and others. The next day, they celebrated the Divine Liturgy there. Later, in 1944, the Polish Orthodox Archbishop Sava of Grodno blessed a chapel within the Anglican Shrine for Orthodox pilgrims. Although this was originally intended as only a temporary measure, it has since been the main Orthodox centre. In 1964, Metropolitan Athenagoras of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese established Orthodox Confraternity of Our Lady of Walsingham, which is pan-Orthodox. Today, there is still an Orthodox presence at the Shrine as well as at the nearby village of Walsingham, and Orthodox Faithful continue to make pilgrimage every year, singing the Troparion:

Hail, O Virgin Theotokos! As thou didst receive the Good News of salvation at Gabriel's appearing and didst by thine own appearing at Walsingham cause the Holy House to be raised up as an everlasting remembrance of that same mystery of salvation, pray that we may ever bear in our souls Jesus whom thou didst bring forth, the Savior of mankind.

* * * * *

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It is greatly beneficial to go on holy pilgrimage, for many of the reasons described above. Organisations such as the Friends of Orthodoxy on Iona and now the Fellowship of St Erkenwald are aiding us in this spiritual journey. One must approach pilgrimage with a proper mindset, a spiritual hunger for Christ and His holy Church, as all point to Christ – relics, saints, and shrines. As Stephen Graham notes, those who are really just tourists are tired out within a few days, and ‘it is scarcely worth going [just] to be a looker-on. Unless one lives the life, [Holy Pilgrimage] can mean little or nothing. And even living the life, it is necessary to have the placid, receptive soul – the open house of the soul wishing to be furnished.’ A pilgrim sees inwardly what others see only on the surface. Not everyone can, of course, go on pilgrimage. In such cases, it is well to remember the words of St Lazarus of Mount Galesion: ‘Wherever anyone does good, there is the <true> Jerusalem!’ When a monk asked the hermit Sisois, ‘What is pilgrimage, abba?’, he replied: ‘To keep silent: and wherever you go say, “I am at peace with all men”: that is pilgrimage.’

* * * * *

‘May we walk in prosperity this day of light:
in the power of the most High God, greatest of gods,
In a manner pleasing to Christ,
in the light of the Holy Spirit,
In the faith of the patriarchs,
In the merits of the prophets,
In the peace of the apostles,
In the splendour of the saints...
In abundance of peace,
In praise of the Trinity,

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With our senses alert,

With constant good works,

With spiritual powers,

With holy life,

In these things is the journey of all labouring for Christ
who leads his saints after death into eternal joy.

That I may hear the voice of the angels,
praising God and saying Holy, Holy, Holy.³

May St Alban the Protomartyr of Britain and All the Saints of the British Isles pray for us. In
the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

3 From the Anglo-Saxon *Book of Cerne*.

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