

## St. Boniface

Apostle of [Germany](#), [date](#) of birth unknown; [martyred](#) 5 June, 755 (754); emblems: the oak, axe, book, fox, scourge, fountain, raven, sword.

He was a native of [England](#), though some authorities have claimed him for [Ireland](#) or [Scotland](#). The place of his birth is not known, though it was probably the south-western part of Wessex. Crediton (Kirtton) in Devonshire is given by more modern authors. The same uncertainty exists in regard to the year of his birth. It seems, however, safe to say that he was not born before 672 or 675, or as late as 680. Descended from a noble [family](#), from his earliest years he showed great ability and received a religious [education](#). His [parents](#) intended him for secular pursuits, but, inspired with higher ideals by missionary [monks](#) who visited his home, Winfrid felt himself called to a religious state. After much difficulty he obtained his [father's](#) permission and went to the [monastery](#) of Adescanastre on the site of the present city of [Exeter](#), where, under the direction of Abbot Wolfhard, he was trained in [piety](#) and learning. About seven years later he went to the Abbey of Nhutselle (Nutshalling) between Winchester and Southampton. Here, leading an austere and studious life under Abbot Winbert, he rapidly advanced in [sanctity](#) and [knowledge](#), excelling especially in the profound understanding of scriptures, of which he gives evidence in his letters. He was also well [educated](#) in history, grammar, rhetoric, and poetry. He made his profession as a member of the [Benedictine Order](#) and was placed in charge of the [monastic school](#). At the age of thirty he was [ordained priest](#). Through his [abbot](#) the fame of Winfrid's learning soon reached high civil and [ecclesiastical](#) circles. He also had great success as a preacher. With every prospect of a great career and the highest dignities in his own country, he had no desire for human glory, for the thought of bringing the light of the Gospel to his kindred, the Old Saxons, in [Germany](#), had taken possession of his mind. After many requests Winfrid at last obtained the permission of his [abbot](#).

In 716 he set out for the mission in Friesland. Since the Faith had already been preached there by Wigbert, Willibrord, and others, Winfrid expected to find a good soil for his missionary work, but political disturbances [caused](#) him to return temporarily to [England](#). Towards the end of 717 Abbot Winbert died, and Winfrid was elected to succeed him, but declined and induced Daniel, [Bishop](#) of [Winchester](#), to influence the [monks](#) to elect another. Winfrid was left free to follow out his intentions, but before going back to his apostolic work he wished to visit [Rome](#) and to obtain from the [pope](#) the apostolic mission and the [necessary](#) faculties. Bishop Daniel gave him an open letter of recommendation to kings, princes, [bishops](#), [abbots](#), and [priests](#), and a private letter to the [pope](#). On Winfrid's arrival in [Rome](#), in the fall of 718, [Pope Gregory II](#) received him kindly, praised his resolutions, and having satisfied himself in various conferences as to the [orthodoxy](#) of Winfrid, his [morals](#), and the purity of his motives, on 15 May, 719, he gave him full authority to preach the Gospel to the [heathens](#) in [Germany](#) to the right of the Rhine, ordering him at the same time to adhere to the Roman practice in the administration of the [Sacrament of Baptism](#), and to consult with the [Holy See](#) in case of difficulties.

Having received instructions to make his first journey through the country, only a tour of inspection, he travelled through [Bavaria](#) and found the [Church](#) flourishing, with a number of churches and [monasteries](#). In Alamannia, which he crossed on his way to [Thuringia](#), he found similar conditions. Thuringia was considered by [Rome](#) as [Christian](#), and the mission of Winfrid was supposed to be that of an authorized reformer. He found the country, however, in a bad condition, [St. Kilian](#) had laboured with energy, but without success. Duke Gotzbert and some years later his son, Hethan II, both converts of [St. Kilian](#) had been [murdered](#), perhaps on account of their injudicious [zeal](#) in trying to spread [Christianity](#). Great numbers of their rebellious subjects had lapsed into [heathenism](#), or a mixture of [Christianity](#) and [idolatry](#). Winfrid tried to enkindle a missionary spirit in the [priests](#) and to make the people live up to the pure [precepts](#) of the [Christian religion](#). Though he converted some of the [heathens](#), he did not meet with the success which he had anticipated. On his way to the court of [Charles Martel](#), possibly to interest that prince in the matter, he received news of the death of the Frisian King Radbod, and went to Friesland. Here he spent three years under the aged [St. Willibrord](#), travelling about with tireless energy and preaching fearlessly as he went. Multitudes of [Christians](#) who had fallen away during the [persecution](#) of Radbod were brought to repentance and thousands of [pagans](#) accepted the Faith. Many of the converts were brought together to lead a [religious life](#) under the [Rule of St. Benedict](#). [St. Willibrord](#), feeling the weight of his years, wished to make Winfrid his assistant and successor in the [See of Utrecht](#). Winfrid refused, giving as his main reason that the [pope](#) had sent him for missionary work. He therefore left and followed in the wake of the army of [Charles Martel](#) as far as [Trier](#). Near this city was the Abbey of Pfalzel (*Palatiolum*). From there he took with him as a disciple and companion Gregory, a boy of about fourteen or fifteen, afterwards [abbot](#) in [Utrecht](#), and continued his journey to [Thuringia](#), where he converted many. He then went into Hessa, where many more were brought into the fold of Christ. With the assistance of two chiefs whom he had converted he established a monastic cell at Amöneburg at the River Ohm (then called Amana) in Upper Hessa, as a kind of missionary centre in which native [clergy](#) were to be [educated](#).

While Winfrid was under the [jurisdiction](#) of [St. Willibrord](#) he had no special reason for reporting to the [Holy See](#), but, now working independently, he considered it his [duty](#) to do so. He therefore sent Bynnan, one of his disciples, with a letter to Gregory recounting his labours of the past years and asking for further directions. Bynnan promptly executed his commission and soon returned with the [pope's](#) answer, expressing satisfaction with what had been done and a desire to confer with Winfrid personally. Winfrid accordingly set out for [Rome](#), taking his course through [France](#) and [Burgundy](#). He was warmly welcomed by the [pope](#), who questioned him carefully, made him take the usual [oath](#) of allegiance, received from him a profession of [faith](#), and on 30 November, 722 (723), [consecrated](#) him a regional [bishop](#), with the name Boniface. Some say that Winfrid had taken this name at the time of his [religious profession](#); others, that he received it on his first visit to [Rome](#). The same discrepancy of opinion exists in derivation from *bonum facere* or *bonum fatum*; perhaps it is only an approximate Latinization of Wynfrith. [Pope Gregory](#) then sent Boniface back with letters to his diocesans in [Thuringia](#) and Hessa demanding obedience for their new [bishop](#). A letter was also addressed to [Charles Martel](#) asking his protection. Boniface himself had received a set of [ecclesiastical canons](#) for his guidance.

Boniface returned to Upper Hessa and repaired the losses which occurred during his absence, many having drifted back into [paganism](#); he also administered everywhere the Sacrament of Confirmation. He continued his work in Lower Hessa. To show the [heathens](#) how utterly powerless were the gods in whom they placed their confidence, Boniface felled the oak sacred to the thunder-god Thor, at Geismar, near Fritzlar. He had a [chapel](#) built out of the wood and dedicated it to the prince of the [Apostles](#). The [heathens](#) were astonished that no thunderbolt from the hand of Thor destroyed the offender, and many were converted. The fall of this oak marked the fall of [heathenism](#). Tradition tells us that Boniface now passed on to the River Werra and there erected a Church of St. Vitus, around which sprang up a town which to the present day bears the name of Wannfried. At Eschwege he is said to have destroyed the [statue](#) of the idol Stoffo. Thence he went into [Thuringia](#).

The difficulties that confronted him here were very great [Christianity](#) had indeed made great progress, but it had become mixed up with [heretical](#) tenets and [pagan](#) customs. This was due to a great extent to some Celtic missionaries, several of whom had never been [ordained](#), while others had been raised to the [priesthood](#) by non-Catholic [bishops](#), though all performed [priestly](#) functions. These taught doctrines and made use of ceremonies at variance with the teaching and use of the [Roman Church](#), especially in regard to the [celebration of Easter](#), the conferring of [baptism](#), [celibacy](#), the [papal](#) and episcopal authority. Besides, many were wanting in [education](#), some scarcely able to read or write, and equally ready to hold services for the [Christians](#) and to offer [sacrifices](#) to the idols for the [heathens](#). A neighbouring [bishop](#) (probably of Cologne) also gave trouble, by laying claim to a part of the district under Boniface's [jurisdiction](#) and treating his authority as an intrusion, thereby indirectly strengthening the party of the [heretics](#). All this caused him great anxiety and suffering as may be seen from his letters to [England](#). He overcame all, thanks to his episcopal dignity and to his own [personality](#), full of [courage](#) and [zeal](#) in the cause which he defended, and supported by the authority of the [pope](#) and of [Charles Martel](#). His friends helped him not only by their [prayers](#), but also by material aid. Many valuable books, [ecclesiastical](#) articles and the like were sent to him with words of encouragement. Numbers of men and [women](#) went to [Germany](#) at different times to be his helpers. Among them were Lullus, Denehard, Burchard, Wigbert, Sola, Witta (called also Wizo and Albinus), Wunibald, Willibald and the [pious women](#) Lioba, Chuniild, Chunitrude, Berthgit, Walburga, and Thecla. With these, and others recruited in [Thuringia](#) and elsewhere in [Germany](#), he continued his labours. The number of the faithful increased wonderfully, including many of the nobility and the [educated](#) of the country. These assisted him in the building of [churches](#) and [chapels](#). Boniface took care to have institutions in which [religious life](#) would be fostered. In Thuringia he built the first [monastery](#) Ohrdruf on the River Ohrn near Altenberga. He appointed Thecla [Abbess](#) of Kitzingen, Lioba of Bischofsheim, and Walburga of Heidenheim.

[Pope Gregory II](#) died 11 February, 731, and was succeeded on 18 March by [Gregory III](#). Boniface hastened to send a delegation to the new pontiff, to pay his respects and to assure him of his fidelity. The answer to this seems to be lost. In 732 Boniface wrote again and stated among other things that the work was becoming too much for one man. [Gregory III](#) congratulated him on his success and praised his [zeal](#), in recognition sending him the [pallium](#), and making him

an [archbishop](#), but still without a fixed see. He gave him instructions to appoint [bishops](#) wherever he thought it [necessary](#). Boniface now enlarged the [monastery](#) of Amöneburg and built a [church](#), dedicating it to [St. Michael](#). Another [monastery](#) he founded at Fritzlar near the River Eder, which was completed in 734. The church, a more magnificent structure, was not finished before 740. In 738 Boniface made his third journey to [Rome](#), intending to resign his office and devote himself exclusively to the mission among the Saxons. He was accompanied by a number of his disciples, who were to see [true Christian](#) life in the centre of [Christianity](#). [Gregory III](#) received him graciously and was rejoiced at the result of Boniface's labour, but would not allow him to resign. Boniface remained in [Rome](#) for about a year and then returned to his mission invested with the authority of a [legate](#) of the [Holy See](#). His first care on his return was the [Church](#) in [Bavaria](#).

In 715 (716) Duke Theodo had come to [Rome](#) out of devotion, but probably also to secure [ecclesiastical](#) order in his provinces. [Gregory II](#) sent three [ecclesiastics](#) with instructions to do away with abuses. Their work, however, was rendered futile by the death of Theodo in 717 and the subsequent political quarrels. Boniface had twice passed through the country. Now with the help of Duke Odilo and of the nobles he began the work of reorganization acting entirely according to the instructions of [Gregory II](#). He examined the orders of the [clergy](#), deposed the obstinate, reordained those whose [ordination](#) he found invalid, provided they had [erred](#) through [ignorance](#) and were willing to submit to authority. He made a new circumscription of the [dioceses](#) and appointed [bishops](#) for the vacant sees, viz., the Abbot John to the [See of Salzburg](#), vacant since the death of [St. Rupert](#) in 718; Erembert to Freising, vacant since the death of his brother, [St. Corbinian](#), in 730; Gaubald for [Ratisbon](#). Passau had been established and provided for by the [pope](#) himself through the [nomination](#) of Vivilo. About this time Boniface founded the new Diocese of Buraburg, and named Witta as its [bishop](#). This diocese existed for only a short time, during the administration of two [bishops](#), and was then joined to Augsburg. Somewhat later the [dioceses](#) of [Eichstätt](#) and Erfurt (Erphesfurt) were formed, and Willibald was [consecrated bishop](#) for the former about October, 741; for the latter Boniface appointed as first (and last) [bishop](#) Adalar, who, it seems, never received episcopal [consecration](#), as he is continually spoken of as a [priest](#). Burchard was chosen for [Würzburg](#).

[Charles Martel](#) had died 22 October, 741, at Quiercy on the Oise and was succeeded by his sons Carloman and [Pepin](#). In [Rome Pope Gregory III](#) died 28 November, 741, and was followed by Zachary. Carloman asked Boniface, his former preceptor, to a consultation. The result of this was a letter to the [pope](#) in which Boniface reported his actions in [Bavaria](#) and asked advice in various matters. He also stated the wish of Carloman that a synod be held. In answer [Pope Zachary](#), 1 April, 742, confirmed the erection of the [dioceses](#), sanctioned the holding of the synod, and gave the requested information. The synod, partly [ecclesiastical](#) and partly secular, was held 21 April, 742, but the place cannot be ascertained. The [bishops](#) appointed by Boniface were present and several others, but it was mainly the authority of Boniface and the power of Carloman that gave weight to the first German synod. Among its decrees the most noteworthy are those ordaining the subjection of the [clergy](#) to the [bishop](#) of the [diocese](#) and forbidding them to take any active part in [wars](#), to carry arms, or to hunt. Very strict regulations were made against carnal [sins](#) on the part of [priests](#) and religious. The [Rule of St. Benedict](#) was made a norm for religious. Laws were

also enacted concerning marriage within the forbidden degrees of kindred. A second [national synod](#) was held 1 March, 743, at Liptina in Hainault, and another at [Soissons](#), 2 March, 744. In this synod a sentence of condemnation was passed against two [heretics](#), Adalbert and Clement, the former a native of Gaul, the latter of [Ireland](#). They were strain condemned in 745 and also at a [synod](#) held in [Rome](#). Several other [synods](#) were held in [Germany](#) to strengthen [faith](#) and discipline. At the request of Carloman and Pepin the authority of Boniface over [Bavaria](#) was confirmed and extended over Gaul.

In 744 [St. Willibrord](#), [Bishop](#) of [Utrecht](#), died, and Boniface took the diocese under his charge, appointed an assistant or *chor-episcopus*. About the same time the See of Cologne became [vacant](#) through the death of Ragenfried, and it was the intention of Boniface as well as the wish of Pope Zachary to make this his [archiepiscopal see](#), but the [clergy](#) opposed. Before the project could be carried out the [Diocese of Mainz](#) lost its [bishop](#) through the deposition of Gewilib who led a very irregular life and had killed the slayer of his [father](#), who was his predecessor in the episcopal office. Pope Zachary, 1 May, 748 (747), appointed Boniface [Archbishop](#) of [Mainz](#) and [Primate](#) of [Germany](#). The new archdiocese comprised the [dioceses](#) of Tongem, [Cologne](#), Worms, [Speyer](#), [Utrecht](#), and the [dioceses](#) erected by Boniface himself: Buraburg, [Eichstätt](#), Erfurt, and [Würzburg](#). Of Augsburg, Coire, and [Constance](#) the [decree](#) does not speak, but they are shortly afterwards mentioned as belonging to the province. After a few years Boniface was able to reconcile his enemies with the [Holy See](#), so that the supremacy of the [pope](#) was acknowledged in Great Britain, [Germany](#), and Gaul, as well as in [Italy](#).

In 747 Carloman resigned his share of the government to his brother Pepin and left to spend the remainder of his days as a [monk](#). He built a [monastery](#) in [honour](#) of St. Silvester at Soracte near [Rome](#), and later retired to [Monte Cassino](#). His motives for this are not known, but perhaps he was frightened at the severity of the measures he had felt himself [obliged](#) to use in order to obtain a union among the German tribes. Pepin, now the sole ruler, became the founder of the [Carlovingian](#) dynasty. That Boniface had anything to do with the dis-establishment of the old royal family and the introduction of a new one cannot be [proved](#). He did not mingle in the politics of the country, except in this, that he did all in his power to convert the people to the [true](#) Faith, and to bring them into spiritual subjection to the [Roman pontiff](#). It is generally stated that Boniface anointed and [crowned](#) Pepin by order of the [pope](#), though this is denied by some.

The rest of his life Boniface spent in confirming what he had achieved in [Germany](#). This he did by frequently holding [synods](#) and by enforcing the sacred canons. He did much for [true religious life](#) in the [monasteries](#), especially at [Fulda](#), which had been established under his supervision by St. Sturm, and into which Boniface returned yearly to train the [monks](#) and to spend some days in [prayer](#) and meditation. At his request Pope Zachary exempted the [abbey](#) from all episcopal [jurisdiction](#) and placed it under the immediate care of the [Holy See](#). This was something new for [Germany](#), though already known and practised in [Italy](#) and [England](#). It seems that Boniface's last act as [Archbishop](#) of [Mainz](#) was the repudiation of the claim of the [Archbishop](#) of [Cologne](#) to the [diocese](#) of [Utrecht](#). The matter was laid before Pepin, who

decided against Cologne. The same decision must have been given by [Pope Stephen II \(III\)](#) who had become the successor of Zachary, 26 March, 752, for after that time no further claim was made by Cologne. No change was made until the ninth century, when Cologne was made an archdiocese and Utrecht one of its suffragan [sees](#). Boniface appointed Abbot Gregory as administrator of [Utrecht](#), and Eoban, who had been assistant, he took as his companion.

When Boniface saw that all things had been properly taken care of, he took up the work he had dreamed of in early manhood, the conversion of the Frisians. With royal consent, and with that of the [pope](#) previously given, he in 754 resigned the [Archdiocese of Mainz](#) to his disciple Lullus, whom in 752 he had [consecrated bishop](#), again commenced a missionary tour, and laboured with success to the East of the Zuider Zee. Returning in the following year, he ordered the new converts to assemble for confirmation at Dorkum on the River Borne. The [heathens](#) fell upon them and [murdered](#) Boniface and fifty-two companions (according to some, thirty-seven). Soon afterwards, the [Christians](#), who had scattered at the approach of the [heathens](#), returned and found the body of the [martyr](#) and beside him the bloodstained copy of [St. Ambrose](#) on the "Advantage of Death". The body was taken to [Utrecht](#), afterwards through the influence of Lullus removed to [Mainz](#), and later, according to a wish expressed by the [saint](#) himself during his lifetime, to the Abbey of [Fulda](#). Portions of his [relics](#) are at [Louvain](#), [Mechlin](#), [Prague](#), [Bruges](#), and Erfurt. A considerable portion of an arm is at Eichfeld. His grave soon became a sanctuary, to which the faithful came in crowds especially on his feast and during the Octave. [England](#) is supposed to have been the first place where his [martyrdom](#) was celebrated on a fixed day. Other countries followed. On 11 June, 1874, [Pope Pius IX](#) extended the celebration to the entire world. Brewers, tailors, and file-cutters have chosen St. Boniface as their patron, also various cities in [Germany](#). The writings of St. Boniface which have been preserved are: "Collection of Letters"; "Poems and Riddles"; "Poenitentiale"; "Compendium of the Latin Language"; "Compendium of Latin Prosody";