

TRUTH TRIUMPHANT: CHAPTER 12

Aidan And The Church In England

Not Augustine at Canterbury, but devoted Irish Gaels in every valley of the Heptarchy - Aidan, Finan, Colman, Maeldubh, Diuma and the others - first carried the evangel of Christian culture to the savage English tribes.¹

PATRICK in Ireland, Columba in Scotland, and Dinooth in Wales were apostles to a people using the Celtic tongue. Aidan, on the other hand, a disciple of Columba's Celtic school, was called to be an apostle to a different race - the pagan Anglo-Saxons of England. During its six-hundred-year Anglo-Saxon period, the conversion of England stood as a monument to the missionary zeal of Aidan.

The pagans in conquering Britain by the sword had all but destroyed the primitive British Church. Nearly two hundred years later this same evangelical church not connected with Rome, through Aidan and his successors, subdued practically two thirds of their heathen conquerors by the power of the gospel.²

The seven kingdoms, the Heptarchy, into which England was divided in Aidan's days, were as jealous of one another as are the Balkan States today. Mercia in the center was the largest. The next largest, occupying the northeast portion of the realm, was Northumbria, where Aidan began his great work. South of Northumbria along the coast were (in succession) East Anglia; Essex, the kingdom of the East Saxons; Kent; and Sussex, the kingdom of the South Saxons. To the southwest of these lay the seventh member of the Heptarchy, Wessex, the kingdom of the West Saxons.

The Character And Education Of Aidan

To the west and north of these seven pagan Anglo-Saxon kingdoms lay the Celtic Christian lands of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland; and to the southeast across the English Channel was the kingdom of the Franks which was ruled over by papal sovereigns.

Aidan came from Iona, which had grown into a well-equipped university.³ Scholars of renown filled its chairs of instruction. This fact so impressed Dr. Samuel Johnson, the interesting figure in English literature, that he wrote: "We were now treading that illustrious island, which was once the luminary of the Caledonian regions, whence savage clans and roving barbarians derived the benefits of knowledge, and the blessings of religion." ⁴ Many travelers of the high seas occupied the guesthouse at Iona during the student life of Aidan, so that he devoured eagerly the knowledge imparted by the navigators from Iceland in the north, from the Holy Land in the south, and from other distant parts of the world. ⁵ He must also have known considerable about the seven kingdoms of pagan England, since many Angles came into Caledonia, either as fugitives or as captives taken by the warring Scots.

Two events occurred which singled out the call of Aidan as one of an unusual nature. The assembly of Iona selected one of their students to go in answer to the request from King Oswald of Northumbria for an evangelist. Though distinguished for the austerity of his life and for his learning, the one selected quickly returned home, complaining, like the ten spies of old, of the fierce people and the great obstacles to overcome. He lacked the faith to serve, however much he loved to shine. Another student

in the assembly, who advocated love, gentleness, and patience in winning the Anglo-Saxons, was chosen. This was the youthful Aidan.

The second unusual factor in the case was the remarkable career of Oswald, ruler of the land to which Aidan was called. In early youth Oswald knew of the national hatred of his pagan people for the Britons which led to the slaughter of the twelve hundred students.⁶ He had also witnessed the conversion of his pagan father to the superficial Christianity advocated by Paulinus, a priest sent from Kent. Later the priest fled when, at the death of Oswald's father, the Northumbrians lapsed into idolatry. Oswald himself was compelled to flee his own land and find an asylum at Iona. Then the love of his countrymen for his family revived, and Oswald was summoned to the throne. Paulinus, the Roman bishop, was still alive and near at hand, but Oswald wanted his people in Northumbria to walk in the ways of Columba, so he passed this priest by and sent to Iona for a leader.

Rome's Mission to the Kingdom of Kent

Northumbria was not the only Anglo-Saxon kingdom which, after it had lapsed from Romanism into idolatry, was won to Christ by the Celtic Church. In fact, the history of the whole 1260-year period reveals that it was the Church in the Wilderness in papal lands that helped, by virtue of its competition, to keep Roman Catholicism alive. When it was removed or destroyed in certain areas, the standards of Christianity began quickly to fall. Such was the case in Essex, Mercia, East Anglia, and Kent. To understand this and to follow the great work of Aidan and his successors, consideration should be given to the labors of Augustine and his forty monks who came from Rome to Canterbury in 597.

The following instruction from Pope Gregory to Augustine after the latter through the efforts of Bertha, the Catholic wife of the pagan king, Ethelbert, had secured for him and his monks a footing in Kent, is worthy of notice:

At first it was Gregory's intention, which he intimated, indeed, to King Ethelbert, to have all the temples of idolatry destroyed; but on maturer reflection, he altered his mind, and dispatched a letter after the abbot Mellitus, in which he declared, that the idol temples, if well built, ought not to be destroyed but, sprinkled with holy water and sanctified by holy relics, should be converted into temples of the living God; so that the people might be more easily induced to assemble in their accustomed places. Moreover, the festivals in honor of the idols, of which the rude people had been deprived, should be replaced by others, either on the anniversaries of the consecration of churches, or on days devoted to the memory of the saints whose relics were deposited in them. On such days, the people should be taught to erect arbors around the churches, in which to celebrate their festive meals, and thus be holden to thank the giver of all good for these temporal gifts. Being thus allowed to indulge in some sensual enjoyments, they could be the more easily led to those which are inward and spiritual.⁷

As to the methods Augustine employed, the following is from the historian Albert Henry Newman:

By making a parade of ascetical life, by pretended miracles, and by promises of earthly advantages, they succeeded in converting Ethelbert, king of the Saxons, who with about ten thousand followers received baptism in a river at the hands of the missionaries. A firm alliance having been formed between the king and the Roman See, the missionaries addressed themselves to the far more difficult task of subjecting the British Christians to Rome. When all other means proved unavailing, they persuaded the Saxon king to make an expedition against them. Three thousand of the British Christians

were slaughtered on one occasion. For centuries the Christians of the old British type, in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as in various parts of Germany, resisted with all their might the encroachment of Rome, and it is probable that Christianity of this type was never wholly exterminated.
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Aidan's Missionary Labors

In direct contrast to the method employed by Augustine in Kent stands the manner in which Aidan labored for Northumbria. John Lingard, a defender of the Papacy, writes:

As soon as he had received the episcopal ordination, he repaired to the court of Oswald. His arrival was a subject of general exultation; and the king condescended to explain in Saxon the instructions which the missionary delivered in his native tongue. But the success of Aidan was owing no less to his virtues than to his preaching. The severe austerity of his life, his profound contempt of riches, and his unwearied application to the duties of his profession, won the esteem, while his arguments convinced the understanding of his hearers. Each day the number of proselytes increased; and, within a few years, the church of Northumbria was fixed on a solid and permanent foundation.⁹

The character of Aidan was well balanced. In religious fervor he was second to none of the great church leaders. His industry was amazing. He was never idle. In him was that flame of living fire which blazed forth so gloriously in many of the young missionaries sent from the schools of Patrick and Columba. Of him Bede says:

It was the highest commendation of his doctrine, with all men, that he taught no otherwise than he and his followers had lived; for he neither sought nor loved anything of this world, but delighted in distributing immediately among the poor whatever was given him by the kings or rich men of the world. He was wont to traverse both town and country on foot, never on horseback, unless compelled by some urgent necessity; and wherever in his way he saw any, either rich or poor, he invited them, if infidels, to embrace the mystery of the faith; or if they were believers, to strengthen them in the faith, and to stir them up by words and actions to alms and good works.¹⁰

The good work spread to the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. What thrilling encouragement this evangelical movement among these pagan neighbors must have given to those of like faith who in Persia and the Far East were laboring for the conversion of the heathen! One medieval historian breaks forth in admiration as he attempts to tell what God had done for King Oswald. He enumerates all the nations - the Britons, the Scots, the Picts, and the English - and the provinces of Britain that were brought under Oswald's dominion.¹¹

Aidan was a man of prayer. He withdrew into his closet and shut the door. On bended knees he poured forth his fervent supplications to God. He had a clear perception of truth and duty, and he exercised a saving, transforming influence upon all who were about him.

He exhibited great tenderness in his labors for the sinner and in his effort to relieve the poor and afflicted. "He is said to have been deeply concerned for the welfare of the poor and to have devoted much attention to ransoming slaves."¹² Bede, while expressing plainly his disapproval of Aidan's refusal to accept papal doctrines, takes great pleasure in saying that this missionary was careful to omit none of the things which he found in the apostolic and prophetic writings, but that to the utmost of his power he endeavored to perform them all.¹³

Aidan was also a founder of church schools and training colleges. At the beginning of his ministry, King Oswald assigned to him the island of Lindisfarne. This was situated on the eastern coast of Northumbria near to the capital of the kingdom, but sufficiently off the main thoroughfare to give the proper surroundings to an educational center. Taking Iona as a model, Aidan did for England through this mother college what Columba had done for Scotland. The fields were used to give work to support the students, as well as to furnish the food for faculty and pupils. It was the purpose of the Celtic Church to plant many centers rather than to concentrate numbers and wealth in some ecclesiastical capital. Aidan and his followers limited the buildings to the necessities of the school.

Of the location of Lindisfarne and its influence in creating similar institutions, John Lingard says that in all his toil, Aidan kept his eyes fixed on his patron, Columba.¹⁴ From Aidan's first institution, similar training centers were established in the kingdoms of Bernicia, Deira, Mercia, and East Anglia. Aidan's work was a triumph for truth. First, paganism was swept away and replaced by religion founded on New Testament doctrines.

Only thirty years was spanned by Aidan and his immediate successors, Finan and Colman. In apportioning these years, Bede gives seventeen to Aidan, ten to Finan, and three to Colman. ¹⁵ And yet in that brief period the Celtic Church grew and prospered so that John Meissner says, "The original Celtic Christianity had thus a very powerful hold on the country at the time when the first Roman emissary landed in Kent."¹⁶ Edward Hulme writes that "Aidan was the apostle of England."¹⁷

Celtic Church Training Centers

The chief instrument of Aidan's success was the training school. In naming these evangelical colleges, many writers call them "monasteries," using the term in its ancient sense. W. M. Hetherington presents as additional proof that the East was the homeland of early British Christianity, that the terms "monk" and "monastery" as used by the ecclesiastical writers of that age did not mean segregated congregations of unmarried men as writers generally now use the expressions. These words meant, rather, that the pupils of the British theological seminaries were married men and were frequently succeeded in their offices and duties by their own sons. This author further claims that wherever the Culdees or Celtic Christians founded new settlements, the presiding officer of the board of directors was chosen by election, not appointed by some foreign superior. "He was, in fact, nothing more than 'the first among equals.'"¹⁸

Archbishop James Ussher writes that "our monasteries in ancient times were the seminaries of the ministry: being as it were, so many colleges of learned divines, whereunto the people did usually resort for instruction, and from whence the church was wont continually to be supplied with able ministers."¹⁹ Furthermore, the learned Joseph Bingham takes considerable pains to prove by past authorities that "monk" and "monastery" originally had different meanings from those usually given to the words now.²⁰

Soon after the establishment of Lindisfarne, Aidan founded Melrose on the Tweed River as a second training field. Although for centuries since then the shadows have daily crept across the vacant fields where once stood this Columban college, yet splendid memorials still remain to show its noble contribution to civilization.²¹

Whitby as a Training Center

Another such institute, probably the most famous of all Columban spiritual headquarters in England, was Whitby in the kingdom of Northumbria. Two celebrated names - Hilda and Caedmon - are connected with this history-making center. Whitby is remembered particularly because of the celebrated abbess Hilda. She was of royal descent, and from the age of thirteen was well known for her piety and consecration to the Christian faith. When paganism again arose in Northumbria after the superficial work done by Augustine, Hilda left the country and went to the south, probably to East Anglia. Then came the great news that King Oswald was on the throne of her native land. Having distinguished herself by a noble work in two training centers, she returned to Northumbria and undertook either to build or to arrange a Bible seminary at Whitby. Bede relates that Aidan and other religious men knew her and honored her work. Because of her innate wisdom and inclination to the service of God, they frequently visited with her and diligently instructed her in the doctrines. Even kings and princes asked and received her advice.²² She put the seminary at Whitby under efficient and scholarly discipline. This establishment was very large, having two separate divisions, one for each sex. This latter arrangement was unusual. She obliged all those who were under her direction to attend much to the reading of the Bible and to learn how to teach scriptural truths.

There is ample evidence that this was the type of training center established throughout the world by the Church in the Wilderness. A specialty was made of studying and copying the Holy Scriptures. Farming and other trades were taught. To the girls instruction was given suitable to their later life. Whitby became the nursery of eminent men, graduating five who became provincial directors, and giving to the world Caedmon, the first of English religious poets. Dugdale says that Hilda "was a professed enemy to the extension of the papal jurisdiction in this country, and opposed with all her might the tonsure of priests and the celebration of Easter according to the Roman ritual."²³ In the crisis precipitated in the national convocation, when the contending papal and the British delegates met at Whitby in 664, Hilda was found on the side of the successor of Aidan. Many other training centers besides Whitby were established by the Scots in Great Britain and Ireland.

Caedmon

The grace of the Lord made use of a simple custom in one of these training centers to bring forth a leader. It seems that at certain entertainments a harp would be passed around from one individual to another and each was expected to compose an impromptu poem and play the harp in accompaniment. Caedmon, being a simple cowherd, felt so deeply his inferiority that one night when the harp was passed to him he refused to make an attempt, and retired to the stable where he had charge of the cattle. It seemed that a man appeared to him in his sleep and greeted him, saying, "Sing, Caedmon, some song to me." He answered that he could not, and it was because of this that he had left the feast. The visitor answered him, "However, you will sing to me." "What shall I sing?" asked the humble youth. "The beginning of created things," commanded the voice. Immediately he began to sing and compose to the praise of God. When this was reported, Hilda, always seeking for gifts among her students, requested him to relate the dream and repeat the words he had heard. Bede says, "They all concluded, that heavenly grace had been conferred upon him by our Lord."

The students of the abbey delighted themselves in exercising the gift they had discovered in Caedmon. They gave him passages from the Holy Scriptures which, when translated into English, he immediately converted into harmonious verse and sweetly repeated to his masters. Bede writes:

He sang the creation of the world, the origin of man, and all the history of Genesis: and made many verses on the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt, and their entering into the Land of Promise, with many other histories from Holy Writ; the incarnation, passion, resurrection of our Lord, and His ascension into heaven; the coming of the Holy Ghost, and the preaching of the apostles; also the terror of future judgment, the horror of the pains of hell, and the delights of heaven; besides many more about the Divine benefits and judgments, by which He endeavored to turn away all men from the love of vice, and to excite in them the love of, and application to, good actions.²⁴

The sermons wrought into verse by Caedmon captured the hearts of England. Caedmon loved sacred subjects. Composed in the people's language, these elevating themes could be sung by all circles. For the first time the common people enjoyed the wonderful words of life in hymns they could understand. In those days when there was no printing press, Caedmon, through singing, gave the message that Aidan and his disciples set forth by preaching.

Finan

At Aidan's death Finan was chosen in his place. He carried forward the work ably begun by his predecessor.

When Finan evangelized the kingdom of Mercia, it held a dominant position in the Heptarchy, for it was located in the center of England and was inhabited by a brave, warlike people. Through the influence of the warlike ruler, Penda, the kingdom was given to idolatry. Now, Penda's son, Peada, - a most exemplary young man, open-minded and resourceful, - was in love with Elfleda, the daughter of King Oswy of Northumbria, who was brother of Oswald. When he sought the hand of the girl in marriage, the father refused on the basis that he was not a Christian; but he requested Peada to receive instructions in the teachings of Christ and to work for the conversion of the southern part of Mercia over which his father had set him as ruler. When he learned of the gospel and was taught concerning the resurrection and the future immortal life, he rejoiced in his new-found light and informed Elfleda's father that it was his great desire to become a Christian whether he secured the girl or not. Thereupon Finan was sent to Peada with a large retinue of earls, soldiers, and servants. After Finan had baptized the young prince, he left behind to further instruct him and his people, four pastors of the Celtic Church - Cedd, Adda, Betti, and Diuna. The last-named minister was of Scottish blood while the others were English. When these pastors arrived in the province of the prince, they preached the word of God, which was gladly received by many of the nobility as well as by the common people. Many renounced their idolatry and were baptized.

The East Saxons

From the kingdom of Mercia we turn to Essex. A study of the religion of the East Saxons reveals again the superficial work of papal missionaries. Following his first success in Kent, Augustine ordained Mellitus as bishop to Sabert, king of the East Saxons. Many were baptized, and it looked as if Mellitus had done a good work. Upon the death of Sabert, however, his three pagan sons immediately made an open profession of idolatry which previously they had renounced. They granted liberty to the people to serve idols. And when they saw the Roman bishop celebrating mass and giving the wafer to the people, they argued with the priest. Finally, they forced the bishop and his followers to depart from the kingdom of Kent. All three agreed it would be best for them to leave England, so they withdrew into France.

Under Finan the Christian faith was again established among the East Saxons, and this time the Celtic Church brought the message. The Essex king, Sigebert, and his friends were baptized. After his baptism, the king called Celtic missionaries to his kingdom. Thus the Celtic Church was the instrument in God's hand of making Christianity prevail over idolatry in the kingdom of Essex.

Finan recognized how God was working with the church missionaries in Essex. Following the example of Columba and Aidan before him, he established a theological training center at Tillbery.

It has been shown how the three kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, and Essex were brought back from their idolatry to the faith of the Celtic Church through the consecrated labors of the Scots. Speaking of the magnificent work done by the Celtic Church in these kingdoms, the historian Rapin de Thoyras writes:

Austin [Augustine] has had the honor of converting the English, when in the main the progress he made was not very considerable. 'Tis true he preached to the Saxons of Kent, as Mellitus did to those of Essex, and that with good success....

Augustine in the height of his success, for which he is so greatly honored, established but two bishops only, Justus at Rochester (in his own Kent), and Mellitus at London, though the pope had expressly ordered him to settle bishops wherever there should be occasion.... This is clear evidence, that the progress ascribed to him was not so considerable as Gregory imagines.... It is therefore surprisingly strange that the conversion of the English should be ascribed to Augustine, rather than to Aidan, to Finan, to Colman, to Cedd, to Diuna, and the other Scotch monks, who undoubtedly labored much more abundantly than he. But here lies the case. These last had not their orders from Rome, and therefore must not be allowed any share in the glory of the work.²⁵

The historian Henry Soames writes upon the same theme:

Only two counties, therefore, north of the Thames... were ever under Roman superintendence during their transition from paganism to Christianity, and these two were largely indebted to domestic [Scottish] zeal for their conversion. Every other county, from London to Edinburgh, has the full gratification of pointing to the ancient church of Britain as its nursing mother in Christ's holy faith.²⁶

The Church in Kent, Wessex, East Anglia, and Sussex

What now should be said of the four other kingdoms - Kent, East Anglia, Sussex, and Wessex? Kent, being the kingdom in the southeastern part of the island and farthest away from the missionary advance of the Scots, had early been entered by Augustine. The Christianity which prevailed in this province, therefore, was of the papal type. Wessex, kingdom of the West Saxons, was farthest away from either the Scottish or the papal advance; therefore it long resisted any profession of Christianity.

As to the country of the East Angles, here again it was the influence of Scottish missionaries which reclaimed it to Christianity when, after the departure of the Roman monks, it had fallen into idolatry. A few years after this lapse into paganism a Scottish pastor labored so diligently among them that great numbers of the apostates were led to renounce their errors and return to the faith.²⁷ As for Sussex, kingdom of the South Saxons, it was greatly indebted to the Celtic Church for the knowledge of Christ. Their king had been baptized in the province of the Mercians by the evangelical Scots. Even in the Roman Catholic province of the West Saxons it was the labors of Scottish missionaries which efficiently helped the Anglo-Saxons there to depart from their paganism and embrace the gospel.

"It is no exaggeration to say that, with the exception of Kent and Sussex, the whole English race received the foundation of their faith from Celtic missionaries, and even in Sussex it is known that Irish missionaries were at work before the arrival of Wilfrid."²⁸ As the celebrated Count de Montalembert, French Catholic scholar wrote, "Northumbrian Christianity spread over the southern kingdoms."²⁹

Colman

At the death of Finan, Colman was chosen as his successor to lead the Celtic Church. Bede says that he was sent from Scotland.³⁰ Colman came to preach the word of God to the English nation.³¹ The Scots sent him to Lindisfarne, therefore his consecration and his field of labor were identical with those of Aidan and Finan - the kingdom of Northumbria. Since, however, at that time Oswy, king of Northumbria, was a leader among other kingdoms of England, Colman would naturally be a leader of leaders. He possessed the meekness of Christ. Step by step British Christianity successfully met entrenched paganism and decadent Romanism and advanced into province after province.

Suddenly the wind changed; the intrigues of the Roman Catholic queen of Oswy succeeded. When Colman had been in office only three years, the actions of the queen precipitated the Council of Whitby. Three things were against Colman: first, the short time in which he had been in office; secondly, the fact that his antagonist, Wilfrid, had been drilled in the ways of the Papacy; and lastly, the intrigue of the Roman Catholic queen.

The main question in dispute was the same as that between Augustine and Dinooth, the same which had led Victor I, the Roman bishop, to excommunicate the clergy of the East - the date of the observance of Easter. In other lands the sword was used against those who refused to accept the practices of Rome.³² Eanfled, the Roman Catholic queen of Oswy, was determined to bend the king to the practices of Rome.

The queen's chaplain, Wilfrid, was one of the most determined opponents of the Celtic Church. He had been sent to Rome where for four years he had looked upon the gorgeous rites and temples of the Papacy. During this time he had been drilled in the arguments and traditions designed to spread Rome's authority, and he returned to Northumbria with the purpose of forcing the Celtic Church to come into line with papal practices.³³ Public debate is exactly what Wilfrid sought, in order that a decision might be proclaimed in favor of the Papacy. The weakness of the king assured this victory in advance. Oswy decreed that both parties should meet in open forum. The place chosen was Whitby. Oswy presided over the council. Colman, his Scottish clerks, the abbess Hilda and her followers, and Bishop Cedd were on the side of the Scots. The king, his son, Prince Alchfrid, the queen, and two able Roman priests besides Wilfrid were on the side of Rome.³⁴

None can read the report of the discussion as handed down by the papal historian Bede without realizing how skillfully Colman answered the arguments in the case. However, Wilfrid artfully brought the debate around to the supremacy of Peter. It is informing to know that, although this question was in nowise the real point at issue, the Roman divines heaped derision on the great Columba as Wilfrid shouted:

As for you and your companions, you certainly sin, in having heard the decrees of the apostolic see and of the universal church, you refuse to follow them; for though your fathers were holy, do you think their small number, in a corner of the remotest island, is to be preferred before the universal church of Christ? And if that Columba of yours was a holy man and powerful in miracles, yet, could he be

preferred before the most blessed prince of the apostles, to whom our Lord said, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it; and to thee I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven?'³⁵

Immediately the king broke in: "Is it true, Colman, that these words were spoken to Peter by our Lord?" When Colman replied in the affirmative, endeavoring at the same time to show the fallacy and weakness of using the incident of the keys as a basis for church supremacy, his remarks were considered beside the point. The king led the audience to increasing indecision, until they finally renounced their former custom and decided to conform to the pretended superiority of the papal Easter.³⁶

It is not difficult to see why King Oswy surrendered to the pressure of the queen and her chaplain. Through alliance with the kings of Europe, Rome was laying broad and deep the foundations of her theocracy. The new line of kings, descendants of Charlemagne, was rising to dominance on the Continent and carrying the Papacy along with them. The decrees of the general councils of the Papacy were supreme. Kings of even greater resolution than Oswy would have weakened before the pressure.

The Four Centuries Following Whitby

Some have asked why Colman and his accompanying workers immediately left for the island of Iona. How could he have done otherwise? If he had rallied his forces to fight the king and the foreign priests, such a plan might have torn down the church organization which had been so ably built up by Aidan and Finan. He remembered that when the first fierce persecutions fell upon the infant church in Jerusalem the apostles left the city, so that the assaulting opposition was turned aside from the church. Thus, we can see the wisdom of Colman in departing immediately with his co-workers.

"During the four dark centuries that followed the Council of Whitby, the northward extension of the Roman Church was checked by racial warfare and pagan invasions which built up additional barriers between the north and the south."³⁷

In the providence of God, Colman's departure could not have been better timed. The Papacy was not permitted a widespread enjoyment of her questionable victory at the Council of Whitby, as many historians have stated. Before Wilfrid and his successors could accomplish the destruction of the Celtic Church, the design for which he had been trained at Rome, the Danes swept down upon England bringing with them a new flood of paganism.

However, when the leaders of the British Church had departed, the representatives of Romanism immediately seized the spiritual overlordship of the realm. The year following Whitby, Pope Vitalian wrote a letter to King Oswy concerning the appointment of an archbishop for Canterbury, in which he said, "By the protecting hand of God you have been converted to the true and apostolic faith." Pope Vitalian told the king that he would root out the enemy tares.³⁸ He further promised to send the relics of the apostles Peter and Paul along with the letter. Not long afterward, the king's son, Alchfrid, discovered and banished the Scottish sect.³⁹ This injustice was inflicted by King Alchfrid upon the Scottish believers with the approbation of his father, Oswy, because the Scots refused to conform to a church which sanctioned relic worship.

Although the Papacy had secured the ascendancy in England, God did not permit the truth to die. The seed sown by Aidan, Finan, and Colman, though dormant, was not lifeless. The faith represented by the

Celtic leaders remained powerful in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the southwestern part of England. Followers of the truth persisted down through the centuries, so that when Wycliffe began his marvelous revival centuries later, his followers are thought by some to have been those who had maintained from generation to generation the doctrines of Aidan.

During the four hundred years from Whitby to the Norman conquest the Papacy in England proper was never able to overcome totally the paganism of the Danes or the inspiring courage of Celtic believers. Therefore, the Church of Rome saw that if it was to win, a new plan of battle must be devised. Time and circumstances placed in its hands a leader destined to bring about a change in the British Isles. This champion was William of Normandy.

The Papacy and William The Conqueror

The Papacy favored the conquest of England by William of Normandy.⁴⁰ There were three reasons for this. The Danes in conquering Anglo-Saxon England (c. A.D. 820) were imbued with such a pagan background that Rome could never expect a strong ascendancy through them even though in later years they had leanings toward that faith. This might even have meant a victory for the ancient Celtic Church which had already shown itself spiritually able to win both Anglo-Saxons and Danes. Therefore, the Papacy welcomed the hour when a strong Norman leader in France had an apparent claim to the throne of England. In the second place, something had to be done to break the power of the Celtic Church, particularly in Scotland and Ireland. Finally, it was necessary to have a new race upon which to build. The Normans, whose fatherland was France, were living under the leadership of the people whom the pope had entitled "the eldest daughter of the church." They had enthusiasm for the political combination of colorful superstition, a tyrannical caste system, and regal pomp. If the Normans could lay an iron hand upon Saxon and Danish England, the whole of the British Isles might be brought fully under the papal flag.

When William of Normandy landed in England in 1066 with his warriors, the Danish king, Harold, had just been called to fight in the north a terrific battle with a rebellious rival. Obligated to move south by forced marches to meet the Norman invaders, his wearied army drew up on the heights of Hastings. But it could not withstand the invaders, and the battle was won by the Normans.

The victory at Hastings brought new leadership for the Roman Church in England. A powerful reorganization of English life, customs, and institutions followed. Nevertheless, three hundred years passed before the combined powers of continental Roman Catholicism and Norman prowess could bring Ireland and Scotland under the dominance of the Papacy. Wales was not subdued. Even then the spiritual conquest was one of might and not of right. Swayed by fear and awed by authority, the people accepted the customs of the Normans and made a superficial profession of accepting the papal doctrines. The deeper convictions of truth and liberty which prevailed in the days of the Celtic Church were smothered under the weight of the invaders. The great work of Aidan was apparently buried in utter darkness. Yet, centuries later when the Reformation challenged the supremacy of Rome, the seed sown by Aidan, Finan, and Colman sprang forth to newness of life. The Church of the Wilderness bestirred herself, and a new day dawned not only for England, but for the world.