

The part played by monks and nuns in the evangelization of England,

by Brian McKinlay

The paradox of monasticism itself in these centuries - and the role of monks in the English conversion was a dominant one from the start - was that it fostered on the one hand an intense preoccupation with the withdrawal from the world and personal salvation of the individual, and on the other hand a vivid social consciousness and desire to conquer the whole of human society for Christ. It is impossible to cite any Christian scholar or ascetic in early Anglo-Saxon history who thought it necessary or even right to wash his hands of his fellow men in order to devote himself to God.

The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England /
Henry Mayr-Harting. - London: Batsford, 1972, p.7.

To begin an evaluation of the work of monks and nuns in the evangelization of England we need a background understanding of the social and religious situation in England prior to the arrival of missionaries late in the late sixth century. Christianity was not widespread in Britain until the fourth century, but archaeological evidence of Christians living there has been dated as early as the second century.¹ Patristic sources mention Britain from an early date.² Bede recounts a persecution which included the martyrdom of Alban now believed to have been about 301 CE.³ After the persecution, Bede tells of a period of peace and rebuilding for the church (from 307 CE).⁴ The British church sent three bishops (London, York and Colchester) to the Council at Arles in 314 and was represented at the Council of Ariminum in 360 - though it is unclear whether British bishops were at Nicea in 325.⁵ Pelagius, after whom the pelagian heresy of the fifth century is named, was of British and Irish origin.⁶

The Pelagian controversy sufficiently disturbed the British church, according to Bede⁷, that a Gallic Bishop, Germanus, was requested to intervene

¹ "Christianity" by AS Hargreaves and W.M. Marshall in *Oxford companion to British history* / edited by John Cannon. - Oxford O.U.P, 1997., p.204.

² Irenæus named the Celts among the enlightened nations (*Adv. Hæres* L.1.c2) Tertullian wrote that British districts were inaccessible to Roman arms but subdued by Christ "Britannorum inaccessa Romanis loca, Christo vero subdita" (*Adv. judæos* 7). Origen suggested in AD 240 that 'Christianity was a unifying force among the Britons'. *Hom in Ezekiel* iv).

³ *A History of English church and people*, / Bede translated and with an introduction by Leo Sherley-Price. - Rev. ed. - Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, I.7 (i.e. Book I, chapter 7).

⁴ *Ibid.*, I.8.

⁵ *The Church in Anglo-Saxon England* / John Godfrey. - Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962, pp.13-5.

⁶ *Oxford companion to British history*, p.738.

⁷ Bede, *op.cit.*, I.17.

(c.435-444). The British church maintained its orthodoxy and Deansley states in an essay on early British Christianity that, "There is no evidence to show that the faith and order of the church in Britain in the fourth and fifth centuries differed from those of the church in Gaul, her nearest neighbour, or of the church at large."⁸ Scholars conclude that the church was well established in fourth-century Britain, with a hierarchy of Catholic bishops, accepted in Europe as part of the universal church.⁹ However it is likely to have been urban in character and quite small. Pagan religions were still practiced, particularly in the countryside.¹⁰

Despite this promising background, the church in those parts of Britain now known as England, withered away in the century before Augustine's arrival in 597. From the mid-fourth century, Romanic Britain came under increasing pressure, eventually to collapse entirely. The Picts breached Hadrian's wall and, with the Saxons, staged raids on the south. The Scots of Ireland attacked the west coast sporadically. German marauders similarly attacked the eastern and southern shores. From about the beginning of the fifth century there was German invasion followed by full scale conquest and immigration. The extent to which the culture of the Angles and Saxons supplanted that of the Celts is argued. But among the occurrences demonstrating the completeness of the Anglo-Saxon occupation is the virtual disappearance of the Christian religion from the territories occupied by them - essentially in what is now England.¹¹ "The heathen background of Old English history is impenetrably vague", Sir Frank Stenton remarks in his history of Anglo-Saxon England.¹² But Stenton demonstrates, using place names and other evidence, that by the time of Augustine "heathenism" was strong in the centre and south-east of England and probably more widely. The evidence shows, he says, that, "throughout the country in which Augustine and his companions laboured, heathenism was still a living religion when it met the

⁸ "Early Christianity in Britain" in *Sidelights on the Anglo-Saxon church* / Margaret Deanesly. - London: Black, 1962, p. 11.

⁹ Godfrey, *op.cit.*, p.15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.15-6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34-36.

¹² *Anglo-Saxon England* / Frank Stenton. - 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971 (Oxford History of England; 2), p.98.

Christian challenge."¹³ "The heathenism which confronted the mission of Augustine," he observes, "was rooted in the soil by the practice of generations."¹⁴ Christian evangelism had not come from the British, whose clergy apparently harboured an understandable and abiding dislike of the Anglo-Saxons. Thus Stenton cites a letter written before 705 in which Aldhelm says that:

the clergy across the Severn in Dyfydd will not associate with the English in church, nor eat from the same dishes. They even throw the remnants of a shared meal to the dogs, and scour the dishes as being contaminated.¹⁵

Bede is critical of the failure of the Britons, who had been weakened morally as well as militarily, to convert the invading and conquering Angles and Saxons, but his judgement seems rather harsh.

Among other unspeakable crimes ... they added this - that they never preached the faith to the Saxons or Angles who dwelt with them in Britain. However, the goodness of God did not utterly abandon the people whom he had chosen; for he remembered them, and sent this nation more worthy preachers of truth to bring them to the faith.¹⁶

Fabled missionaries had brought Christianity to other parts - Patrick (c390-461) evangelised Ireland, Ninian (c.360-c432) the Picts of Galloway, and David (c530-589) the Welsh, but England, now largely pagan, apparently remained untouched until the arrival of Augustine's mission in 597.¹⁷ Even before the Anglo-Saxon period, monks and nuns had made little contribution to the evangelisation of eastern Britain. The Celtic churches in Ireland, Wales and elsewhere grew through the planting and expansion of the monasteries and monastic life¹⁸. But the church of the Britons in the east and south had been episcopal in structure and based in urban community life, depending much less for its character on the work of the religious.

Thus we have a brief background on the state of the church in the land that was to become England. But the *English people* is taken to be the evolving ethnic group made up from the Angles, Saxons and Jutes who had invaded the country, admixed with such of the Britons as remained. It is the evangelisation of this people which is the core of our topic.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.103.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103. n.1., citing *Aldhelmi opera* / ed. R Ehwald (Monumenta Germaniae Historica)

¹⁶ Bede, *op.cit.*, I.22.

¹⁷ Hargreaves and Marshall, *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ See the account in Godfrey, *op.cit.*, pp.34-58.

A significant early achievement of Augustine's mission was the baptism of King Ethelbert.¹⁹ According to the tradition, King Ethelbert, as well as others, accepted Christianity and were baptised in St. Martin's Church on Whitsun Eve in 597. It seems that the mission had achieved a great success and more and more began to flock to hear the gospel and join the church. The King compelled no one to accept Christianity, for as Bede puts it, "He had learned from his teachers and guides in the way of salvation that the service of Christ was voluntary and ought not to be compulsory."²⁰ Ethelbert granted Augustine and his companions a place to settle in Canterbury, his chief city, and gave them possessions of various kinds for their needs. After the baptism of King Ethelbert, Augustine travelled to Arles to be consecrated as first Archbishop of the English in November 597.

A second great success of the mission was the mass baptism of the English people in the River Swale at Christmas of 597 or 598. In a letter to Eulogius, Bishop of Alexandria, Pope Gregory confirms that there were more than 10,000.²¹ Shortly after these events Augustine had despatched Laurentius and Peter to Rome to acquaint the Gregory with news of the mission and seek answers to some important questions. When at length they returned in 601 (the delay possibly being due to Gregory's poor health), the emissaries brought extra workers and from Gregory a pall (*pallium*) conferring on Augustine the authority to consecrate bishops. Among the letters sent by Gregory were answers to Augustine's questions.

Pope Gregory's inspiration, organisation and command made possible the place of Augustine's mission in history. The practical wisdom of his instructions and advice to Augustine (preserved in surviving letters) was instrumental in the newly planted church more readily becoming part of

¹⁹ Bede, *op.cit.*, I.26.

²⁰ Bede, *op.cit.*, I.26.

²¹ "... for while the nation of the Angli, placed in a corner of the world, remained up to this time misbelieving in the worship of sticks and stones, I determined, through the aid of your prayers for me, to send to it, God granting it, a monk of my monastery for the purpose of preaching. And he, having with my leave been made bishop by the bishops of Germany, proceeded, with their aid also, to the end of the world to the aforesaid nation; and already letters have reached us telling us of his safety and his work; to the effect that he and those that have been sent with him are resplendent with such great miracles in the said nation that they seem to imitate the powers of the apostles in the signs which they display. Moreover, at the solemnity of the Lord's Nativity which occurred in this first indiction, more than ten thousand Angli are reported to have been baptised by the same our brother and fellow-bishop." (Book VIII epistle xxx)

English society. Augustine was a monk, and had been prior of a monastery on the Coelian hill in Rome. In attributing credit to Gregory, we could remember that, prior to his accession to the papacy, Gregory was also monk - a life which he had left with reluctance.

Yet, the way of life which Gregory sanctioned for Augustine and his companions was not entirely typical of a monastic order. In response to one of Augustine's questions, the life which Gregory prescribed was communal but not monastic. The obligations of a fully monastic life were too great to be borne by those with such a task of evangelisation and church building.

Gregory wrote, in the first of his responses to Augustine (reproduced by Bede):

In your case, my brother, having been trained under monastic rule, you should not live apart from your clergy in the church of the English You are therefore to follow the way of life practised by our forefathers of the primitive church, among whom none said anything that he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.²²

For those not in monastic life, Gregory gives instructions in the same letter relating to the training of local clergy, allowing marriage for certain of them and provision of a stipend.

Augustine had had qualms about consecrating bishops alone, without the witness of other bishops. Gregory's reply is none other than common sense:

In the church of the English, where as yet you are the only bishop, you cannot do otherwise than consecrate a bishop without other bishops being present. For when do bishops from Gaul pay a visit, so that they can be present as witnesses at the consecration? It is our wish, brother, that you should so establish bishops that they are not unnecessarily far apart: so that at a bishop's consecration other pastors, whose presence is certainly desirable, may be readily summoned.²³

In a separate letter, also sent with Laurentius and Peter and recorded by Bede, Gregory accompanied his award of the *pallium* with instructions for the establishment of an episcopate as the church grew. In one respect at least, Gregory's wishes were disregarded. He speaks of Augustine's see as being established in London. But Canterbury was the capital of the Kentish kings and the appropriate place for Augustine to remain while under the protection of Ethelbert. Gregory wrote:

... in regard that the new church of the English is, through the goodness of the Lord, and your labours, brought to the grace of God, we grant you the use of

²² Gregory's reply to the first question of Augustine, Bede., *op.cit.*, I.27.

²³ Gregory's reply to the sixth question of Augustine, Bede., *op.cit.*, I.27.

the pall in the same ... so that you in several places ordain twelve bishops, who shall be subject to your jurisdiction, so that the bishop of London shall, for the future, be always consecrated by his own synod, and that he receive the honour of the pall from this holy and apostolic see, which I, by the grace of God, now serve. ... But we will have you send to the city of York such a bishop as you shall think fit to ordain; yet so, if that city, with the places adjoining, shall receive the word of God, that bishop shall also ordain twelve bishops, and enjoy the honour of a metropolitan ...²⁴

Two archbishoprics were to be established, in London (Canterbury) and York, which were to act in uniformity with each other. In each province, bishops were to be consecrated by authority of the archbishop. Each archbishop was to be supported by a provincial synod, which would choose his successor. The establishment of an archdiocese in York was made hypothetical on that city and its surrounds receiving the gospel. In 604 St. Augustine, consecrated two bishops - Justus at Rochester, and Mellitus at London to preach in the province of the East Saxons. Bruce comments that, though the number of bishops is a rough indicator of the growth of the Christian church, Gregory's plan for twenty four bishops remained a paper scheme as it was not until the time of Henry VIII that England had that many bishops.²⁵

Archer Torrey²⁶ considers the missionary methods established by Augustine to be models important for today. Gregory encouraged a program of what today would be called "indigenisation" or "inculturation". For example, existing places of pagan worship, familiar to the people, could be accepted for the service of God, provided they were totally abandoned by the temple authorities, exorcised, cleansed, rededicated to Christ, and possibly further sanctified by the placing of relics. Thus God was affirmed as the creator of all things, none of which is intrinsically good or bad. Rededication of existing buildings exemplified the similar cleansing, infilling by the Spirit and sanctification which takes place in human lives through the working of the gospel.

Torrey notes also,²⁷ that Gregory encouraged feasts of thanksgiving on the anniversary of the rededication of such places of worship. Christian feasts,

²⁴ Bede., *op.cit.*, I.29.

²⁵ *The Spreading flame : the rise and progress of Christianity from its first beginnings to the conversion of the English* / F.F. Bruce. - Exeter: Paternoster, 1958, p.398.

²⁶ Torrey, Archer. "The Gregorian missionary methods." *Missiology* 8(1):99-103, Jan., 1980. At the time of writing, Torrey was head of the Anglican St.Michael's Theological College in Sosa, Korea.

²⁷ p.100.

he suggests, are best celebrated with gusto and enthusiasm (Deuteronomy 14.22-27).²⁸ To this day, the Christian feasts celebrated with the most gusto in Britain are those taken over from pagan festivals - Easter and the Yule.

Yet Gregory's missionary program differed from those of today. He organised a team of forty people, placing them under the headship of a mature leader who was not man of action, but a man of prayer. The missionaries were already a community before they went to England. It seems that they were not especially adventurous, baulking at the dangers before them, yet ultimately courageous in obediently fulfilling their mission. In addition to teachers and preachers, the team included farmers and masons - people with skills which their community would use to support itself and to benefit the people of England.

This band of cultured foreigners - labouring with their own hands to support themselves and doing work which the proud native warriors considered fit only for women in order that they might learn of Jesus - had a moving effect upon the brutal Saxon.

So Torrey argues.²⁹ His language is emotive, but the point made is that in the missionary community, the Kentish people saw Christians in life and work. This may well have been instrumental in the large number of conversions to the faith and recruitments to the community. Bede says that, "the pure lives of these holy men and their gladdening promises", influenced Ethelbert to accept baptism.³⁰

The mission combined flexibility in culture and worship with political astuteness. Augustine began the work in Kent not simply because Kent is close to France. The path was carefully prepared by letters sent by Gregory to the Frankish kings. Augustine sought out the territory of Ethelbert, brought interpreters from Gaul, and made his contact Bertha, a person with connections in England and Gaul. Thus was exercised a practice of missionary effort which was to endure: the mission began by seeking the protection and co-operation of the local rulership. Ethelbert's influence extended beyond Kent, as he was the

²⁸ "Set apart a tithe [...] In the presence of the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe [...] so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always [...] whatever you wish--oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your household rejoicing together."
(Deuteronomy 14.22-26, extracts, NRSV)

²⁹ p.102.

³⁰ Bede, *op.cit.*, I.26.

Bretwalda - a title held by that English king whose predominance was recognised by his fellow kings in the southern seven kingdoms. Thus the faith to which he was converted was treated with respect. But the other rulers may have been tempted to treat the faith with only nominal conformity, the more readily to revert to paganism should that be expedient.³¹

Gregorian policy sought, primarily, to facilitate the conversion of the English. But as well, Robert McCulloch suggests, the intention was to fashion a Christianity which would uphold and not threaten the authority of the king - the better to seek his conversion and his support.³² McCulloch goes on to suggest that the responses of Gregory to Augustine similarly indicate political awareness as well as practical flexibility. The situation of the missionaries and needs of the new church to grow in a missionary environment gave Gregory a basis even to dispense with church disciplines established by conciliar laws. Such flexibility is evident in the second response relating to liturgy, in which Augustine was given great freedom. Gregory wrote:

My brother, you are familiar with the usage of the Roman church, in which you were brought up. But if you have found any customs, whether in the Church of Rome or of Gaul or any other that may be more acceptable to God, I wish you to make careful selection of them, and teach the church of the English, which is still young in the faith, whatever you have been able to learn with profit from the various churches. ... select from each of the churches whatever things are devout, religious, and right, and when you have bound them, as it were, into a Sheaf, let the minds of the English grow accustomed to it.³³

Political considerations are relevant to this liturgical policy, McCulloch suggests.³⁴ Bertha, Augustine's chief protector in England, would not have taken kindly to the rejection of the customs of her native Gallic church. Similarly, British Christians were accustomed to Celtic liturgical usages. Gregory allowed these also in the English church. This seems to show humility as well as pragmatism on Gregory's part.

Augustine's fourth and fifth questions to Gregory imply that Augustine had restrained the missionary work in the knowledge that the marriage arrangements of potential converts would conflict with church laws in force in

³¹ Bruce, *op.cit.*, p.401.

³² McCulloch., Peter. "Gregorian adaptation in the Augustinian mission to England." *Missiology* 6(3):323-334, July 1978.

³³ Pope Gregory in a letter to Augustine, Bede, *op.cit.* I.27.

³⁴ p.328.

Rome and elsewhere. But Gregory permitted leniency, not denying the sacraments to converts on such grounds.³⁵ As we have seen, Gregory's sixth response relating to the consecration of bishops was similarly flexible and practical.

McCulloch notes that policies making the transition from paganism to Christianity easier for the English were an about-face by Gregory. Earlier, Gregory had exhorted King Ethelbert to destroy the pagan temples and eradicate all trace of paganism. Gregory's earlier directions concerning the Christianisation of Sicily and Sardinia, for example, had been much more stringent. It would seem that Gregory adapted his policy to the situation. Policies that were traditionally satisfactory in Italy could not necessarily be expected to work in England.³⁶

The early English church by no means spread like wildfire. Sabert, ruler of the East Saxons and nephew of Ethelbert was converted by Mellitus, but little else was accomplished there and eventually Mellitus was exiled from London by pagan reaction. The King of the east Angles, was persuaded by Ethelbert to be baptised, but none of his court followed him. Ethelbert's son and successor, Eadbald, at first remained a pagan, threatening for some time the very existence of the church. But by remaining in Canterbury, Laurentius and his successors eventually encouraged a stable Christian regime in Kent. But, Stenton argues, by about 650, the initiative of Canterbury in the conversion of the English had been lost.³⁷ Discussions between Augustine and the British clergy broke down in animosity and failure, differences between Roman and Celtic practice being too great.³⁸ Augustine's part in the discussions seems to have been far from tactful.³⁹ Mayr-Harting comments that, "Augustine clearly had little idea of the great tradition which made the British Church resent his approaches."⁴⁰

In 625 during the Archbishopric of Justus, Ethelbert's daughter was

³⁵ Gregory's reply to the fourth and fifth questions of Augustine, Bede., *op.cit.*, I.27

³⁶ McCulloch, *op. cit.*, pp.330-333.

³⁷ Stenton, *op.cit.*, pp.112-3

³⁸ Possible reasons are discussed by Stenton, *op.cit.*, p.110.

³⁹ Bruce, *op.cit.*, p.339-401.

⁴⁰ *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* / Henry Mayr-Harting. - London: Batsford, 1972, pp.72.

married to Edwin King of Northumbria. She was accompanied northwards by bishop Paulinus. After some time, Edwin was baptised and there was a rapid, but apparently superficial expansion of Christianity. But with the devastation of Northumbria by the Mercians and death in battle of Edwin in battle in 632, Paulinus was obliged to flee, and the church collapsed. Stenton speculates that the more gradual policy of Augustine was perhaps wiser after all.⁴¹ Planting of churches by Felix in East Anglia and Birinius among the West Saxons - both independent missionaries - seems to have had more success, but records are sketchy.⁴²

The Northumbrian kingdom was re-established in 663 under Oswald, who had received Christianity from the monks at Iona and invited them to send a mission.⁴³ Bishop Aidan and his followers established a fabled monastery at Lindisfarne and were instrumental in re-establishing Christianity in the north within twenty years⁴⁴. The episcopate of Finan (651-61), Aidan's successor, was marked by a strong extension of the church southwards. Peada, son of the pagan Mercian king, was baptised in 653 on the occasion of his marriage to the daughter of the Christian Northumbrian king, Oswiu. Peada was allowed to introduce priests into Mercia. Little other detail is known except that a large diocese covering Mercia and Middle Anglia was established and continued to exist.

Oswiu in about the same year persuaded Sigeberht, king of Essex, to be baptised. Restoration of Christianity to the East Saxons became possible. Cedd, one of the four missionaries to the Middle Angles, was consecrated bishop of the East Saxons.⁴⁵ His episcopate is described by Mayr-Harting as "essentially tribal."⁴⁶ He established no town-based see in the Roman pattern, but was simply a monk and bishop-at-large of the East Saxons. Traces of his pioneering work remain, in a church in Essex and a monastery he established at Lastingham on the Yorkshire moors.

⁴¹ Stenton, *op.cit.*, pp.113-116.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.117-8.

⁴³ Bede, *op.cit.*, III.3.

⁴⁴ See Mayr-Harting, *op.cit.*, ch.6, pp.94-103.

⁴⁵ Stenton, *op.cit.*, p.120-122. See Bede, *op.cit.*, III.17.

⁴⁶ Stenton., *op.cit.*, p.100.

Aidan, his co-workers and those who came after them were monastics in the Celtic tradition of the Irish church. Thus to monks and nuns accrues much of the credit for the evangelization of northern England. Their practices differed in important points from the pattern being developed from Canterbury. Their organization was monastic rather than territorial. The bishops' function was ministerial, and authority rested with the chief abbots. Though the founders at Canterbury were also monks and their life communal, the order they established under Gregory's direction was of episcopal authority and territorial governance.

There was bitter controversy about the principles underlying the method of calculating the date of Easter which divided the Northumbrian church into Roman and Celtic factions. Those of continental background were also concerned about the validity of the Irish method of consecrating bishops.⁴⁷ Whatever the cause,⁴⁸ controversy in the Northumbrian church on such matters grew steadily more difficult until at length in 663 the questions in debate were referred to a synod, now known as the Synod of Whitby.⁴⁹ There was a long debate on the dating-of-Easter question. What did Christian unity mean, after all, if there could be no agreement on the date of its main festival?⁵⁰ Giving his ruling, the King is reported to have said that as between St. Peter and St. Columba, he would obey St. Peter.⁵¹ The eventual resolution of the controversy, Stenton argues, was to enable the unification of the English church by Archbishop Theodore, providing a foundation for further work of consolidation and evangelism.⁵² Yet England was still not wholly Christian. Pagan practices continued in varying degrees for centuries. But by the late seventh century every kingdom but Sussex held an episcopal see and Christianity was the dominant religion.

Though bishops were at the head of the pastoral ministry, the parochial system was to develop only slowly over the next several centuries.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.119-120.

⁴⁸ Some of the cause of the debate was the political situation at the Northumbrian court, see Mayr-Harting, *op.cit.*, pp.105-108.

⁴⁹ Described in Mayr-Harting, *op. cit.*, ch. 7, pp.102-113.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.104.

⁵¹ Stenton, *op.cit.*, p.123.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.126.

Monasteries and convents flourished from the mid-seventh century and continued to be a vital source of ministry of all kinds, including evangelistic. We know most about the northern monasteries and nunneries. Some of these were "double monasteries", headed by an often notable abbess, with men and women living separately but worshipping together.⁵³ Pre-eminent among these abbesses was Hilda, grand-niece of King Edwin of Northumbria. She founded the monastery at Whitby which was famed throughout England, as home of learning, teaching and the arts, and a fruitful source of trained clergy.⁵⁴ Henry Mayr-Harting observes that:

Monasteries, whose pastoral activities were doubtless under the general control of bishops, were of supreme importance in the spread of Christianity through the countryside and in the ministry to the faithful. It is hard to imagine a monastery among the seventh-century Anglo-Saxons which would have considered itself so ascetic and withdrawn from the world that it took no part in this work. The reverse was likely to be true - the more ascetic the monastery, the more conscious was it of its mission to the laity.⁵⁵

We have seen that religious were largely responsible for the replanting of Christianity in England beginning in the late sixth century. However, not all of their contribution was made *as* monks and nuns. The consecration of a monk as bishop, for example, released him from his monastic vows. Indeed, the decisions made by Gregory at the beginning of the enterprise relaxed some of the requirements of the monastic life and instituted a form of church government centred on the bishop, not the abbot.

The contribution of the monks and nuns was three-fold. The practical and flexible doctrine and order established by the Gregorians in the south provided a sound basis for the ongoing community life of the English church. The spirituality and driving commitment of the Celtic influence in the north (complemented by bursts of achievement in the south) were instrumental in spreading the gospel through much of England. And the ongoing spiritual and practical life of the monasteries and convents continued to sustain and nourish the evangelistic and pastoral life of the Anglo-Saxon church. The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ was appealed to many of the English. But the appeal

⁵³ see Mayr-Harting, *op.cit.*, ch.10, pp.148-167.

⁵⁴ Bruce, *op.cit.*, p.408-410, Bede, *op.cit.*, IV.24. Hilda's monastery was the venue for the 663 Synod of Whitby.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.242-3.

of the gospel was surely enhanced by the life and dedication of its messengers.⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation ..." (Isaiah 52.7, NRSV) *c.f.* Romans 10.15.