



THE TREE OF THE CHRIST CHILD



St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † December 2018

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ISSUE: Where did the Christmas tree come from?

DISCUSSION: The story of the Christmas tree is part of the story of the life of St. Boniface, whose name was originally Winfrid. St. Boniface was born about the year 680 in Devonshire, England. At the age of five, he wanted to become a monk and entered the monastery school near Exeter two years later. When he was 14, he entered the abbey of Nursling, in the Diocese of Winchester. Very studious himself, St. Boniface was the pupil of the learned abbot, Winbert. Later Boniface became the director of the school.

At this time, much of northern and central Europe still had not been evangelized. St. Boniface decided he wanted to be a missionary to these people. After one brief attempt, he sought official approval from Pope St. Gregory II. The pope charged him with preaching the Gospel to the German people. (Also at this time, St. Boniface changed his name from Winfrid to Boniface). St. Boniface travelled to Germany through the Alps into Bavaria and then into Hesse and Thuringia. In 722, the pope consecrated St. Boniface as a bishop with jurisdiction over all Germany. He knew that his greatest challenge was to eradicate pagan superstitions which hindered the acceptance of the Gospel and the conversion of people. Known as “the Apostle of Germany,” he would continue to preach the Gospel until his martyrdom in 754. At this point we can begin our story about the Christmas tree.

With his band of faithful followers, St. Boniface was travelling through the woods along an old Roman road one Christmas Eve. Snow covered the ground, muffling their footsteps. Their breath could be seen in the crisp, cold air. Although several suggested that they camp for the night, St. Boniface encouraged them to push forward, saying, “Courage, brothers, and forward yet a little. God’s moon will light us presently and the path is plain. Well know I that you are weary; and my own heart wearies also for the home in England, where those I love so dearly are keeping feast this Christmas Eve. Oh, that I might escape from this wild, storm-tossed sea of Germany into the peaceful haven of my fatherland. But we have work to do before we feast tonight. For this is the Yule-tide and the heathen people of the forest have gathered at the Oak of Geismar to worship their god, Thor; and strange things will be seen there, and deeds which make the soul black. But we are sent to lighten their darkness.... Forward, then, in God’s name.”

They pushed ahead, reinvigorated by St. Boniface’s plea. After a while, the road opened to a clearing. They could see houses, but dark and seemingly vacant. No human was in sight. Only the noise of hounds and horses broke the quiet. Continuing on, they came to a glade in the forest and there appeared the sacred Thunder Oak of Geismar. “Here,” St. Boniface proclaimed as he held his bishop’s crozier high with its cross on top, “here is the Thunder-oak; and here the cross of Christ shall break the hammer of the false god Thor.”

In front of the tree was a huge bonfire. Sparks danced in the air. The townspeople surrounded the fire facing the sacred oak. St. Boniface interrupted their meeting, “Hail, sons of the forest. A stranger claims the warmth of your fire in the winter night.” As St. Boniface and his companions approached the fire, the eyes of the townspeople were on these strangers.

St. Boniface continued, “Your kinsman am I, of the German brotherhood and from Wessex, beyond the sea, have come to bring you a greeting from that land and a message from the All Father, whose servant I am.”

Hunrad, the old priest of Thor, welcomed St. Boniface and his companions. Hunrad then said to them, “Stand still, common man and behold what the gods have called us hither to do. This night is

the death-night of the sun-god, Baldur the Beautiful, beloved of gods and men. This is the hour of darkness and the power of winter, of sacrifice and mighty fear. This night the great Thor, the god of thunder and war, to whom this oak is sacred, is grieved for the death of Baldur, and angry with this people because they have forsaken his worship. Long is it since an offering has been laid upon his altar, long since the roots of his holy tree have been fed with blood. Therefore its leaves have withered before the time, and its boughs are heavy with death. Therefore, the Slavs and the Saxons have beaten us in battle. Therefore, the harvest have failed and the wolf-hordes have ravaged the folds, and the wild boar has slain the huntsman. Therefore, the plague has fallen on your dwellings and the dead are more than the living in all your villages. Answer me, you people, are not these things true?" The people sounded their approval and then began a chant of praise to Thor.

When the last sounds faded, Hunrad pronounced, "None of these things will please the god. More costly is the offering that shall cleanse your sin, more precious the crimson dew that shall send new life into this holy tree of blood. Thor claims your dearest and noblest gift."

With that, Hunrad approached the children, grouped together around the fire. He selected the fairest boy, Asulf, the son of Duke Alvoid and his wife, Thekla, and declared that he would be sacrificed to travel to Valhalla and bear the people's message to Thor. Asulf's parents were deeply shaken. Yet, no one spoke.

Hunrad led the boy to a large stone altar between the oak and the fire. He blindfolded the child and had him kneel down placing his head on the stone altar. The people moved closer and St. Boniface positioned himself near the priest. Hunrad then lifted his sacred black-stone hammer of the god Thor high into the air, ready to have it crush little Asulf's skull. As the hammer fell, St. Boniface thrust his crozier against the hammer, and it fell from Hunrad's hand, splitting in two the stone altar. Sounds of awe and joy filled the air. Thekla ran to her child spared of this bloody sacrifice and embraced him tightly.

St. Boniface, his face radiant, then spoke to the people, "Hearken, sons of the forest. No blood shall flow this night save that which pity has drawn from a mother's breast. For this is the birth-night of the white Christ, the Son of the All-Father, the Savior of mankind. Fairer is He than Baldur the Beautiful, greater than Odin the Wise, kinder than Freya the Good. Since He has come the sacrifice ended. The dark, Thor, on whom you have vainly called, is dead. Deep in shades of Niffelheim he is lost forever. And now on this Christ-night you shall begin to live. This blood-tree shall darken your land no more. In the name of the Lord, I will destroy it." St. Boniface then took his broad ax and began striking the tree. A mighty wind suddenly arose and the tree fell, wrenching its roots from the earth and split into four pieces.

Behind the mighty oak stood a young fir tree, pointing like a cathedral spire toward heaven. St. Boniface again spoke to the people, "This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree tonight. It is the wood of peace, for your houses are built of the fir. It is the sign of an endless life, for its leaves are ever green. See how it points upward to heaven. Let this be called the tree of the Christ-child; gather about it, not in the wild wood, but in your own homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and rites of kindness."

So they took the fir tree and carried it to the village. Duke Alvoid set the tree in the middle of his great hall. They placed candles in its branches and it seemed filled with stars. Then St. Boniface, with Hunrad sitting at his feet, told the story of Bethlehem, the Baby Jesus in the manger, the shepherds and the angels. All listened intently. Little Asulf, sitting on his mother's lap, said, "Mother, listen now, for I hear those angels singing again behind the tree." Some say it is true; some say it was St. Boniface's companions singing, "All glory be to God on High and to the earth be peace; goodwill, henceforth, from heaven to men begin and never cease."

As we gather around our Christmas trees this year, may we give thanks for the gift of our faith, hold the story of our Savior's birth in our hearts and listen for the song of the angels.