

St. Otho in Pomerania: A Polish-German Success Story

Although Saint Otho, Bishop of Bamberg, was one of the most apostolic and saintly members of the hierarchy in the beginning of the twelfth century, little today is known of his life. Little too is known of his great missionary endeavor in Pomerania, a task so successfully carried out that he came to be known as the "Apostle of the Pomeranians." I propose to treat of St. Otho's apostolate in this country of Slavic peoples by the Baltic by focusing on the contact which the missionary maintained with Rome. The importance and necessity of such a contact is evident, for, to use the words of a biographer of Otho, "everything carried on in a house will come to naught unless it be done with the knowledge and consent of the master."

Another reason why the papal aspect will be stressed is the character of the former relations of the Bishop of Bamberg with the Bishop of Rome. It is noteworthy that although he was an investiture bishop of Henry IV, yet a stauncher defender of the papacy than Otho was not found at that time. This no doubt sprang from the correct view which the saint must have had of the proper roles of Church and state. A concrete example' is found below, where I show that although Otho was asked to undertake the mission to the Pomeranians by a temporal ruler, he did not make a move until he requisitioned the proper authority to do so from the Apostolic See.

In order to corroborate the claim that the bishop and the pope were in close harmony even before the Pomeranian mission, the following evidence can be presented. In a letter dated March 15, 1111, Pope Paschal II granted to Otho and his successors the use of the pallium and the power to carry the standard of the cross before him within the diocese of Bamberg. Moreover, Callixtus II confirmed everything that was instituted by St. Otho,

and a letter from Innocent II (which came, however, after the mission) confirmed the religion introduced into the many monasteries the saint so arduously worked to found. This testimony of three Sovereign Pontiffs is surely sufficient proof of the loyalty and allegiance he showed to the Vicar of Christ.

BACKGROUND

About the year 1120, Boleslaus III, King of Poland, completed his conquest of certain Slavic tribes in a territory lying on the Baltic Sea near the Oder River. This territory was known as Pomerania, from the Polish words “po” (by) and “morze” (the sea). The people were completely pagan, carrying on all the pagan practices and rituals known at that time.

Boleslaus, determined to have the Pomeranians embrace the religion of his own people, the Poles, was unsuccessful in his efforts for three years. In 1123, he decided to call upon Otho, the Bishop of Bamberg, to attempt evangelization. The reason for selecting Otho was that he saw for himself the renowned sanctity of the bishop when he was a chaplain in the court of his father. Moreover, because of his time of service in Poland, the apostle was well acquainted with the language, customs, and temperament of the Slavs. In his letter of invitation the Polish king offers to provide everything for Otho, companions for the journey, interpreters, and assistants. He would give anything only to make the bishop come.

Otho accepted wholeheartedly. Before he left, however, he had a very interesting interview with a Spaniard by the name of Bernard. The latter apostle had attempted to evangelize the pagan country but failed. The reason was that the Pomeranians despised him in his humble garb and mean appearance, although he was trying in this way to demonstrate the spirit of the

evangelical counsels. The people did not believe that the almighty God would choose such an abject messenger to relate His word to them. Bernard, therefore, advised Otho to go to Pomerania in great state and with much pomp and display. Also, if he received presents, he was to give even greater ones in order to show that he was preaching for God's sake and not for the sake of personal gain.

FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Although the apostolic Otho was invited by a secular prince and promised every sort of aid, he was keenly cognizant of the fact that the authority of the Prince of the Apostles was required above all else not only to undertake the apostolate but also to bring it to a successful outcome. Therefore, he sent legates to Pope Callixtus II for this purpose. According to the biographer Synchronus:

"...having sent legates to the Holy See to get permission, blessing, and obedience, he devotedly undertook this most weighty burden."

Thus fortified, the saintly prelate of Bamberg left for the pagan land on April 24, 1124. Soon the advantages of being a papal legate became apparent. The people flocked to him with wholehearted devotion for two reasons, according to the biographer Ebo: to reverence his own sanctity and to honor him who sent Otho, namely the Pope.

In rooting out the pagan worship of the Pomeranians, Otho performed an audacious action reminiscent of the felling of the great oak of Thuringwald by another famous German apostle, St. Boniface. The reference is to his destruction of the golden three-headed idol, Triglav, which was held in great esteem by the inhabitants of the land. He kept the triple head for himself and then

sent it to Rome to Pope Honorius II as an indication of the victory of the God of the Christians over the gods of the pagans. After similar fruitful labors, Otho returned to his diocese at Bamberg on March 29, 1125.

SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Reports of the relapse of many neophytes to paganism and the need for an ecclesiastical organization necessitated a second journey on the part of the saint to his mission field. Again, Otho did not make a move until he received the authority from the center of operations. Honorius II was the pope at this time, and the following testimonies show Otho's contact with him:

Ebo: "...after receiving the blessing from Honorius, Apostle of the Lord, ...he prepared to enter again into the territory of the barbarians."

Mabilion: "Otho, Bishop of Bamberg, with the assent of Pope Honorius, decided to return again to that place."

This second journey took place in 1127. While he was in Pomerania, legates of a nation of barbarians, known as Moriz, approached Otho to entreat him to come down and work among their peoples. The answer which the bishop gave is a clear indication of his attitude. He said that he first must finish the work he had to do in Pomerania. Afterwards, however, he would eagerly come to them, if they are still willing and if he obtains the permission from the Holy Father.

SEE AT WOLLIN

Otho returned from Pomerania on December 20, 1127. As a devoted and prudent husbandman in Christ's vineyard, he watched incessantly over the fruits of the seeds of faith he had planted. Finally, on June 30, 1139, he departed for his eternal reward. Thus, he did not live to see the final outcome of his efforts, which is embodied in a

letter sent by Innocent II to Adalbert, Bishop of Pomerania, on October 14, 1140. The Holy Father grants the following privileges:

1) The Pomeranian Church is now under the protection of the Apostolic See.

2) An episcopal See is established in the city of Wollin in the church of St. Albert. The duration of this See is to be for "perpetuis temporibus."

3) All the possessions which the church has is to belong to Adalbert and his successors.

4) Anyone who in any way harms the integrity of the church and persists in his contumacity will be referred to the divine judgment for his crime, excommunicated from the Body of Christ, and will be punished.

The two chief notes of the preceding are the hierarchical organization and the immediate jurisdiction of the Holy See. The latter is the best proof of that papal influence I have been emphasizing and serves as a fitting culmination to this essay.

POSTSCRIPT

Since her very inception as a nation in 966, Poland has had to contend with the expansionist policies of her Germanic neighbors on the western frontier. This Teutonic Drang nach Osten, plaguing the Polish nation from the time of Mieszko I through the Partitions to the era of World War II, has generated antagonism, mistrust, and strife between the two states. When the Poles, therefore, celebrated the *Year of the Te Deum* to celebrate their millennium in 1966, the hierarchy wrote a letter to the German bishops alluding to the "hereditary hostility" of German-Polish relations. Thus, they wrote to extend their hands to their German brethren "granting forgiveness and asking for forgiveness." In citing precedents for amicable German-Polish relations, they referred to the apostolic labors of St. Bruno of

Querfurt and the sanctity of St. Hedwig, a Polish duchess of German origin. They could have added to their list the German Otho invited by the Polish Boleslaus to bring the gospel to the Slavic Pomeranians under the authority of the Church of Rome.

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