



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO BISHOP HEINZ JOSEF ALGERMISSEN OF FULDA
FOR THE 1,250th ANNIVERSARY OF THE MARTYRDOM
OF ST BONIFACE, THE "APOSTLE OF GERMANY"**

*To Bishop Heinz Josef Algermissen of Fulda, Germany,
and all the Bishops and Archbishops and faithful of Germany
on the occasion of the 1,250th anniversary of the martyrdom of St Boniface*

My Venerable Brother,

1. On 5 June the Church, particularly the Church in Germany, commemorates the martyrdom of St Boniface 1,250 years ago. I gladly join in prayer all of you who have gathered on this important occasion at the tomb of the "Apostle of Germany", as this great missionary is described, to thank God for his work and for the heritage he has bequeathed and, once again, to entrust the Church and the faithful in Germany to his intercession. Furthermore, this historic date invites us to remember the work of this saint which has lived on down the centuries, and to understand the message that his life and death have left to the Christians of today.

2. This year the Church is also celebrating the 1,400th anniversary of the death of St Gregory the Great. By sending the Roman Abbot Augustine to England, the Pope was preparing the ground for a wonderful cultural and religious development in the Motherland of the missionary to Frisia. Deeply rooted in the Christianity of his native Country, St Boniface impressed spiritual strength and joy upon his life. He passed on this inheritance with passion to those to whom he proclaimed the Gospel. What he had received in his Homeland was to become a customary practice in Germany too, and would bear fruit. The Abbey of Fulda, the foundation so dear to St Boniface, became with others a centre of outreach of the religious and spiritual life. Indeed, the saint encouraged the crucial encounter between the Roman-Christian and Germanic cultures, whose importance for history was demonstrated in the subsequent centuries: to him we owe the Christian foundations of Europe.

3. In particular, St Boniface's life and activity were shaped by his close relationship with the Roman Pontiffs, the Successors of Peter, for whom he harboured deep veneration.

The words of the Prince of the Apostles were so precious to him that he asked his friends at home to transcribe his Letters in golden ink. He made three gruelling journeys to Rome. He asked and obtained from Pope Gregory III permission to go to the Frisians, and the Pope ordained him a Bishop. Pope Gregory III awarded him the Metropolitan Pallium and above all, invested him with the dignity and authority as Papal Legate to create episcopal sees and consecrate Bishops. The hierarchical structure of present-day Germany thus owes its essential features to his work.

Rather than being a missionary to pagans as he thought, he became the master builder of the Church in the Kingdom of the Franks. He strove to establish ecclesial relations patterned on the model and directives of Rome. Important synods served this purpose. So it was that St Boniface succeeded in strengthening the formerly weak bonds of the Germanic peoples with the centre of the Church in Rome and in bringing them closer to the universal Church.

Lastly, he wanted to base spiritual life on the ecclesial structures he had founded. St Boniface worked hard to reinforce the foundations of Christian morality and did his utmost to ensure a dignified celebration of the Eucharist and the administration of the sacraments in accordance with ecclesial norms. The Successors of Peter supported him and strengthened him in this task. Pope Zachary asked in a Letter that "all those who live in Gaul and in the provinces of the Franks follow the reforms of St Boniface".

Thus, the ambassador of the faith who had come from England succeeded in laying the foundations of an exceptional religious and cultural revival, which blossomed after his death and whose fruits are still present today. The 1,250th anniversary of St Boniface's death can be seen as an incentive to spread the witness of a living Church, inspired by strong faith. The Church which Boniface established in Germany, hence also in Europe, was starting out towards a brighter future, filled with the grace with which the Lord God, complying with the inscrutable designs of his Providence, endows the holy community of his faithful in all times, thus also in our time.

4. So what is the message of this day of commemoration? St Boniface, who grew up in the monastic culture that was highly developed in his Homeland, remained throughout his life either a teacher or a disciple of it. He recognized as an important presupposition for preaching and receiving the Gospel the spiritual and moral development of the person through concern for and transmission of the ancient patrimony of Christian formation. St Boniface, therefore, is a model for families, schools and institutes of formation also in an age when this patrimony is at risk.

At the same time, he is also a model of fidelity to the papacy as the centre of ecclesial unity. Only the branch that abides in the vine can bear fruit (cf. Jn 15: 4). Historically St Boniface and his testimony are credited with having brought about and safeguarded unity between the Church in his

mission land and the Church united round the Successor of Peter.

Yet, it is not only the great missionary's work that speaks to us today but also his whole personality. He left his own safe Country to proclaim the Gospel among the Germanic peoples and Franks as a "foreigner by God's will". Unafraid and undaunted, not only did he fight against the pagan cults of his time, but he did not even fear hostility when it was a matter of reforming the Christian life that already existed.

St Boniface was discouraged neither by the difficulties caused by the obstacles he encountered nor by failure and defeats. He bequeathed to others for their guidance his own experience of life: "Let us stand firm in the fight on the day of the Lord, for days of affliction and misery are here.... We are not dogs that cannot speak, nor silent observers, nor mercenaries fleeing from wolves! Instead, we are hard-working Pastors who watch over Christ's flock, who proclaim God's will to people whether important or ordinary, rich or poor... in season and out of season" (Boniface to Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the year 747).

5. The artist who decorated the tomb of St Boniface shows him resting in the sarcophagus keeping watch as he raised the lid: a good Shepherd, in fact, does not forget his own flock on earth even in the glory of Heaven. Let us therefore turn to the "Apostle of Germany" and implore his intercession so that the faith he proclaimed to the Church which he founded may flourish today too, and in the future as in the past, and bear a valid witness to Christ's Gospel. As I entrust you to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of St Boniface and of all the saints of Germany and Europe, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all.

From the Vatican on the Solemnity of Pentecost, 2004

JOHN PAUL II