

## St. Willibrord



Saint Willibrord was born in Northumbria in 658 from pious, newly converted parents. His father Wilgils entrusted the boy as an oblate to the monastery of Ripon, and became a recluse at the mouth of the Humber. Willibrord grew up under the influence of St Wilfrid, bishop of York, who preferred the Roman practice to Celtic church characteristics. At the age of twenty Willibrord was irresistibly drawn towards Ireland, the "Isle of Saints", where he submitted to strict asceticism at the monastery of Rathmelsigi. He was ordained priest in 558. Willibrord was filled with the spirit of "peregrinatio", the mystic desire of renouncing an earthly home, in order to preach the gospel to heathen peoples. In the year 690 he crossed over to the European mainland with 11 companions, to bring the Christian faith to the people of the Frisians, who had so far resisted evangelisation.

Contrary to the mission practice of the Iro-Scottish monks, who tackled evangelisation unsystematically, Willibrord organised his missionary work with clever pragmatism. He first sought the protection of Pippin II, who had thrown the Frisian king, Radbod, back over the Rhine. Furthermore he wanted to proceed in close accordance with papal authority, and therefore twice ventured on the hard journey to Rome. There he was consecrated Archbishop of Utrecht by Pope Sergius I in 695. Upon recommendation of the Pippin dynasty Willibrord was lavishly endowed with estates by the Frankish nobility, so that he could build a lot of churches and monasteries. In the year 698 he received one half of a larger estate from Irmina, abbess near Trier and mother of Plectrudis, the wife of Pippin II. This estate, situated in Echternach, was later completed by the donation of the other half by Pippin II. Thus Willibrord was able to found a monastery in Echternach, where he liked to retire to prepare his missionary expeditions to restless Frisia, and as far as Denmark and Thuringia. In his activities he suffered many setbacks, until at last Charles Martell had defeated his eternal antagonist Radbod. In 719 Winfrid, better known as Bonifatius, came to Willibrord and stayed with him for nearly three years, before he went to Germanic lands to preach the gospel there.

We have no information about the end of Willibrord's life. Before he died at the unusual age of 81 years, he had organised his succession and allotted his rich possessions. On his 70th birthday he made a note in the margin of his calendar about the most important dates of his missionary activity, and concluded with the dictum, "in Dei nomine feliciter", which expresses his unflinching faith in God. He died on 7th November 739 and, according to his wish, he was buried in Echternach.

Very soon after his death he was venerated as a saint, so that more and more pilgrims came to his grave, and about 800 AD the modest Merovingian church had to make room for a larger, three-aisle church, which was over 60 metres long. The two biographies, first by Alcuin, written at about the same time, and then by Abbot Thiofrid (which was produced 300 years later), tell of legends and innumerable miracles, so that the renown and the veneration of the saint grew considerably in European monasteries and churches on this side of the Alps.

Willibrord wells and springs, which skirted his missionary routes and prove a great baptizing activity, where visited by the people, to solicit the healing of various nervous diseases, especially of children. A great number of parish churches in Belgium, the Netherlands, and along the Lower Rhine, which were often linked with the monastery of Echternach, have been dedicated to St Willibrord to this day. Faithfulness to their patron saint is proved by pilgrimages to Echternach and their participation in the Dancing Procession. This procession is a religious event whose origins date very far back, and which could survive up to our days thanks to its uniqueness. It takes place every year on Whit Tuesday, and attracts thousands of participants and an equal number of spectators, thus to honour the memory of a saint of really European dimension, who is often called the apostle of the BENELUX countries.