

Christmas 2017 “St. Boniface and the Christmas Tree”

Fr. Frank Schuster

I think the most exercise I get during the month of December is when I go through the process of putting up my Christmas tree. How about you? It isn't just the lifting and carrying the tree into the home that gets my heart going, it is the process of getting the tree to stand up straight in the stand that gets me every year. For some reason, it always takes me a long time to get that tree to stand straight! The process was especially involved this year which made me start to wonder where this tradition of decorating Christmas trees comes from. The practice of having ceremonial trees or boughs brought indoors during winter certainly predates Christianity. There is something about evergreens in winter that remind us that spring will eventually come again, that summer days will once more triumph over winter nights. I was, however, fascinated to re-learn the story of St. Boniface, the great evangelist to Germany in the 8th century. Legend has it he saved a boy named Asulf from being sacrificed on an altar below an Oak tree by a pagan priest who worshiped the pagan god Thor. As the ceremonial hammer of Thor was raised against the boy, St. Boniface heroically knocked the hammer out of the priest's hands with his crozier thus rescuing the boy.

Here is an expert from an article by Fr. William Saunders recounting this wonderful legend.¹ “St. Boniface, his face radiant, then spoke to the people, ‘Hearken, sons of the forest. No blood shall flow this night ... 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.”

Saunders continues, “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.’” The story continues, “So they took the fir tree and carried it to the village. Duke Alvold 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...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.’”

¹ Saunders, Rev. William. "The Tree of the Christ Child." *Arlington Catholic Herald*. 2003.
<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-tree-of-the-christ-child.html>

I mention this story because I believe almost every household here probably has a Christmas tree and it is good to remember a beautiful tradition of how this got started. I continue to find it interesting though, that as the days get darker and darker, as a people we have the instinct to decorate Christmas trees inside of our homes and adorn the outside of our houses with a festive array of cheerful lights to brighten our neighborhoods. I love driving around looking at Christmas lights and decorations. Don't you? The brilliant displays, especially the manic ones, almost feel like an act of defiance to the shortened days and long nights this time of year. The cosmic wrestling match between light and darkness seems to be a defining characteristic of human culture, don't you think? It is ingrained in our anthropology, ever present in the movies we enjoy like Star Wars or the Lord of the Rings, and ever present in our literature like we saw with the story earlier about St. Boniface and the origin of the Christmas tree.

The gloominess of winter somehow has a way of reminding us of the darkness we all deal with throughout our lives. Therefore, it is fitting that during the darkest time of the year, we celebrate the birth of the light of the world, our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. As a people of faith, we defiantly believe the darkness does not have the final say. The hope we have in the future represented with the birth of Jesus has an effect on how we live our lives today. We become more mindful of the ways we can become people of the light to the people around us in a world all too often overshadowed in darkness. Simple acts of kindness, the little things we do with great love, are what is necessary to keep our world bright. On Christmas, we remember that when the world couldn't get any darker, God has shown us the way by giving us his only Son. The birth of Jesus has given us a new star for us to navigate our lives. Although the days are short and the weather is dreary, we are correct to celebrate. Because of Jesus, the darkness we deal with will never have the final say. With the birth of Jesus in our lives, our future is bright with hope.

You see, the story of St. Boniface and the Christmas tree inspires me in that when he encountered real darkness in his world, he decided to take action. Boniface could have seen that great injustice about to unfold and kept walking, keeping his head down. How often do we deal with the darkness in our world in that way, keeping our head down, pretending not to notice? We can ask ourselves this Christmas, what are the areas in my life that feel dark right now? In what areas in my life do I therefore need to act, to choose to reflect the light of Christ present in my heart to the world around me? Perhaps the next time we are just sitting quietly in our living room gazing on the beauty of the Christmas tree, we can be reminded of St. Boniface and that, since we have chosen to be called Christian, we must defiantly choose light over darkness, life over death, joy over despair, and Jesus over the world!