

# **ST. VIRGILIUS**

## **Irish Abbott, Scholar and Bishop of Salzburg Who Taught That the World Was Round**

**S**t. Virgil, or Fergal, who died about 784, was an Irish monk; scholar of renown; a theologian and philosopher; and an historian as well. He was also greatly respected as an astronomer, a geographer and a mathematician.

So, how did this Irish monk end up as Bishop of Salzburg in far-off Austria, and what role did he play in the evangelization of Europe? The story needs a bit of background.

From its beginnings in Judea, the faith of Jesus Christ spread westward throughout the Roman world - through the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea - through Gaul and even to Britain. Despite three centuries of horrendous persecution, Christianity became the faith of the Roman Empire after Constantine legalized it in the fourth century. It added to Roman law, culture and tradition those aspects of religion and ethics that were to characterize western civilization for centuries to come.

In the fifth century, the power and majesty of Imperial Rome finally collapsed under the combined onslaught of internal bickering, economic chaos, and the constant attacks of Teutonic invaders, who had long coveted the quality of life in the Empire. Even as the Empire was falling apart, however, Christianity was being spread and Roman culture was being preserved by monks and missionaries. In these desperate times, Patrick converted Ireland; Augustine won over Anglo-Saxon Britain; and Remigius brought into the faith the Teutonic Frankish rulers who had taken over old Roman Gaul (modern France). And, in the chaos and confusion that followed the collapse of Roman unity in Western Europe, it was the Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks and missionaries who not only nurtured faith and culture, but who now reversed the direction of Christian missionary efforts - continental Europe was to be Christianized from the West.

By the eighth century, when Virgil appeared on the scene, the turbulence and devastation of the years of invasion had abated somewhat. Although the era was still characterized by instability, things had quieted sufficiently to allow new kingdoms to emerge. What were to become England and France were in the process of being established. By the end of that



*St. Virgil, as interpreted by former St. Virgil Parishioner Jeanne Gunther, depicting his scientific theory that the world was round. He holds the signs of his office as Bishop of Salzburg. The painting hangs in St. Virgil's Church.*

century, a new Christian Empire would come into being in Western Europe. On Christmas day, 800, Pope Leo III would crown Charlemagne Holy Roman Emperor, thus restoring an empire in the west that embodied Teutonic and Roman tradition, and Christianity.

During this same eighth century, when continental civilization was at its lowest ebb, it was Irish and English monks who had the greatest impact on continental culture. The foundations of the new age were laid by men like St. Boniface, the Apostle of Germany and English Benedictine monk; Alcuin, an Irish monk and scholar and advisor to Charlemagne; and Virgil.

Boniface not only reformed the Frankish Church of Charlemagne's forebears, but with the help of Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns he destroyed the last strongholds of Germanic heathenism, and planted abbeys and bishoprics throughout Germany. It was through his efforts that Germany first became a living member of European society.

The Irish monk Virgil was a contemporary of the English Boniface. He was but one of the hundreds of monks from Ireland whose missionary zeal brought

religion and culture to the continent. They seemed to be everywhere. It was said by one historian that "one hundred and fifty Irish saints are venerated in Germany; forty five in France; thirty in Belgium; and eight in Norway and Iceland."

That Virgil would end up as Bishop of Salzburg and evangelizer of hundreds of thousands of people in Austria and what are now parts of Hungary and Czechoslovakia was not necessarily the fulfillment of a lifelong ambition. He was born in Ireland, around 710. Where is not known. He became a monk and priest, and by the late 730's was abbot of a monastery at Aghaboe in County Leix (now Laoighis) in central Ireland.

For whatever reason, Virgil decided to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He left Ireland with several companions to make the arduous and time-consuming overland trek to the Holy Land. If he didn't at first realize the difficulties of getting to Jerusalem, he soon found out.

He may have become concerned that success in such a major expedition was beyond his reach. At any rate, in 741 he and his companions arrived at Compaigne, the court of Pepin the Short, father of Charlemagne and ruler of the Franks. He and his companions, one of whom was Sidonius (later Bishop of Passau in Germany), were welcomed warmly to the palace and actually kept there for several years as guests and consultants to the court.

In 744 or 745, Pepin sent Virgil to the court of his brother-in-law, Ottilo, Duke of Bavaria. Bavaria had been partially converted to Christianity by St. Boniface, but much more work remained to be done. Pepin recommended his Irish friends highly for the work of instructing the half-Christian subjects of Ottilo. Ottilo accepted Virgil as abbot-bishop of Salzburg. Thus began a ministry of almost forty years among the Alpine peoples of Austria and the eastern dukedoms.

Almost from the beginning, Virgil found himself in hot water. The ecclesiastical jurisdiction of St. Boniface extended over Bavaria as well as other parts of Germany. Boniface had installed an Anglo-Saxon monk named John as Bishop of Salzburg. Virgil, as abbot of St. Peter's Monastery in Salzburg, administered his jurisdiction in the Irish manner. In other words, he administered the diocese, but since he was not yet consecrated, he left the actual performance of episcopal acts to one of his bishop companions named Dodbagracus. Obviously, Boniface wasn't too



*This is a picture of the statue of St. Virgil's outside of the Dom in Salzburg, Austria.*

happy with Virgil's presence. But Virgil had the backing of Pepin.

Before long, an incident occurred that led to much discussion and some bad feeling between the two saints. In those days, priestly training was not as formal and thorough as it later became. Peasant boys received only elementary training, and, quite frankly, were not well educated. Nor was their Latin very good. Sometime in 746 or 747, Boniface learned that some people in Virgil's diocese had been christened by a priest who used the grammatically incorrect formula: "Ego te baptizo in nomine Patria et Filea et Spiritua Sancta." He declared the baptisms invalid and ordered that these persons be rebaptized. Virgil objected and declared that the error was one of accidentals rather than substance. Virgil appealed to Pope Zachary. The Pope upheld Virgil, saying that ignorance of Latin did not invalidate the baptisms. The priest evidently had the intention of doing what the Church requires. The

baptisms stood; rechristening was unnecessary.

A second difference between Boniface and Virgil entailed more serious charges. In his earlier years in Ireland, Virgil had been recognized for his knowledge of astronomy and mathematics. In those days when little was known about the physical world and its nature, Virgil, far in advance of his contemporaries, satisfied himself that the world was round and that people lived on the other side of it. In 748 Boniface reported to the Pope accusing Virgil of ambiguous and even false teaching about men on the other side of the world. Boniface apparently interpreted Virgil as saying that if men resided on the other side of the world, they might not be of a race descended from Adam. In short, this was to deny that these people could be redeemed by Christ, since Christ redeemed all the descendants of Adam.

This was a serious charge. If true, Virgil could have been condemned and deprived of his faculties.

The Pope's reply was that Boniface should prove that Virgil actually taught this doctrine. If so, Boniface was to convoke a council and drive Virgil from the Church.

Whatever became of these charges is somewhat of a mystery. It is hardly likely that Virgil was guilty of any such doctrine. Since neither Boniface nor the Pope knew astronomy as well as Virgil did, it is very probable that they simply misunderstood his teaching. Whether Virgil actually clarified his statements or

satisfactorily explained them to the Pope is not known. All that is certain is that the matter died. Virgil continued his work in Salzburg and his missionary activity in Austria. Boniface turned to missionary activity in Frisia (now Holland) and was martyred there in 754. Had Virgil been found guilty of false teachings, it is hardly likely that he would have been consecrated bishop, as he was.

Virgil's life is full of such little mysteries. For example, it is almost impossible to pinpoint the exact date of his consecration as Bishop of Salzburg. Some sources give 755 as the date; most others list 766 or 767, after the death of Bishop John. But he was active in the diocese for almost forty years.

The Salzburg diocese grew and expanded dramatically under Virgil. He was a formidable administrator and builder. Lands were acquired; churches and monasteries erected. He rebuilt the monastery of St. Peter in gratitude to those Benedictine monks who welcomed him when he first arrived, and whose abbot he became. That construction lasted twelve years. He also rebuilt the diocesan cathedral. It was consecrated in 774 in honor of St. Rupert, another Irishman, who was the founder and first bishop of Salzburg. Although this early cathedral was long believed to be a modest wooden structure, excavations following the bomb damage of World War II proved it had been a major structure larger in quality and size than all contemporary churches.

Virgil continued to be a missionary. Although pretty much restricted to Salzburg and its environs because of his episcopal duties, he sent missionaries into neighboring provinces. Several hundred thousand Alpine Slavs in Corinthia (now eastern Austria, part of Hungary and Czechoslovakia) were brought into the Church. Never one to sit still, he managed frequent visits to the newly established churches and missions, and did much to confirm them in their faith.

In fact, one of his last acts was a journey to the neighboring missions. He became ill and decided to return to Salzburg where he died, according to the sources, on November 27, 784. He was buried among his beloved monks at St. Peter's.

Virgil might easily have become just another name in a long roster of bishops who occupied sees throughout medieval Europe. Although revered and famous among his contemporaries, and known to the giants of his time - St. Boniface, Pepin, Charlemagne, and several popes - he was soon forgotten except



perhaps among the people of his own diocese.

Nothing more was heard about Virgil until almost four hundred years later. In the late twelfth century, St. Peter's monastery was destroyed by fire. While being rebuilt in the 1170s, Virgil's tomb was discovered and his body removed to the cathedral. Many miracles were attributed to him, and on June 18, 1233, he was canonized by Pope Gregory IX.

Virgil is one of those saints not widely known in the Church. Perhaps it is because he was overshadowed by the great lights of his time, especially lost in the glow cast by the great St. Boniface. He labored in a corner of what was to become the extensive empire of Charlemagne - on the borders of the Christian world at the time. He is still in the shadows, revered mainly in his home diocese of Salzburg, and among the Irish. But he has his place in our little corner of the world - he is the patron of our Christian community in Morris Plains.

*This is the small statue of St. Virgil which stands on top of the St. Virgil reliquary in the Church. Read the story of the St. Virgil's relic on the next page.*

## *The St. Virgil Relic*

*The St. Virgil relic reposes in a public reliquary in the Church of St. Virgil's, Morris Plains. There have been claims that devotion to this relic has produced remarkable results.*

*The following is an extract from **The Story of a Parish** by Rev. James J. Flynn, former pastor of Assumption Parish, Morristown, and founder of St. Virgil's parish. Fr. Flynn tells the story of the St. Virgil relic and a miracle attributed to this relic.*

“**T**he Church (of the Assumption, Morristown) was further enriched by the arrival of the precious relic of St. Virgil, which, through the kind offices of Franz Mayer of Munich, Bavaria, was so graciously given by the Archbishop of Salzburg (on March 24, 1887).

"We have thus come into possession of, perhaps, the only genuine relic of an Irish Saint on this continent. And thus, after the lapse of twelve centuries, this saintly prelate, a voluntary exile from his fatherland for the spread of the Gospel, finds among the children of his exiled race, in a land whose existence he maintained almost at the cost of degradation from his high office, a new home, ardent worshippers, and devout clients. That God is wonderful in his Saints is still evidenced by the blessings, both spiritual and corporal, which have been so abundantly shed upon us. Gratitude to God demands more than a passing allusion to this manifestation of His power, as well to enkindle greater love and reverence towards Him as to strengthen the faith of the flock.

"Miss M\_\_\_\_\_ for years was a sufferer from a severe disorder, and had tried vainly the skill of the local physicians and specialists of high repute. Hundreds of dollars had been expended in this fruitless search for health.

"On the advice of Dr. J. H. O'Reilly, and accompanied by him and her sister, she visited the most celebrated specialist in New York. A patient and searching examination convinced the physician that a perilous operation would be necessary, with the chances of surviving it greatly against her. Womanly modesty more than the fear of death made her shrink from the proposition.

"On returning home, she began a novena to St. Virgil, and, as usual, received Holy Communion on the morning of the ninth day. Dean Flynn read over her the prayers for the sick in the Roman Ritual and blessed her with the holy relic.

"Full of faith and joy, she went home and announced to her family that she was cured. The



scrutiny of the New York physician, whom they again sought, after another diligent examination could discover no traces of her disease. She was, indeed, entirely cured. Neither medicine nor physician had any part in her instantaneous restoration to health, but the power of God, through the intercession of St. Virgil."

(A short clinical history of the case by Dr. J. H. O'Reilly is contained in *The Story of A Parish*)

*The St. Virgil relic resided in the altar of the Assumption Church until that building was renovated recently. At the request of members of the St. Virgil's Parish Centennial Committee, Fr. Derricks, Assumption pastor, donated the relic to St. Virgil's as a centennial gift. This gift is especially appropriate, coming from the parish which began our parish as a mission a century ago.*

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