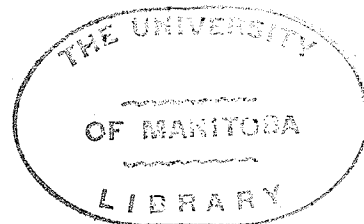


THE LIFE OF
SAINT GILBERT OF SEMPRINGHAM

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INTRODUCTION

I. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ST. GILBERT OF SEMPRINGHAM

Sempringham was a small, almost unknown village in Lincolnshire until the third decade of the twelfth century. In 1131, out of obscurity, it sprang into prominence when one of its inhabitants founded the only entirely English religious Order. Gilbert of Sempringham was born in 1083¹ to Jocelyn, a Norman knight of no mean standing, and to his pious English wife. But as so often happens with many hopeful fathers, Jocelyn was at first greatly disappointed with his son; for not only was Gilbert physically deformed in some way, which meant he would be unable to follow in his father's footsteps as a soldier and as owner of the family's demesne, but he was also sluggish in behavior and had a thorough dislike of studies of any kind. A younger son of a Norman lord, or one who showed no aptitude for the military life, was usually put to study in preparation for entering the priesthood or for becoming a monk of some kind: a very poor second to the life of activity followed by the lusty lords of William of Normandy and his successors. But for

1. Date given in the Dictionary of National Biography. Dr. Rose Graham, in her St. Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertines, p. 2 note 1., gives the date as 1089, basing this on the supposition that the Bollandists made a mistake in taking the word "sex" as meaning six, instead of realizing that it was probably a corruption of "senex." There seems no reason to suppose, however, that "sex" was a corruption of "senex."

Gilbert even this course seemed unattainable, as in his early years he showed no sign whatsoever that he cared for religion in any way other than the habitual Mass - going. It appears that he was more or less ignored by his family, and even the servants made him a butt and refused to eat with him.

But Gilbert's mother, like Mary the Mother of Jesus, must have been keeping certain things in her heart. Before Gilbert was born she had a dream in which the moon came down from heaven into her lap, and she, rightly as it proved, took that to be a presage of the future holiness of her son, whose light would one day show others the difficult path of salvation. Her hopes in and prayers for her son were not disappointed when he showed the first sign of energy by suddenly going to France, where he commenced a period of eager study, not only in letters but in holiness also². He had previously idled his time away, but the turning point of his life had come. He returned to England with a reputation for goodness and learning, causing his father to treat him more like a beloved son than an outcast servant. Although he wore costly clothes, as became his station, he started his religious life by opening humble schools for boys and girls, acting with great discretion and humility. Apart from the ordinary rudiments of learning given to all of them, he organized the boys into a miniature monastic

2. See below, p. 75 note 3 .

order, where all the virtues were zealously cultivated, and a fairly severe discipline imposed. Gilbert seems to be unique among the founders of religious orders in that he had the experience of organizing an order, on a small scale it is true, before the adult congregation was established. For this indeed was the humble beginning of the Order of Sempringham - an entirely English foundation which never went outside the borders of England except for a brief sojourn³ in Scotland. With the acquisition of the parish churches of Sempringham and West Torrington, the opportunities for founding an Order were at hand. These churches had been built by his father, who had the right of patronage in them and who presented them to Gilbert. Gilbert accepted them in order to maintain his father's right of patronage, and after a few troublesome law suits, he was canonically installed as minister of those churches by Robert Bloet, bishop of Lincoln⁴.

His chaplain was Geoffrey, a man of proved holiness, and it was he who attended to the sacramental duties of the Churches and offered Mass, as Gilbert was not an ordained priest. These two at first lived nearby in a parishoner's home, whose daughter looked after them quietly and

3. J. Edwards, Transactions of the Glasgow Archaeological Society, II (1908), "The Order of Sempringham and its connection with the west of Scotland," pp. 72-90. The Catholic Encyclopedeia, VI, pp. 556-557 maintains that there were also two Gilbertine houses at Westmeath in Ireland.

4. This must have been before 1123, because Bloet died in that year, and Gilbert was at his court then.

satisfactorily, being a modest, kind young lady. Then Gilbert had a terrible dream about her. He put his hand in her bosom and in spite of great exertions, was unable to pull it away. He confessed this to Geoffrey, who in turn related a similar dream. So they decided to leave that house immediately, in case the dream was an omen of future sin; and they went to live in a room over the Sempringham church. However, far from being a bad omen, the dream was a happy presage, for the girl later became one of seven women who were the original nuns of Gilbert's Order.

All these events must have occurred before 1122 or '23, the date in which it seems probable that Gilbert went to live in the court of Robert Bloet, bishop of Lincoln who died in 1123, being succeeded by Alexander, "the Magnificent," nephew of Roger, bishop of Salisbury - that shameless nepotist and immoral statesman whose probable son, Nigel, became bishop of Ely ten years later. Gilbert, now a clerk, continued living in the new bishop's court, devoting himself to learning, piety and strict self-discipline; and so note-worthy did he become that Alexander forced him to become a priest, though Gilbert considered himself quite unworthy; an attitude of mind born of that humility, which was to colour his thoughts and actions all his life⁵. Soon afterwards, Alexander thought so

5. CE Vol. III p. 295 states that while Gilbert was carrying out his pastoral duties in the Lincoln diocese, he became a Canon Regular at the Austin Canons house at Bridlington. This is difficult to fit in with other references to his life. On the other hand, the Prior of Bridlington wrote to the Pope on Gilbert's behalf, when the former believed the lies spread about him by the lay brothers. (See below p. 15 .) Why should this particular Prior have done this unless Gilbert had had some close connection with Bridlington?

much of his holiness that he made him his confessor. But it was more than humility which prompted Gilbert to refuse an archdiaconate offered by the bishop a little later. Knowledge of the worldly pitfalls arising from such a position made him immediately say that there was no surer way to hell than to become an archdeacon. The time was fast approaching for him to commence the main work of his life.

In 1131 Gilbert found seven maids who longed for a close union with God and whose minds had readily assimilated all that Gilbert had formerly taught them; and these he enclosed as nuns, building for them a house and cloister against the north wall of St. Andrew's Church, Sempringham. But even before he enclosed these holy women in their convent, he had shown himself a kindly but firm minister to his flock - encouraging some by a kind word when it was needed, giving liberally of his resources where want was felt, and at the same time chastising severely those who did not act as good Christians. Although it seems likely that Gilbert had returned to Sempringham before 1131, Bishop Alexander still kept a close watch on him, and it was with his help and encouragement that the seven "took the veil." Their life was extremely strict right from the start; they were contemplatives in the true sense of the word, being completely enclosed and spending most of their time in continual prayer. One window alone was left unblocked through which the nuns received their daily necessities,

and through which any necessary talk could take place.

" . . . had men been able to live without the necessities of life, he would even have sealed up that window which he had left open only at the time it was fitting that it should be open."⁶

Because most of their days were taken up with prayers and other religious observances, Gilbert organized a few girls from the village to minister their natural needs. But when warned by Abbot William of the Cistercian house at Rievaulx⁷ that these girls living in the world might kindle dissatisfaction in the minds and souls of the nuns, he conceived the idea, no doubt at William's suggestion, of having a band of lay sisters, based on the Cistercian institution of lay brothers, tend the nuns. The lay sisters would also be under vows but of a less stringent nature than those taken by the nuns. Gilbert did not, however, rush these maids into taking hasty vows which afterwards they might regret, having imperfectly realized the difficulties and constant hardships and devotions of their state. Accordingly all had to undertake a year's probation.

But still the new order seemed incomplete to its Founder - there was no one capable of doing the heavy manual work needed for the support of the nuns and sisters. So once again the Cistercian example of lay brothers bore fruit outside that Order, this time more directly. Lay brothers were added to the Order of Sempringham whose sole task was the farming and

6. Monasticon Anglicanum, VI 2, P. VII.

7. Graham, St. Gilbert, p. 11.

other manual occupations of the Order. These were drawn from former servants of Gilbert's family, former villeins desirous of breaking the feudal chain binding them forever to one master and to one spot on the earth, and any others who wanted to follow in Christ's footsteps, but who could not do so in the long-established Black Monk monasteries because they were illiterate. Soon the male equivalent of the nuns was to be added, the duty of which would be to instruct the women and minister to their spiritual needs. Men who could do this would have to be "literati," and would not have to do any manual work except perhaps at harvest time. But this is looking too far ahead, for before the canons were added, Gilbert was to go abroad, meet the leading monk of that age, St. Bernard, and receive Papal approval of his Order and its rule which had been drawn up with St. Bernard's help.

All the time the order was growing extremely fast, largely owing to the renowned sanctity of Gilbert himself, and to the simple, dedicated life followed by his religious. The process of growth was assisted by the grants of land and privileges given by the landed class, who, under Gilbert's direction built monasteries on their own domains. The first grant of land made to Gilbert after the enclosure of the seven nuns occurred in 1139, when Gilbert's feudal overlord, Gilbert de Gant gave him further land at Sempringham, and on this land the famous priory was built. Even King Henry II, whose strong reign commenced in 1154 after the chaos of

the preceeding nineteen years, encouraged Gilbert's work, and all the time Alexander of Lincoln supported and aided him. Being so firm a believer in humility and poverty, Gilbert at first resisted so many grants of land; and he may also have been influenced by the fear that lay control over the various monasteries might at a later date become a serious threat. Lay heads of religious houses had been a noted abuse in late Anglo-Saxon times not a hundred years before, and the general European Investiture contest, waged so triumphantly for the Church by Pope Gregory VII, still reared its grasping head. Secular powers, whenever Sees and Abbacies fell vacant, still desired to assert claims of appointment without reference to ecclesiastical authority and rights in the matter. But Gilbert realized that it was God's will that the Order should increase, so his next move was to provide the necessary government and rule for those under his care. He attempted to persuade the Cistercians to become the spiritual and temporal Supervisors of his Order, feeling that he had neither the ability nor capacity to look after it satisfactorily. He chose the Cistercians because they were a new, strict and most vigorous order, their first house in England having been founded in 1132, one year after Gilbert established his nuns in Sempringham. The Cistercian order held an annual Chapter at the Mother House at Citeaux, and thither Gilbert went to the Chapter of 1147, where he not only saw and spoke to the Pope, Eugenius III, but also St. Bernard the Cistercian of Clairvaux whose

burning zeal and ardour had long ago set and continued to keep Europe aflame with militant religious enthusiasm. Gilbert placed his petition before the Cistercians, but received the reply that that Order could not undertake to look after the religious and general well-being of another Order, especially one containing women. The Pope was obviously greatly impressed by Gilbert, and, with the advice of his counsellors, including the recommendation of St. Bernard who helped Gilbert draw up the Gilbertine Rule, committed the care of the Order of Sempringham into the holy and capable hands of its Founder. He bowed his head in obedience, and returned home with the Rule. As soon as the Pope had formally given his blessing to the new Order, it had been placed under Papal protection in perpetuity; which in theory should have meant that there would be no episcopal control exercised over it.

The time had now come for the completion of the Order with the addition of educated priests (canons). Without them, Gilbert felt his Order would be rudderless in a sea of ignorance and uncertainty; but with the canons the Order would become a whole - a living, thriving body working and praying for the salvation of its members inside its walls, and that of all outside. So occurred the revival of the English "double" monastery, unique in England at that time, but immediately to become flourishing and successful. More will be mentioned of the system of double monasteries, when the Rule of the Order, and the general European monastic

background will be discussed. Once the canons had been added, Gilbert had to draw up stringent rules for the almost complete segregation of the men and women, so that there could be no suspicion of scandal to which enemies of religion and of the Order could point.

That the Order had enemies seems evident from the fact that Gilbert's biographer, a Gilbertine canon who had known the saint, tells us of Gilbert issuing "An argument against detractors;" against those, that is, who tried to impute maliciously that the new Order, its Rule and Gilbert's teaching were against the Catholic faith. Gilbert himself seems to have written an answer, saying that although he had added certain devotional practices and other disciplinary innovations to be followed by his religious men and women, these did not vitiate the doctrines and traditions of the Church in any way; rather did such accretions enhance the former. We gather that these detractors, whoever they were, had no success in their designs against Gilbert and his Order. Gilbert, as do all founders of religious Orders, wrote down not only the Rule for his religious, "De Constructione, or De Fundatione, Monasteriorum," but various ideas for the furthering of their spirituality - the fruit of much thought and prayer. This same biographer gives the text of one letter Gilbert wrote to the Canons of Malton just before he died. It is full of loving kindness, common sense and encouragement; and he plainly drew attention to the relative position of lay brothers and canons when he told the latter that they had no

excuse for slackness in following the Rule, as the lay brothers did all the manual work which would otherwise distract them from their devotions and from their work in the three hospitals in their charge⁸.

One of the most important sections of the biography is that entitled, "How Gilbert fared in his Ministry"⁹. It is here that Gilbert's ability to control and help all those put under his charge is indicated. Gilbert always considered that the only satisfactory way for an individual to prepare in this life for eternal salvation was to spend as much time as possible in prayer, meditation and penance without the worry and cares imposed either by directing the administrative and temporal affairs of the church - as the abhorred archdeacons did; or by the calls made when concerned with the spiritual welfare of members of an Order. But when Gilbert was shown the work to be done in the latter sphere, then his ideas of a solitary, prayerful life had to be left behind, and he turned to his task, putting into it all the vigour and holiness he would have used exclusively for his own spiritual life. By an exemplary life he led his spiritual sons and daughters along the narrow path of virtue; and how well he did this is seen not only by the expected eulogies of his biographer, but also by the renown and respect he and his Order obtained. Ever since he had turned away from the idleness of his youth, he had subjected himself to

8. Monasticon, VI. 2, p. XXII.

9. Monasticon, p. X.

a vigorous spiritual, intellectual and physical discipline, and his penances and fastings were all in the time-honoured tradition of the self-inflicted scourges of the saints. His biographer stresses the fact that he was completely unostentatious in his dress, and that whenever he travelled from one house to another, modesty was the most obvious feature: no retinue of servants and no costly accoutrements. Surely the emphasis laid upon the sobriety of Gilbert indicates that many monks acted and dressed as though the court and not the cloister were their regular habitation. Even in old age - a state Gilbert was accustomed to for many years as he died when over a hundred - his mind remained active and he never desisted from his customary practices and devotions until forced to, through excessive weakness just before his death.

His great humility showed itself in many ways, one of the most noticeable of which was his reluctance to become a Canon in his own Order. It was precisely because he had drawn up its Rule that he hesitated so long before yielding to the arguments of his advisers and friends, who wanted him to be invested with the Canon's habit. They were afraid that if this did not happen, after his death the next Master might be forced onto his Order from another. Roger, Prior of Malton, Yorkshire, therefore, clothed him in the habit of a Gilbertine canon. Roger was to be the next Master after the Founder's death; but owing to the latter's increasing age, he had been relieving him of some of the burdens of ruling the ever-growing and fairly scattered Order.

Before coming to Gilbert's last days, two "highlights"