The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons Saint Gregory the Great and Saint Augustine

Ștefan Negreanu

Ștefan Negreanu
„Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad
E-mail: negreanus@yahoo.com

Abstract

The end of the sixth century finds the still pagan nations of the British Isles prepared to receive the good news of the Gospel of Christ. The souls had been cleaned by holy men like Ninian, Patrick or David. From now begins the Age of great Christian missions among the peoples of the archipelago. One of the missions started from Ireland, which now returns the gift of Christian faith, to the ones that had forgotten or had not heard of it yet, through Saint Columba - the apostle of the Gentiles in northern England and Scotland. Meanwhile, Rome turned its attention back to Britain, this time through the head of the church, Saint Gregory the Great. He will toil a lifetime, especially after he will become Pope of Rome, to fulfil one of the dreams of his youth – the Christianization of Anglo-Saxon people. The man who will be the "instrument" of this great work is Saint Augustine.

Keywords

Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Augustine, Christianization Anglo-Saxon, King Ethelbert

The British peoples from nowadays, even if most of them are far from the spirit of Orthodoxy, are in a blessed period of rediscovering their saints. For centuries they blocked, willingly or unwillingly, the past of the first

millennium, but now the British mention more often the manes of those who have brought the Christian faith into the archipelago, of fought in times of struggle to keep it alive. They begin to learn to rediscover their history, to regard their ancestors not only with the critical eye of the mind, but more with their heart. Uprooted and wounded by the horrors of the world in which they live, many Westerners have understood that they can move forward only knowing themselves. And this need for knowledge made them bend on their past as a nation. In the past they found themselves, have found the sense of living, eventually they found God. Thus, the Westerners in general, and the British in particular, have gained "the acute awareness that it (the Orthodoxy) is the one that keeps them tied to their origin countries and civilizations"[1].

Although he never set foot in the British Isles, the Christianization of the Saxons is due to St. Gregory the Great. A Roman nobleman by birth and education, he happily joined the sense of duty of ancient Rome with the medieval faith and asceticism. It was said that this saint is the key of true understanding of the medieval Christian Church.[2]

While he was prefect of Rome, St. Gregory struggled with traces of destruction of the city by the barbarians, and the wars of reconquest of Italy led by Emperor Justinian. Hunger and poverty that affected the people could not leave indifferent the man who would become the bishop of the city. He began to share his wealth and to build monasteries; the dearest to his soul was built on the hill Caelius in his family home, which will be dedicated to St. Andrew the Apostle.[3]

In 579 Pope Pelagius II sent him to Constantinople as legate to get help from Easterners against the Lombards invaders in Italy. The time spend in the capital of the Eastern Empire will determine him even more to alienate from those worldly.[4] But St. Gregory the Great will not be designed to retreat to the monastery built in his home to pray there in silence and solitude, but he will be called upon to put his talents to the benefit of Westers who were in great social, but especially spiritual, impasse. As a keen analyst and expert in the issues of his time, he wrote

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[1] Placide Deseille, *Nostalgia Ortodoxiei*, Anastasia, București, 1995, p. 234.

[2] C.J. Godfrey, *The Church in Anglo – Saxon England*, Cambridge University Press, 1962, Cambridge, p. 67.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 68.

[4] *Ibid*.

words of sadness about contemporary priests and hierarchies and urges them to live a true spiritual life and protected from the welfare of the world and not to let what they had learned in theological schools to become mere empty words, otherwise the shepherd "that goes into the abyss, will pull all the flock with him."[5]

His election as pope in the year 590 (he was the first monk that became bishop of Rome) will see the major changes both in Rome and in the surrounding kingdoms. Henceforth will begin the period that made the historians say about St. Gregory the Great that there was no other pope who influenced the German world during the centuries VI - XIV so much as he did.[6]

St. Gregory thought to put the monasteries in the centre of the work of renewal of the Church. The only place in the West where the monastic community flourished in that era was Ireland. In the other countries the decline of monasteries was visible, even in places with great tradition, as Gaul. As such, the new pope will fight to restore the necessary independence of the monasteries needed for a life far from the tumult of the world. He forbidden the bishops to interfere in the internal affairs of the communities, and the abbot was elected only by the brethren of the monastery.[7]

Before he set eyes to the far western islands, the pope will start his missionary work among the Arian Lombards and the Jews of Spain. The only way in which he thought would succeed was that of preaching, of the word.[8] In addition to the re-evangelization mission, St. Gregory will organize meals for the needy in Rome, but also in areas affected by poverty in the provinces of Italy. Being a noble man and a former diplomat, he will be the one to make peace between the Lombards who invaded Italy and the local leaders, but also among the laity and the believers who ruled the Merovingian kingdoms.

The thought to send a mission to England apparently arose in the mind of St. Gregory even before becoming Bishop of Rome. The moment seems

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[5] James McSherry, *Outreach and Renewal: A First-Millennium Legacy for the Third-Millennium Church*, Liturgical Press, 2011, p. 77.

[6] *Rome and the North: The Early Reception of Gregory the Great in Germanic Europe*, edited by Rolf H. Bremmer Jr., Kees Dekker, David F. Johnson, Peeters, Londra, 2001, p. IX.

[7] James McSherry, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

[8] *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, vol.6, edited by G.J. Cuming, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 30.

to have been that of his meeting with some young Anglo-Saxon slaves brought to the market for sale, whose beauty and purity of countenance amazed the Saint. On the other hand we must not forget that Britain remained in the memory of the Western Roman Empire citizens as one of the greatest former province, now mostly abandoned and fallen in paganism. Driven by the enthusiasm of youth, St. Gregory was ready to go himself to England, but the people and those who valued didn't let him, realizing that all his virtues and grace were most helpful in Rome.[9] Here's what he himself confessed later to Brunhilda, the Queen of the Franks, about the motive of the Roman mission to England:

> "... It has come to our knowledge that the England nation, by the will of God, is keen to become Christian, but that priests who are in their neighbourhood have no pastoral care about them. And lest their souls to perish in eternal punishment, our concern was to send there the carrier of these gifts, Augustine the servant of God ...".[10]

St. Gregory shows that this mission started at the request of Anglos who desired the Christianization, but the French bishops had failed to help.[11] This request seems to be one of the possible explanations for the rapid Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons.

But sending missionaries was not an easy step for Rome. While the city was under Ostrogothic dominion, the expansion of Christianity in distant parts of the continent has been postponed. But when Franks gained an increasing power in the West, their connection with the papacy made possible the sending of missions with the Frank material support.[12]

St. Gregory told the abbots of Gaul to buy young English and teach them the Christian faith and then send them as missionaries back in their homeland. This was conceived as first step of the missionary work. We don't know if this idea came to life, but the intent is preserved in the Epistle

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[9] Eric John, *Reassessing Anglo – Saxon England*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996, p. 28.

[10] Sf. Grigorie cel Mare, *Registrum Epistolarum*, pars III, cartea VI, „Epistola LIX către Brunhilda, regina francilor", editat de J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae. Cursus completus. Series Latina*, Tomus LXXVII, p. 842.

[11] C. J. Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 74

[12] David N. Dumville, *Saint Patrick A.D. 493-1993*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1993, p. 10.

to Candidus, the priest of Gaul, the manager of the papal estates in French territory.[13]

French influence on Anglo-Saxons increased in the late sixth century. Hence Pope Gregory the Great will choose the starting point for the mission of Christianization the Kingdom of Kent, known to be the most developed of all the kingdoms of the island, and having the largest expanse of dominion or influence.[14] In the vicinity of the European shore, Kent made quite strong links with the Merovingian royal house, especially through matrimonial alliances.

Augustine will be appointed the head of the mission to Anglo-Saxons. He was the abbot of the monastery Caelius, a monastic establishment which combined the Benedictine order with the Vasilian one. It will be accompanied by 40 monks from the same community. About their abbot, St. Gregory has only words of praise in his the letters to the Frankish clergy, "Bishop Augustine was trained according to the monastic order, has a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures and by the grace of God, is a man of holy life".[15] Pope will send the abbot with instructions about the way in which he should deal with the pagans and their religion.

The trip to Britain that began in 596 was longer because Augustine stopped for a while in Provence, at Lerins. There he heard stories that circulated about the cruelty of the Saxons which discouraged his companions.[16] They will send Augustine to Rome to call off the missionary expedition, but he encountered the fortitude and consistency of a Pope who didn't listened to the tales, but gave Augustine several letters of recommendation to the Frankish clergy and nobility in which he required them to fully support the missionaries. He writes to the monks who wanted to return to Rome:

> "So do not let the toil of the journey or the evil-speaking to stop you; but continue without delay and with enthusiasm what you have began being led by God and knowing that much trouble is followed by the glory of an eternal reward".[17]

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[13] George Frederick Maclear, *A History of Christian Missions during the Middle Ages*, Macmillan and Co, Cambridge, 1863, p. 99.

[14] C. J. Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

[15] Gordon Beattie, *Gregory's Angels 597-1997, A 1400 Year Celebration of the Order of Saint Benedict in the British Isles*, Gracewing, Leominster, 1997, p. 10.

[16] C.J. Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

[17] Sf. Grigorie cel Mare, *Registrum Epistolarum*, pars III, cartea VI, „Epistola LI către

From now on the road through Gaul was smoothened, and the missionaries were helped with everything they needed. They were protected and were provided shelter, food and security. Augustine will be appointed bishop of Anglos in the church in Arles.[18] Within a year after leaving Rome, he and his 40 companions will land in Kent, at the same time when, somewhere in the north, on the island of Iona, St. Columba ended his earthly ministry. King Ethelbert was ready to receive them. A few years before, his wife, Bertha, daughter of a Frankish king, had agreed to become his wife on the condition that she will preserve her Christian faith, the receiving of her priest in Kent and the reopening of an old Roman church in Canterbury[19]. About the priest who accompanied the queen Bertha in the new country was told that he was bishop, taking as a basis a gold coin discovered in this region.[20] This attests both the political role of the queen and her confessor and a possible beginning of a mission among the English, even before the sending of Augustine in Kent. It seems that this Frank bishop died in 595and this permitted to Pope Gregory to urge the departure of the roman missionaries to England. The death of the Frank bishop is the only explanation for the possibility of the appointing Augustine as bishop of the English, which happened during his stay in France. Although the head of the Roman Church, St. Gregory the Great would not allow himself sending another bishop and thus breach the existing territorial jurisdiction if the first had still lived.[21]

The first papal letters to the King of Kent indicate a rush to see carried through the Christian mission. In time St. Gregory the Great will change his tactics, understanding that instead of a violent Christianization, but without effects through time it would be more desirable and gradual and lasting evolution toward inner faith.[22]

Pope Gregory the Great will send other people to help Bishop Augustine (who will become future bishops of London, Rochester and York). Also he

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fratii care merg spre Anglia", editat de J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae. Cursus completus. Series Latina*, Tomus LXXVII, p. 836.

[18] Gordon Beattie, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[19] C.J. Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

[20] N. J. Hihgham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England*, Manchester University Press, 1996, Manchester, p. 73.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

[22] Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1992, p. 17.

sends two letters to King Ethelbert (in which encourages him to destroy the heathen temples, following the example of St. Emperor Constantine the Great) and by his wife, Bertha (in front of whom he puts the model of St. Helena the Empress and he a prays her to strive to convert her husband, showing her the important role of the queen towards the leader and thus to his people as a whole): "So you strengthen your glorious husband's mind by unceasing encouragements to love the Christian faith; your love will increase his love for God love, thereby his heart will light up to full conversion of his subjects."[23]

Besides the monks sent to reinforce English mission, the new church will be endowed with many books (especially Service Books), sacred vessels, vestments, manuscripts, especially holy relics. Augustine will receive a letter whose content differs entirely from the first letters from Rome. If in the beginning St. Gregory the Great taught his missionary disciple to be intransigent toward pagan religion, now he changed his tone and advice, telling Augustine to destroy only the idols and to sprinkle with holy water the pagan temples and raise in them Altars where to put relics. This British loved this and they were attracted easier to Christianity.[24]

> "When people will see that these temples are not destroyed, will remove error from their hearts, and knowing and glorifying the true God will come with more familiarity in the places where they have been accustomed."[25]

Also, pagan celebrations will be replaced with the celebrations of holy God and His saints.[26] The reason for this attitude less violent was the faith of the pope that in this manner, seeing their temples still standing, the Anglo-Saxons will receive more easily the new religion.[27] At the same time, Pope Gregory sent to King Ethelbert a letter, and but the way he has to support the Christianization of his people started by Augustine differs from the tone of the epistle to the Roman missionary:

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[23] Sf. Grigorie cel Mare, *Registrum Epistolarum*, pars III, cartea XI, „Epistola XXIX către Bertha, regina anglilor", editat de J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae. Cursus completus. Series Latina*, Tomus LXXVII, p. 1136.

[24] *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, vol. 6, p. 29.

[25] Sf. Grigorie cel Mare, *Registrum Epistolarum*, pars III, cartea XI, „Epistola LXVI către Mellitus episcopul", editat de J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae. Cursus completus. Series Latina*, Tomus LXXVII, p. 1215.

[26] George Frederick Maclear, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

[27] C.J. Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

"Hurry to spread the Christian faith among your subjects, multiplying your zeal in their Christianization; destroy the idolatry, pull down their temples, plant the good clean living habits in your people by exhortations, and good words, guiding them and showing them examples of good deeds."[28]

Pope Gregory advises Augustine to divide the island into two provinces according to the Roman model which Pope was familiar with - one with its capital in London, the other at York, and in each province to nominate 12 bishops. The missionary will be able to fulfil only one of these exhortations - he will nominate only two bishops in the south and one in the north and London will not become see although it was the largest and most populous city, was still a pagan stronghold.[29] Thus the ecclesiastical residence remained at Canterbury. In a way, this situation suited Augustine because he remained under the sheltering wing of King Ethelbert.[30] The number of twelve bishops will be filled only after a century, and the North will never have more than three prelates. Over time, the tradition already established will prevent moving the Archbishopric of Canterbury in London. In 604 Augustine appointed two bishops, Mellitus and Justus. Mellitus will be sent as a missionary in Essex. In addition to organizing the Church, Augustine will found monasteries, such as the St. Peter and Paul in Canterbury, following the model of Rome that he had left. The first generation of Anglo-Saxon Christians will give a large number of monks.[31]

In a year of preaching and missionary work Augustine baptized the King and about 10,000 of his subjects. Although Augustine did not know the language Saxon and the King did not know Latin and help of French priest to translate will always be needed, in a few years most of Ethelbert's courtiers embraced the new religion. St. Gregory the Great, talking about the good start of the Christianization of the British mission, summarizes in a few words: "God ... wanted that through weak people would powerfully work among nation of England".[32]
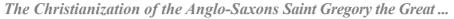
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[28] Sf. Grigorie cel Mare, *Registrum Epistolarum*, pars III, cartea XI, „Epistola LXVI către Ethelbert, regele anglilor", editat de J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae. Cursus completus. Series Latina*, Tomus LXXVII, p. 1202.

[29] Eric John, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[30] C.J. Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

[31] C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, Pearson, Harlow, 2001, p. 54.

[32] Sf. Grigorie cel Mare, *Registrum Epistolarum*, pars III, cartea XI, „Epistola XXVIII către Augustin, episcopul anglilor", editat de J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae. Cursus comple-*

The linguistic impediment will be overcome in time, but not by Augustine, but by the Christianized - King and nobles – who will begin to learn Latin. To assist in the services, the believers must know Latin. Thus Augustine established at Canterbury, along with the first church, the first grammar school.[33]

How the Anglo-Saxons were converted so easy? It was claimed that some of the Britons natives have had merit, who, in the one hundred and fifty years of living together, managed to stagger the pagan religion, so that Augustine will not face tough opposition of Frisian tribes, the continental Saxons or Scandinavians.[34] This response may partially explain the reality. We must not forget that the Britons, having lost the battle and territories, receded in western regions, and have not returned to their enemies to preach the Christian faith. On the other hand, the Anglo-Saxons were proud enough not to accept the religion of a people once conquered. They believed in the power of spells, plants and water, the goblins, dragons and wicked fairies, and all they will keep their consciousness long after Christianization, as legends. Probably the process of polishing of Germanic tribes in contact with Christianity found in the island was gradual the more so since the coming of Augustine they renounced since a while the human sacrifices, limited themselves to the animals[35]

The historians have wondered in a more concrete way, related to the first conversion of the English, why Ethelbert accepted the new faith. Was conviction or political reasons? The information left by St. Bede on the miracles made by Augustine and his companions, but also their way of life after settling in England, seems to have pleaded for a greater respect which Ethelbert had for these monks. But it is hard to believe that the life of monks, full of hardship and austerity, made the King to wish for baptism.[36] Whatever the purpose, Ethelbert's baptism will be the source of similar events in the royal families all over England. He is the one who started this wave of Christianization which included kings, nobles, and then whole nations of the British island. This is evident to his contemporaries in Europe: "The first of the English kings who was brought to the Christian

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tus. Series Latina, Tomus LXXVII, p. 1142.

[33] A. F. Leach, *The Schools of Medieval England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1963, p. 3.

[34] C.J. Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[36] N. J. Higham, *op. cit*, p. 58.

faith by these people (Roman mission) was Ethelbert, King of Kent, who shone with his nation after being cleaned in the waters of baptism."[37]

But the British will not simply receive the new religion, but in time they will ask themselves various questions related to it. Augustine will mention these aspects in his letters to St. Gregory the Great, asking for advice about how to give the best respond.[38] He came from Rome as a conqueror, waiting for the Anglo-Saxons to become part of the superior Christian culture. He didn't learned their language, but used some scholars from the court of the King who knew Latin or the Frank priests who came with him.[39] In the Epistles of St. Gregory the Great send to Augustine he refers to the wonders that the missionary made among the English, miracles that amazed even him and for which Augustine asked Pope's advice. St. Gregory's exhortation is simple and full of wisdom: "Regarding the gift that you received or you will receive - to work miracles - for this receive power as if it hasn't been given to you, but to those for whose salvation you acquired it."[40]

An important aspect of the Roman mission to England is the constant and valuable support - both material and human sent - which the Frank kingdoms gave to Augustine. Pope Gregory will thank them by letters. In 496, King of the Franks, Clovis, received the Christian faith from the hands of Remigius, bishop of Rheims, and with him all his subjects. One who interceded for this to be possible was the King's wife, Clotilda. After one hundred years, her great-granddaughter, Bertha, will smooth the way of converting King Ethelbert of Kent by Augustine. The question was asked why the Franks didn't do anything until the arrival of Augustine in England, as long as efforts for supremacy over the island existed in the mid sixth century. The answer given by one author was because of the missing of missionary tradition outside their own territory. The work of St. Gregory the Great was unique at that time and made possible the emergence of a

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[37] *Ibid*., p. 54.

[38] Stephanie Hollis, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[39] Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, vol. 3 – The Medieval Church*, Wm.B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., Cambridge, 1999, p. 119.

[40] Sf. Grigorie cel Mare, *Registrum Epistolarum*, pars III, cartea XI, „Epistola XXVIII către Augustin, episcopul anglilor", editat de J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae. Cursus completus. Series Latina*, Tomus LXXVII, p. 1142.

tradition that will strengthen only in the next centuries.[41] From now on, the involvement in the affairs of England even if it will be only religious at the beginning, will seem extremely appealing for various Franks Kings as part of the struggle for supremacy between the rival kingdoms of Frankia.

After the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons, Augustine turned to the Western Welsh Island, which he found to be Christians but not according to Roman order. However, there was an Orthodox Church and Augustine saw in them a good way to reinforce what he had begun among the Anglo-Saxons. It seems that Augustine wanted to unite the two churches in England - Celtic and Anglo-Saxon – which began to be more distant from one another, but his call for unity was made on the condition of the acceptance of the authority of Rome. Augustine's intention was to smooth the differences between the churches, not just those relating to the date of the Easter and the tonsure of the monks, but also the organization and their leadership.[42] He will face the Celtic hostility towards the conquerors of the island, although their enthusiasm as travellers and warriors would have made them unsurpassed missionaries.[43] Within two years - 602-604, Augustine will meet twice with the bishops of Britons, asking them to give up the different habits and to support the work of Christianization of English. Bede portrays the native Britons in a very unfavorable light, given his Anglo-Saxon bias. At the final meeting the bishops will ask the advice of a Briton hermit about the position they should to adopt towards Augustine. Here is the dialogue between the bishops and the Welsh hermit, reproduced by Bede:

> "If he is the man of God, follow him" – "How do we know this?" They asked. He answered them, "our Lord says - Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart - so if Augustine is meek and lowly in heart, you will believe that he took upon himself the yoke of Christ and offers you to take upon yourselves the same yoke. But if he is shown to be stern and haughty, then he is no man of God, and we will not listen to his words." They asked again: "And how will we know that?" –

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[41] Ian Wood, *The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English*, în Speculum, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Jan., 1994), p. 8.

[42] Paul E. Pierson, *The Dynamics of Christian Mission – History through a Missiological Perspective*, William Carey International University Press, Pasadena, 2009, p. 75.

[43] C.J. Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

"Make sure" said the hermit "that he and his companions reach first the place where the council will meet; and if when you approach he will stand up, you will listen to him, knowing that he is the servant of Christ; but if he will look down on you and will not rise, since you will be more in number, then either will you give him the due honour."[44]

Bede goes on to say that Augustine did not rise to greet the Britons bishops, as such they have announced him that they will not obey, but shall remain, they and all the faithful under their authority, independent of the Church of Rome. Dissatisfied with this opposition and futility of his plan, Augustine will prophesy about the Welsh: "If they do not preach the way of life to the English nation, they will find from their hands the vengeance of death."[45]

The Roman Archbishop will not get to see this prophecy fulfilled; he died in the year 604, the same year as St. Gregory the Great. But in the year 613 (according to some authors in 616) in Chester will be one of the biggest battles between the Britons and the English, in which many Welsh leaders will be killed, and together with them, Ethelfrith, King of Northumbria, will kill over 1,200 monks and priests (mostly from the monastery of Bangor) who come to support the Britons on the battlefield with their prayers. The abbot Brocmail, the one who was leading them, will escape with fifty monks, and gave testimony about the martyrdom of their brethren. The Chronicle says that this is the fulfilling of the prophecy of Augustine.[46]

The future monk Seraphim Rose remarked that the gospel has been preached to almost all nations of the earth, so the end of the world is near. Saint John Maximovich responded that "the Gospel of Christ must be preached in all the languages of the world *in an Orthodox context*. Only then the end comes."[47] British Orthodox saints are those who call on their followers today to "make straight the way of the Lord".

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[44] Beda Venerabilul, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, cartea a II-a, cap. II, on Internet la pagina http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/bede/bl-bede-2-2.htm.

[45] *Ibid*., pe Internet la pagina http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/bede/bl-bede-2-2.htm

[46] *Cronica anglo-saxonă*, partea I, pe Internet la pagina http://omacl.org/Anglo/part1.html

[47] Ieromonahul Damaschin, *Viaţa şi lucrările Părintelui Serafim Rose*, Editura Cartea Ortodoxă, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 278.