Dawid Dudziak

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
dawiddudziak1@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-4200-6358

The Missionary Activity
of the Pope Gregory the Great

Działalność misyjna papieża Grzegorza Wielkiego

Abstract: The Migration Period at the turn of antiquity and the Middle Ages changed the face of Europe permanently. The Fall of the Roman Empire in the West showed that the functioning of the state and church administration must change. This was perfectly understood by Pope Gregory the Great, who, understanding the circumstances, undertook the task of re-evangelising Europe. In this undertaking, the monks played a significant role as missionaries of the new Europe. The Pope restored to the Holy See the priority in organizing missions and evangelization, which had been the domain of the secular power of the Empire for several centuries. Gregory the Great left behind numerous guidelines and advice for the missionaries, and he personally ensured that everyone entrusted with the task of evangelization was properly prepared for it. As the basis of the mission, Gregory considered, first and foremost, the testimony of the life of missionaries according to the so-called spirituality exemplum. In addition to the proclamation of the Gospel, monks were required to be active witnesses of love, demonstrated by the establishment of structures for the service of caritas. In his decisions, the Pope was firm and courageous, which is why posterity gave him the title of First European.

Keywords: Saint Gregory the Great, missions, Migration Period, evangelization, Britain, Roman Empire

Abstrakt: Wielka Wędrówka Ludów na przełomie starożytności i średniowiecza zmieniła na stałe oblicze Europy. Upadek Cesarstwa Rzymskiego na Zachodzie pokazał, że dotychczasowe funkcjonowanie administracji państwowej i Kościoła musi ulec zmianie. Doskonale rozumiał to papież Grzegorz Wielki, który odczytując bieżącą sytuację, podjął się zadania reewangelizacji Europy. W tym przedsięwzięciu mnisi odegrali znaczącą rolę jako misjonarze nowej Europy. Papież przywrócił Stolicy Apostolskiej pierwszeństwo w organizowaniu misji i ewangelizacji, które od kilku stuleci były domeną władzy świeckiej Cesarstwa. Grzegorz Wielki pozostawił po sobie liczne wskazania i rady dla misjonarzy, jak również osobiście dbał o to, aby każdy

udający się z zadaniem ewangelizacji był do tego odpowiednio przygotowany. Jako podstawę misji uznał Grzegorz świadectwo życia misjonarzy według tzw. duchowości exemplum. Oprócz głoszenia Ewangelii do podstawowych zadań mnichów należało czynne świadectwo miłości, okazywane poprzez zakładanie struktur posługi caritas. W swoich decyzjach papież był stanowczy i odważny, przez co potomni nadali mu tytuł Pierwszego Europejczyka.

Słowa kluczowe: św. Grzegorz Wielki, misje, Wielka Wędrówka Ludów, ewangelizacja, Brytania, Cesarstwo Rzymskie

In Europe's history witnessed the time called the Migration Period which took on great importance. This term came to mean the mostly military actions of peoples which unwittingly determined the shape of the Old Continent and instilled a new ethos in the inhabitants of the Western world of the time. The mixing of cultures, peoples and nations translated into three centuries of suffering, bloodshed and a huge resettlement of European peoples. Although the greatest intensity of the barbaric activities occurred in the 6th century, it had begun two hundred years earlier. The invasions of Germans, Visigoths, Huns, Vandals and Suebi led to chaos in Western Europe. Roman political and administrative control quickly collapsed.[1] The areas captured by the barbarians became the foundations of modern European states. The origins of today's political divisions in Europe can be traced back to the events unfolding at the turn of antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The new circumstances in Europe compelled the Church to act. Six centuries may seem to have been long enough for the Good News to reach every inhabitant of Europe. Yet, during the pontificate of Gregory the Great[2] it became obvious that missionary activity in all social, political and ecclesiastical circumstances was called for. Gregory came up with the idea of monasticism which was to be both coenobitic and missionary.[3] He regretted the Church ceased to function in areas where earlier the community of believers had been highly active, and decided to breathe new life into the activities of the Church. The reforms of the Church administration that he prepared and implemented were a response to the need of the clergy.

Gregory the Great's correspondence with the rulers and bishops of Gaul and with Augustine, the monk to whom the Pope had entrusted the task of evangelizing Britain, is an invaluable source of information about the Pope's missionary

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[1] H. Chadwick, *Kościół w epoce wczesnego chrześcijaństwa*, Warsaw 2004, p. 247.
[2] The pontificate of Gregory the Great covered the years 590–604.
[3] V. Grossi, *Historia duchowości – duchowość Ojców Kościoła*, vol. 3b, Krakow 2004, p. 314.

activity. In his *Letters* and the *Book of the Pastoral Rule* (*Pastoral Care*) he laid down guidelines on the qualities required of the Good News preachers. Among the ecclesiastical documents, Pius X's *Iucunda Sane* encyclical and John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Plurimum significans* throw light on Gregory's missionary commitment.

The Holy See's assumption of missionary leadership

The disintegration of the relationship between the spiritual and secular powers compelled Gregory the Great to undertake and reorganize the Church's missionary activity. Undoubtedly, he should be credited with establishing a new model of missionary work, which was not to be limited only to the lands of the Roman Empire as a natural environment of Christianity, but extended to all nations.[4] Until then, the world was identified with the Empire, but then for a further 100 years Western Europe was merely an heir to the former Roman glory. The situation was different in the East, where Roman power and ethos were still sustained. This divergence forced the Pope to act alone in matters of Europe's Christianization re-Christianization of. In Italy in 600 there were areas where the peasant population was still pagan. However, within a century the whole peninsula became catholic thanks to the missions.[5]

Gregory's undertaking needed material funds for a missionary expedition and, most importantly, people who would dare to undertake such a dangerous task. It seems that the decision about a missionary expedition to the Anglo--Saxons was made because of a personal experience he had already had before his pontificate, when in a Roman marketplace he had once encountered a group of slaves from England, who amazed him with their angelic faces. When Gregory had asked about their faith, they had replied they were pagans. The future Pope was even more astonished by that nation's name – the Angles – which clearly referred to their angelic appearance. When he had asked more precisely where they lived, he had found out that they came from the province of Deiri, which he understood – translating from Latin as *de ira* – as being saved from God's wrath.[6] The great Pope would remember the people who looked like angels, so when he became St Peter's successor, he intended to convert them from paganism to the faith in the One God.

4   R. Bulas, *Grzegorz Wielki w anglosaskiej Brytanii i celtyckiej Irlandii*, "Vox Patrum" 23 (2003), vols. 44–45, p. 354.
5   B. Kumor, *Historia Kościoła II – 600–1500*, Lublin 2001, p. 13.
6   J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze średniowiecznej Europy*, Warsaw 1987, pp. 56–57.

The attempts to send missionaries to European peoples were beset with problems because the Byzantine emperors did not recognise the lands conquered by barbarians as sovereign countries. Byzantine conservatism never came to terms with the formation of new states and preferred to disregard facts and treat those states as parts of the federative empire.[7] The missionary expedition was a confirmation that the Empire in Western Europe had fallen irretrievably. While until now the papacy had been interested in and supported in principle only efforts to strengthen the faith and the Church in the peoples already converted, leaving the initiative to spread Christianity to rulers or individual zealots, since the time of Gregory the Great the Apostolic See took the lead in missionary matters.[8] The papal correspondence with Theodoric, the king of Franks, and Queen Brunhild is a testimony to the lively commitment to the missions of the royal court: "Some monks told us what blessings Your Excellency have given them when they were on their way to the people of England. Therefore, while thanking you warmly, we request you to grant your generous help also to those monks whom we are now sending."[9]

Papal fervour in the proclamation of the Gospel was a model for the clergy to develop their missionary service in the Church. The missionaries who were about to give up on this dangerous, burdensome and uncertain pilgrimage continued to do so, strengthened by the words of the one who had sent and encouraged them to carry out the work that had already begun.[10] Gregory would utter such words: "How can a man who could make a name for himself while helping his neighbour prefer a retreat to helping others when the only-begotten Son of the Father, wanting to help many, left the womb of the Father to act in our world?"[11] The Pope became known as a prophet who confronted reality with the experience of the past and was able to clearly predict the effects of his own actions in the future. The missionary theology developed by Gregory was future-oriented, and as such restored the Church's universal dimension during the late Roman Empire, too strongly engaged in temporal structures and neglecting the evangelical guidelines i.e. the preaching to all nations. Gregory, the realist, considered the Empire to be a phantom of the past – a great one, but one burdened with the stigma of iniquity; when he sent Augustine to Britain, it was

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[7]   A. Markus, *Grzegorz Wielki*, Warsaw 2003, p. 195.
[8]   J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze...*, op. cit., p. 57.
[9]   Gregory the Great, *Listy*, transl. J. Czuj, Warsaw 1954, vol. 4, XI 47, p. 109; English translation by WTR.
[10] John Paul II, *Plurimum significans*, "Vox Patrum" 10 (1990), vol. 19, p. 586.
[11] Gregory the Great, *Księga reguły pasterskiej I,5*, transl. E. Szwarcenberg-Czerny, Krakow 2008, pp. 58–59; English translation by WTR.

not for the purpose of restoring the lost island to Roman culture, but for the extension of the Kingdom of Christ. A *nova Anglorum Ecclesia* was to be created, not a revived former British Church.[12] In the future the Pope saw a new and thriving Church, so he was aware that the methods of preaching the Gospel can sometimes be unconventional and the liturgy enriched with cultural influences.

The desire to carry out missionary activity among the incoming peoples deepened the divisions between Rome and Byzantium. The Pope's decisions were fully autonomous. Two different ways of thinking could not be reconciled. The Emperor wanted to pursue a conservative policy, while Gregory lived as if there were no tomorrow, building new structures for eternity.[13] Generally, the Pope thought about community. It was a great challenge for the Church to take the initiative in missionary activity. The servant of the servants of God knew that he alone could not tackle such a monumental task. To this end he appealed to particular individuals – especially monks, kings, queens and shepherds of the Church – and groups of Christians in an attempt to win the peoples who lived in Europe during a period of turbulent migration over to his ideas.[14] However, by involving so many influential people in the world at that time, the Pope remained the leader of the Church's missionary activities. In a letter to Bertha, the Queen of England, he expressed his gratitude for the help given to the missionaries:

> For indeed our most beloved son Laurentius the presbyter, and Peter the monk, have brought us word on their return to us how your Glory has exhibited itself towards our most reverend brother and fellow-bishop Augustine, and how great succour and what charity you have bestowed upon him.[15]

Providence gave the Pope the courage to separate secular and clerical powers, which was the beginning of a return to the proper tasks and mission of the People of God on earth. Throughout his pontificate, Gregory pointed out that the whole life of the Church and that of priests and all pastoral activity should be directed towards Christ and his life.[16]

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[12] J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze…*, op. cit., p. 57.

[13] W.H. Carroll, *Historia chrześcijaństwa*, vol. 2: *Budowanie chrześcijaństwa*, Kobierzyce 2010, p. 209.

[14] V. Grossi, *Historia duchowości…*, op. cit., p. 415.

[15] Gregory the Great, *Listy*, op. cit., vol. 4, XI 35, p. 90; English text available at: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360211029.htm [access: 20.10.2020] (Book XI, Epistle XXIX).

[16] Sojka S., *Intelektualno-duchowa formacja kapłanów według zasad św. Grzegorza Wielkiego*, "Vox Patrum" 13–15 (1993–1995), vols. 24–29, p. 203.

Gregory's guidelines on missions and missionaries

Gregory felt the enormous burden of responsibility for a missionary expedition to barbaric peoples. He felt that, apart from technical matters, he had to provide future missionaries with decent education. For this purpose, he used the monastery, of which he was once a founder and member. In 590 he became Pope and this monastery became the operational base for the evangelization of the British Isles.[17]

He kept pointing out that the unity of Christ's flock was of utmost importance in the Church. Therefore, in his statements and letters he would keep reminding that the shepherd should also take care of those people who were outside the Christian religion. This care should be aimed at restoring or gaining the infidels for the Church.[18] The missionaries should feel responsible not only for the members of the Church, but also, to the same extent, for people living in paganism. All care and action should have its origin in God. The connection between two types of love – those for God and the neighbour – was so fundamental that the exercise of the second is a practical way of verifying the first commandment of love.[19]

The missionary whom Gregory sent to Britain had first to show great love for every man he met, even that hostile to the Good News preached by God's heralds. Gregory taught that the clergyman "being joined at once to the highest and to the lowest by the bond of charity, though in himself mightily caught up in the power of the spirit into the heights above, yet among others, in his loving-kindness, he is content to become weak."[20] The Pope also emphasized that this kind of apostolate was to be derived from love and heart. Only paternal love, as Gregory would say, could be considered as the starting point of an activity aimed at establishing bonds with this group of people.[21] The Servant oft servants of God wanted the missionaries of Christianity to regard love, of which Christ's reference to the Church is a model, as an essential imperative and essential substance.[22] Despite pagan peoples' infidelity and opposition to the faith in Jesus, the missionary should remain faithful to his vocation.

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[17] V. Grossi, *Historia duchowości...*, op. cit., p. 313.
[18] S. Sojka, *Ideał życia kapłańskiego w świetle pism św. Grzegorza Wielkiego*, Lublin 2003, p. 208.
[19] S. Witek, *Chrześcijańska wizja moralności*, Poznań 1982, p. 49.
[20] Gregory the Great, *Księga reguły pasterskiej II,5*, transl. E. Szwarcenberg-Czerny, Krakow 2008, p. 82; English text available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/36012.htm [access: 20.10. 2020].
[21] S. Sojka, *Ideał życia kapłańskiego...*, op. cit., p. 209.
[22] S. Witek, *Miłość chrześcijańska w życiu człowieka*, Warsaw 1983, p. 16.

Another important aspect of missionary service in the Church is the example of one's own life. The Pope pointed to a spirituality that should be a pure example to follow, the so-called exemplum spirituality. He saw the possibility of preserving the Law of God contained in the Holy Scriptures through free will supported by God's grace, and he understood the good example itself to be the fruit of the help of grace and not merely the production of a man's will.[23] Gregory claimed that a good example was to be the fulfilment of the pastoral function and integrally connected with it. It is only then that the missionary becomes a shepherd in its full dimension, when in the style of his Christian life the faithful receive a concrete model of conduct.[24] He was convinced that words not translated into visible action were tantamount to empty and meaningless talk.

Gregory's recurrent subject in his teachings was the priest as a preacher in the full sense of the word. As such, he should above all be a paragon to others, while his conduct should be a reference point for all. Effective pastoral activity also required that he know the addressees and adapt his statements to the situation of each person.[25] The concept of the ideal pastoral care given by Gregory the Great aimed first and foremost to create a constant and intense commitment on the part of the priest to always have before his eyes the spirit and greatness of his Master, to whom he leads the faithful.[26] The value of one, even the smallest good example, was for the Pope much more valuable than a large scale pastoral teaching:

> For he who is required by the necessity of his position to speak the highest things is compelled by the same necessity to exhibit the highest things. For that voice more readily penetrates the hearer's heart, which the speaker's life commends, since what he commands by speaking he helps the doing of by showing (…) which means that he who is engaged in heavenly preaching should already have forsaken the low level of earthly works, and appear as standing on the summit of things, and by so much the more easily should draw those who are under him to better things as by the merit of his life he cries aloud from heights above.[27]

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[23] V. Grossi, *Historia duchowości...*, op. cit., p. 411.

[24] S. Sojka, *Ideał życia kapłańskiego...*, op. cit., p. 213.

[25] Benedict XVI, *Mistrzowie duchowi, Ojcowie i Pisarze I tysiąclecia*, Krakow 2009, p. 56.

[26] Sojka S., *Intelektualno-duchowa formacja kapłanów...*, op. cit., p. 203.

[27] Gregory the Great, *Księga reguły pasterskiej* II, 3, transl. E. Szwarcenberg-Czerny, Krakow 2008, p. 74; English text available at: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/36012.htm.

History, observation of reality and drawing common conclusions were very important for Gregory. He treated the events of the past as an experience that can explain the current facts and predict the future development of societies and human behaviour. Realizing that he could no longer count on the natural framework of the Roman Empire, and even less so on help from the East, he understood history through the category of prophecy, that is, he pointed out in the course of history, both civil and ecclesiastical, the Christian faith as a point of reference for a new coexistence between nations in the West, which had to be rebuilt.[28] He taught his monks this approach, who in their encounter with the Lombards and Celtic Britons could not afford the usual patterns of thinking or understanding or practicing their faith. Viewing history as a prophecy permanently changed the understanding of faith among believers. Since the times of Gregory, the Church has begun to understand the meaning of non--verbal ways of spreading the faith.[29] Missionaries sent to pagan peoples had to know the methods of reaching a different culture and customs, completely different from the achievements of Roman civilization.

While searching for new ways of evangelization, Gregory did not forget about the native rules of proclaiming faith to others. He convinced monks that art could be a visual kind of teaching and as such it turned out to have a huge impact on the religious art of Britain. Thanks to their efforts, the Anglo-Saxons learnt the art of icons.[30] All missionary activities also depended largely on the prudence of those preaching of the Gospel. They had to determine what could be implanted in the pagan culture, and what was worth preserving from this culture in the emerging Church. Many years before the Church came to appreciate diversity, Gregory laid the foundations for the concept of inculturation, which proved to be the key to the Pope's missionary success.

An important feature of his approach to pagans was that he advised to adapt rather than demolish pagan centres of worship.[31] He advised leniency to some Anglo-Saxon customs, if they did not contradict the Christian faith and the doctrine of the Church; he even recommended the use of pagan temples, ordering only statues to be destroyed. Such an evangelization model would win many new believers for the faith.[32]

The need for an immediate involvement of future preachers in the missions could have resulted in their poor theological education. However, with full

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[28]   V. Grossi, *Historia duchowości...*, op. cit., p. 414.

[29]   W. Lipoński, *Narodziny cywilizacji Wysp Brytyjskich*, Poznań 1995, p. 246.

[30]   R. Bulas, *Grzegorz Wielki...*, op. cit., p. 355.

[31]   Cf. Gregory the Great, *Listy*, op. cit., vol. 4, XI 56, p. 121.

[32]   W. Lipoński, *Narodziny cywilizacji...*, op. cit., pp. 185, 232.

responsibility he demanded an appropriate intellectual formation of priests. According to Gregory, a priest should acquire knowledge to the extent necessary for him to lead people to God.[33] In the whole process of theological education, he would attach greater importance to humility than learning. He would stress that Scripture ought not to be read only to satisfy one's own desire to know things because that meant giving in to the temptation of pride and could lead to heresy. Intellectual humility is the guiding principle for those who seek to explore supernatural reality, taking the Holy Book as their starting point. Of course, humility did not exclude serious study, but it remained indispensable for spiritual benefit, enabling immersion in the depths of the text.[34]

For Gregory, the issue of education was the basis for the missionary work of the clergy. He clearly defined it in his programmatic work. Some of the statements of the Pastoral Rule are well known, like the one that defines pastoral ministry as the most sublime art; and we cannot forget the urgent warnings that precede or appear later, for example, "why do some people dare to undertake pastoral ministry without preparation?" or "often someone who has never known the laws of the Spirit has the audacity to make himself a doctor of souls."[35]

Difficult times for the training of the clergy did not prevent Gregory from making the missionaries of Celtic Britain true theologians and teachers of evangelized peoples. In this aspect, the Pope saw the need for financial transparency of the work undertaken. In a letter to Bishop Augustine he ordered that all income should be divided into four equal parts. One of them was to provide a livelihood for the bishop and his household, the second was to provide funds for the clergy, the third was to be given to the poor, and the fourth was to provide a fund for the repair of churches. This division of goods was expected to enable proper pastoral care, further missionary work and total dedication of the clergy to evangelization.[36]

Only people free of temporal attachments were able to cope with the tasks that the Pope decided to impose on them. According to Gregory, too much commitment to temporal things deprived people of an objective assessment of the world. Only the one who rises above the temporal reality reaches an attitude of objective evaluation that is free of falsehood.[37] The freedom of the missionary's heart from worldly influence was for him one of the prerequisites

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[33] S. Sojka, *Intelektualno-duchowa formacja kapłanów...*, op. cit., p. 207.

[34] Benedict XVI, *Mistrzowie duchowi...*, op. cit., Krakow 2009, p. 53.

[35] John Paul II, *Plurimum significans*, op. cit., p. 584.

[36] Gregory the Great, *Listy*, op. cit., vol. 4, XI 56a, p. 122.

[37] S. Rosik, *Finalizm życia chrześcijańskiego w świetle twórczości papieża Grzegorza Wielkiego*, Lublin 1980, p. 88.

of the value of the mission of the preachers of the Word of God. He believed that the right attitude towards material goods was to see them as means to an end, and attachment to them should never be an end in itself. At the same time, he encouraged others to concentrate all their efforts on achieving the heavenly goal.[38] Gregory believed that the actions taken by the missionaries could not result from any other motivation than the salvation of the souls of all people. The moral ideal, as he pointed out, always meant achieving a harmonious synthesis of word and action, thought and commitment, prayer and devotion to the duties of one's own social station.[39]

He advised all clergy to be ascetic. A truly ascetic attitude, he claimed, was not so much seeking suffering as accepting it. Asceticism understood in such a way allows man to control himself and even devote himself fully to God's cause, develops in him the virtue of chastity, increases love for God and neighbour, becomes the cause of love for heavenly things and shapes in him a sense of truth.[40] Gregory knew perfectly well that only the righteousness of the clergy's conduct and their full commitment could be the beginning of preaching the Gospel.

The question of obedience was no less important in the Pope's missionary thought. The demands placed on the missionaries were very radical both intellectually and spiritually. Gregory pointed out that he who subordinated himself to his superior's will by the same token manifested the disposition of submission to God's will.[41] The ability to adapt to all the conditions of the mission was an essential feature of the teachers of faith in Britain. The Pope knew that only absolute obedience to the Church and her shepherds could ensure harmony in a declining world. He insisted that the shepherd should recognize his misery every day so that pride could not destroy the good done in the eyes of the Supreme Judge.[42] Only absolute obedience to the hierarchy could prevent one from departing from God's will and acting according to one's own discretion.

The letter to Augustine shows the profound realism of life in the mission territories. Gregory recommended that certain pagan customs among the people, especially incestuous marriages committed by the Angles, should be eradicated with all possible force. However, if, despite the admonitions, people remained in such relationships, they should not be deprived of the possibility of receiving the Eucharist because the entry into such a marriage took place

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[38]   S. Sojka, *Ideał życia kapłańskiego...*, op. cit., p. 217.

[39]   Benedict XVI, *Mistrzowie duchowi...*, op. cit., Krakow 2009, p. 54.

[40]   S. Sojka, *Asceza w świetle pism św. Grzegorza Wielkiego*, "Vox Patrum" 7 (1987), 12–13, p. 342.

[41]   S. Sojka, *Intelektualno-duchowa formacja kapłanów...*, op. cit., p. 204.

[42]   Benedict XVI, *Mistrzowie duchowi...*, op. cit., Krakow 2009, p. 56.

before accepting the Gospel.[43] The Pope recommended that the zeal for the transmission of the Truth should be supported by gentleness and realism. In the same spirit, Gregory approached the issue of baptism. While he ordered the candidates for this sacrament to undergo appropriate preparation, when lives were endangered, he recommended baptizing both children and adults who expressed such a will.[44]

All the above-mentioned qualities of the future missionaries were the pearls that Gregory was looking for in the monks ready to undertake an evangelistic journey among the barbarians and all those they met on their way. The education he had given to the preachers of the Good News finally helped overcome hindrances and led to the difficult evangelization of the Anglo-Saxons.[45] Even though the Pope did not experience the fruits of this mission, he was nevertheless very eagerly committed and did not remain indifferent to the spiritual poverty of the people of Western Europe.

Monks and their commitment to missions

Gregory's missionary undertaking was because it required financial resources and above all people ready to preach the Gospel in the most difficult regions of the continent. In 595, the Pope ordered the administrator of the papal estate to buy out young English slaves in Gaul and to hand them over to monasteries so that, as he himself wrote, they would become pleasing to God.[46] The Pope knew that Britain's indigenous people could become a good link between the pagans and the missionaries. The redeemed slaves were to be assigned a priest who would gradually introduce them to the faith and instil in them a desire for missionary service.[47]

Soon the Friary of St Andrew, previously founded by Gregory, in which he himself for a few years before being elected to the Holy See had led the life of a monk, became the centre of missionary formation for Britain and Gaul.[48] The Friary was not only a place where future missionaries learnt the art of evangelization, but also a community that breathed new life into the Church's activity.

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[43] Gregory the Great, *Listy*, op. cit., vol. 4, XI 56a, p. 126.
[44] Ibidem, p. 129.
[45] V. Grossi, *Historia duchowości...*, op. cit., p. 313.
[46] J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze...*, op. cit., p. 57.
[47] J. Czuj, *Papież Grzegorz Wielki*, Warsaw 1948, p. 143.
[48] V. Grossi, *Historia duchowości...*, op. cit., p. 313.

It is not without reason that the monks became the first missionaries sent by the Church to England. In a world full of chaos and uncertainty, the monks' lifestyle seemed to be a remedy for the problems of the people of that time. Only the combination of contemplative and active life could bring order. At the same time, pastors should be particularly close to people through merciful compassion and should rise to God with a loving desire. In this case too, the growth of the love for God in contemplation depends in a special way on the growth of love for one's neighbour, which is expressed in the works of active life.[49] The turbulent times at the turn of the century required a spiritual breakthrough. The peaceful life of the monks, to which many had grown accustomed, was interrupted by the urgent requirements of the times.

It is surprising that Gregory believed that one should not reconcile clerical life with that of a monk: he did not like it when clerics lived in monastic communities, where their presence could lead to problems. On the other hand, he entrusted special missions to monks and chose those from his own monastery as bishops.[50] Although there were many more priests in the European Church, the monks were assigned the most important tasks of the renewal of the community of believers. Those who lived a peaceful life and were distant from everyday life became evangelizers of nations, changing their lives and ministry into an active-contemplative style.

Gregory the Great, by strengthening moral evangelical ideals in societies that often experienced a very acute contact between the medieval and ancient epochs, in place of the monastic ideal inherited from antiquity, often characterised by an escape from the world, strongly promoted the ideal of life, which on the one hand should be marked by a certain distance to earthly realities and on the other – by a profound commitment resulting from the love for God and neighbour.[51] Monastic life could never be an escape from the uncertainty and hardship of everyday existence. Only conscious monks could lead a life that was truly pleasing to God. The effort that the Pope put in their education and formation resulted in later years in their great courage and bravery in proclaiming the Gospel in Gaul and ultimately in Britain. All the valuable guidelines that he gave to the monks testify to the high regard in which Gregory held the care of souls, which he called the *ars atrium*, or the sublime art.[52] Only

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[49] P. Gwiazda, *Bonus ordo Vivendi – życie doskonałe w doktrynie św. Grzegorza Wielkiego*, [in:] *Duchowość przełomu wieków*, S. Urbański, M. Szymula (eds.), Warsaw 2000, p. 210.

[50] A. Markus, *Grzegorz Wielki*, op. cit., p. 90.

[51] S. Sojka, *Przedchrześcijańskie actio i contemplatio a Vita activa i Vita contemplativa u św. Grzegorza wielkiego*, "Vox Patrum" 6 (1989), vol. 10, p. 17.

[52] Benedict XVI, *Mistrzowie duchowi...*, op. cit., Krakow 2009, p. 57.

monks constantly pondering the Word of God, living in a spirit of poverty and obedience, were able to pass on the faith to the dangerous descendants of the barbarians and establish the first churches and religious communities among them.

Christianization of the British Isles

After a long preparation and formation of future missionaries, the church opened the time of great missions in the north of the European continent. In 597, Gregory the Great sent to Canterbury in the Duchy of Kent a mission to Britain headed by Augustine, a monk from Rome's St Andrew's Monastery, founded by Gregory himself. There were many reasons why the missionaries went to Britain. The aim was on the one hand to stop the internal religious struggle among the Saxons and the Angles, and on the other hand Rome's desire to carry out the Christian evangelization of the once Christian Britain destroyed by the invasion of pagan Germans. This mission was also an alternative to the expansion of the Celtic Church, which had been carrying out its evangelizing activity from the north.[53]

However, the initial zeal and commitment had to face the unpredictability of the whole expedition. The beginnings were very difficult, and obstacles emerged on the way, especially in Gaul.[54] Despite the preparation and zeal of the monks, this first expedition seemed to have been poorly organized and ended in a complete failure: it did not even reach England. The missionaries turned around halfway, probably deterred by some unspecified hindrances and hurdles, asking the Pope to release them from their duty to evangelize Britain.[55]

One of the reasons for the return of the missionaries may have been the stories about the people of England heard on the road. While traveling through France, the monks became quite doubtful, hearing about the cruelty of the Britons and their hatred of Christianity and, understandably, realizing that none of them could say a word in their language.[56] It would seem that reason and self-esteem prevailed over the spirit of evangelization that the missionaries had.

Augustine's first mission was not a great success; still, but it did give the Western Church an experience of a different culture and discernment, which

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[53]   R. Bulas, *Grzegorz Wielki...*, op. cit., p. 354.
[54]   J. Czuj, *Papież Grzegorz Wielki*, op. cit., p. 143.
[55]   J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze...*, op. cit., p. 57.
[56]   W.H. Carroll, *Historia chrześcijaństwa*, op. cit., p. 210.

was used in subsequent missionary activities.[57] The difficulties encountered on the way scared the missionaries and Augustine returned to Rome. The Pope wrote a letter to him, asking him to return to the mission and tried to convince him that it would have been better not to undertake such a great task at all than to give up because of the fear and anxiety caused by the news that reached the ears of the monks.[58] The request to be relieved of the missionary obligation was immediately met with the Pope's opposition, who did not even want to hear about it, but, having learnt from experience, immediately began to better prepare for the second expedition.[59] The ability to examine his conscience and to admit his mistakes in preparing the first expedition gave Gregory new enthusiasm for further activities.

Strengthened in spirit, with the encouragement from the Pope, the missionaries decided to go to Britain for the second time with the Good News. This time, in terms of logistics, the expedition was complemented by things that were missing previously. As a fundamental matter, Gregory decided to extend Augustine's powers and strengthen his position. He provided him with letters of commendation to both Franciscan bishops and secular rulers.[60]

Augustine and his companions may have met with incomprehension, if not open reluctance on the part of the Galician bishops through whose dioceses they had to pass. The Episcopate of Gaul had no understanding for the missionary doctrine newly formulated in Rome; the intellectual and moral state of a large part of the clergy and the Frankish Church in the 6th and 7th centuries was regrettable. This explains why Gregory, sending Augustine back to England, not only gave him a higher dignity as an abbot and equipped him with a letter full of words of encouragement to the disappointed companions of the first expedition, but also entrusted him with letters of commendation to the Abbots and Bishops of Gaul, whose monasteries and dioceses were on the planned path of the missionaries.[61] The missionaries provided with such references began to be regarded as having the authority equal to that of the Pope.

The sending of 40 monks led by Augustine to England and the organization of a church hierarchy there under his guidance in the capacity of, first, abbot and then bishop and metropolitan of Canterbury, was the beginning of great changes in the British Isles. When these missionaries, after many difficulties, finally arrived in Kent, with the help of King Ethelbert and his wife Berta they

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[57] R. Bulas, *Grzegorz Wielki...*, op. cit., p. 354.
[58] Gregory the Great, *Listy*, op. cit., vol. 3, VI 52, p. 225.
[59] J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze...*, op. cit., p. 58.
[60] J. Czuj, *Papież Grzegorz Wielki*, op. cit., p. 142.
[61] J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze...*, op. cit., p. 58.

managed to expand the ecclesiastical organization, under the strong influence of the Roman Bishop.[62] Despite their success in the mission, they remained humble people. They were always faithful to the Pope and did not succumb to the temptation of forming an autonomous structure from the newly converted Christians. All the doubts and reports of the activities in the region were regularly presented by Augustine to Gregory, and the Pope's decisions were put into practice on the islands.

The Pope gave the monks the recommendation that, prior to their expedition to England, they should stay in Gaul for some time and recruit Frankish priests for the mission because they could serve as translators. In the spring of 597, Augustine and 40 companions crossed the Channel on several flat-bottomed boats. In good weather, they landed on the island of Thanet off the coast of Kent, the same island where the first Germanic invaders attacking Britain had landed 150 years earlier.[63] Queen Berta was a blessing to the mission because, as an ardent Christian, she helped to re-evangelize the island. On this basis, Augustine could expect a favourable reception, and he arrived there as a bishop, ordained by Eucherius of Lyon.

In the year when the monks arrived in England, King Ethelbert let himself be baptized, and a great number of his subjects followed suit.[64] Thanks to such decisions, the missionary work moved forward vigorously. The missionaries obtained the monarch's permission to settle near Canterbury; they also used the St Martin's Church, and later were allowed to rebuild the former Roman-British church in Canterbury itself and consecrate it to the Saviour.[65] St Augustine applied the evangelization technique used by St Paul in his missions. He always sought to reach big cities and only from there to transmit the faith to smaller settlements. Gregory himself was very much interested in every move of the monks. In his letter to the Patriarch of Alexandria, he reported not only on difficult but also on good events:

> And he, having with my leave been made bishop by the bishops of Germany, proceeded, with their aid also, to the end of the world to the aforesaid nation; and already letters have reached us telling us of his safety and his work; to the effect that he and those that have been sent with him are resplendent with such great miracles in the said nation that they seem to imitate the powers of

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[62] J. Lachowicz, *Autorytet Biskupa Rzymu w nauczaniu i praktyce Św. Grzegorza Wielkiego*, "Vox Patrum" 24 (2004), vols. 46–47, p. 358.

[63] W.H. Carroll, *Historia chrześcijaństwa*, op. cit., p. 210.

[64] J. Czuj, *Papież Grzegorz Wielki*, Warsaw 1948, p. 145.

[65] J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze...*, op. cit., p. 59.

the apostles in the signs which they display. Moreover, at the solemnity of the LORD'S Nativity which occurred in this first indiction, more than ten thousand Angli are reported to have been baptized by the same our brother and fellow-bishop.[66]

The work of the missionaries has been extremely impressive. Probably none of those undertaking this task, as well as Gregory himself, believed in such a rapid and violent acceptance of faith among the people of Britain. Although there were foundations for church organization, they were far from perfect. On the one hand, the monks had contact with the newly converted king, while on the other hand their influence was limited to a certain part of the island.[67]

In reading this as God's will, St Augustine decided not to hesitate and immediately create the structure of a local church that would be able to continue to form neophytes and prepare those willing to serve in the heartland of the British Isles. To the east of the city of Canterbury, Augustine founded the monastery of St Peter the Apostle, to which the king added the church of St Peter and Paul, which was not completed until after Augustine's death.[68] The group of 40 monks was, however, too small to take care of the pagan converts, let alone carry out a mission within the country. After the initial great conversions, Augustine immediately asked Pope Gregory to send more priests because he knew that the Church in England would be developing fast.[69]

Not wanting to leave the Pope without details of the expedition to Britain, in 601 some monks returned to Rome to report on the progress of the mission and fetch to the isles the things the local Church needed. These were things necessary for the worship and ministry of the faithful, such as liturgical utensils and robes, church decoration, clothing for priests and other clergy, relics of holy apostles and martyrs and many books.[70] In the same year, after giving Gregory a thorough report on his four years of work, the Pope granted Augustine's request. In June, he sent a new group of missionaries under the guidance of Abbot Mellitus equipped with the requested equipment.

The British Church urgently needed more dioceses and bishops to guarantee its stability and continuity. Therefore, in 601, the Pope instructed Augustine to ordain 12 bishops for the whole Kingdom of Angles. At the same time, Gregory

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[66]   Gregory the Great, *Listy*, op. cit., vol. 3, VIII 29, p. 43; English text available at: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360208030.htm [access: 20.10.2020] (Book VIII, Epistle 30).
[67]   J. Lachowicz, *Autorytet Biskupa Rzymu*, op. cit., p. 358.
[68]   J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze...*, op. cit., p. 59.
[69]   W.H. Carroll, *Historia chrześcijaństwa*, op. cit., p. 211.
[70]   A. Markus, *Grzegorz Wielki*, op. cit., pp. 213–214.

establishes clear rules of ecclesiastical jurisdiction: "Venerable Brother, through God our Lord Jesus Christ, you will be made superior not only to the bishops you ordained, but also to those ordained by the Bishop of York, and to all the bishops of Britain."[71]

A serious problem faced by the monks was the customs of the peoples passed by generations. And although the Pope approached many local traditions with great enthusiasm, he could not accept some of the local practices. An example is the custom, rooted in English legal consciousness, of marrying a stepchild and a stepmother or marrying a sister-in-law after the death of a brother.[72] Monks and priests who were indigenous to the British Isles became invaluable in teaching proper human relations.

As administrative structures in England grew stronger, Gregory took another initiative to bind Britons to the Pope. In a letter to Augustine he made two proposals regarding the relationship between England and Gaul. The first one mitigates the law, according to which a bishop's consecration had to be assisted in Italy by at least three bishops. This rule was completely impractical with regard to the new Church of the Angles, and although Gregory wanted the churches of the Franks and the Angles to work together as closely as the small distance between them allowed, the second proposal determined more precisely what the relationship between them should be like. Augustine had no power over the bishops of Gaul, but they should advise and encourage each other to spread the Good News.[73] The ideal of faith for England and Gaul was unity and cooperation, which was fundamental for the future of the Church and Europe.

Although the lands of Gaul were mostly Christian, in some places the religious practices were lost. In northern Gaul Christianity was pushed by a wave of pagan pressure from what is now Belgium.[74] Gaul, too, had to reorganize its existing activities and take new evangelization measures to restore faith in its territory. Gregory was not obsessed with the greatness of his success or failure. In the short term, the plan he had for the Northern Churches led to nothing. The work of the Irish monk, Columba, left a much stronger mark on the Church of Burgundy than Augustine did anywhere in Gaul. Irish and Gaulish missionaries worked on the Christianization of northern Gaul and the lands bordering it. Those who came to the Kingdom of Angles from the Irish east and north of Britain succeeded in rooting Christianity deeper than

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[71] Gregory the Great, *Listy*, op. cit., vol. 4, XI 39, p. 100.
[72] J. Strzelczyk, *Iroszkoci w kulturze...*, op. cit., p. 61.
[73] Cf. Gregory the Great, *Listy*, op. cit., vol. 4, XI 56a, pp. 126–127.
[74] B. Kumor, *Historia Kościoła...*, op. cit., p. 13.

Augustine and his immediate successors were able to do in the south of the island. The reason for this is that the churches of the English and Franks were much more dependent on one another than one might think.[75] The fruits of the mission were negligible during the life of Gregory and his evangelizers, but from the very beginning the Pope taught very clearly that what they were doing was not an immediate action, but a broad undertaking to bring about a new order in the Church and the world.

Establishment of Church structures in missionary areas and the ministry of Caritas among the Christianised peoples

The success of the missions of Augustine and Columba on the British Isles led to an urgent need to create religious centres that would undertake further catechesis of the newly evangelized peoples. The increase in the number of the faithful of the Church was a consequence of the most important tasks undertaken by the missionaries. Gregory did not accept the division into pastoral and missionary activities. He viewed them collectively.[76] For such a task he needed clerics whose mother communities were monasteries founded in Britain. The proclamation of the Gospel was, of course, impossible without first providing basic and decent living conditions. The uncertainty of life and the plague that decimated the population made it all the more necessary to provide well-organized help to the poor and the sick. Such an activity was the fulfilment of Gregory's teaching on the perfect form of life, which is a combination of active and contemplative life.[77]

The task of caritas service rested mainly on bishops established in the area. Therefore, the Pope's policy when filling bishop's see was based on the practice of finding people who had proven their integrity.[78] They in turn had to establish in their own dioceses priests responsible for the organization of humanitarian aid. The charity was headed by a manager. Gregory recommended that it should be a monk, although the law did not require it, leaving the decision to the founders of the charity.[79] Soon the Pope imposed certain legal requirements on

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[75] A. Markus, *Grzegorz Wielki*, op. cit., p. 222.

[76] Ibidem, p. 221.

[77] M. Wójcik, *Instytucje dobroczynne w Listach Grzegorza Wielkiego*, "Vox Patrum" 21 (2001), vols. 40–41, p. 342.

[78] J. Lachowicz, *Autorytet Biskupa Rzymu…*, p. 406.

[79] M. Wójcik, *Instytucje dobroczynne…*, op. cit., p. 344.

the function of the administrator. He forbade them to accept bishop's dignity and financial benefits for running a charitable institution.[80] Only the Britons formed according to Gregory's principles could meet such extremely difficult requirements.

The Anglo-Saxons called Gregory a father and an educator.[81] The Pope created from scratch the whole system of humanitarian aid. His letters contain three types of charitable institutions: xenodochia, ptochia and gerontokomia. Definitely, most often he writes in his letters about various issues related to the activities of xenodochium. It seems, therefore, that such institutions were rather numerous, and among various types of houses for the poor these were the most common. They were often built along pilgrimage routes and sometimes also acted as hospitals. The xenodochium probably also had the most general functions.[82] The Pope believed that goodness shown to the needy should be a model of both humble and firm love: discipline and mercy lose in importance when they are separated. But with great skill in distinguishing things, priests must preserve the mercy that finds wise solutions and the love that punishes through discipline.[83]

In order to show mercy to those in need, the Church organization also needed buildings and lands to secure the smooth running of charities. Rich landowners often donated part of their wealth to the poor and the needy. But, as with any matter connected with money, the Church's charity caused much confusion among the people of Britain. The problem was that the Roman law had not yet developed a definition of a legal person. As a result of this ambiguity, governments usurped title to the Church's property.[84] It is not surprising, therefore, that Gregory so thoroughly worked out the procedure of appointment to the office of manager and with even greater commitment made more restrictive the procedure of removing wrong people from office.

Poverty, misery and human suffering did not go unnoticed by the Pope. He knew exactly that without prior feeding and taking care of those in need, the proclamation of the Gospel would remain fruitless. He was not only an ordinary clerk dealing with statistics and the results of his work, but he took paternal care of every lost and suffering person.

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[80]   Ibidem, p. 349.
[81]   R. Bulas, *Grzegorz Wielki...*, op. cit., p. 355.
[82]   M. Wójcik, *Instytucje dobroczynne...*, op. cit., p. 343.
[83]   M. Starowieyski, *Ojcowie Kościoła o kapłaństwie i kapłanach*, Krakow 2010, p. 107.
[84]   M. Wójcik, *Instytucje dobroczynne...*, op. cit., p. 349.

Conclusions

The task of preaching the Gospel remains the Church main task. The times when Gregory the Great held the papal office required a new look at the functioning of the Church and her tasks. The vision of a new Europe and a new missionary activity which he initiated would last for many centuries. This innovative view not only contributed to the conversion of Europe, but also initiated a completely different administrative division of the former Roman Empire in the West. The conversions of Spain and England, which took place 15 years after each other, bound the two later great Catholic countries to France, that "oldest daughter of the Church," creating a bastion of Christianity in the West that was never completely defeated. When Spain was conquered by the followers of Islam, France remained Catholic and repulsed the pressure of the Muslims, while England converted Germania. When England, in turn, under Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, left the Catholic camp, and France threatened to do so under the pressure of the Huguenots, Spain saved France for the Church, thus saving the Christian world. When France was consumed by the fire of the revolution, threatening to destroy or control the Church, Spain and England joined forces to defeat the revolution.[85] Undoubtedly, Gregory counted in his actions on the mutual help of the Churches in nation states. In 596, he expected the Frankish Church to help the missionaries he had sent; around 601, the new Church of the Angles had already supported the implementation of plans to reform the Franconian Church. There can be no doubt that he saw the mission to England as part of a broader vision in which the two Churches were to play a partnership role in their mutual Christian renewal.[86]

In a world of unrest and chaos he managed to bring about unity, a sense of common good and to give the peoples of Europe a new ethos of life and direction for the future. When Pope Gregory and Augustine of Canterbury died at the same time in 604, the Church had already firmly established its roots in Kent and was ready to move on to conquer the neighbouring Saxon kingdoms. It seems that at that time there was nothing that could limit the Pope's vision, his control over events or the state of faith and the faithful. Without the innovative way of building unity shown by Gregory the Great, Europe could have been plunged into an even greater crisis, from which it would have proved impossible to emerge.

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[85] W.H. Carroll, *Historia chrześcijaństwa*, op. cit., p. 211.
[86] A. Markus, *Grzegorz Wielki*, op. cit., p. 220.

The task of the evangelization of the world is still valid, in every era of history, and the changing times point to new needs and methods of preaching the Good News. Deciding to evangelize Europe, Gregory probably did not expect to be called by posterity the Father of Europe and the First European. Having read the history of the world in a prophetic spirit and after analysing the reality, he did a work without which it would be difficult to imagine the history of Europe.

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Dawid Dudziak (rev.) – presbyter, doctoral student at John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Faculty of Theology, in the field of Church History, at the seminar on the Church history in antiquity. The current scope of research is directed at the teaching of Pope Gregory I Great, with particular emphasis on the work *Moralia in Iob* and its influence on the understanding of the theological virtues: faith, hope and love in the Church teaching.