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Howard Huws

SAINT GERMANUS
OF AUXERRE



ST. GERMANUS OF AUXERRE

by Howard Huws



Orthodox Logos Publishing

Front cover:

St Germanus of Auxerre, from an icon written for the author by Popadija Đorđević of Novi Sad, Serbia in 2003.

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(These windows and stone carving may be the earliest known depictions of the saint.)

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Foreword

Being interested in both Orthodox spirituality and post-Roman history, I cast about for a volume presenting all that is known to us about one of the most famous and influential figures of the 5th century, Saint Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre: and finding none, have dared distil into one booklet the works of those scholars who have cast light upon one aspect or other of St Germanus' life and works.

We know more of him than of St David, St Patrick, Arthur or any other figures of the "Age of Saints", because of the singular impression he made upon his contemporaries. He is known to have visited the Isle of Britain at least once, if not twice: and his fame spread far, permeating especially into the collective memory of my own Welsh nation, amongst others. Our forefathers delighted in talk of his deeds, reminding each other of his aid and leadership in trying times. We have inherited great respect towards him, consecrating many churches and wells to God in his name, and baptizing sons in his honour.

Much has been written about St Germanus: but in the course of time, living recollection faded and gave way to distortions and embellishments. Like Arthur, he became a prop for shaky speculations, a legendary figure upon which each successive age projected its own concerns. The purpose of this little work is simply to clean the grime from his icon, leaving any restoration to more competent hands.

With that in mind, I've researched into as many sources of information as I could find, reading the works of dependable chroniclers and historians. In this I have been most generously aided by Dr Bruce Griffiths of Bangor; Dr A. C. Lake of Swansea; Tristan Grey Hulse, of Bontnewydd; and Chris Schoen of Pen-y-groes in Gwynedd, who prepared the maps. The reproductions of stained-glass depictions of St Germanus from the Cathedral of St Etienne, Auxerre, are courtesy of Professor Patrice Wahlen and Les Amis de la cathédrale St-Étienne d'Auxerre: and the picture of the image at St-Germain-l'Auxerrois, Paris, was provided by Véronique Pilon. I also thank Mr Maxim Hodak of Orthodox Logos Publishing for his skilled work and great patience.

I now present to you the poor and unworthy fruit of my labours, hoping it may cast a little more light on the saint, his faith and his times until such time as true scholars may provide its better. Should the reader find any of it to be incorrect, it is hoped he or she shall not delay in saying so: for better any error here be corrected at once, than pass for truth and infect others.

I cannot depart without drawing attention to the words of Fr Justin Popović, who stated that in reading the lives of the saints, we read the Life of Christ. Such works are a continuation of the Acts of the Apostles, and testify that the Life of Christ on this earth did not end with His Ascension into Heaven, nor with the death of His Apostles. The saints, in the Eternal Light of God, continue to direct us towards the Heavenly Kingdom: and here is the story of such a one, especially dear to us, the Welsh: Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre and friend of the Britons.

Troparion (from the French)

Holy Bishop Germanus, our defender,
Honour and comfort of the Church in Gaul
Thou didst cast off pride and wealth
So as to follow Christ our God humbly.
Thou didst combat the heresies, and ensure
The victory of the True Faith.
Father of the people of Auxerre, refuge of the unhappy,
Pray that Christ in His mercy will strengthen us.

Howard Huws.

Penrhosgarnedd.

1. The Life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre

The death of an empire is a fearful spectacle, best observed at a safe distance. While the great beast roars and thrashes in its agonies, it remains dangerous: but at its last gasps, those who once feared it will gather around, waiting their opportunity to feast off it, and so gain strength enough to fight amongst themselves for the title of Top Predator.

So it was at the beginning of the fifth century AD, when the Roman Empire in the west was plunging into violence and chaos. As resources dwindled and the old imperial ideals faded, Roman commanders fought both invaders and each other for the remains of supreme authority: and having succeeded awhile, ruled cruelly and unjustly. The common folk, trodden into serfdom and taxed beyond endurance, often responded with rebellion.

At the Empire's fringes, those nations which once dreaded its power now seized their chance to carve it up. Roman dependence on German soldiers and leaders had increased considerably: but the time had now come when whole tribes could cross the frontier without hinderance. From the east bank of the Rhine, hungry eyes coveted the rich, defenceless land of Gaul.

There in Gaul, in the city of Auxerre, was Saint Germanus born to noble Christian parents in about the year 378.¹ He was well brought up, and given the best available education: and in time, was sent to Rome to study Law. On his return he began a successful career as an attorney, marrying the high-born daughter of a wealthy family, a

lady of impeccable character. His career flew so high that he was appointed duke, which was honour indeed: for few could - or wished - to accept such responsibilities at so turbulent a time.²

Then came the unexpected. At the unanimous call of the clerics and all the people, high and low, town and country, yes, even his own colleagues, he was appointed bishop. Why? We don't know: but he himself must have been utterly convinced that his comfortable life and worldly success were as nothing compared to the opportunity to serve God and his fellow man before the holy altars. He exchanged the worldly army for that of heaven; he put off the pomp and baubles of this earth; his wife became as a sister to him; and on the seventh of July in the year 418, by popular acclaim, he was enthroned Bishop of Auxerre.³

He changed his way of life completely, disciplining his body by fasting and penitence. To the end of his days, he ate neither wheaten bread, oil nor beans, nor even salt: and would drink neither wine nor vinegar. He began each meal by eating some ashes, then barley bread whose grains he himself had milled.⁴ Day and night, summer and winter, he wore but a mantle and tunic, whatever the weather, until they either fell to pieces or were given by him to the needy. Next to his skin he wore a prickly horsehair shirt, and he slept on a bed of a few planks and ashes, hard as the very ground. A piece of sacking beneath him answered for a mattress, and an old military cloak for a coverlet. He did without a pillow.⁵

He rarely took off his belt or shoes, and around his neck wore a leather thong bearing a small box of relics. Such discomfort meant that he could barely sleep, but by penitence and prayer his sanctity was burnished as if by long, slow martyrdom. He remained most welcoming and hospitable, feeding all who came to him, and washing their feet. He achieved that which is most difficult: to live like a hermit in the midst of daily distractions, and as if in the desert, within sight and reach of all the world's pleasures. After a short while he founded a monastery near the city, on the opposite bank of the river, so that the Church, through this community, could spread the Orthodox Christian faith among the local inhabitants.⁶

By the Grace of God, and his untiring efforts, signs were given that Germanus was indeed a conduit of divine power. Ianuarius the regional tax-collector, visiting the bishop one Saturday, was so careless as to lose his satchel of monies. He took his eyes off it for a moment, and in that instant it was stolen by a man possessed by a demon. When Ianuarius discovered his loss, he was beside himself with fear and fury: and in his terror, demanded that Germanus repay him every last coin, as if the bishop was to blame.

"In God's name", said the bishop, "I promise you'll get the money back". But by the following Sunday there was no sign of the satchel, and the tax-collector was on his knees before Germanus, wailing that the Governor would kill him if the lost money wasn't found.

"Patience", said the bishop, "all will be well."

Before attending liturgy that morning, Germanus requested a private interview with that unfortunate man who'd stolen the money. The bishop demanded that he confess his misdeed immediately, but the demon controlling him refused point blank. His ire aroused, Germanus went to the church, where he commanded that the demoniac be brought before the congregation. There the bishop prostrated himself, and prayed.

At once, the thief was hurled up into the air, and began to scream deafeningly. As if on fire, he shouted that he'd stolen the money. After Germanus had quizzed him further, the taxman's gold was found, and the demon cast out of the poor sufferer. Germanus had healed many before that time, but in secret: this was one of the few times he did so in public.

Then the city was stricken by a disease of the throat, which first killed children, then their parents. With his flock decreasing by the day, Germanus sensed that the powers of evil were behind this plague: so he blessed oil, and anointed each sufferer in turn. The sickness abated at once: and as one of the demons fled, it yelled that they, the spirits of evil, had caused the disease, and that the prayers of the holy man had seen them off.

Another time, whilst Germanus was returning to the monastery from a journey, one of the monks there began prophesying that the bishop wouldn't be able to cross the river to them for lack of a boat. After a while, the bretheren went down to the waterside, and indeed, the

"prophet" was right. So a boat was despatched to fetch the bishop home, and when he landed, they told him how they knew of his return. Germanus sensed that this prophetic ability was not God's doing, but the Devil's: for the Evil One too has spiritual power, and can send prophecies and visions in order to mislead men, and tighten his grip upon us. He immediately exorcised the "prophet" of the demon in him: and in a foul stench, the unclean spirit fled.

Whilst journeying late one winter's evening, Germanus and his party reached an old ruin which local people said was haunted. It had fallen into almost total decay: but as soon as the bishop heard mention of ghosts, he insisted on staying there. One fairly complete room was found, so they laid their packs there, and all except Germanus ate a little. At the darkest hour, with the bishop now asleep, one of the clerics began to recite according to his office: but suddenly, a fearsome spectre appeared before him, and a shower of stones pelted the walls. In terror, the reader called on Germanus, who awoke instantly. He arose, looked into the spectre's eyes, and ordered it to state, in the name of Christ, who it was, and why it haunted that place.

Cowering, the ghost told Germanus that when alive, it was one of a pair of robbers who had been killed, and their bodies dumped there like so much rubbish. Denied peaceful rest, they disturbed the living: and it begged the bishop to pray to the Lord, that He would take them to Him, and grant them eternal repose.

The saint knew well that human bodies, the image of the Almighty, should never be so mistreated, whoever they were. He ordered the spectre to show him where the bodies lay, and by torchlight, despite the foul weather and the dilapidation, the ghost indicated the very spot. At dawn, the bishop asked assistance of some of the neighbours, exhorting them to shift the rubble: and there were found the two corpses, still manacled. A grave was opened, the manacles removed, shrouds were wrapped about the remains, and a Christian burial conducted. In giving peace to the dead, quiet was granted to the living: for the ruin was repaired, and henceforth became a tranquil home.

Germanus proceeded on his way: and whist staying, as he preferred, at poor lodgings, he spent the night in prayer. At dawn, he noticed that the farmyard cockerels were silent: so he enquired regarding this strange behaviour. The answer given was that they hadn't crowed for many a day: could he help them? The bishop took wheat, blessed it, and fed it to the tongue-tied birds: and ever afterwards, they greeted the sunrise most enthusiastically. A small matter: but sufficient to reveal the greatness of the Lord.⁷

As the western half the Empire collapsed, the Emperor Honorius told the Britons to look to their own military defence. The islanders, however, remained in contact with their continental neighbours: and in the year 429 a deputation of them arrived in Gaul seeking aid against spiritual enemies. The followers of the heretic Pelagius were abroad in their land, and successfully spreading their misleading ideas amongst both clerics and laymen. The unity of the Christians, and their relationship with

the Catholic Church, the very Body of Christ, were in dire peril.⁸

Who was Pelagius? A Briton, it's said, who preached in Rome at about the beginning of the fifth century. His notion was that anyone could save his or her own soul by virtue of works alone. All that was necessary to secure salvation, he thought, was to use our free will in order to differentiate between good and evil. Easy? Too easy by half: it would mean that the definition of "good" and "evil" would depend entirely on one's own whims. Christ's coming, death and resurrection would be effectively redundant. Also, any "success" on our part would invite pride, the chief of sins: and any "failure" would throw us into hopeless despair.

The truth is that man must co-operate with God in order to be saved. Yes, we've been granted free will: but without God's Grace, we'd misuse our freedom to wander off-course into the darkness, as Adam did. Only by co-operating with God, by asking His support and that His Grace light our path and steer our will towards salvation, despite our sins, can we be saved. For if, by the light of Grace, we use our free will to move one step towards God, He'll take ten steps toward us, just as the father ran to greet the prodigal son. That's the truth which Pelagius was undermining.

The news from Britain horrified the shepherds of the Catholic Church in Gaul. A synod of bishops was convened, and it was decided to send bishops Germanus of Auxerre and Lupus of Troyes to Britain, to preach against the Pelagians and reinforce Christian unity. So

they set out together for the coast.⁹

Seeing both men sailing for Britain, demons brewed so terrible a storm that both clouds and waves were churned into a howling, crashing tempest. The sailors feared that the ship would surely be sunk: but with the vessel being tossed on the sea like a cork, Germanus went to sleep. If it was bad before, it now became ten times worse: and Lupus and the others woke the saint, begging him to help them. Germanus kept both his cool and his faith: and in the Name of Christ, he reprimanded the waves. Pouring a little oil on the waters, he prayed: and the storm ceased, the sea became calm, and both bishops landed safely in Britain.

They were welcomed there by crowds of people from near and far, because unclean spirits, possessing a number of unfortunates, had prophesied the coming of the Gaulish bishops. Germanus and Lupus cast those spirits out: and in fleeing, they roared that they were the ones responsible for raising such a hurricane against the Lord's servants.

The two bishops had so much success in preaching against the Pelagians that report of them and their miracles ran from one end of the island to the other. With enormous crowds pressing upon them, they preached in churches and at crossroads, in the fields and lanes, encouraging the faithful and bringing the lost back into the fold. By spoken and written word, and by miracles, entire regions were brought back to the True Faith. The Pelagians saw their support vanishing like April snow, and when it was suggested that a public debate between

both parties be held, the heretics accepted the challenge, thinking to silence the Catholic bishops once and for all. The Pelagians and their supporters arrived at the appointed place in rich attire, hoping to create an impression.¹⁰ They opened their mouths to lecture: but no amount of fine clothing could disguise their lack of understanding. Against them stood Germanus and Lupus, men well trained in debate, skilful and eloquent speakers, and more importantly, men illumined and convinced by the Truth. By inspired preaching, and quoting the Scriptures, they quashed their opponents and demolished their arguments in no time. The crowd could scarcely be prevented from tearing the Pelagians to pieces: but no-one could stop their deafening cheers for the two bishops.

Suddenly, a military officer stepped into the ring, placing his blind, ten year old daughter in the bishops' arms, and asking them to restore her sight. ¹¹ "Take her to our opponents", said they. In fear, the Pelagians refused to attempt such a thing. Rather, they joined in the people's call that the bishops heal her. Germanus prayed a little: then took the box of relics from about his neck, and touched her eyes with it. Her sight was restored to her at once: and as her parents called out their thanksgiving, the crowd was awestruck, seeing that the Bishop of Auxerre's strength lay not only in words, but in his indefatigable faith. From then on the people flocked to Germanus and Lupus, not to the Pelagians.

As he was in Britain, Germanus saw fit to visit the grave of the Holy Martyr Alban.¹² On the way, however, a demon caused him to fall and hurt his foot, and he was

confined to bed. By accident, one of the nearby houses caught fire: and as they were thatched with dried reeds, the flames soon spread to all other buildings in the neighbourhood. Germanus' friends rushed to the rescue, but he refused to let them move him, reprimanding them for their lack of faith. So they ran to save what they could: but all was consumed. Every building, that is, except the one in which Germanus lay. Though fire surrounded it, not one reed was burnt: and when the flames were extinguished, it yet stood a whole house in a sea of ashes. Germanus was none the worse.¹³

Talk of him spread throughout the surrounding countryside, and people thronged to him in hope of healing. Despite which, he never allowed anyone to try and cure him: rather, he patiently awaited the Lord's mercy. One night, he saw a shining man in the whitest garments reach out to him, ordering him to arise and stand. He obeyed: and having arisen, found that his foot was completely healed. He could resume his journey.

Lent came: that time of year when Christians give particular attention to the quality of their spiritual life, and enter into training for Easter. Unfortunately, it was also a time when the Britons' enemies were giving particular attention to attacking them. The Picts and Saxons had been raiding for decades, bringing bloodshed and ruin wherever they struck. Now they decided to unite as an unstoppable horde, to pillage and kill on an even greater scale: and so they descended upon the land like countless wolves.

There were no Roman legions to stop them. There were

brave men, but no-one who could lead and inspire them in the face of this threat. They turned to Germanus, and he accepted the challenge: to forge an army, and lead it against the foe. Eager to become trained soldiers, warriors flocked to hear him preach, and to be baptised by him. In their camp they erected a church of green boughs in preparation for Easter, and with the Picts and Saxons approaching, Germanus there celebrated the Great Feast. Then, being their General, he inspected the defences, and led part of his force towards the mountains which stood between the Britons and their enemies. With practised eyes he picked out the path by which the barbarians would probably pass between the hills, and down a steep valley. He ordered his soldiers to hide themselves: no-one was to move or make the least sound until he gave the sign.

As he foresaw, so it happened. The enemy crept over the pass, thinking to fall on the Britons' camp in a surprise attack.

Suddenly, Germanus and Lupus stood before them, and shouted: "Hallelujah!"

"Hallelujah!" shouted the soldiers, leaping out of their cover on either side of the astounded foe.

"Hallelujah!" shouted the bishops again.

"Hallelujah!" yelled the Britons, waving their arms and banners.

"Hallelujah!" a third time.

"Hallelujah!" until the very rocks rang.

The Picts' and Saxons' hearts failed, their guts turned to porridge within them, and their blood ran cold. As one man, they turned to flee, throwing their arms and booty as they raced back for the hills, with the Britons in hot pursuit. Such was their panic, many were drowned in trying to cross a nearby river. Victory went to Germanus, with not a drop of British blood shed.¹⁴

Having defeated enemies spiritual and earthly, Germanus and Lupus returned home. By virtue of their goodness, and by the entreaties of the Holy Martyr Alban, they had a safe passage: but on reaching Auxerre, Germanus saw that his fellow-citizens were in difficulties indeed, ground down and impoverished by additional new taxes. Full of compassion, he decided to go to the governor and ask for the lifting of this burden from the people: and so a small deputation started out for Arles, the regional capital, with Germanus riding the worst of the nags.¹⁵

On the way south, an apparently impoverished traveller joined the group. No-one knew he was a thief, and that night, whilst the others prayed, he made off with the bishop's horse. The following morning, with both "traveller" and nag gone, one of the priests offered his own mount to Germanus, and they set off again. It was noticed that the bishop was doing his best not to laugh: and one of his comrades asked him what he found amusing, considering that a thief had stolen his horse.

"Let's wait awhile", said the bishop, "because truly, that poor man's in a real fix. You'll see him now, all of a lather."

At that, who ran towards them but the thief himself, leading the missing horse. He prostrated himself at Germanus' feet, confessing that he'd taken the animal and tried to ride it, but it wouldn't budge an inch. Then when he attempted to dismount, he couldn't: he was stuck fast in the saddle, and could only move when he decided to restore to the bishop his horse.

Germanus said: "Had we given to you according to your needs, you wouldn't have been driven to steal. Take now what you require, and render to us our property." Because he'd confessed, the thief obtained reward and blessings, rather than punishment.

Though he tried to travel inconspicuously, talk of his miracles went before him, and crowds came to greet him all along the way, eventually forming one long procession. He stayed awhile at Alise with his old friends, the priest Senator and Nectariola his wife.¹⁶ Seeing Germanus' bed so uncomfortable, Nectariola (unbeknown to the bishop) discreetly placed some straw beneath it, to soften it somewhat. Having spent the night in prayer and chanting psalms, Germanus resumed his journey the following morning, and Nectariola carefully kept the straw.

A few days later, a local nobleman, Agrentius, was possessed by a demon from which no-one could release him. Nectariola remembered the straw, and arranged that Agrentius be wrapped in it. He screamed Germanus' name all that night, but by dawn the demon had left him once and for all.¹⁷



SAINT GERMANUS OF AUXERRE



It's the year 427 AD, and the Roman Empire in the West is collapsing into violent anarchy. Civil order is crumbling under the onslaught of invaders, and the Church, the sole remaining rock of stability, is shaken by controversy.

In Britain, the situation is desperate. The legions are gone, the land is under barbarian assault, and heresy is gaining ground. The Church appeals for help: and it arrives in the person of Germanus, wonder-working Bishop of Auxerre.

This is a retelling of Germanus' career as champion of Orthodoxy, leader of men and shepherd of souls, including his missions to Britain, Arles and the glittering imperial court at Ravenna. It's also an account of the development in Wales and beyond of a powerful, inspiring legend, as Germanus of Auxerre became Garmon Sant, vanquisher of heretics, destroyer of tyrants, and maker of kings.

This account sheds light on a dark period in western history, when dedicated, God-inspired individuals struggled to uphold Orthodox Christianity against growing chaos, and "the good fight" was often literally that: going into battle, and laying one's life on the line. It also records the extraordinary impression that Germanus made on his contemporaries, and the persistence of memories about him to this day, when the re-emergence of Orthodoxy in the West has revived interest in those men and women who have struggled to uphold the True Faith.

The author is an Orthodox Christian from Bangor in Wales. By profession a translator, his previous works include a Life of St John the Russian, and numerous articles concerning Welsh history and culture. He has an especial interest in holy wells, and is current Chairman of Cymdeithas Ffynhonnau Cymru, dedicated to the preservation of wells in Wales.

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