

Saint of the Month for May 2013

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

**Saint Bede the Venerable,
Priest and Doctor of the Church
Saturday, May 25**

We move to the world of England before the Norman conquest (1066 A.D.) when we look at the life of St. Bede. He was born in 672 or 673 A.D. near Jarrow (east of Newcastle), and lived near this famous monastery for just about his entire life. Nothing is known about his parents, and very little about his life. He joined the Benedictine order, was ordained a deacon at 19 and a priest at 30.

He was known for his learning and writings during his life, and was given the title of “the Venerable” while still living, a rather rare honor. (The title was one of respect sometimes bestowed on distinguished members of religious orders.) He’s probably best known today for his **Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (Ecclesiastical History of the English People)**, which covered the period from Julius Caesar’s raids on England in 55-54 B.C. to the arrival of St. Augustine, the first archbishop of Canterbury, in 597 A.D. This work was finished in 731-732, and is essential for those wanting to know about the arrival of Christianity in England up to ecclesiastical events in Bede’s own time. It used a reckoning of the time of events based on the number of years since the incarnation of Christ, a scheme popularized by the wide circulation of his **History**, and still used today—A.D., anno Domini (in the year of the Lord).

He wrote a number of commentaries on the scriptures which were widely distributed to monastic libraries of western Europe, and many other works, including some concerned with the reckoning of Easter. His influence was perpetuated at home by a school at York founded by one of his most eminent pupils, Archbishop Egbert of York, and spread to the continent by Alcuin, who studied at this school before becoming the master at Charlemagne’s palace school at Aachen (now in Germany).

Almost all we know directly about his life comes from a short account he gave us of himself. In the last chapter of his famous work, named above, he says:

Thus much concerning the ecclesiastical history of Britain and especially of the English nation, I, Bede, a servant of Christ and priest of the monastery of the Blessed Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul, which is at Wearmouth and at Jarrow, have with the Lord’s help composed so far as I could gather it either from ancient documents or from the traditions of our forefathers or from my own knowledge. I was born in the territory of said monastery and at the age of seven I was, by the care of my relations, given to the most reverend Abbot Benedict (St. Benedict Biscop) and afterwards to Coelfrid to be educated. From that time I have spent my whole life in that monastery, devoting all my efforts to the study of the Scriptures, and amid the observance of monastic discipline and the daily charge of singing in the church it has ever been my delight to learn or teach or write.

Bede traveled little, making a trip to Lindisfarne (the Holy Island, off the Northumbrian coast, and a location associated with famous illuminated Gospels) and one to York. Bede died in 735 A.D., and was buried at the monastery of Jarrow. Later his remains were moved to the Durham cathedral, where they are today in the Galilee chapel.

He was canonized in 1899 by Pope Leo XIII.

The poet Dante accorded him a place in his *Paradiso* – he is the only Englishman mentioned in that work.

On a personal note, many years ago I was visiting Durham with Denise, and we found his tomb, which we didn't realize was there. It is plain but most imposing when you think about his life and work. We were walking about this magnificent Romanesque cathedral, with its round arches and thick walls (compared to Gothic cathedrals with pointed arches and thinner walls because of the flying buttresses) when the tomb inscription was right in front of us!

His commemoration is given the rank of Optional Memorial, and is usually celebrated on his saint's day, May 25 now, but May 27 in earlier times. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); Butler's **Lives of the Saints, 2nd edition** (Ave Maria Press); **Encyclopædia Britannica, 15th edition**)

Collect from the Mass of St. Bede:

O God, who bring light to your Church
through the learning of the Priest Saint Bede,
mercifully grant that your servants
may always be enlightened by his wisdom and helped by his merits.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

We are not all scholars and historians of his stature, but we can be more aware of the long history of the Catholic Church, of its progress through time of bringing the message of Jesus to more lands, and of the saints of the past who labored to accomplish these goals. Saint Bede the Venerable, pray for us!