An Introduction to Nicholas Breakspear, The English Pope 1154-1159

Little is known about the early life of Nicholas Breakspear and what can be discerned is somewhat circumstantial. There are two main sources written by Cardinal Boso who was a member of Nicholas' Papal household and John of Salisbury whom Nicholas got to know well in later life. There are also two later sources from the pens of William of Newburgh (1136- 98) and Matthew Paris, but how reliable these accounts are is the subject of discussion amongst historians. It is not unusual that Boso and John of Salisbury gave few details of Nicholas' early life for it was the custom when writing about popes in those days to concentrate on the papacy itself rather than the man himself.

He is thought to have been born around 1100 in the village of Abbots Langley near St Albans. His father was of humble origins working as a clerk and who later abandoned Nicholas and became a monk at the Abbey in St Albans. William of Newburgh claims that Nicholas was too poor to attend school but attended the monastery daily for a pittance where his father was ashamed of him and by taunting him drove Nicholas away to go to France to the schools there. This is mostly unsubstantiated evidence though all the sources agree Nicholas found his way to Arles as a wandering scholar to complete his education possibly in the field of Roman Law as that was a centre for the study and teaching of church law.

During one vacation Nicholas went to the monastery of St Ruf near Avignon where he took the vows and habit of an Austin Canon and sometime later was made its Abbot. The Austin (short for Augustinian) Canons were regular priests rather than secular priests and successive popes found them helpful in playing an important role in C11th and C12th church reform. They emerged from cathedral chapters or other churches with the intention of living a communal life alongside personal poverty inspired by how the early church lived. One of the first papal bulls to effect change was granted by Urban II to St Ruf in Avignon in 1092. It was the first time a Pope had formally acknowledged the Augustinian vocation as equal to the monastic vocation. The Bull also provided the Canons with an ancient tradition dating back to the C4th when Urban I was pope.[1]

Of equal importance to the tradition were the rights conferred upon the Canons. Among these rights was the freedom to elect their own Prior or Abbot; they were also free to ask a bishop of their choice for permission to administer the sacraments if their own bishop was in schism or a heretic. Above all however, it was the affirmation that their way of life was an acceptable way to live out a religious vocation. As the rule governing the Canon's lives was rooted in the manner that St Augustine organised communal life in his palace at Hippo so the minutiae of everyday life in the different congregations depended on their interpretation of the texts Augustine left behind. The guidelines that each congregation devised became their distinguishing features with some stricter than others. Often, they were based on the customs of the mother house and were more varied than the monastic orders and appealed to a wider variety of people.

The origins of the St Ruf congregation dated back to 1039, when four canons of the Cathedral chapter at Avignon decided to establish a form of communal life in an abandoned church dedicated to St Ruf outside the city walls. It quickly grew and its influence spread throughout Provence, Southern France and Catalonia in Spain with priories being founded and extant cathedral chapters being reformed. The order of St Ruf was less rigorous than other canonical congregations, which may explain its appeal. For example, their cowls were made of linen rather

[1] Bolton Brenda and Duggan Anne(Eds) *Adrian IV The English Pope (1154-1159)* (Routlege 2016) 21

than rough wool and like the Victorines in Paris the St Ruf Canons were a learned order. [2] It could be that Nicholas wanted to be more rigorous, as William of Newburgh claims the monks later repented of their choice of Abbot and grew to hate Nicholas, twice appealing to Rome with allegations about his behaviour as Abbot. The first time it occurred things were settled through diplomacy, the second time the canons were ordered to appoint a new abbot, whilst Nicholas was made the cardinal archbishop of Albano.However, Boso, in his account of Nicholas views his elevation just as an expected promotion, not connected to any abbatial dispute. John of Salisbury also fails to mention disputes within the community but claims that Nicholas confided in him when he was Pope, that it was a thorny burden and he wished he'd never left England or at least remained living a quiet life in the cloister of St Rufus rather than entering on such difficult paths but dared not refuse since it was Lord's bidding (polycraticus vol 4: 28). Would someone who had who suffered parental cruelty and monastic insubordination really look back with regret to happy quiet times?

As Abbot, Nicholas would visit the Curia wherever it was sitting, and it is probable he was at the Council of Rheims in 1148. There is no record of his attendance but conversely, he was not named in the list of those who were excommunicated for disobeying the Pope's summons to Council. Soon after this council however, Nicholas was dispatched to Catalonia possibly as an unofficial papal legate to the Crusaders who were waging, since 1147, a campaign to drive the Moors out of Spain. As the Moors retreated, and Christianity returned St Ruf became the blueprint for the religious houses created by Ramon Berenguer Count of Barcelona who led the campaign probably as a result of Nicholas's work.

Between Spring 1152 and the autumn of 1154, Nicholas was on another mission for the pope, this time as Papal Legate to Scandinavia. It is one of the better documented episodes of Nicholas' career before his papacy possibly because Boso was in the accompanying entourage, and it is from him that most of the information comes. This conjecture cannot be guaranteed, however. Nicholas first visited Norway, which was in a state of civil war and the king's authority neither strong nor respected. Nicholas managed to temporarily reconcile the warring factions and restore the monarchy. There is no official record of the way this was achieved, but the result of his actions was evident. He divided the extant Archbishopric of Lund, which comprised the whole of Norway and Sweden into two distinct Sees, Trondheim in Norway becoming a metropolitan See in honour of St Olaf whose relics were in the church there. He arranged for the annual payment of Peter's pence to be paid and reorganised the church on Italian lines with canon law paramount thereby reducing the influence of the laity, which Walter Ullman has argued was encroaching upon traditional spiritual realms. He also reformed abuses that had crept into usages of the clergy. He was prevented from establishing a Metropolitan See in Sweden due to the rivalry between it and Gothland, with one side claiming it for Uppsala and the other for Skara. However, he did reform the clerical abuses and, as with Norway, negotiated the payment of Peter's Pence. Boso describes Nicholas's mission to Scandinavia as

[2] The Victorines grew out of the school of St Victor in Paris.

bringing peace to the kingdoms, law to the barbarians, tranquillity to the monasteries, order to the churches discipline to the clergy and a people pleasing to God, devoted to good works[3]

Nicholas returned to Rome in late 1154 and was immediately elected Pope after the death of Anastasius IV, taking the name Adrian IV. Rome was in ferment at the time; a Republican commune under Arnold of Brescia which was hostile to the papacy was in open revolt, William, king of Sicily was hostile also and his friendship with Frederick Barbarossa increased the danger. The local barons were fighting each other and the Pope by raiding the surrounding countryside and robbing pilgrims on their way to visit the tombs of the apostles. Adrian was unable to enter Rome after his election due to the hostility of the ruling commune and retired to the Leonine city, placing Rome into interdict until the Wednesday in Holy Week 1155 when it was lifted and Adrian returned to Rome. [4]The leaders of the commune reluctantly submitted to Adrian accepting his role as ruler of Rome, but Arnold escaped although he was later captured and executed.

Was a pontificate of 4 years 8 months and 28 days a great success? It was a period dominated by disputes with the city of Rome, the German emperor- Frederick Barbarossa and William, King of Sicily who was a Norman. Some might say it was a failure pointing to the legacy of his breach with Barbarossa which, after Adrian's death led to a nineteen-year schism in the papacy and permanently damaged relations between the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy. Unlike his immediate predecessors and successors Adrian did not preside over a reforming Council legislating upon things such as clerical life and behaviour. He did not have the opportunity to call one distracted as he was by the many political and military crises that threatened the papacy. Neither are there any primary sources such as encyclicals or homilies to provide evidence on what Adrian felt about the problems, he and known world were facing. So, to judge his papacy, it is necessary to look at some of the decisions he was asked to arbitrate upon. As Duggan points out [5] the papacy Adrian was elected to was transformed from being titular head of the of the Latin Church to one seeing active engagement as a judge and arbiter, The Curia was swamped with requests for confirmations of rights and properties and judgements on points of ecclesiastical law. Duggan, furthermore, claims that it is here Adrian can be seen as an "engaged and responsible pastor at work" and certainly, it reflects the same attitude that he brought to bear in settling the dispute in Scandinavia. As evidence for how Adrian arbitrated are ten decretal letters which his contemporaries recognised as being so important that they formed part of the collection of canon law that was being assembled during that time.[6]

Two particular decisions he made on laws relating to tithes and marriage of *servi* (unfreed persons) were so important that they became part of Pope Gregory's codification of canon law which remained in place until 1917. In the decretal entitled *Dignum est* Adrian was replying to a question brought by the Archbishop of Salzburg on the validity of marriages between *servi* without their Master's approval or against his wishes. Adrian's reply was clear and decisive quoting from

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[3] Duggan, A., in Bolton Brenda and Duggan Anne (Ed's) *Adrian IV The English Pope (1154-1159)* (Routlege 2016) 703

[4] To be placed under Interdict by the Pope means that no Religious ceremonies including the saying of Mass can take place until the interdict is lifted.

[5] Ibid. chapter 8

[6] Decretal letters were written in response to a particular question posed by someone lower down in the episcopal order

Paul's letter to the Galatians – "there is in Jesus Christ neither freeman nor slave" (Gal 3:28) therefore he concluded, all are free to receive the sacraments including marriage, and ecclesiastical law should not be used to dissolve any marriage contracted against a master's wishes. Underlying this judgement was the question of the rights of lords over their *servi*. In some societies peasants were tied to the soil, and even if not technically *servi* their personal freedoms were at the mercy of their lords. It was not a particular problem if the *servi* were on a single estate, but if they were on neighbouring estates the human and Christian rights of the peasants were in conflict with the jurisdiction and economic rights of the lords of the land. Adrian's judgement of the absolute rights of the unfree to contract valid marriages was a significant step in the legal consolidation of the human and religious rights of the unfree. Adrian removed all ambiguity from a piece of law that had wide ramifications, and which stayed in canon law until the early twentieth century when canon law was codified.

The exemption of individual monastic houses and even whole Orders from the payment of tithes to a local parish or episcopal church had, in the twelfth century become a particularly thorny issue, setting the ancient rights of local clergy against the wide-ranging privileges of Cistercians and canons regular. Exemption was originally conceived as a means of assisting poor and struggling institutions in their early days, especially when the endowments were undeveloped and unproductive. However, the success, particularly of Cistercian agrarian practices such as Rievaulx and Fountains Abbeys in England had made some of their monasteries economically very successful and incredibly wealthy. Additionally, as time passed, already inhabited and tithe-paying land was given to them and to the canons regular, who then claimed exemption by virtue of their privileges. This could be seen, both as an infringement of the ancient rights of episcopal and parish churches, and as a scandal in a world where even the poorest peasant paid a tithe of his agricultural produce to his baptismal church. Adrian was sympathetic to the cries of protest which reached him from the areas most significantly affected. He recognised the validity of the charges, especially where new grants of old land had been made to monasteries by generous patrons, or where, in the case of the Cistercians, existing tithe-paying inhabitants had been moved to make way for more economic management of the lands. Adrian responded very favourably to those who sought restitution of lost tithes, recognising the ancient right of local clergy to receive the tithes due from their parishioners, while at the same time confirming the exemption of religious who were bringing virgin land into cultivation for the first time by their own efforts. He sought a compromise whereby any new land which the monks had brought into cultivation by their own hands or expense were exempt from tithes. This was the privilege he gave Byland Abbey in Yorkshire for example. He even wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury over one abbey who were resisting payment:

> *For these reasons we order you [archbishop of Canterbury] to compel them [monks of Boxley] to pay tithes in full to the said church for their cultivated lands, on which houses were formerly constructed before they settled there. And just as tithes were once paid from pasture, so now we wish tithes to be paid without diminution from the same lands, which have been brought into fruitful fertility.*[7]

The papacy of Adrian IV was characterised by the even-handedness by which he made decisions and policy. In early 1159 he refused to authorise a joint crusade in southern Spain proposed by

[7] Duggan ch 8

the kings of England and France. In his reply he lauded them for wishing to extend the boundaries of Christianity, but refused its principal request of invasion:

> *It would seem to be neither wise nor safe to enter a foreign land without first seeking the advice of the princes and people of the area. But, as we understand it, you are proposing to go there in haste, without consulting the Church and the princes of that land, although you ought on no account to attempt it, unless having learned of the need from the princes of the land, you are first asked by them.*

It seems that Louis and Henry II, who each had interests in the south, were planning a mutually advantageous crusade, which might, in the unsettled state of the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain, have resulted in the expansion of their own lordships there.

Adrian, as an Englishman used his papacy to favour the abbey at St Albans with many privileges amongst them abbatial primacy, exemption from episcopal authority and most important, confirmation of the liberty and archdeaconry of St Albans, by which the abbey was ranked as the premier abbey in all England. It may or may not be coincidence that the first Pope Adrian (772-95) was reputed to be so impressed with Alban the martyr that he endowed the abbey with its initial privileges. Certainly, Adrian IV was very familiar with the abbey having been born near St Albans and the abbey became his father's home.

He was also very firm with Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury over the right of people appeal to Rome:

> *It has come to our attention by common report that the right of appeal is so smothered by you and the king of England that no-one dares to appeal to the apostolic see in your presence or his. In addition, you are in every way lukewarm and remiss in dispensing justice to those who suffer injustice, and you are said to seek the king's favour so much and succumb to fear of him that when we send letters to you on behalf of any one that he may have justice, he cannot secure his right through you, as we have heard from the complaints of many.*[8]

Although Adrian allowed himself to be persuaded to give some form of approval to Henry II's proposals for Ireland in the document *Laudabiliter* (1155) it was not acted upon by Henry until 1172 under new permissions from Adrian's successor Pope Alexander supported by the Irish bishops. It did not affect the newly established *Ecclesia Hibernica* of 1152 which organised the church in Ireland in Archiepiscopal Sees. What the grant of Ireland to Henry was has been lost and was not referred to by either Adrian or Henry.

Adrian was Pope at a very difficult time in Europe but as Pope, Adrian took very seriously the title 'servant of God's servants'. He followed as much as he could the policy of even- handedness so no one could feel they had not been fairly listened to in his judgements and acts. He died on September 1st, 1159, at Agnani and was buried in St Peter's three days later.

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Sources

Catholic Encyclopedia (https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01156c.htm) accessed 15/07/2024

[8] Duggan ch 8

Bolton Brenda and Duggan Anne(Ed's) *Adrian IV The English Pope (1154-1159)* (Routlege 2016)