

The story of St Hugh of Lincoln

Hugh was born at the Château of Avalon in Burgundy between 1135 and 1140. His mother died when he was eight years old when his father retired with him to the nearby priory. Hugh did very well in the monastic life and was ordained Deacon at the age of 19. In about 1159 he was sent to be the prior of the neighbouring monastery, thereafter he entered the Grande Chartreuse at the height of its reputation for the rigid authority and austerity of the Carthusians. He was probably ordained at the age of thirty and after being there for ten years he was entrusted with the important and difficult office of procurator which he retained until the year 1180.

He then became Prior of Witham, the first Carthusian house in England situated in Somerset and founded by Henry II as penance for the murder of St. Thomas of Canterbury. There were long delays in the funding of the Charterhouse but the Saint was fearless in reproving Henry's faults, particularly his parsimony in funding the building and his violation of the Church. Witham was situated on the edge of Selwood Forest, one of the monarch's favourite hunting-places and in spite of the Saint's constant criticism of his appropriation of church revenues the King was a regular visitor. In May, 1180 Henry summoned a Council of Bishops and Barons to determine the affairs of the state and his nominee for the Bishopric of Lincoln, which had not been filled for sixteen years was Hugh Prior of Witham. Hugh, a stickler for authority and protocol, first obtained the approval of his superior the Prior of the Grande Chartreuse, before being consecrated Bishop in Westminster Abbey in September 1181 Hugh continued to enrage the monarch by challenging his iniquitous forest laws and excommunicating the King's Chief Forester whilst defended his actions with charm and wit.

He soon became conspicuous for his unbounded charity to the poor and his tending of lepers, (then so common in England,) with his own hands. He had regular contact and became personally acquainted with all of his priests. He was a mighty builder and rebuilt Lincoln Cathedral after it was destroyed by earthquake in 1185.

In 1188 he went as an Ambassador to the French King and was in France at the time of Henry's death but returned in time to attend the coronation of Richard 1.

Hugh was prominent in his attempts to protect Jews, (great numbers of whom lived in Lincoln,) from their persecution at the beginning of Richards reign. He refused the King's demand of monies and knights for his foreign wars to the extent that his property was ordered to be confiscated. Nobody dared lay hands on it. The Saint journeyed to Normandy where he won the King's forgiveness for his extraordinary forthrightness and courage but he continued to berate the monarch for his infidelity to his wife and encroachments on Church's rights.

"Truly". Said Richard to his courtiers, "If all the prelates of the Church were like him, there is not a king in Christendom who would dare to raise his head in the presence of a bishop".

Following the death of Richard he attended the coronation of King John at Westminster Abbey before returning to France to aid him in his affairs of state. Upon returning to England in 1200 he caught a fever and died at his London residence. The primate conducted his funeral at Lincoln Cathedral and King John assisted in carrying his coffin to its resting place in the north-east transept.

In 1220 Hugh was canonized by Pope Honorius III and subsequently his remains were solemnly translated to a magnificent golden shrine situated prominently in the cathedral and Lincoln became the most celebrated centre of pilgrimage in the North of England.

Subsequently, the shrine, along with all its gold and precious stones became a tempting bait for Henry VIII and was confiscated and his relics lost during the Reformation.

St. Hugh's emblem is a white swan, in reference to the beautiful story of 'The Swan of Stowe' which contracted a deep and lasting friendship with the saint, even guarding him while he slept.

St. Hugh's feast day is kept on 17th November.

Compiled with acknowledgement to the New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia.
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