

The Bishop's Pastoral Letter on the 650th Anniversary of Blessed Hemming

May 22, 2016

Dear Members of this Diocese,

Today, on May 22nd, we mark the Memorial of Blessed Hemming. Since the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity falls on this date this year, Hemming's Memorial is not marked in the liturgy of the Church. However, we are united with Blessed Hemming in the Catholic teaching on the Holy Trinity.

We have good reason to remember Blessed Hemming today — at least in the form of this pastoral letter — as this very day is the 650th anniversary of Bishop Hemming's death. The Church traditionally sees the death days of Blesseds and Saints as their heavenly birthdays.

Hemming was born in the village of Bälinge near Uppsala in Sweden in 1290. He was ordained a priest at the age of 25, after which he continued his studies. He studied ecclesiastical law and the arts in Paris for ten years. At the conclusion of his studies he was appointed Canon of Turku Cathedral. When the Bishop's Seat became vacant, he was unanimously elected Bishop of Turku in 1338. He was ordained a Bishop in the Stockholm Cathedral the following year.

In addition to his role as bishop, Hemming also had a number of earthly responsibilities. Among other things, he was a member of the Privy Council of the King of Sweden. There is no doubt that in his day he was the most influential person in the eastern half of the kingdom, present-day Finland. Under Bishop Hemming, the Diocese blossomed. Ravaged in wars, the Cathedral of Turku was repaired and enlarged. Kuusisto Castle was built as an episcopal residence. The administration of the Diocese was reformed and the office of Dean of the Cathedral was established. The Bishop also donated a significant number of books to Turku Cathedral in order to improve the level of education among the clergy. He himself wrote a number of works on church law, the liturgy, pastoral work and housekeeping in order to teach others.

Bishop Hemming made frequent visits to the parishes in his Diocese and thereby strengthened the faith of his priests and parishioners as well as the position

of the Church, which was not fully established at the time.

Fittingly, Saint Bridget wrote about her hard-working friend Hemming: "Hemming is always running, except when he sleeps." It was on the request of St Bridget that Bishop Hemming travelled all the way to Avignon, where the Pope resided at the time, to encourage him to return to Rome. Hemming also sent a message to the kings of France and England to plead with them to put an end to the Hundred Years' War. The Pope didn't return to Rome at his request and there was no immediate peace between France and England, but Bishop Hemming showed he was working for what was good and holy.

Saint Bridget had predicted that Hemming's death would be unexpected, and so it was. Bishop Hemming was found dead in the position of prayer on May 21, 1366. The funeral was held in Turku Cathedral and the bishop was buried in the choir.

After the funeral a candle was lit on Hemming's grave every day. Bishop Hemming was well-known in all parishes and he was known to have been a holy man. People started asking him to intercede for them. Over time it was found that many of the prayers were answered. Miracles were written down and finally a decision was made to ask the Pope for permission to declare Hemming blessed. In 1497 Pope Alexander VI gave permission to move Hemming's remains to a reliquary to beatify him. The reliquary has been preserved in Turku Cathedral but today it is empty. Because of war the beatification was not celebrated in Turku until 1514, some 500 years ago. That festive Mass was the last big event in Catholic Finland before the Reformation. The preparations for a canonisation of Blessed Hemming had reached an advanced stage, but the Reformation put an end to the process. The ties to Rome were cut. The King of Sweden became head of the local church and his subjects had to accept the Lutheran faith.

But the Church never forgets her Blesseds or her Saints. Even now, centuries later, we still remember Blessed Hemming. Through prayer he is always present with us, a holy man who prays for us. There is no time in Heaven, only Eternity. We are separated from Bishop Hemming by centuries, but we firmly believe

that he is alive in God's Heaven.

It is our pious wish that the canonisation process, which had begun even before he was beatified, will finally be completed so that we can venerate him as a saint. We can and should frequently ask Hemming to intercede for us: "Blessed Hemming, pray for us! Amen."