

Saint Eligius

Introduction

1. In 1990, with the approval of the Principal Chaplains Committee - Army, **Saint Eligius** was adopted as the Patron Saint of the Corps of the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.
2. In adopting Saint Eligius as Patron Saint, the Corps chose a Saint who had the characteristics required of the soldier-craftsman. Saint Eligius is universally recognised as the protector and supporter of craftsmen, tradesmen, artisans and artificers, and of the old world 'smith', 'farriers', 'armourers', 'wrights', 'saddlers', 'coach makers' and kindred tradesmen. Saint Eligius is recognised as the spiritual guardian and mentor of the officers and men of the Corps of the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

Aim

3. The aim of this paper is to summarise the life history of and highlight the festival day, or "anniversary" of Saint Eligius.

Festival Day

4. The Festival Day of Saint Eligius is 1st December each year, and when practicable a suitable church service should be conducted on the nearest Sunday to this date. It should not normally involve any elaborate ceremony. Should this date conflict with religious celebrations held by other Regiments or Corps, the senior RAEME officer should make such alternative arrangements as are appropriate.
5. The RAEME Corps Birthday is traditionally celebrated on or about the 1st of December each year. Combining the festive day of Saint Eligius with the traditional RAEME Corps Birthday parade and sports day is to be encouraged.

Summary - Life History

6. The following is brief summary of the life history of Saint Eligius:

"Saint Eligius was born the son of an artisan, at Chaptelate, near Lomoges in France, about the year 588. Showing remarkable talent for engraving and smithing, he undertook an apprenticeship to become a gold smith.

Upon completion of his training he became known to King Clotaire II in Paris. The King gave Eligius orders to make him a throne, and with the materials furnished he made two instead of one. Clotaire was so impressed he made him Master of the Mint, and coins are still to be found with his name upon them. King Dagobert I shared his father's trust in Eligius and gave the foundation of a monastery, which in 623 was occupied by monks following the combined orders of Saint Columba and Saint Benedict. He also gave Eligius a house in Paris which he converted into a nunnery under Saint Aurea.

Saint Eligius was eventually chosen to be Bishop of Noyon and Tournai. He took a leading part in the ecclesiastical life of his day and for the whole of his life he practiced his craft.

Saint Eligius (Known as Saint Elio in France) is well Known on the European Continent and is the patron of all metal workers and farriers.

He died at the age of 71 years, and his remains are in the Cathedral at Noyon. There is a statue of him in the Henry VIII Chapel at Westminster Abbey."

7. During his lifetime Saint Eligius had achieved mastery of his trade and craft skills, he had won the confidence of kings and queens, he was acclaimed for his high ethical standards within his craft and the community. He was tireless in his contribution to the less fortunate and a recognised motivating force in the development of a strong community, through the fellowship of man. Without exception, the officers and men of the Corps can look proudly to their Saint Eligius, to draw spiritual strength and guidance in all matters relating to their well being.

Biography

8. Attached as Annex A is a resume on the life and times of Saint Eligius.

Annex:

A. Resume of the life and times of Saint Eligius

RESUME OF THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SAINT ELIGIUS

The name of Eligius, and those of his father, Eucherius and his mother, Terrigia, show him to be of the Roman Gaulish extraction. He was born at Chaptelat, near Lomoges, about the year 588, the son of an artisan. His father, seeing in due course that the boy had a remarkable talent for engraving and smithing, placed him with a goldsmith named Abbo, who was a master of the mint at Limoges. When the time of his apprenticeship was finished Eligius went into France, that is, across the Loire, and became known as the treasurer to Clotaire II at Paris. This king gave Eligius an order to make him a chair of state, adorned with gold and precious stones. Out of the materials furnished he made two such thrones instead of one. Clotaire admired the skill and honesty of the workman, and finding that he was a man of parts and intelligence took him into his household and made him master of the mint. His name is still to be seen on several gold coins struck at Paris and Marseilles in the reigns of Dagobert I and his son Clovis II. His 'vita' states that among other works the reliquaries of St Martin at Tours, and of St Dionysius at Saint-Denis, of St Quintinus, St Crispin and St Crispinain at Soissons, St Lucian, St Germanus of Paris, St Genevieve, and others, were made by Eligius. His skill as a workman, his official position and the friendship of the king soon made him a person of consideration. He did not let the corruption of a court infect his soul or impair his virtue, but he conformed to his state and was magnificently dressed, sometimes wearing nothing but silk (a rare material in France in those days), his cloths embroidered with gold and adorned with precious stones. But he also gave large sums in alms. When a stranger asked for his house he would be told "go to such a street, and it's where you see the crowd of poor people."

A curious incident occurred when Clotaire tendered him the oath of allegiance. Eligius having a scruple lest this would be to swear without sufficient necessity, or fearing what he might be called upon to do or approve, excused himself with an obstinacy which for some time displeased the king. Still he persisted in his resolution and repeated his excuses as often as the king pressed him. Clotaire, at length perceiving that the motive of his reluctance was really a tenderness of conscience, assured him that his conscientious spirit was more a pledge of fidelity than oaths from others.

St Eligius ransomed a number of slaves, some of whom remained in his service and were his faithful assistants throughout his life. One of them, a Saxon named Tillo, is numbered among the saints and commemorated on January 7; he was first among seven disciples of St Eligius who followed him from the workshop to the 'eveche'. At the court he sought the company of such men as Sulpicius, Bertharius, Desiferius and his brother, Rusticus, and in particular Audoenus, all of whom became not only bishops but saints as well. Of these, Audoenus (St Ouen) must have been a boy when St Eligius first knew him; to him was long attributed the authorship of the 'Vita Eligii', which is now commonly regarded as the work of a later monk of Noyon. By it St Eligius is described as having been at this time 'tall, with a fresh complexion, his hair curling without artifice; his hands were shapely and long fingered, his face full of angelic kindness and its expression grave and unaffected'.

King Clotaire's regard for and trust in Eligius was shared by his son, Dagobert I, though, like many monarchs, he valued and took the advice of a holy man more willingly in public than in private affairs. He gave the saint the estate of Solignac in his native Limousin for the foundation of a monastery, which in 632 was peopled with monks who followed the Rules of St Columban and St Benedict combined. These, under the eye of their founder, became noted for their good work in various arts. Dagobert also gave to St Eligius a house in Paris, which he converted into a nunnery and placed under the direction of St Aurea. Eligius asked for an additional piece of land to complete the buildings, and it was granted him. But he found that he had somewhat exceeded the measure of the land which has been specified. Upon which he immediately went to the king and asked his pardon. Dagobert, surprised at his careful honesty, said to his courtiers "Some of my officers do not scruple to rob me of whole estates; whereas Eligius is afraid of having one inch of ground which is not his." So trustworthy a man was valuable as an ambassador, and Dagobert is said to have sent him to treat with Judical, the Prince of the turbulent Bretons.

St Eligius was chosen to be bishop of Noyon and Tournai, at the same time as his friend St Audoenus was made bishop of Rouen. They were consecrated together in the year 641. Eligius proved as good a bishop as he had been a layman, and his pastoral solicitude, zeal and watchfulness were most admirable. Soon he turned his thoughts to the conversion of the infidels, who were a large majority in the Tournai part of his diocese, and a great part of Flanders was chiefly indebted to St Eligius for receiving the gospel.

He preached in the territories of Antwerp, Ghent and Courtari, and the inhabitants, who were as untamed as wild beasts, reviled him as a foreigner, a "Roma"; yet he persevered. He took care of their sick, protected them from oppression, and employed every means that charity could suggest to overcome their obstinacy. The barbarians were gradually softened, and some were converted; every year at Easter he baptised those whom he had brought to the knowledge of God during the 12 preceding months.

At Noyon, St Eligius established a house of nuns, to govern which he fetched his protege, St Godeberta, from Paris, and one of monks, outside the city on the road to Soisson. He took a leading part in the ecclesiastical life of the day, and for a short time immediately before his death was a valued counsellor of the queen-regent, St Bathildis. They had in common not only political views but also a deep solicitude for slaves. The only certainly authentic writing of St Eligius is a charming letter to his friend St Desiderius of Cahors. "Remember your Eligiu", he says in the course of it, "O my Desiderius, who art dear to me as mine own self, when your soul pours itself out in prayer to the Lord....I greet you with all my heart and the most sincere affection. Our faithful companion, Dado, greets you also" (Dado is St Audoenus) When he had governed his flock 19 years Eligius was visited with a foresight of his death, and foretold it to his clergy. Falling ill of fever, he on the sixth day called together his household and took leave of them; he commended them to God, and died a few hours later, on December 1, 660. St Eligius was for long one of the most popular saints in France, and his feast was universal in north-western Europe during the later middle ages. In addition to being the patron saint of all kinds of smiths and metalworker, he is evoked by farriers and on behalf of horses: this on account of legendary tales about horses that have become attached to his name.

Of all the Merovingian saints, Eligius (St Elio) possibly brings us most nearly into touch with Christian practice at that period. It is therefore not surprising that his life has given rise to a relatively abundant literature. Everything centres around the 'Vita S. Eligii', an unusually lengthy document, of which, as stated above, St Ouen is the reputed author. The best text is that edited by B. Krusch in MGH., 'Scriptores Merov', Vol iv, pp 635-724; it is also to be found in 'Migne, PL., Vol lxxxvii, cc 477-658. It seems certain that St Oeun did write some account of his friend, but the life now preserved to us was compiled at Noyon a half-century or more later; and though it probably incorporates a good deal of what St Ouen wrote, it has been recast and supplemented in many places.

An excellent account of St Eligius is given by E. Vacandard in DTC., Vol iv, cc 2340-2350, and there are several articles of the same author bearing on the subject, notably in the 'Revue Des Questions Historiques' for 1898 and 1899, where the question of the authenticity of the homilies attributed to the saint is fully discussed.

See also 'Van der Essen, Etude critique sue les saints merovingiens' (1904), pp 324-336; H. Timerding, 'Die Christ. Fruhzeit Deutschlands', Vol i (1929) pp 125-149; S.R. Maitland, 'The Dark Ages' (1889), pp 101-140; P. Parsy, 'Saint Eloi' (1904) in the series 'Les Saints'; Butlers 'Lives of the Saints' Vol iv., pp 455-458; and P. Fouracre, 'The Church in Town and Countryside in the Seventh Century Newstra', pp 77-91., ISBN 0-631-11421-1 (1979)

In the long article by H. Leclercq in DAC., Vol iv, cc 2674-2687, a detailed account is given of the different works of art attributed to the Saint's craftsmanship.