

BURTON, IAN HAMILTON (Archimandrite Barnabas) (1915 - 1996), Orthodox priest

Name: Ian Hamilton (archimandrite Barnabas) Burton
Date of birth: 1915
Date of death: 1996
Gender: Male
Occupation: Orthodox priest
Area of activity: Religion
Author: Ruth Gooding

Ian Burton was born on 3 September 1915 in Pennal, Meirionethshire, the second of four children of Peter Jones Burton (1883-1956), a stonemason, and his wife Margaret (née Latham, b. 1878). He first language was Welsh, and he spoke little English in his early years. He attended the village school, before passing the scholarship examination to go to Tywyn Grammar School. Following a dispute with the rector over church cleaning, his mother decided to attend the Congregational chapel rather than the church, except when her family were visiting. Burton commented, 'I must say I hated the long dreary services of the chapel and loved the beauty and mystery of the Church.'

Burton left school in 1931, having passed five credits in arts subjects but without any success in science or mathematics. Already he was deeply religious. He continued to study Latin and Greek with his Rector, Reverend Robert Davies, and eventually started preparing for ordination in the Church in Wales.

Burton met a hermit Anglican nun, Sister Mary Fidelia, who lived in his grandfather's old house in Llanwrin. Following her advice, he joined the Anglican Order of the Cowley Fathers at Oxford, becoming a postulant there in September 1933. This was a fruitful time for him as he read voraciously and followed the rigorous programme of monastic life.

Deciding to prepare for ordination, Burton reluctantly left Cowley in 1934 and returned to Pennal. To qualify for entrance to St David's College, Lampeter, he needed to add mathematics to his school certificate. To achieve this, he attended St John's College, Ystrad Meurig, studying hard and living just one mile from the ruins of Strata Florida. He managed to pass the entrance examination for St David's College and was admitted to the degree course in theology in 1935. As a student he belonged to the high church Society of Saint David. He completed his training for the priesthood at Ely Theological College, before being ordained in St Asaph Cathedral. His first curacy was in Colwyn Bay, serving under Canon Clement Thomson, a moderate Anglo-Catholic. In 1940 he moved to Buckley, serving as an air-raid warden alongside his pastoral duties. His next posts were as Minor Canon in Bangor Cathedral and then curate at the extreme Anglo-Catholic stronghold of Landore, near Swansea. All the time he was becoming more and more aware of the contradictions inherent in Anglican Papalism, as well as hankering towards monasticism. He spent a few months with the Society of St Francis at Cerne Abbas, and then undertook a series of short posts as a nuns' chaplain.

In 1949 he became a Roman Catholic; in April that year he was received by a Jesuit father at the chapel of East Hendred House. At this time, he was living with his widowed sister Morwenna Schenk (1920-1988) and her two small children. Having left the Anglican priesthood, Burton spent time as a teacher and then as a postulant at Douai Abbey near Reading. However, he struggled with the authoritarianism of the Roman Catholic Church and failed to feel comfortable there. He discovered that 'from inside, the Roman Church was very different from what it seemed from outside'. He has commented that he was unconsciously being led to Orthodoxy, and occasionally attended Russian or Greek services. Burton left the Catholic church, rejoining the Anglican priesthood in 1954.

In 1956, Burton visited Paris, where he met Père Denis, an Orthodox monk who followed the western rite. The spiritual friendship between the two men had a decisive effect on Burton's life. Under Denis's influence Burton came to see in the Orthodox Church the continuation of the undivided Church founded by Christ. In 1960 he was received into the Orthodox Church and ordained priest a few months later, becoming the first Welsh Orthodox priest since the Great Schism of 1054. It was at this point that he took the monastic name Barnabas and was given the title Archimandrite. He spent some time in Paris, reciting the Benedictine office daily and joining in Byzantine rite services. Eventually he was to move from Western Rite Orthodoxy to the Byzantine Rite.

He returned to England in 1964, hoping to find a suitable site for a monastery. In 1967, he discovered a semi-restored farmhouse and buildings in the village of Willand, near Cullompton in Devon. He founded the monastery of the Holy Prophet Elias there; the fledgling community had four members. Life was not easy, but the daily life of the monastery revolved around the Divine Office and people came from far and wide to find healing and peace in the seclusion, silence and order. Anxious to see an Orthodox parish develop beyond the monastery, Archimandrite Barnabas set up a small house church in Combe Martin. This is now the Orthodox Parish of the Holy Prophet Elias, with a church in Exeter as well as in Combe Martin.

Archimandrite Barnabas' lifelong wish was to establish an Orthodox monastic tradition in Britain. He moved back to Wales in 1973, settling in New Mills, between Newtown and Llanfair Caereinion, the next year. He established a monastery, Mynachdy Sant Elias, in an old farmhouse there. In the 1980s, Archimandrite Barnabas moved to Aberfan, where he became a familiar figure walking the streets in his long black robes. After this, he was called to serve in Cardiff; he died there on 14 March 1996.

Author

Ruth Gooding

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