Today we remember Bertha and Ethelbert of Kent, which naturally enough brings to mind the story of the old lady who swallowed a fly. If you don’t remember this little ditty let me just give you the highlights. Here goes, “She swallowed the dog to catch the cat, She swallowed the cat to catch the bird, She swallowed the bird to catch the spider; She swallowed the spider to catch the fly; I don't know why she swallowed a fly.” And so before you send me off to the loony bin let me explain myself. Let’s start with Bertha who was also known as Aldeberge, which is not to be confused with Altenberge a small town located near Munster in northwest Germany. Bertha was born in modern day France sometime between 539 and 564 depending on which sources you consult. Her father was the Frankish King Charibert. She was a Christian but was married off to the pagan Ethelbert who was king of Kent (which is basically southeast England). She consented to the marriage under the condition that she could continue to practice Christianity. This was agreed upon and she came over from France bringing her own chaplain, a guy by the name of Liudhard. Her and her chaplain restored a church from Roman times in the town of Canterbury and dedicated it to St. Martin of Tours. For a fun fact the church still exists today and is recognized as having the longest continuous history in the English-speaking world. Now this might be all well and good but now we get into the swallowed a dog to catch the cat part. So you have a Christian queen and a pagan king hanging around in England. While down in Rome you have Pope Gregory the Great taking a stroll through a slave market. Why he was strolling through a slave market I don’t know. Anyway the story goes that he saw some English slaves and asked who they were to which some papal lackey replied that they were Angles (as in Anglo-Saxons) to which Pope Gregory is reported to have said they are not Angles but Angels. Then and there he decided that he needed to send a missionary to the Angles and so he chose a guy named Augustine, who would later be known as Augustine of Canterbury. It appears that Augustine was not really feeling it, that is this whole journey to England thing, as evidenced by the fact that he tried to turn back and begged Gregory to let him go back to Italy. Gregory would not relent and so Augustine eventually found himself in England. His first meeting with Ethelbert is recorded by Bede and states, “When he had sat down, pursuant to the king's commands, and preached to him and his attendants there present, the word of life, the king answered thus: ­ ‘Your words and promises are very fair, but as they are new to us, and of uncertain import, I cannot approve of them so far as to forsake that which I have so long followed with the whole English nation. But because you are come from far into my kingdom, and, as I conceive, are desirous to impart to us those things which you believe to be true, and most beneficial, we will not molest you, but give you favorable entertainment, and take care to supply you with your necessary sustenance; nor do we forbid you to preach and gain as many as you can to your religion.’ Accordingly he permitted them to reside in the city of Canterbury, which was the metropolis of all his dominions, and, pursuant to his promise, besides allowing them sustenance, did not refuse them liberty to preach.” Well not to give away the ending but Ethelbert eventually converted. Many speculate that this meeting between him and Augustine probably would not have happened had he not had a Christian wife. And with the conversion of Ethelbert, Anglo Saxon England began to convert. Much of Ethelbert’s court became Christian, as did Sæberht, king of Essex. Neither Augustine nor Bertha would live to see complete conversion of England, but they saw its beginnings. In 1st Corinthians Paul says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” I think this is a good way to think about the lives of Bertha and Ethelbert. They planted but would not live to see the full growth, and that is okay and it is okay for us too. We do what we can do. Bertha refused to give up her belief in Christ when she married a pagan king, Augustine after some misgivings went to England and Ethelbert listened to his wife and eventually saw the truth of the Gospel. They were faithful to God in the situation in which they found themselves, planting seeds that would one day lead to England becoming a truly Christian nation. As far as I know none of us are kings, queens or even minor Prussian nobility, but that does not preclude us from being faithful with what God has given us. We may not see the result of what we have planted in this life, but that is not the point when we have an eternal mindset. We don’t know what chain of events may be set off by trying to catch the fly. May we be faithful with what we have been given this day and forevermore.