

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN PRE-COLUMBIAN AMERICA

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I



HE celebrations this year in Iceland in commemoration of the millenium of its *Althing*, together with the restoration of the ancient Catholic see of Holar, extinct since the Reformation, cannot fail to remind many Catholics in the United States of the romantic story of Greenland, and its Church. It is the purpose of this paper to recall, in brief, the story of its discovery and colonisation by the Norsemen and of its checkered religious history. To an American these Norsemen are of great interest inasmuch as, centuries before Columbus, they also landed and settled upon the American continent,¹ just where, we shall later discuss, and, on the assumption that it was New England, we have a Catholic Bishop having jurisdiction over that section of the United States nearly six hundred years before Bishop Cheverus established himself in the see of Boston.

Of the discovery and colonisation of Iceland, whence sprang the Greenland colony we need not speak in detail. Probably discovered and certainly colonised by the Irish,² it eventually fell into Norse hands and was a pagan land. Christianity was not established there by law till A. D. 1000, fifteen or sixteen years after Eric the Red had settled in Greenland. Hence the latter was founded as a pagan colony and there are not wanting indications that, at least immediately after, it was looked upon as a possible asylum for those Norse chiefs to whom the rather ruth-

¹ While Greenland is geographically an insular appendage of the American continent, it should be borne in mind that to the Norsemen who discovered it it was considered as being as much an outlying part of Europe as Ireland, the Orkneys or Iceland. Hence also Vinland, though certainly a part of the mainland of the American continent, was not so thought of. It is, therefore, not necessary that the credit given to Leif Ericson be at the expense of Columbus.

² Geoffrey of Monmouth states that after Arthur had conquered Ireland, (a considerable exaggeration even for Geoffrey) he also conquered the Irish colony in Iceland.

less missionary zeal of King Olaf was unwelcome. While Eric the Red founded the first permanent settlement in Greenland, he was not its discoverer. A man of violent temper, he had been exiled from Norway for manslaughter and a repetition of the crime compelled him to leave Iceland. He bethought him of the land seen some years before by a venturesome seafarer named Gunnbjörn and named by him Gunnbjörn's Rock. Yet it is no means certain that even this represents the first sight of the land. In view of its proximity to Iceland, whose early Irish settlers probably shared that Irish mania for seafaring to which the legends of Saint Brendan bear witness, it is by no means improbable that they had visited it many years before Gunnbjörn; in fact some have seen in Greenland the legendary Ireland the Greater. Confirmation of previous knowledge of this land is to be found in the Bull of Gregory IV to which reference is made on a later page. In any case, at the time of Eric's visit there seems to have been no trace remaining of a previous European occupancy.

Eric, after a visit of exploration in which he definitely located Greenland, decided to attempt to found a colony there, calling it by that misleading name the easier to induce colonisation. The summer after his return he gathered a fleet of twenty-five ships but only fourteen arrived at their destination, the rest being either wrecked or forced to turn back. This was "sixteen winters before Christianity was made law in Iceland"³ that is in 984 or 5, though most of the annalists place it in 986. The party settled on the west coast, apparently the more fertile. Eventually two chief settlements arose, called the East and West Settlements. At first it was thought that these were on opposite coasts, but it is now generally held that both were on the west coast, one being northwest of the other. Of these the Eastern Settlement seems to have been the larger, having about 190 homesteads while the Western had about 90. At its utmost development it would seem that the population did not exceed 3,000⁴ though Nansen⁵ states that it was not more than 2,000. On the other hand, some, judging partly from the generous contributions to Peter's Pence, have made it as high as 10,000, which seems highly improbable.

³ Landamana-boc ii. c. 12.

⁴ Larson—"The Church in North America," *Catholic Historical Review* Vol. V. p. 177.

⁵ Meinberg—*The Norse Church in Medieval America*. C. H. R. Vol. V. (New Series) p. 191.

In its early and more flourishing period Greenland was an independent republic but after 1003 became tributary to Norway though still retaining much of its independence. However, shortly after Iceland became wholly subject to Norway in 1241 Greenland fell into a similar subjection. This probably had much to do with its eventual decay since trade was restricted and the land neglected. Commerce and communication were at the mercy of a single royal vessel and during the disturbances which for centuries troubled the Scandinavian peninsula its journeys were frequently omitted so that gradually the island was forgotten. Into the cause of its eventual decay we cannot here enter, and the matter is a highly controversial one. Plagues and the pressure of the native tribes doubtless reduced the numbers of the colonists so that eventually the few who survived were absorbed into the surrounding tribes and lapsed into paganism.⁶

From the middle of the fifteenth century Greenland drops out of sight and almost out of the memory of man for nearly a century and, in fact, it was not till 1721 that a Lutheran clergyman named Hans Egede reopened communication with the lost colony which henceforth became a Danish possession and though Christian, wholly Protestant.

II

The first mention of Christianity in Greenland is contained in a Bull of Gregory IV dated A. D. 835, one hundred and fifty years before the colony of Eric the Red, in which the Pope, having conferred the Pallium upon Saint Ansgar, the Apostle of Scandinavia, is

resolvéd to confirm . . . the said Ansgarius and his successors in office . . . and they are hereby appointed Legates Apostolic among all the nations round about—the Danes Swedes Norwegians Faroese Greenlanders Helsingers Icelanders and Slavi. . . .⁷

The authenticity of this Bull has been questioned, but it is probably genuine. It is however possible that the references to Greenland and Iceland are interpolations. On the other hand

⁶ In this connection it is noteworthy that, though the majority of the Greenland Eskimos are small, it is not uncommon, especially on the eastern coast to find men of moderate height, and even tall, and with more refined features. This would seem to imply some admixture with the early Norse settlers. Vide Réclus-Geographie Universelle—Amérique Boréale p. 129.

⁷ Vide Documents—*Catholic Historical Review* Vol. III. pp. 210 ss. Here are to be found all the Papal documents relating to Greenland published by Heywood. Both the Latin text and an English version are given. We shall refer to this as "Documents."

Bede who died in 735 speaks of Iceland and Geoffrey of Monmouth places Arthur's conquest of Iceland, referred to above, in 505. However a pre-Norse settlement of Iceland seems certain, and, on the basis of Irish legend and Icelandic Saga, a pre-Norse settlement of Greenland probable.⁸ Hence there seems to be no reason for insisting upon interpolations. However the point need not be laboured for if there had been any pre-Norse Christian community it had ceased to exist by the time of Eric the Red.

Eric, as we have said, was at the time of his settlement a pagan but his son Leif was converted to Christianity during a visit to the court of Saint Olaf in the winter of 999-1000. On his return he was accompanied by a priest named Thermod, who set to work on the conversion of the people, all of whom with the exception of one family,⁹ were pagans. Eric was distinctly hostile though eventually he too submitted to baptism whereas his wife, Thiodhild (or Thorhild) embraced the faith immediately and with joy and built the first Church there. Their example was speedily followed and soon the entire colony was, at least nominally, Catholic but "the old Sagas have tales aplenty to show that paganism did not vanish immediately with the coming of Christianity and that it was not an easy thing for these hot-blooded people of the North to bend under the yoke of the Gospel"¹⁰

Many were the difficulties in the observance of the faith in Greenland. Of the lapses in its episcopate of Gardar we shall speak later. Because of the difficulties of travel churches were comparatively numerous, twelve in the East and five in the West Settlement, a total of seventeen for not more than three thousand souls. "The churches, built of very large well-chosen stones, were usually about 48 to 60 feet long and 24 feet wide. The Cathedral of Gardar, however, was much larger. It was cruciform in shape; its total length about 74 feet measured on the

⁸ Cf De Costa—*Pre Columbian Discovery of America*, pp. 23-27.

⁹ To a Christian who accompanied this Christian family we are indebted for what must be the earliest known Christian prayer connected with America which runs as follows:

May he whose hand protects so well
The simple monk in lonely cell,
And o'er the world upholds the sky,
His own blue hall, still stand me by.
(De Costa, p. 89-90)

¹⁰ Meinberg p. 185.

inside. The nave was 26 feet wide with the narrow transepts extending only 4 feet beyond the nave. All other churches were rectangular without projecting choir. The walls at least four feet thick were built of red sandstone, turf and clay. The roof was of wood. Only the church at Kakortok contained mortar and glazed windows."¹¹ The Cathedral was dedicated to Saint Nicholas.¹²

It is generally stated that there were but two religious houses in Greenland, one a convent of Benedictine nuns, the other a large monastery of Canons Regular dedicated to Saints Olaf and Augustine which, perhaps, dates back to the eleventh century. On the other hand, a passage from the *Historie* of certain voyages of two Venetians, the brothers Antonio and Nicolò Zeno at the end of the fourteenth century, cited by Thacher,¹³ which has apparently been overlooked by the other authors read by the present writer, refers to a Dominican convent in the following terms:—

he found a monastery of the Order of Preachers and a church dedicated to Saint Thomas close to a mountain which gave forth smoke like Vesuvius and Etna: and there is a fountain of fiery water with which both the Church of the monastery and the cells of the brothers are heated.¹⁴

Thacher comments on this in a footnote as follows:—

The alleged existence of volcanoes in Greenland causes much perplexity, as today the remains of these are nowhere to be found. Hot springs, on the other hand are found, Captain Graah mentioning one . . . seventy feet in circumference, in which the water registers a temperature of 108 degrees Fahrenheit. Ivar Bardsen, steward of the Bishop of Gardar, describes such a monastery and such springs, but not exactly as does Zeno. The monastery of Ivar Bardsen was one of the St. Augustine Order and was dedicated to Saint Olaf. . . . These springs were so hot that, according to Nicolo, fish and food were cooked in them, and bread when put into brass pots without water was baked as if in an oven. Hot water was conveyed by conduits underground for the cultivation of gardens.¹⁵

Hence it is not clear whether Zeno is in error both as to description of site and dedication and occupancy and that the convent he describes was really the Augustinian one of Saint Olaf, or that there were actually two religious houses of different religious Orders and with diverse dedications, or that the Augustinian

¹¹ Meinberg 192.

¹² De Costa 202.

¹³ Thacher—*Christopher Columbus*, Vol. I. p. 383 ss.

¹⁴ Thacher—p. 385.

¹⁵ Thacher—loc. cit.

monastery of Saint Olaf passed into the hands of the Dominicans and its dedication was changed, which does not seem probable. On the other hand, the present writer could find no reference to a Dominican convent in Greenland in either Mortier or Walz.¹⁶ Perhaps further research may prove enlightening.

In any case priests were few and their difficulties many. Church furniture, altar cloths, vestments, candles, oil for the sanctuary lamps and even the very bread and wine needed for the Holy Sacrifice had to be imported from Norway. How serious was the problem provoked by the latter may be seen in the correspondence between Gregory IX and the Archbishop of Trondhjem. "The archbishop had stated that in some of the dioceses of his province there was great dearth of wheat and had asked whether a wafer made of other materials might be given to the worshippers instead, to which the Pope replied in the negative. The archbishop had also stated that there was lack of wine in those churches 'for rarely or never is any wine to be obtained in those parts,' and had inquired whether beer or some other drink might be substituted; but to this the Pope would not assent."¹⁷ He did however suggest that "bread simply blessed might be given to the people as was the custom in other parts of the world."¹⁸

The fewness of the priests is attested in the burial rites of early Greenland as related in the Saga of Thorfinn Carlsemme.

The custom had been in Greenland since Christianity came out thither that men were buried there at the homesteads where they died in unconsecrated earth. They used to set up a pole from their breast, and afterward, when clerks came there, then they would pull up the pole and pour in holy water and hold the chant over it, though it were a long time afterward.¹⁹

Nor were the priests always ideal as is clear from the Sagas. Native vocations were of the rarest. Many came from Norway

¹⁶ Mortier—*Histoire des Maitres Generaux de l'Ordre des Freres Precheurs*.
Walz—*Compendium Historiae Ordinis Praedicatorum*.

¹⁷ Larson 181.

¹⁸ Larson, *loc. cit.* has misunderstood the Pope's words, *panis simpliciter benedictus*, which he translates as "the consecrated bread alone." Since the whole difficulty turns upon the impossibility of obtaining wine for Mass and the Pope has refused, of course, to permit of a substitute, so that there could, in consequence, be no celebration of Mass and hence no "consecrated bread," it is clear that some *sacramental* is being substituted for the unobtainable sacrament. Hence this *panis simpliciter benedictus* must be the *pain benit* distributed at the High Mass on Sundays in Continental churches and in French Canada to this day.

¹⁹ Larson 182.

perhaps with the idea of ridding themselves of many of the restraints of civilisation. Many were married and resisted any efforts to enforce celibacy. The old Norse spirit, stern and vengeful, was still strong as witnesses the story of Bishop Arnald.²⁰ Arnald who is called a "pious priest well fitted to be a teacher of the people" because of the unruliness of that people was unwilling to accept the episcopate and laid it down as a condition of his acceptance that "Einar shall bind himself with an oath to protect the rights of the bishopric and the property consecrated to God, and punish everyone who attacks it and be the defender of all things belonging to the Church."²¹ The Saga praises the zeal and humility of Arnald. He had, however, another side, for when a certain Ozsar after bringing an unsuccessful law suit against the Bishop, in a vengeful mood destroyed some of the bishop's property, the latter declared his life forfeit and caused Einar, in virtue of his oath, to slay him, thus bringing about a disastrous feud. Yet there are not wanting signs of a zealous clergy and a faithful people.

III

The see of Gardar was erected in 1125 and was subject to the Danish Archbishop of Lund whose province extended over all the Scandinavian countries, who also, as the successor of Saint Ansgar in that hegemony, had the right, by privilege of Gregory IV, to appoint its bishops. However, the growth of national feeling made it imperative that the Norwegian bishops should have a metropolitan of their own. Therefore Eugenius III sent Cardinal Nicholas Breakspear, who later, as Hadrian IV, was to be the only English occupant of the See of Peter, as Apostolic Legate to Scandinavia. He arranged for the erection of Nidaros (Trondhjem, Drontheim) into an Archiepiscopal See to which, among others, Gardar was subjected. This was ratified by Anastasius IV in 1154²² and again confirmed by Innocent III in 1206.²³ It is interesting to note the statement that Nicholas composed catechisms for the use of the Norsemen and also a treatise upon the Conception of Our Lady, which may have reached Greenland, but none of which is now extant.²⁴

²⁰ *Saga of Einar Sokkeson*—De Costa, op. cit. 183ff.

²¹ op. cit. 184.

²² Vide Mann—*Nicholas Breakspear*, pp. 10-12.

²³ Documents p. 213ss.

²⁴ Mann op. cit. p. 14. n. 3.

The succession of bishops and their dates is not altogether uniformly stated but we give it here as found in Meinberg²⁵ who also gives a brief sketch of each.

- 1124-1150. Arnald.
- 1150-1187. John I, surnamed Khul.
- 1188-1209. John II, surnamed Smirill, i.e., the Hawk.
- 1212-1230. Helgius or Helgo.
- 1234-1240e. Nicholas.
- 1246-1280. Olaf.
- 1288-1314. Thored or Theodore.
- 1314-1346 or 9. Arne.
- 1365-1377. Alf.

It will be noticed that, apart from considerable absences from the diocese on the part of the bishops, there were frequently lengthy interregnums.

After the death of Alf, no bishop again set foot in Greenland though the succession was maintained by a series of titulars sixteen in number ending with Bishop Kampe who is not heard of after 1537.²⁶ Only one of these Matthias Knutsson, a Danish Benedictine, appointed in 1492, a significant date, seems to have had any intention of visiting his See but, for some unknown reason, does not seem to have realized his intention. Two of these titulars were Dominicans, Bartholomew of St. Hyppolite (1433-1440), a licentiate in Scripture, of unknown nationality, and Jacob Blaa (1481 or 3-1492). The writer is unable to give any information about these two Dominicans who are not even mentioned by Mortier or Walz.

IV

The sad end of the Church of Gardar, of which, unfortunately, so very little is known, can best be judged from the following citations from the letter of Nicholas IV to the Bishops of Iceland, September 25, 1448 and the letter of Alexander VI, probably of 1492, appointing Matthias Knutsson Bishop of Gardar.²⁷

From the natives and from dwellers in Greenland . . . a
sorrowful cry has come to our ears and saddened our hearts. . . .
These people nearly six hundred years ago received the Faith . . .

²⁵ *op cit.* pp. 198ss.

²⁶ Meinberg 212-5.
Larson 190-3.

²⁷ Documents 223-227.

and it kept unchanged and pure . . . the worship of God was faithfully carried on until within thirty years, . . . barbarous people from the neighbouring heathen shores sent ships to invade the island. The land was laid waste with fire and sword, churches were everywhere destroyed in all the island, said to be of vast extent. . . . Many of the unhappy people of both sexes, who seemed strong to bear the yoke of lasting slavery and by reason of physical strength appearing best suited for the labours of their masters, were carried away as prisoners. Nevertheless . . . many of them returned to their native country and . . . wished to establish the worship of God and restore its former splendor. Nevertheless . . . they had no means of supporting a bishop and priests and unless . . . they could perform a journey of a number of days to the churches that had survived the destruction of the barbarians they were without the comfort of a pastor or the services of priests for thirty years.

Hence they have asked aid of the Pope who commissions the Icelandic bishops to investigate and if possible secure and consecrate a Bishop for the widowed See of Gardar. Apparently they took no effective action for more than forty years later Alexander writes:—

no ship has touched there for eighty years . . . and no resident priest or Bishop has ruled the Church for some eighty years past. Therefore, on account of the lack of priests it has come to pass that very many of the people of that diocese who were formerly Catholics have, alas! denied the sacred baptism they had received. It is said that the people of that land have no other relic of the Christian religion than a corporal which they exhibit once a year upon which the Body of Christ was consecrated by the last priest who was resident one hundred years ago.

And these last tragic words, which ring down the curtain upon a once flourishing Catholic colony in the New World, were written, by a thought-provoking coincidence, in the very year in which Columbus was to discover new fields for the Gospel on the same American continent.

V

This paper should hardly be closed without some reference to Vinland, the Greenlanders' colony on the American mainland. What happened, in brief, is as follows. Leif, the son of Eric, on his return from Norway in 1000 was driven off his course and eventually came to a new and more fertile land, but merely touched there and returned to Greenland. Thence he set out on a voyage of discovery back towards this apparent paradise. The result was the discovery and colonisation of Vinland. Concerning this land two things only are certain; it was on the American mainland and certainly not further north than Acadia or Nova Scotia. Rafn, whose researches into the location of Vinland were extensive and of very great weight, places it in the

vicinity of Newport, R.I., and Cape Cod and it must be admitted that this section of the country compares well with the descriptions in the Sagas. On the other hand, Storm, many years later, claimed that Rafn had misinterpreted the astronomical data at his disposal, which necessitated Vinland being located much further to the North. According to Storm and his followers, the real Vinland is Nova Scotia. However neither theory has won universal acceptance and the matter is far too involved to be discussed here, hence the inquiring reader is referred to Reeves and De Costa.²⁸ Little is known of the colony which seems never to have been particularly vigorous in spite of climatic and other conditions far more favourable than those of Greenland. It was visited by at least one bishop, Eric, who had been exercising episcopal functions in Greenland three years before the erection of the See of Gardar. It is not certainly known in what capacity he did so. He it was who in 1121 visited Vinland. What he did there or whether he ever returned thence is not known for his setting out for the mainland colony is the last known event recorded in his life. It would seem that there were no really resident priests and no church, though a priest might occasionally pay a visit from Greenland. In fact, it is clear that such structures as did exist were of the simplest and most unsubstantial kind. Perhaps however it is an exaggeration to speak of Vinland as a colony and it was merely a trading place. This would account for the absence of ruins which would enable us to definitely locate the site of Leif Ericsson's settlement.

²⁸ Reeves—*The Finding of Wineland the Good*. Pp. 181ss.
De Costa—*op. cit.* pp. 94-104 *et passim*.

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