

RICOLDO OF MONTECROCE—DOMINICAN MISSIONARY TO THE NEAR EAST, 1289 A.D.

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ODAY we are coming more and more to regard the Middle East—Syria, Mesopotamia, and especially Palestine—as the key and center of the world's history and of our history's future. Politically it hangs in ambivalent doubt between the free and Communist worlds. Geographically and strategically, it is a meeting-ground between these worlds and the bridge between three great continents. Historically, it has been a busy emporium of merchandise and of ideas. Above all, it has been the birthplace of three great world religions—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. So today, all eyes are on the Middle East.

To Christians it has a very special meaning. Here were enacted the mysteries of our Redemption; here, the first glories of the Church and the Gospel. Yet tragically enough, the birthplace of the Christian church is no longer Christian. Rent by schism and heresy, these venerable communities finally succumbed in the seventh century to the warlike propagators of a new creed, the creed of Mohammed. Swift Arabian cavalry carried the standards of Islam across the ancient Christian heartlands, winning converts at swordpoint or by cruel oppression. And today, thirteen hundred years later, the most unmistakeable fact about the Middle East is that the Moslem intruders are still in possession—(except for the new state of Israel).

By these initial successes, the Arabs dealt Christendom a staggering blow. Yet they were not to go unchallenged. Four hundred years Christian Europe was on the defensive, slowly recovering from the shock of these Mohammedan victories, and meanwhile consolidating her own internal strength. Then the counter-offensive was begun. In the last years of the eleventh century, Pope Urban II, at the Council of Clermont, called for a Crusade. With the generous ebullience of a strong young man

facing his first great task in life, all the West responded to his call. The Catholic hosts surged eastward; within four years Jerusalem had fallen. Thereafter, for almost two hundred years—one of the most glorious chapters in our history—the Frankish knights maintained a Christian foothold in Syria and Palestine—sometimes gaining, sometimes losing; sometimes weak, sometimes strong; sometimes supported, often bereft of aid, always against overwhelming odds, in a land and climate far different from their Northern homes. Gradually their power ebbed away, and the fall of Acre (May 18, 1291) spelled the end and failure of the Crusades.

Yet this long occupation of the Holy Land by Western military forces gave the Church an opportunity to rehabilitate itself there. Bishops and lower clergy came with the first armies. But the real missionary effort took place in the thirteenth century, with the founding of the Mendicant Orders. The apostolic character of the new religious made the spiritual recuperation of Christ's homeland one of their primary goals. St. Francis himself preached before Saladin, and within a few years of their establishment the Franciscans and Dominicans were coming to Palestine in large numbers. Their uncloistered mobility allowed them to range even further afield; and leaving the European footholds on the coasts of the Levant and the Black Sea, they penetrated all through the Middle East and into the far recesses of Asia, as far as India, China, and Turkestan. These missionary efforts outlasted the military phase of the Crusades by several hundred years, and even if the course of history precluded the establishment of the Church in those lands on any solid basis, the movement as a whole reaped considerable fruit. While less well known than the Crusades, it was quite as significant, and every bit as romantic. The epic of these "voyagers for Christ" makes interesting reading, and some of their records have already been published, especially those of the Franciscans. The Dominicans remain practically unknown.

Yet the thirteenth-century Dominicans were every bit as "mission-minded" as their Franciscan cousins. St. Dominic himself longed to go to the Cuman Tartars. Within a few years of their founder's death, Dominicans in the frontier provinces—Poland, Hungary, Greece, and the Holy Land—were devoting most of their energies to work among the infidels. From the priories of the West, volunteers streamed forth to join in the struggle. While the Franciscans evangelized China and all of

northern Asia, the Friars Preachers were especially active in Armenia, Persia, and India. Often they followed in the tracks of those Italian merchant-adventurers who were all through the Orient in the late Middle Ages. But not infrequently the heralds of Christ struck out on their own, and became the first, and sometimes the only Europeans to visit certain parts of the globe.

Of these one of the most remarkable is Ricoldo of Montecroce, a Florentine Dominican who visited the Holy Land and what is now Iraq towards the end of the thirteenth century. The record of his journey, his *Itinerarium* or *Liber Peregrinationis in Partibus Orientis*, is one of the most interesting and significant pieces of travel literature to come out of the Middle Ages—a unique source on the peoples and customs of thirteenth-century Mesopotamia. Ricoldo is the only European to have left us a first-hand description of Baghdad during the Tartar domination. Yet scholars have been slow to exploit this invaluable bit of medieval Orientalia. As yet not a single account of Ricoldo and his expedition has appeared in English.

It is hardly our intention to preempt the field, and fill this lack in the present article. Trained historians, we are convinced, have plenty of room for illuminating study on Ricoldo, his deeds, and his writings. Rather we propose here to give our brethren in religion, and all the members of the Dominican family, a more detailed awareness of their glorious missionary heritage, with which they are at least in a general way familiar. For we feel sure they will be as intrigued as we were by the unusual story of this apostolic son of Dominic, Ricoldo of Montecroce.

Ricoldo (Pennini was his family name) was born in Florence about 1243.¹ His more familiar name, "of Montecroce"—of Mount Cross—he adopted years later in Palestine; it refers of course to the mount of Calvary. As a youth, Ricoldo was an eager student; in later life, as he began his long missionary expedition,

¹ The principal accounts on Ricoldo of Montecroce are those of Fineschi, Vincent, O.P., *Memorie istoriche degli domini illustri del Convento ui. S. Maria Novella*, Florence, 1790, pp. 303-340; Mandonnet, Pierre, O.P., "Fra Ricoldo de Monte-Croce, Pelerin en Terre Sainte et Missionnaire en Orient, XIIIe Siecle" *Revue Biblique*, II (1893), pp. 44-61, 182-202, 584-607; and Monneret de Villard, Ugo, *Il Libro della Peregrinazione nelle Parti D'Oriente di Fratere Ricoldo da Montecroce*, (*Dissert. Hist. O.P. XIII*), Rome, 1948. Monneret de Villard's is the most recent and the most definitive, but Pere Mandonnet's remains indispensable; Fineschi's work was not available to me. Cf. also on Ricoldo's literary work, Quesif-Echard, *Scriptores Ordinis Praedicatorum*, Paris, 1719, v. 1, pp. 505 sqq.

he reflected that this would be fit penance for "those long and arduous journeys I undertook, while still in the world, to learn the secular sciences, the so-called liberal arts."² We are not certain where he studied; Mandonnet suggests the University of Paris.³ Back at Florence, in 1267, he took the Dominican habit at Santa Maria Novella; he was then twenty-five. Three of his brothers belonged to this same Florentine priory: Domenico, Bencivenni (who became a lay brother), and Sinibaldo. Ricoldo himself completed his theological studies and became a priest by 1272; in that year he was assigned by his Provincial Chapter as a Lector or professor in the new *Studium* of Philosophy or "arts" then being established at Pisa. In the acts of subsequent chapters we can trace his teaching career in various priories of the Tuscan Province. Finally, in 1287, the year before he embarked for the Holy Land, he was assigned to his native city and excused from teaching. Thus he had the better part of a year to prepare for his projected missionary career.

Ricoldo's *Itinerarium*, which records this remarkable saga, is not a large book. It is written with all the pithy economy of style so characteristic of pre-Gutenberg days, when everything had to be written out by hand. A cursory reading discloses that the sketch is divided into two somewhat dissimilar parts, according to the two chief laps of Ricoldo's journey. The first narrates his pilgrimage to the Holy Places in Judea and Galilee; the second, his missionary circuit through the mountains of Asia Minor and down the valley of the Tigris to Baghdad. Moreover, one notes, there is a distinct change of point of view: the Palestinian section is filled with minute topographical details; but in the latter part Ricoldo is preoccupied with ethnological and cultural considerations, and geography is at a minimum. It is this section, almost the sole Western source on the Mohammedans and other peoples of thirteenth-century Mesopotamia, that is so valuable to scholars; and since this was the properly missionary phase of his journey, we too will find it more interesting. Ricoldo's description of the Holy Land pilgrimage, in his earlier chapters, has been considered somewhat stereotyped. Long before the scientific Biblical geography of our day had supplanted the medieval accounts, Ricoldo's itinerary was far less popular than the lei-

² Riculdi a Monte Crucis, *Liber Peregrinationis in Partibus Orientis*, in C. M. Laurent, *Peregrinationes Medii Aevi Quattuor*, Leipzig, 1873, p. 105. It will be referred to hereafter as *Itinerarium*.

³ *Op cit.*, p. 48.



surely and more personal *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae* of his fellow Dominican Burchard of Mount Sion.⁴ We are justified, then, in hurrying Ricoldo through his pious visit to the scenes of the Gospel narrative, and setting him as soon as possible on the high-road to inner Asia.

Having received therefore the command of the Lord Pope through the mediation of the Master of the Order [begins Ricoldo] I set about my journey, passing over the sea, in order to see in the flesh those very places which Christ in the flesh had visited, and especially that place in which he deigned to suffer for mankind, so that the memory of His Passion might be fixed more unshakably in my mind, and the Blood of Christ shed for our salvation might strengthen and confirm me to preach and even die for Him, who has given me life by His death.⁵

Ricoldo set sail for Palestine in midsummer of 1288. He tells us nothing of his voyage. If he sailed from Venice, as is likely, it might have taken several weeks before his ship dropped anchor at Acre, that ancient natural harbor just north of Mount Carmel. Acre, the modern Akka, was the last foothold of the Christians in Palestine. Here Ricoldo joined a veritable army of pilgrims, as many as twenty thousand, about to start the round of the Holy Places. We need not follow them to every shrine they visited. But the sight of this vast crowd, come far from their native lands for the sake of religion, should remind us of that deep faith which dominated medieval Europe. Three years before the last vestiges of Catholic power were swept from the coasts of Palestine, thousands like Ricoldo still poured through St. Jean d'Acre, intent on making this most sacred of pilgrimages.

This great army of priests and faithful moved first through Galilee and then into Judea, hoping to climax their march with a visit to the Holy Sepulchre. But the Saracens at first refused them entrance; however, on returning to the Holy City a few months later, they were allowed to enter the basilica and hold services.

The program of the pilgrimage is rather interesting. As they arrived at a spot associated with the life of our Lord, the appropriate Gospel was solemnly chanted. Then Ricoldo and the other priests would preach, administer the sacraments, and if the hour permitted, say Mass. At the Jordan, on the feast of the Epiphany, they found thousands of Christians bathing in the river, in mem-

⁴ In Laurent, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-94.

⁵ *Itinerarium*, p. 105.

ory of Christ's baptism by St. John. Frequently, Ricoldo records with moving faith and humility the graces he sought at each of these holy places; at Cana,

I prayed Christ, who changed water into wine, that He would change the water of my tepidity and indevotion into the exquisite wine of His spiritual tenderness.⁶

But the true spirit of this early son of Dominic and the vivid medieval devotion of the Passion of Christ are perhaps best evinced in this account of his second (and successful) visit to the Tomb of the Savior:

At last we came to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is a very large church, containing the whole of Mount Calvary. In the spot where the Lord was crucified, we found the crevice where the wood of the Cross had been planted in the rock. Nearby, an image of the crucifix in mosaic, looking to the West . . . and the spot where the Blessed Virgin Mary stood with St. John. . . . This place inspires so much devotion, that he who does not weep with compassion for the Son, must surely be struck to tears at the sight of this Mother, watching her Son die for us.

Led by Ricoldo, the pilgrims formed a procession to reenact the events of Christ's death and burial, and urged on by their preacher, they pressed onward to the Sepulchre.

We followed the route of the three Marys, when they brought their sweet ointments; and as we walked, we repeated their words to one another: 'Who will roll back the stone?' Drawing near, we intoned the *Victimi Paschali laudes*. On coming to the Sepulchre we circled about, looking everywhere for our Lord. We did not find Him. Then suddenly a powerful voice sang out triumphantly:

Surrexit Christus spes mea;
Praecedet vos in Galilea.⁷

Then the pilgrims filed through the door from which the stone had been rolled back, to venerate the sacred spot. They remained at the Basilica, Ricoldo says, "both day and night" and again and again the priests of the company took advantage of this opportunity to preach, say Mass, and communicate the people, in this most venerable shrine in Christendom.

Now Ricoldo "of Monte Croce" (thus he would be called

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 113. The verse: "Christ my hope has arisen;
He goes before you into Galilee."

is from the Sequence of the Mass for Easter Sunday.

ever after in memory of this glorious visit) was ready for the great work which lay ahead. Fortified with the grace and spiritual exaltation of his pilgrimage, he returned to Acre and took ship for the southern coast of Asia Minor. His vessel skipped northward from port to port along the Syrian coast, putting in at "Laiacum" (modern "Ayas") in the Gulf of Alexandretta. Here the missionary disembarked and found himself in the Christian kingdom of Cilicia, or Little Armenia. From this tiny port he journeyed through countrysides redolent of the Church's early history, coming finally to Tarsus, the birthplace of Saint Paul. Tarsus, just south of the Taurus Mountains, was a terminus for caravans going north to join the great East-West trade route which led from the busy ports of the Levant, paralleling the southern shores of the Black and Caspian seas, and stretching far away into Turkestan and Cathay—the route followed a few years earlier by Marco Polo.

In the spring of 1289 he joined a caravan heading north out of Tarsus. Passing through the Taurus barrier *via* the Cilician Gates, they came into "Thurcimannia," i.e., the Seljukid Sultanate of Iconium or Roum. Ricoldo now found himself in a world fantastically different from that with which he was familiar. He encountered the Turks: "bestial" he calls them with his characteristic penchant for hyperbole. Then, coming out onto the high arid plateau of central Asia Minor, he met the Tartars, a spearhead of that bizarre, irresistible surge of people which Genghiz-Khan and his successors had led clear across Asia, subjugating and destroying everything in their path.

Ricoldo was fascinated by these fabled hordes he had heard tales of in his youth. Knowing his readers would share his curiosity, he incorporated into his narrative a lengthy account of the Tartars, their history, and their strange way of life. In spite of their savage ways, Ricoldo found much to admire in them. They were a simple people, childlike in many respects, if proud and violent in others. They made no false pretense of a supernatural revelation; their law and their religion were that of nature, which they practiced scrupulously according to their lights. Truthfulness and honesty were held in high regard, and they had a tremendous respect for authority. However, they practiced frightful aberrations. Drunkenness and pillage were regarded as acts of virtue. They believed in the resurrection, but in a very materialistic sense: they would bury their dead not only with food, clothing and money, but in the case of their ruler, with a

fully-saddled horse and as many as twenty slaves, buried alive to serve him in the after life.

In the course of this description we get a faint outline of Ricoldo's passage among the Tartars as an ambassador of Christ. Constantly travelling as he was at this time, he had no opportunity for concerted missionary work. But in the caravans, and around the campfires at night, he must have had considerable friendly contact with the warrior race, for his information on Mongol history bears all the earmarks of their own oral tradition. He did make bold to rebuke them for their disgusting burial practices, while they in turn accused the Christians of unkindness in not providing for their dead in like manner. Again, he seems to have conversed at length with the Buddhist priests who had come with the Tartars from the Far East. Ricoldo's *Itinerarium* is the only European source to note the presence of these "baxites," as he calls them, in Anatolia.

The Tartars honor certain men above all the world, the *baxites*, who are priests of idols. They are men of India, wise and well-ordered and of very serious demeanor. They commonly know the magical arts, and rely on the advice and assistance of demons, and show forth many signs and predict future events. For one of the greater among them is said to fly, though in truth it was found that he did not fly, but walked a bit above the ground, without touching it, and when he seemed to be sitting, no solid thing supported him. Some of these say there are three-hundred and sixty-five gods. And others that there are a hundred *tumans* of gods (a *tuman* being ten thousand). All agree however that the principal god is one. And they claim to be brethren of the Christians, and say they are of the same rite and sect as ourselves, though they know not Christ. They say moreover that the Deluge did not extend to their country, and that the world has been in existence for over thirty thousand years. For they say that they always carve a new idol in stone every thousand years, and every ten thousand. They are of a dark and sun-burned complexion, but they come from a fairly cool region.⁸

Clearly, Ricoldo must have had long discussions with these Buddhist priests, and no doubt made serious attempts to convert them. For later on, as he passed beneath Mount Ararat, he personally verified the fact that the waters flowed from its slopes both east and west. In this he saw a refutation of the Buddhists' insistence that the Deluge did not affect their homeland, since from the high watershed of Ararat the flood would have receded both towards Europe and towards India.

Ricoldo's mission, however, was not to the Tartars, and his caravan moved on, leaving the desert plateau of Asia Minor and

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.

climbing the mountains of Greater Armenia. They passed through Sebaste, where Ricoldo found a small community of his Dominican brethren. While he was in the city, news arrived that Tripoli in Syria had fallen to the Turks (April 27, 1289). The Moslems of Sebaste celebrated this victory with riotous blasphemy. Tying a crucifix to the tail of a horse, they drove it through the Christian quarter, molesting all they met and profaning the churches. For greater insult, this diabolic rampage took place on a Sunday. Ricoldo himself seems not to have been molested, however. As a member of the caravan, he would no doubt have escaped notice.

Next they came to Erzerum, a beautifully-situated town high in the Armenian mountains, in a region of great cold. The caravan was now approaching the border between Turkey and Persia; they would have to cross the high mountain passes to the north of Lake Van. They passed Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark had rested, and soon the narrow pass debouched into a broad and beautiful plain. This was Persia, and the plain was called "Delatacta" (Persian "Alataq"). Its beauty and fertility haunted Ricoldo. Later, in his *Letters*, he marvelled that God in His Providence should bestow such blessings and delights on the Saracens, while the followers of Christ were persecuted and despoiled and even driven from those lands most sacred to the memory of Our Savior. Fountains of oil, great mountains of salt to be had without effort—it is the age-old complaint of Job, the problem of the Psalmist, echoing through the centuries to perplex the just man.

As the winter of 1289 closed in, Ricoldo finally came to Tabriz (his "Thauris"), the great metropolis of Azerbaijan, and at that time the capital of all Persia. Situated on the great trade routes that led from the Black Sea to East and South, Tabriz offered hospitality to merchants of every race, Venetians and Genoese among them. Here, too, Ricoldo found Dominicans, crowded together in the same poor house with their Franciscan brethren, for the Tabriz priory was a base for missionaries going off to work in India and Cathay. Ricoldo stayed here for six months, his travel interrupted by the rigors of the Azerbaijan winter. He took advantage of this halt to evangelize the people, preaching in Arabic through a Turkish interpreter. Towards the beginning of Spring, Ricoldo left Tabriz, heading towards Mesopotamia. This lap of his journey brought him through the rugged mountains of Kurdistan. Though the fierce, indomitable Kurds,

in the description of the *Itinerarium* "hated Christians, and even more, Europeans ("Franks"), and most of all, religious," he met with a kind reception at their hands. They even helped find some of the travellers who were lost in the mountain snows, and, as did the Maltese for Saint Paul and his shipwrecked companions, built huge fires to warm their guests.

After a long and arduous journey, they descended into the valley of the Tigris and came to the ruins of Ninive, which stretched along the river bank for a great distance. Crossing the river, they entered the new city, which was Mosul (Ricoldo's "Monsal").

Mosul was then, as it is today, a great stronghold of Christianity in the midst of the Arab world. One found there both Nestorians and Jacobites (Syrian Monophysites), together with a large Jewish colony. Even the "king" or governor of the city was a Nestorian Christian. Here Ricoldo saw his great apostolic opportunity. He received permission to preach, and the Nestorian prince gladly heard him out, but was not won to Catholicism. Another day, Ricoldo and his companions (several Friars Preachers who apparently came with him from Tabriz) went to the synagogue and engaged the Jews in public debate. The Christian missionaries felt justified in claiming a victory.

But Ricoldo's most notable apostolic venture in the neighborhood of Mosul was his visit to the Jacobite monastery of Mar Mattai (Saint Matthew the Apostle) some eighteen miles north-east of the city. This venerable convent was the residence of the *mafrian*, or "patriarch," as Ricoldo calls him, who had quasi-patriarchal jurisdiction over the Jacobites of the old Persian empire. Even today, Mar Mattai retains its position as a key center of the Monophysite church; in Ricoldo's day it was at the apogee of its history. Religious observance and sacred studies flourished among its ranks, the heritage of the famed *mafrian* and savant, Barhebraeus (Gregory al-Faraj), who had died there but four years previously, in 1286. In 1290 his brother Bar Sauma was *mafrian*, presiding over a community of some three hundred monks.

The account of this visit to Mar Mattai is prefaced by a detailed resume of Jacobite doctrine and practice. The key tenet of the Monophysite heresy is the unity of nature in Christ; thus He is neither God nor man, but a sort of indeterminate being. Since He does not share our human nature, He cannot be said to mediate for us in any real sense; the most glorious teachings of

Catholic Christology are rendered meaningless. Monophysitism was condemned at Chalcedon in 451, but became the rallying cry of Syria, Egypt, and Armenia in their politico-religious struggles with orthodox Byzantium. Soon viable separatist churches were firmly established in these three countries, isolated from the life and doctrinal development of the church as a whole. No wonder, then, that in going their own way they developed such peculiarities as Ricoldo noted among them—the deprecatory formula for Baptism, quite different from that of Mt. 28:19; the insistence on fresh leavened bread and warm water for the Eucharist; and strangest of all, anointing and communicating the deceased. They confessed their sins to God alone, and in a general manner; nor did they share Catholic belief in Purgatory or in the immediate reward or punishment of souls after death.

When Ricoldo and his little band of missionaries came to Mar Mattai they were received not as men, but as angels. The monks crowded about, eagerly relating the wondrous history of their monastery and the miracles wrought there in days gone by. But when the Dominicans sought permission to preach, the simple monks hesitated. "They will seduce us to accept their heresy," they muttered, for they perceived the visitors were learned men. Then one night an earthquake shook the monastic buildings. The Jacobites saw in this a sign from heaven, and consented to hear the Friars preach. Their own theologians marshalled texts and arguments, and one, a bishop, was elected spokesman to defend the doctrine of their forefathers.

The debate was held in the great hall of the monastery, illuminated by hundreds of flickering candles. Ricoldo began, announcing that he had come solely for the sake of their eternal welfare. The Dominicans had marvelled at their great austerity and works of piety, he continued. They kept long, severe fasts, and perpetual abstinence; their Office, far longer than that of the Latin church, was sung standing throughout. What a pity it would be, he argued, that these good works should profit them nothing, simply because they were in error on the central mystery of Christianity. He adjured them by the blood of Christ to renounce their heresy and return to the bosom of the true church. The other Dominicans seconded him, establishing the truth of the Catholic doctrine by appeals to Patristic authority and sound philosophy. The Monophysites, when it came their turn to speak, were silent; they seemed deprived of voice by the Holy Ghost himself. He who was to defend their cause was the

first to accept Catholicism. "To such things as these," he told his remonstrating brethren, "we have no answer." Others, the most learned and venerable men of the community, followed suit, urging the rest to do likewise. But a numerous party protested, raising such a tumult that Ricoldo had cause to fear bloodshed. Composed of the more unlettered and chauvinistic elements of the community, they shouted that it would be worse than shameful to desert the faith their fathers had kept for eight hundred years, just because a few Westerners had tripped them up with their subtleties and syllogisms.

As the number of converts grew—even the *mafrian* made over to Ricoldo a clear and explicit formula of submission—the schism grew more exacerbated, and the Catholic party pleaded with the Friars to withdraw if they did not care to be torn limb from limb. Returning to Mosul, Ricoldo preached in the city square to a great assembly of Jacobite clergy and faithful, while the *mafrian* and his attendants stood by, confirming the truth of the Catholic teaching. It is important to note that these sermons were delivered in Arabic, so far had Ricoldo progressed in that language since his stay in Tabriz a few months previously.

Leaving Mosul, they sailed down the Tigris towards Baghdad. Midway, at Takrit, they encountered a large colony of Maronites from Mount Lebanon, whose archbishop sent a profession of faith to the Pope *via* Ricoldo. The Italian Dominican consistently regarded these Christians as Monothelites; modern scholars, however, tend to doubt they were ever in formal rebellion against Rome.

Finally—it must have been in July-August, 1290—Ricoldo arrived in Baghdad and was overjoyed to find a group of his brethren in the city. In 1290, this great metropolis had a population of some 200,000 Saracens, ruled by the Tartar khans who had conquered it in 1258. Before this, it had been the religious capital of the Moslem world, the seat of the Caliph, but he had been cruelly murdered by the invaders. It was still, however, the residence of the Nestorian patriarch, or *jakelinus*, as Ricoldo calls him (an obvious corruption of the ancient Greek title *katholikos*, universal bishop, still used by certain dignitaries of the lesser Eastern churches).

The Nestorian heresy is diametrically opposed to that of the Monophysites. In the fourth century Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, and his fellow heresiarch Theodore of Mopsuetia had taught that in Christ there were not only two natures, but indeed

two persons. Consequently those actions that were proper to Jesus of Nazareth were not to be predicated of the Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Particularly did they abhor any reference to the Virgin Mary as the mother of God. Condemned at Ephesus in 431, they took refuge in Persia, where after a period of severe persecution, they eventually achieved a privileged status. Even after the Moslem conquest, they remained in favor with their new rulers, and found it easy to ally with them in persecuting their arch-enemies, the Jacobites. A zealous missionary spirit flourished among the Nestorians. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, at the height of their prosperity, they had churches and monasteries all across the face of Asia, and Nestorian clerics were to be found in the retinues of Mongol khans. Indeed, the illustrious patriarch Yahbhallaha III, who figures in Ricoldo's story, was a native of Peking. But this eastward outlook had drawn them even further away from the main body of Christendom than the Jacobites. Theological and liturgical aberrations were legion, and superstition all too common. Ricoldo even claims that the Nestorians had a church in Baghdad dedicated to a dog, and kept a feast in honor of the same animal!

It was among these Nestorians that Ricoldo undertook his first apostolic work in Baghdad. At first they listened eagerly, but when he began to use such phrases as "Mother of God" they turned from him in horror, expelled him from their church, and scrubbing down its walls with rose-water, held a solemn Mass to expiate the sacrilege. When Ricoldo protested to the local archbishop, he was offered a church and a comfortable house, on condition that he desist from preaching. The Dominicans rejected these odious restrictions, saying they would rather live like beggars in the fields and highways, than be prevented from preaching the word of Christ. Ricoldo carried his case to the Patriarch himself, one day when the latter had come into Baghdad from his country villa. Yahbhallaha heard him out, and privately admitting that he himself put no stock in the teachings of Nestorius, insisted that his subordinates allow the Friars free use of all their churches. In this way, the true Catholic teachings began to win acceptance with the leaders of the sect and the prejudice which had hampered them in their desire to repudiate the heresy was gradually overcome. In 1304, Patriarch Yahbhallaha was able to send his submission to the Dominican pope Benedict XI through the monk Bar Sauma, who received Holy Communion from the hands of the Sovereign Pontiff.

But Ricoldo's chief purpose in coming to Baghdad was to work

among the Saracens, and to this end his chief efforts were directed. From the establishment of the Caliphate in Bagdhad had been the capital of the Moslem world. Here were the great universities and Koranic schools, where students from every province, of every shade of belief, came together to pore over the pages of the sacred text and dispute over points of the law. *Studia Generalia*,^{8a} Ricoldo calls them—so much did they remind him of the great Dominican institutions of Europe. The scholars led a veritable monastic existence: their diet, their whole mode of life was designed to foster recollection and contemplation, quite after the manner of Catholic religious houses. Even the architecture, with its long cloister ranges, its spacious halls, and its secluded cells, reminded the missionary of his native priory.

Ricoldo's plan was to acquire as profound a knowledge as possible of Islamic thought and culture. To this end he sought admittance into the Moslem halls of learning, where once again, to use his favorite expression, he was received more like an angel than a man. He first undertook to perfect his knowledge of Arabic, and then embarked on a full-scale study of the Koran itself. To one such as he who had traveled in the majestic realms of Scholastic theological speculation, the prospect of dedicating his life to the falsehoods and blasphemies of Mohammed seemed tedious indeed. Yet he went at it like a man dedicated. He saw clearly the need to grapple with error at its source, if the Church were ever to win back the souls. He set to work on a Latin translation of the Koran, the first such translation to be undertaken by a competent Christian scholar. But the fatuity and idle repetitions of the book proved too much for him, and he put it aside in disgust.⁹ He had nonetheless, acquired a considerable familiarity with its pages, and the last chapters of the *Itinerarium* were devoted to a detailed criticism of the Koranic law; it is, Ricoldo argues, confused, obscurantist, mendacious, and irra-

^{8a} A *Studium Generale*, or General House of Studies, in the Dominican Order, is a large priory where the young Friars study philosophy and theology at the university level.

⁹ The translation current before Ricoldo's time had been made at Toledo in 1141 under the auspices of Abbot Peter the Venerable of Cluny. In this effort the monk-translators of Cluny had enlisted the services of a Moorish scholar named Mohammed. The work was somewhat uneven. Ricoldo, however, was the first Catholic theologian to have achieved such a personal mastery of the Arabic language and Moslem theological speculation, that he could undertake such a translation single-handedly, without relying on the cooperation of non-Catholic scholars. See Monneret de Villard, Ugo, *Lo Studio dell'Islam in Europa nel XII e XIII Secolo*, Vatican City, 1944, for the condition of Islamic studies before Ricoldo's time.

tional, filled with many fables, blasphemies, and preposterous miracles.

This criticism is developed at greater length in Ricoldo's magnum opus, variously called the *Improbatio Alcorani* (*Refutation of the Koran*) or *Contra Legem Saracenorum*, (*Against the Law of the Saracens*) which deserves to be ranked among the great apologetical writings of the Middle Ages. Of all Ricoldo's works, this had the greatest diffusion in Europe. Nicholas of Cusa praised it highly, and Martin Luther (of all people!) translated it into German.¹⁰

For all his hatred of the impious doctrines of Mohammed, Ricoldo's relations with the Saracens at Baghdad seem to have been a perfect fulfillment of the precept: "Love the sinner, but hate the sin." Not only did he gain entrance into their study-halls, but into their very homes. The proverbial hospitality of his Arab guests was lavished upon him, and the cultured Saracens, in terms of highest respect, would ask him to speak of Christ. He marvelled, too, that under a law so diabolical, men could be found leading such praiseworthy lives.

Lengthy passages in the *Itinerarium* recount these acts of virtue. They had their fasts and penances, in some ways stricter than those of Catholics. He had seen their zeal for study, and the great expense incurred by their rulers for intellectual purposes. Their fidelity to daily prayer, their generous almsgiving and kindness towards the poor and unfortunate (and towards dogs, in whose favor many bequests were made by the Saracens of Baghdad) and above all, their reverence for the name of God (Allah be He praised!) and His prophets impressed him tremendously. But as he remarks several times in the course of these chapters, he sets these things down "not so much for the praise of infidels, as for the shame of Christians, who are unwilling to do for a law of life what these poor reprobates do for their law of death."¹¹

In the midst of Ricoldo's flourishing apostolic labors, news suddenly reached Baghdad that the Christian fortress-town of Acre had fallen to the Saracens after a long and terrible siege. The victory was consummated with frightful scenes of rapine and bloodshed. Forty thousand Christians, many religious among them, were slaugh-

¹⁰ Paradoxically enough, Ricoldo's great work may be found most handily in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, t. 154, col. 1035-1152. This is the Greek translation by Demetrius Cydones (ca. 1360) published with a Latin re-translation by the Humanist Bartolomeo Picerno de Montearduo. After the sixteenth century, this version all but supplanted Ricoldo's original text outside of Spain.

¹¹ *Itinerarium*, p. 131.

tered or led away into slavery. The Dominican community was exterminated, and among the victims was the last resident Latin patriarch of Jerusalem before modern times, Nicolas de Hanapes, a Dominican. Fearing a repetition of the anti-Christian pogroms he had experienced at Sebaste, Ricoldo fled hastily from Bagdhad, delaying there only to make discreet inquiries about the fate of the Acre Dominicans. A torn and blood-stained chasuble, which he found in a bazaar, gave him his answer. Later he was able to purchase from wandering tradesmen other remnants of the convent he had visited but two years before; a copy of St. Gregory's *Moralia* and a Dominican Missal, the parchment pages of which were about to be used in the manufacture of tambourines.

Ricoldo's withdrawal from Bagdhad ends our documented knowledge of his missionary career. But he certainly remained in the Orient for some years, and his self-imposed exile from Bagdhad seems to have been only temporary. It was at this time that he wrote his moving, Job-like *Letters to the Church Triumphant*, which *Dominicana* hopes to publish at some future date. Ricoldo apparently fled into the vast desert that stretches far to the west of the river valleys, and at this time, it seems, we should date an autobiographical detail noted in the *Letters*. He continued to preach, there in the desert, to whomever he met. One day, however, he fell in with a group of Arabs (Bedouin) who did not like his talk of Christ. Stripping him of his Dominican habit, they forced him to work as a camel-driver. "I know that Mohammed himself was a camel-driver, O Lord," he prays in the *Letters*. "Is this the means You have designed for me to overcome Mohammed's false teaching, by taking up his profession?"¹² He does not say how he escaped from his captor, but another passage relates how he traveled from land to land, wearing a flowing beard to alleviate prejudice against his religious character, dressing sometimes as a Friar, sometimes as a camel-driver or other indigenous type, as prudence dictated.

He was back in Florence, however, by 1301, as a document of his convent bears witness. His return had been prompted by a need to consult at the Papal curia on problems that had arisen in the course of his missionary labors. This would suggest that he planned a return to the East, but his business with the Pope dragged on and his health began to fail. He seems to have devoted his first decade back in Italy to completing and polishing his *Improbatio Alcorani*. After 1310, however, he took an active role in the affairs of his

¹² *Epistolae ad Ecclesiam Triumphantem*, ed. R. Roehricht, in *Revue de l'Orient Latin*, II (1884), 284.

province, and devoted himself zealously to preaching and priestly ministrations. He was given the title of Preacher General by the Provincial Chapter held at Arezzo in 1315. Ricoldo of Montecroce died at Santa Maria Novella, October 31, 1320.

What kind of a man was Ricoldo and what is his position in history? Ricoldo Pennini was a "third generation" Dominican. He entered the Order just a half-century after its approbation and he would have known older religious who remembered St. Dominic. His Dominican intellectual formation, influenced as it was by then by St. Thomas, is most evident in his writings. Even when Ricoldo is most pragmatic and particular, the Scholastic, the Aristotelian, the fond student of theology shows through. He had that flaming piety for the Sacred Passion that was characteristic of medieval Italy. But he was also a man of broad outlook, with a strong liberal training even before he entered the Order. We have seen how talented he was as a linguist.

But above all he is a perfect type of the thirteenth-century missionary, a model of all those Friars, Franciscan and Dominican, whom medieval Christendom sent forth into the supernaturally barren wastes of the heathen world. They are historical proof of Europe's expansionist tendencies. Yet their inspiration was wholly supernatural, for they were convinced, far more than we, that salvation lay in Christian faith and baptism. They saw clearly the bondage of sin and ignorance which held the pagan world in thrall, and they spent themselves trying to lift that bondage.

Yet how much success did these men have? What could a man like Ricoldo show for his long years in the vineyard? A mere glance at the present day conditions of the Eastern Churches reveals the failure of the medieval missionary effort to bring about a definitive reunion. Yet the continued existence of these schismatic bodies is not the whole story. In fact, the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries witnessed a widespread movement towards Catholic unity. We have seen that the head of the Nestorian church made his submission to Rome during Ricoldo's own lifetime, and perhaps through his intervention. The Popes of the time were constantly receiving similar embassies. Perhaps the most notable success of this great movement was the formation in Armenia of a new religious order, modelled on Dominican lines. Founded in the 1330's, the Friars Unifiers of St. Gregory the Illuminator worked devotedly in the Catholic cause for over three hundred years.

Admittedly, this return to Catholicism was incomplete, restricted, not destined to endure. The factors that caused this are many: the

missionaries seemed unable to consolidate their gains, characterized as they were by extensive mobility, a supernatural wanderlust which worked to their disadvantage. Ricoldo himself warns against the tendency to stress the peculiar customs and observances of the Western church with the same force as they did divinely revealed dogmas. But the principal blow came from the outside with the invasions of the Turks and the Mongols. Latin Christendom was thrown once more on the defensive.

But their work had not been in vain. The Friar missionaries had planted the seed of good-will which helped later Latin clerics in their contact with the Eastern churches. At Mosul, where Ricoldo worked so strenuously, the French Dominicans have been engaged in a fruitful apostolate since 1750. In that district, the Catholic Chaldeans have long since surpassed their Nestorian brethren both in numbers and in level of cultivation.

Turning to Ricoldo's work among the Mohammedans, we would see far less in the way of concrete results. There is no indication that he made a single convert. Confronted by the superior intransigence of the Saracens, Ricoldo spent his time developing a method, trying to discover a way of approach on the intellectual and cultural level. We have seen how his program of study was cut short by political upheavals. But his greatest contribution to the Moslem apostolate remains the accurate, first-hand knowledge of Koranic teaching that he brought back with him from the schools of Bagdhad. Only when one knows something of the exaggerated ideas held in medieval Europe about the Moslems, does he begin to appreciate the value of Ricoldo's work.

In all this we may see the properly Dominican quality of Ricoldo's missionary career. Like Dominic himself, he had an ardent love of Jesus Christ, an unquenchable thirst for souls. Beyond this, however, he tried to follow his Holy Father by applying the intellectual apostolate to the Moslem and East-Christian worlds. He adopted Dominic's own method of disputing with heresiarchs. He had that constant solicitude for truth which is the great heritage of the Preachers. With this he coupled a Scholastic willingness to distinguish, to carefully examine the tenets of a tradition not his own, rejecting what is false or corrosive, embracing what is true and good, insisting on essentials, yet flexible in non-essentials. But above all else, Ricoldo of Montecroce clearly grasped and steadfastly pursued the end which gave direction to his entire priestly and Dominican life—that all men should be brought to know, love and serve the One True God.