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The North Pole mission in Iceland
1857 - 1858

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Introduction

With the beheading of the last catholic bishop in Iceland Jón Arason in the year 1550 the history of the Catholic Church in Iceland came to an end. For the next three hundred years there ceased to be a Catholic in Iceland.

In 1854 the *Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith* (Propaganda de Fide) – the institution within the Catholic Church responsible for missionary work founded the Prefecture Apostolic of the Polar Regions or as it often called the North Pole Mission. The intention of the mission was to regain the Northern part of the Scandinavian countries, Iceland, Greenland, the Faroes and the Polar region of North America for the Catholic faith. An important role in the North Pole mission played Stepan Stepanovich Djunkowsky a Russian aristocrat who had converted to Catholicism and had become a priest in Paris. After having visited different Scandinavian countries he had suggested to the Propaganda de Fide to unite the Scandinavian countries to one apostolic prefecture (Kalde, 1999, p. 423). This is an area designed for missionary work by the Vatican. Cardinal Alessandro Barnabó in charge of the Propaganda de Fide nominated him as the head of the mission.

In recent years there has been an increased scholarly interest in the mission, especially in Scotland and Scandinavia (Newby, 2010; Brodersen, 2006; Werner, 2011). The missionary activities in Iceland are mentioned and referred to in these articles, however often only briefly and mainly by quoting the official reports sent to Rome. Most of the correspondence of the missionaries to Rome and to each other has so far not been used for the research. In the 1970s the catholic bishop in Iceland, Frehen, showed an interest in the history of the mission and obtained from the archives of the Propaganda de Fide copies of the letters regarding the missionary activities in Iceland. These copies are in the archive of the Catholic Church in Iceland and are the main basis for this article. Furthermore the Icelandic sources have systematically been evaluated in order to get a better understanding of the Icelandic perspective on the arrival of these missionaries in the middle of the nineteenth century. What emerges when these two sources are examined together is an interesting conflict or clash of strategies and tactics between the Catholic Church and its representatives on the one hand and the Lutheran establishment in Iceland on the other. There is no evidence suggesting that anyone in Iceland – except for the Catholic priests and missionaries - knew of the existence of the North Pole Mission as such or the true intension of the whole endower of reclaiming Iceland for the Catholic faith. Indeed, such a project, had it been openly pursued, would almost certainly have been banned by law (Arnór Sigurjónsson, 1957). However, in spite of the secrecy of the true purpose of her mission the Icelandic Lutheran Church and state officials were on guard with respect to the Catholic missionaries, and met every move by the Catholics with considerable suspicion trying to make sure that they did not gain any ground in establishing themselves in the country. Thus the initial phase of the North Pole Mission in Iceland can be described as a game of chess where the protestant strategy was to read and

interpret every actual and intended move of the Catholics and deny them any benefits. The strategy drawn up for Iceland by the North Pole Mission was mainly worked out by the French priest Bernard and his colleague the Icelander Ólafur Gunnlaugsson and consisted of three interrelated parts.

Firstly, the general and all important strategy was to win the trust of the local population through charity work, education, general helpfulness and by attending to the sick. An important tactic in this respect was not to begin by pushing religious issues, but rather to gain trust and then eventually build upon that trust a possible conversion to Catholicism.

Secondly, the missionaries did not reveal why they were really in Iceland and the whole concept of the North Pole Mission was not known to the Icelanders as mentioned above. The pretext given was to help the French fishermen who by the thousands were fishing for cod in Icelandic waters.

Thirdly, there was the idea of presenting Catholicism as a national and literary heritage and link the 13th century poetry and cultural traditions to the awakening of nationalist sentiments and the struggle for independence from Danish rule.

These strategies and tactics of the missionaries emerged very early, in fact within the first year of their arrival in Iceland. Simultaneously the response and “defence” moves of the Lutheran establishment in Iceland appeared and thus the main characteristics of the long drawn out chess game between the forces trying to reintroduce Catholicism in Iceland and the Protestant Church became apparent in the first year of the mission. In the following a sketch will be drawn up of these main characteristics as they appeared in the correspondence of the missionaries and the public response of Icelandic clergymen and others in the media at the time.

Iceland

In 1857 the Mission’s representatives came to Iceland. The representatives were the French priest Bernard, accompanied by Ólafur Gunnlaugsson, an Icelander that had converted to Catholicism and father Oddenino, an Italian priest. Bernard was the first Catholic priest setting foot on Iceland in 300 years. During the summer he wrote his first series of letters to Barnabó in Rome and Djunkowsky in Alta describing with optimism his arrival in Iceland even though father Oddenino who came with him had turned around and taken the same boat back to the continent after realizing where he had landed (Skjalasafn, Box1, 1st September 1857). Bernard explained that Ólafur Gunnlaugsson stayed with him for two months to teach him the basics of the Icelandic language and to help him making contact with the Icelandic people, before Gunnlaugsson left for Rome (Saga, 1975). In this time they tried to gain the trust of the locals and used the French fishermen as the official (and partly real) reason for being in Iceland.

Gaining the trust of the locals

Bernard stayed the first winter in Seyðisfjörður with Mr Poppe, a Danish business representative from the company Örum and Wulff, who had rented him one room in the house. It was the only room he could find in the East of Iceland.

Bernard’s main problem was the Icelandic law forbidding the practice of any other religion than the “Lutheran and Judaism”. The district authorities told him that it might be accepted to practice the Catholic rites for the Catholics, but not openly. In order to strengthen his position in the country he wanted to build a hospital for the seamen, serving as well the local population. He was also thinking about opening a school in the East of Iceland and educate the youngsters, which would allow him to interact with the local population. According to Bernard there was no school in the

East of Iceland and therefore the local population might be happy about it. Seyðisfjörður was according to him a good place for the mission since there were enough people living there and it had a connection to Europe. Another option he considered was to open a small business run by two or three good Catholics. Making business with France by selling Icelandic goods like wool, skin, fish oil, salted meat of sheep, quilts and more, and then importing materials from France would allow everyone to profit from it. The transport would not be very expensive since there were all the French vessels coming each year anyhow. The business would allow the priests also to get into contact with the local people. He thought that Icelanders would welcome the idea, because having competition with the Danes could only be in their interest. He kept speculating since there were six harbours in Iceland where foreigners were allowed to settle “we could therefore invade the country not in a materialistic but spiritual manner. I therefore ask you to send me the permission and the means to start this enterprise” (Skjalasafn, Box1, 1st September 1857). He came furthermore up with the idea of having a school for girls and drew up a plan of the school building which he sent to Rome for approval. All they would need here would be two dedicated good catholic women giving instructions “to girls of ‘*de bonnes maison*’ and if we have enough resources we could take orphans“ (Skjalasafn, Box1, 1st September 1857). He underlined that there was no hate against the Catholics and that they should promote their mission in the eyes of the Icelanders as a way back to the faith of their fathers.

This approach is also described by Ólafur Gunnlaugsson in the report he wrote after arriving in Rome in 1857. There he suggests that for the Catholics to have foreign priests in Iceland would always be a problem because of the language, recruiting priests from the locals should therefore have priority. Furthermore following the example of the Benedict monks they needed to work the earth to give a good example. Gunnlaugsson also pointed out that land does not cost much in Iceland and suggested to buy land in order to have a centre, where young people would be educated. Students would join he assumed, since the college in Reykjavik had become less and less popular since 1846 and had lost since then half of its students. The students who have the vocation of becoming priests could be sent abroad and the others could get a secular education in Iceland. Such a Catholic institution in Iceland would certainly give results; it might be slow but lasting (Saga, 1975).

Judging from the discussion in the Icelandic press at the time, the arrival of the Catholic priests does not seem to have evoked much public attention during the first months. However it is clear from reports that rev. Sigurður Gunnarsson, who served in the eastern part of Iceland, sent to Sveinbjörn Skúlason, the editor of the newspaper *Norðri* in Akureyri that Icelandic clergymen kept an eye on the Catholics. These letters and reports were published in *Norðri* irregularly for about three years signed with the pseudonym “Farmer Easterner” or “*Bóndi Austfirðingur*” (Arnór Sigurjónsson, 1957). In these letters – that in fact are a public warning to Icelanders – the motives of the priest and his co-workers are questioned. As had been the case in Norway (Brodersen, 2006) they were thought to be Jesuits and they were suspected of wanting to convert Icelanders to Catholicism. In a report in *Norðri* on the 31st of October 1857 it is explicitly suggested that they are using Jesuit-like methods, by gaining the trust of the common people through doing good deeds, learning the language and familiarizing themselves with the customs of the locals. In particular Bernard is mentioned as a man that is likable “well mannered, kind, calm and nice” (*Norðri*, 31st October 1857). It becomes very apparent from the reports in *Norðri* that Bernard is well liked by the general public, and that neither he, nor Baudoin, a second French priest arriving a year later, did talk very much about religion. On the contrary, they were attending to the sick generally making a good name for themselves. That indeed seems to be the main reason for the publication in *Norðri* of

the reports on the Catholic movements. This is e.g. demonstrated in a report in the spring of 1858 when some effort is put into discrediting the healing powers or medical skills of father Bernard, and a popular belief in his skills relegated to a status of superstition (Norðri, 17th April 1857). In the same report the intentions of Bernard to build a hospital and a school in Seyðisfjörður are addressed. The idea of a hospital and a school seems to appeal to the Icelanders – even to the critical reporter in Norðri. But the reporter reflects on this idea and suggests that if father Bernard is primarily a catholic priest out of practical reasons and not a religious idealist (Jesuit) this might be harmless. However if he was an idealist he should absolutely not be allowed to build a school and hospital. But the reporter's conclusion is that it would be best to give the priest a qualified permission for such an endeavour, because it may seem harmless to begin with but it might grow into something more in the hands of the "Djunkowsky's apostles" (Norðri, 17th April 1857).

Literary heritage and Catholicism

Popularizing the Mission as a return to the faith of their forefathers was already a method that had been used in Norway by portraying Protestantism as a Danish colonial religion. The missionaries understood very well to make use of the national movements in these countries. The same method propagating the Catholic faith as the old national faith was later used in the North of Scotland (Newby, 2010).

In October 1857 Djunkowsky was able to send to Rome the first official report on the progress of the mission (Skjalasafn, Box 2, 2nd October 1857). The report is very optimistic and copies of Bernard's letter to Djunkowsky were sent along with the report. In one of the attached letters Bernard is strongly recommending Ólafur Gunnlaugsson and asked the Propaganda de Fide to support him in his intention to study in Copenhagen the old catholic monuments produced in Iceland, like the lives of Saints, the songs in Latin, liturgies, monuments which would be helpful to reproduce in order to gain trust of the literary society of Iceland and the people. It would be a way to popularize the catholic mission in Iceland and push for a general return to the catholic faith, since Iceland had as Bernard expressed it more "defected us than been against us (...). That is the opinion I got from these people which lived far away from all controversies" (Skjalasafn, Box 2, 16th September 1857). In all early letters he strongly supports Ólafur and his brother who is in Rome studying to become a priest. Ólafur Gunnlaugsson had in his afore mentioned report suggested the strategy of producing catholic literature in order to gain the attention of Icelanders. As he pointed out in the report the population of Iceland produced in the 12th, 13th and 14th century great catholic literature which is for a large part unpublished and vanished in the libraries in the Northern countries. Publishing would be very useful for the Icelandic people, since the language has not changed since the 12th century. Furthermore, this would also have a big impact on the intellectuals in Scandinavia, since this is the only source of the history of the middle age and one could hope that the publications of the Icelandic catholic literature would disperse many prejudices in the Scandinavian countries.

This strategy never really did play a significant role in the interaction between the Mission on the one hand and the Lutheran establishment on the other. To be sure, in the long term some important intellectuals picked up on this point but that had little significance and hardly any in the initial stage. Pétur Pétursson has pointed out in his examination of the secularization process in Iceland 1830-1930, that there was a close connection between the existing conservative state church doctrine, the loyalty to the Danish king (as opposed to the Danish government) and politics of the early Icelandic struggle for independence. This was partly based on the unity of the crown and religion, the unity of the king and religion – and thus there emerged a situation with rather strange bedfellows in the Lutheran state religion and the king on the one hand

and the progressive and in many ways radical nationalistic demands of the intellectual Icelandic political elite on the other (Birgir Guðmundsson & Markus Meckel, 2014). Therefore this part of the North Pole Mission's strategy was less likely to yield success than were the others.

The service to French fishermen

In his report written in Rome in late 1857 Ólafur Gunnlaugsson explicitly explains the method he (and Bernard) believes should be used to regain Iceland. The French and Flemish fishermen would be the perfect pretext to enter the country, since they were all Catholic. Likewise the reason Bernard gave to the local population for being in Iceland was the French fishermen. Between 2000 and 3000 came each summer to fish around the coast of Iceland for cod. He underlines that there are often cases of sickness and death and the "poor ones are without any help, and the dead ones buried right and left by protestant priests" (Skjalasafn, Box1, 1st September 1857). It was in this context that he spoke of establishing a hospital for the fishermen which incidentally would also serve the natives. Father Bernard put strong emphasis on the building of a hospital and seems to have seen it as a way to strengthen the mission in general and as an argument for receiving funds.

Since Bernard did not receive the funding he had hoped for, he left in August 1858 for France and started to take things into his own hands. In his quest for funds the most important argument seems to have been the service to the fishermen rather than the pursuit of the North Pole Mission. In his first letter after arriving in Dunkerque he justified his departure to Cardinal Barnabó and underlined the need for proper funding: "What can we do living in a room rented from a Protestant in an unfree country?" (Skjalasafn Box 2, 7th September 1858). He explained that there was not even enough money to sustain themselves and when Baudoin arrived this spring he brought nothing with him.

Bernard addressed the bishops of France and Belgium because they should care about their Catholic sailors in Iceland as well as the ship owners. On the 14th of September 1858 (Skjalasafn, Box 2, 14th September 1858) in Dunkerque Bernard reminded the bishop in a letter of the Mission's financial problems and came forward with a new plan to buy a farm. The farm would be in the bay of Seyðisfjörður. He kept reminding him how much the priests were needed there also for "our poor French fishermen" and their urgent needs for their bodies and spirits. He was also looking for funding for a hospital at the coast of Iceland close to Seyðisfjörður, and further points out in the letter that the French sailors should be better supervised since their disorderly behaviour creates prejudices among the locals.

Three days later Bernard wrote (Skjalasafn, Box 2, 17th September 1858) to a boat owner fishing around Iceland. Bernard was eager to get the project going, and tried to sell him the idea that it would be in the owner's best interest to have a hospital in Iceland. "Many times I heard from the captains: if we would have a hospital in Iceland, we at least would know where to go if we needed help. Our medical supplies are so little and no one knows how to use them" (Skjalasafn, Box 2, 17th September 1858). Then he pointed out that a small hospital might make a big difference, and he reminded the ship owner that each fisherman who died left behind a wife and children and they will have to be taken care of by the communities. "Around 3000 French fishermen are around here. If you try to care for them on board of your ships you will lose time, but if they are in the hospital the boat can take them home at the end of the season or they can stay over winter here. Would you be willing to financially support the build of such a hospital? If you agree, it would then be possible to ask the French government to support this project by sending a doctor and two nuns. We will need to get the permission of the Danish government, which I think, with the guarantee that there will be a doctor available in the hospital, it will not refuse. It would be best to

have the hospital at the coast where most of the fishermen are working in the summer and it would be good having a fjord where there is also a merchant for the resources” (Skjalasafn, Box 2, 17th September 1858).

A month later he also addresses the French Minister of the Sea in Paris (Skjalasafn, Box 2, 14th October 1858) regarding the hospital and asks for official support for the hospital project. Now he used the honour of France and its reputation in Iceland as an argument for helping the fishermen and claims that he has the support of at least 30 ship owners (Skjalasafn, Box 2, 14 October 1858).

The Ministry clearly began to make inquiries because a year later Commandant Véron, Captain of a ship reported from Cherbourg to the Minister that “as you instructed I examined whether there would be use for a hospital in the East of Iceland. The project had already been suggested by the missionary Bernard. I have the honour to express doubts about the impartiality of the priest. I persist believing that our main ships are the preferred place for treating our sick sailors. I met this year with father Bernhard and he confessed regarding his hospital project, that having a pretext for trying to catechize the inhabitants, was a much more important aim than taking care of our sick” (Skjalasafn, Box 2, 18th September 1859).

There is no evidence in the Icelandic media of the time suggesting that either the Icelandic population or the clergymen and state officials question that the main purpose of the catholic priest was to serve the French and Flemish fishermen. Indeed – despite the doubts of Commandant Véron – it is unfair to suggest that the Mission did not care for the welfare of the fishermen although other considerations also played a role. However there is an interesting point in the relations between the Icelanders, father Bernard and the issue of the fishermen worth mentioning. Although the relations in general between the fishermen and the Icelanders were mostly good there were incidents of disagreements and conflict. Father Bernard clearly believed this to be a problem for the Mission, as is demonstrated in his own correspondence and also in a report published in *Norðri*. In December 1858 it is reported in a letter in *Norðri* that father Bernard is aiding an Icelandic farmer on the east coast to claim justice as some French fisherman had come ashore and robbed him and beaten him up. This is considered by the writer of the letter in *Norðri* as a sign that father Bernard is using quarrels with the fishermen as a means of gaining trust in Iceland. The letter then goes on to criticize the Icelandic authorities for not guarding the rights of citizens instead of leaving it to catholic priests (*Norðri*, 14th of December 1858).

A Mission in financial strains

Bernard’s letters from spring 1858 until late summer 1858 to Djunkowsky, Cardinal Barnabó and the Bishop in France and Belgium focus all on the financial situation of the mission in Iceland. Furthermore he described that people started to get suspicious of their staying and it was suspected that they were not only there to help their compatriots. “The bishop in Reykjavik gave special instructions to his priests with warnings and a small brochure had been printed in *Eyjafjörður* in 1857 by the protestant priest Hallgrímsson, in order to warn the people against the wolves coming here to devour and reminding the priests and the authorities of their task.” And he further explains that in an anonymous letter in *Norðri* the idea is put forward that my coming to Iceland is a Jesuits move (Skjalasafn, Box1, 1st September 1857).

The threefold strategy of the North Pole Mission that emerged already in the first year can be said to have succeeded in some respects but not in others. Father Bernard and later Baudoin as well, generally seem to have gained personal trust among the Icelanders they mingled with. They did not enter the country aggressively and did not explicitly preach or talk about religion. The emphasis on the connection with the

French and Flemish fishermen worked well and gave them the legitimisation that they otherwise would not have had. However the idea of connecting Catholicism and the awakening of the independence struggle from Denmark was less of a success.

Although father Bernard and his co-workers faced already in the first year many obstacles from the Icelandic public and the establishment, their main problem was not a bad strategy or their approach in communicating with the Icelanders. Their main problem was the lack of resources and financial support from their hinterland, from the Missions headquarters in Alta and the Catholic Church in Europe. Nevertheless Bernard was not discouraged and returned in 1859 to Iceland and moved to Grundarfjörður and then to Reykjavik where he bought Landakot. His ideas of building a hospital and a school were realized in the 20th century.

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