The Life of Anskar, Missionary to Scandanavia


When one of Anskar's followers suggested to him that he could work miracles he replied, "Were I worthy of such a favour from my God, I would ask that He would grant to me this one miracle, that by His grace He would make of me a good man." No one can read the "Life" written by Rimbert his disciple and successor which, after being lost for five hundred years, was fortunately rediscovered, without feeling moved to thank God for the accomplishment of the miracle for which Anskar had prayed. He was a good man in the best and truest sense of the term. In the character presented to us by his biographer we have a singularly attractive combination of transparent humility, unflinching courage, complete self devotion, and unwavering belief in a loving and overruling providence. The claim to the title Apostle of the North, which was early made on his behalf, rests not upon the immediate outcome of his labours, but upon the inspiring example which he bequeathed to those who were moved to follow in his steps. For whilst the Missions which lie planted in Denmark and Sweden during the thirty-three years of his episcopate were interrupted after his death by the desolating raids of the Northmen, those by whom the work was restarted gratefully recognised him as their pioneer.

The Life of Anskar, written by his companion and successor Bishop Rimbert, contains nearly all that is known of his life and work. A brief summary of what is told us by Bishop Rimbert, supplemented by the information that can be derived from other sources, will serve as an introduction to a study of his work.

The Emperor Charlemagne, who died on January 28, 84, had waged a series of seventeen campaigns extending over thirty-three years (772-805) against the Saxons, his avowed object being to compel them to accept the Christian faith. In order to accomplish this end he denounced the penalty of death against all who refused to be baptized and threatened the same punishment against those who, in despite of Christian custom, ate flesh during Lent. His campaigns were conducted with great cruelty, and on one occasion he massacred in a single day 4,500 prisoners surrendered to him by Witikind whom he was endeavouring to convert to the Christian faith. As a result of his wars he had effected the nominal conversion to Christianity of the peoples inhabiting the country as far cast as the River Elbe, and had included their territories within his dominions. The Danish and Scandinavian peninsulas, however, remained unaffected by his influence.

It had been his intention to make an effort to spread the Faith amongst the inhabitants of these lands, and with this object his view he had refused to allow the Church at Hamburg, which was in charge of a priest named Heridac, to be included in any of the adjacent sees, as he intended to establish it as an independent bishopric, in order that it should form a centre from which Missions to the northern peoples might be organised. The war in which he was engaged with the Danes and, subsequently, his own death prevented the accomplishment of this plan, but it was carried into effect by his son Louis the Pious.

A dispute as to the right of succession to the crown having arisen in Denmark, his help was solicited by Harald Krag, one of the disputants, and in 82Z the ambassador whom Louis sent to Denmark suggested the establishment of a Mission among the Danes. Ebo the archbishop of Rheims, who was the Emperor's favourite minister, was asked by him to organise this mission and with him was associated Halitgar, bishop of Cambray.

As early as the eighth century the Danes became celebrated for their piratical expeditions and for their descents upon the coasts of England, Scotland and Normandy, and from the
inhabitants of these countries as well as from their intercourse with the Franks, some knowledge of the Christian faith must have reached them. A writer in the *Centuriatores Magdeburgenses* [Quoted by Kruse P. 237.] says, "Our Lord Jesus Christ extended His kingdom amongst the Danes in this wise: He urged the Danish kings to attack the Franks, and by them the Danes were defeated and slaughtered, after which by bishops and certain steadfast teachers He converted them to the faith. Thus Willibald, during the reign of Charlemagne, won for Christ a certain number of Danes, as Honorius has stated." Willibald became Bishop of Eichstadt in 742. Saxo Grammaticus in his history of the Danes [IX. 178.] says that a Danish chief or king named Frotho VI was baptized in England and that he sent from England messengers to beg Pope Agapet to send missionaries to Denmark. The messengers however, died before reaching Rome. Agapet I died in 536, and Agapet II in 936, neither of which dates appears to harmonize with the statement of Saxo Grammaticus. Willehad (d. 789), who was the first bishop of Bremen, says that he preached to the peoples north of the River Elbe; moreover a church existed at Meldorf in 776, which was afterwards destroyed by the Saxons. Of the missionary work organised by Ebo or Halitgar, practically nothing is known, but it would appear that as a result of their efforts the Danish king became favourably disposed towards Christianity. In 826 King Harald, with his wife and a large train of followers, visited the Emperor at Ingetheim, where he and his followers were baptized, and when he was about to return to his own land it was suggested that he should take with him a monk to act as priest and teacher.

Anskar, who was born in 801, was trained in the monastery of Corbey near Amiens and had been transferred with other monks to the monastery of New Corbey near Hoxter on the River Weser, which was founded in 822. By the time of Anskar the spiritual life of the Benedictine monasteries had sunk very low, but the Benedictine monastery of Old Corbey in which he had been trained and which owed its origin to a colony of monks who had come from the stricter Columbanian monastery at Luxeuil, had preserved its early tradition unimpaired. In the new monastery Anskar was placed in charge of the monastic school and, he was also accustomed to preach to the public congregation. From early childhood he had seen visions and dreamed dreams, which created in him the desire to lead a religious life, and his thoughts were perhaps turned in the direction of missionary enterprise by the accounts which must have reached him of the work accomplished by Boniface and his successors. His definite resolve to devote his life to this object dated, as his biographer tells us, from a time immediately after the death of Charlemagne, when he had recently taken the tonsure and had become a monk. About this time he had a vision in describing which Anskar says, "When then I had been brought by the men whom I mentioned into the presence of this unending light, where the majesty of almighty God was revealed to me without need for anyone to explain, and when they and I had offered our united adoration, a most sweet voice, the sound of which was more distinct than all other sounds and which seemed to me to fill the whole world, came forth from the same divine majesty and addressed me and said, Go and return to Me crowned with martyrdom."

His biographer adds, "As a result of this vision, which I have described in the words which he had himself dictated the servant of God was both terrified and comforted and in the fear of the Lord he began to live more carefully, to cleave day by day to good deeds, and to hope that by the mercy of God, in whatever way He might choose, he might be able to obtain the crown of martyrdom." [Chap III] The greatest disappointment in after life which Anskar experienced was caused by the fact that his expectation of martyrdom founded on this vision was not literally fulfilled.

In another vision, which he saw before starting on his missionary journey to the Swedes, he heard a voice which said to him in reply to his question, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do? Go and declare the word of God to the nations." [Chap IX] These visions are typical of many others by which Anskar's life and conduct were influenced from his early youth. His first vision came to him when he was only five years old. [Chap II]
When then the name of Anskar was suggested by Wala the Abbot of Corbey and he was asked by the Emperor whether he was willing to go with the King of Denmark in order that he might preach the gospel to the Danish people, he replied that he was entirely willing. [Chap VII] The task which he proposed to undertake appeared to be so full of danger and difficulty that his friends and fellow-monks tried hard to dissuade him from his purpose and, when he began to make preparations for his journey, only one, a monk named Aubert, was found willing to act as his companion.

The first two years (8268) after his arrival in Denmark were not productive of great visible results, but he laid a foundation for subsequent missionary work by starting a school for the training of Danish youths who might become the evangelists of their own countrymen. The twelve boys with which the school opened were either purchased by Anskar or presented to him by the king. The school was established on the borders of Denmark at Hadeby or Schleswig. [Chap VIII XXIV] Two years later Harald, who had incurred the hostility of his subjects by his attempts to introduce the Christian faith, was driven from his kingdom, and Anskar's work was interrupted. In 820 he left the mission work in Denmark in charge of a monk named Gislema and, at the suggestion of the Emperor, undertook a new Mission to Sweden.

This Mission was undertaken in response to a request which had been made to the Emperor Louis by some Swedish ambassadors who had represented to him that "there were many belonging to their nation who desired to embrace the Christian religion." At the time of which we are speaking Sweden was inhabited by two distinct races, both of which were of Teutonic origin, i.e., the Sveas, or Swedes, in the north, and the Goths in the South.

During the eighth century the Sveas and the Goths were ruled by a single king. Their king, whose capital was Upsala, claimed divine origin as the descendant of Odin, and every nine years a great assembly of Sveas and Goths was held at this temple at which he took the lead. A belief in the survival of their ancestors formed part of the popular religion. Thus Bishop Wordsworth writes, "As the king was the national priest so every father of a family was regarded as a priest in his own household. Polygamy was not prohibited. The graves of the dead were near the houses and were places for religious worship and meditation. In these family howes, as they were called, the head of the faintly was wont to sit, according to custom, for hours together, no doubt to hold converse with the spirits of the departed and to look forward to the uncertain future. These howes were also places for games and athletic sports. ... The use of the churchyard for festivals is clearly a relic [cf. Wordsworth, National Church of Sweden, p. 40] of this custom, which prevailed also in England."

Those to whom the Swedish ambassadors referred and who desired that a Christian Mission should be sent to their country, had probably obtained some knowledge of Christianity from Danish or other traders who had visited their shores. The Emperor on receipt of their request appealed to the Abbot of Corbey who once again suggested that Anskar should be invited to undertake the new Mission.

After a dangerous voyage, during which lie and his companion Witmar were robbed by Vikings, he reached Birka, a port on an island in Lake Malan, now called Byorko, which lies about eighteen miles Nvest of Stockholm and twenty-two miles south of the old city of Sigtuna (Signildsberg). At this time Upsala, which was about twenty miles north of Sigtuna, was the chief centre of heathenism. It contained a gilded temple surrounded by a sacred wood on which the bodies of men and animals that had been sacrificed to the gods were constantly hanging. The temple which contained images of three of the national gods of Sweden, Thor, Wodan and Sicco, was not destroyed till seventy years after the death of Anskar. Anskar was well received by King Bl6m, who, after consulting his people, gave him permission to preach. He remained in Birka for two winters and then returned to report to the Emperor the progress that had been achieved; whereupon the Emperor decided to make Hamburg a centre from which to develop missionary work in the north and arranged that Anskar should be consecrated as its bishop. The
town of Hamburg, of which Anskar thus became the first archbishop, was founded by
Charlemagne in 808, who had been about to make it the seat of a bishopric when he died. His
scheme was carried into effect by his son Louis in 831 and, three years later, a charter was
issued, which was confirmed by Pope Gregory IV, raising the see to the rank of an
archbishopric which was to include not only the surrounding districts, but Iceland, Greenland,
and the whole of Scandinavia. Anskar, who became the first bishop and afterwards archbishop,
founded here a monastery and a school. In 847 it was decided at a synod held at Mainz that
Hamburg should be attached to the bishopric of Bremen, and that the seat of the archbishop
should be at Bremen. Soon after his appointment as Archbishop of Hamburg Anskar
consecrated his nephew Gautbert as a bishop for Sweden. He laboured there as a missionary
for several years, but in 845 was attacked and driven out of the country by the heathen. In the
same year the city of Hamburg was attacked and pillaged by an army of Northmen led by Eric
King of Jutland, who laid waste the whole country and destroyed nearly all the Christian
churches. For several years Anskar wandered over his desolate diocese, till in 849 when he
became Archbishop of Bremen, he succeeded in winning the favour of Eric King of Jutland and
obtained his permission to restart missionary work in Denmark. He then built a church at
Schleswig, where he had formerly established a Christian school. Schleswig was situated on the
borders of Denmark and its inhabitants had frequent intercourse with the Christian towns of
Dorstede and Hamburg. At this place many who were secret Christians openly professed their
faith, and joined with the new converts in Christian worship.

After Gautbert had been expelled from Sweden missionary work remained in abeyance for
seven years, but in 851 Anskar sent thither a hermit named Ardgar, who laboured there for over
ten years. In 853 Anskar, whose missionary zeal had been increased by another vision in which
the late Abbot of Corbey had appeared to him and had told him that he was destined to carry
salvation even unto the ends of the earth, set out once again for Sweden. On his arrival at Birka
he found the king and his subjects engaged in debating how they might do honour to a new
national deity whom they had recently recognised. In reply to Anskar's request that he might be
allowed to preach the Christian faith to his people, the king decided that lots should be cast in
the open air in order to discover whether it would be right to accede to his requests. The lots
having proved to be favourable, Anskar was allowed to lay a proposal before a general
assembly of the people, at which, after a long discussion, which is graphically described by
Rimbert, it was finally decided to allow the Mission to continue its work. He remained in Sweden
for over a year, and on his return to Hamburg in 854, left Erlimbert a nephew of Gautbert in
charge of the Mission.

During his absence in Sweden the prospects of missionary work in Denmark became
overclouded. Eric, King of Jutland, who had formerly supported Anskar, had become unpopular
with his pagan subjects, and in a battle which lasted for three days he and nearly all his chief
men were killed, and his one descendant, Eric II, was left as regent over a small portion of
Jutland. His chief counsellor was a man named Hovi who persecuted the Christians and put an
end to Christian worship at Schleswig, but in course of time Hovi was superseded and the
Christian missions which Anskar had inaugurated were once more permitted to develop. Anskar
moreover, received from the king a grant of land at Ripa in Jutland on which he built a second
church.

On his return to Hamburg, lie devoted himself to ministering to the needs of his own diocese. A
number of Christians who had been carried off as slaves by some of the pagan tribes in the
north had escaped into Northalbingia (i.e., the country north of the River Elbe), and had either
been retained as slaves or sold to other slaveholders. Anskar, who was greatly distressed that
this had occurred within his own diocese, went at once to the chiefs who were responsible and,
after an impassioned appeal, persuaded them to release all their captives.

As his life drew to its close he was much distressed that the vision which he had seen many
years before, in which, as he thought, it had been foretold that he would die a martyr's death,
had not been literally fulfilled. Shortly before his death, however, he had another vision which assured him that it was through no fault of his that the crown of martyrdom had been withheld. At the same time his friends reminded him that the hardships and dangers which lie had experienced had in effect made his whole life one continuous martyrdom. He died on February 3, 865, at the age of 64, more than half his life having been spent in missionary work in Denmark and Sweden and within the limits of his own diocese.

His whole life was characterized by rigid discipline and self-denial: he wore a haircloth shirt by day and night, and in the earlier part of his life he measured out everything that he ate or drank; he chanted a fixed number of Psalms morning and evening, and would also sing Psalms as he laboured with his hands, and chant litanies as he dressed, or washed his hands, and three or four times a day he would celebrate Mass. Of all that he received he gave at once a tenth part to the poor and every five years he tithed his income afresh. Wherever he went in his diocese he would eat nothing till some poor persons had been brought in to share his meal and during Lent he would wash their feet and would distribute amongst them bread and meat.

Although his biographer attributes to him the working of a number of miracles, Anskar himself never claimed to possess this power. Adam of Bremen, referring to the hospital founded by Littgart at Bremen, states that Anskar was wont to visit it daily, and is said to have healed very many by his speech and by his touch. [I.30. plurimos dicitur verbo vel tactu sanasse.] There is no reason for doubting that the tradition which Adam quotes represents what actually occurred. In view of the steadily increasing use in the Mission Field of anointing, in order to promote the recovery of the sick,* it is interesting to read the reference to anointing which occurs in his life: "It is impossible to count the number of those who were healed by his prayers and by his anointing. For according to the statement made by many persons, sick people came eagerly to him, not only from his own diocese but from a great distance, demanding from him healing medicine. He, however, preferred that this should be kept quiet rather than that it should be noised abroad." [Chap XXXIX]

Of the effect produced by his preaching, alike upon the rich and the poor, we read: "As the grace of God shone more and more in his body, his preaching had a special charm, though it was at times awe-inspiring, so that it might be clearly seen that his words were controlled by divine inspiration. By mingling gentleness with terror he would make manifest the power of God's judgment, whereby the Lord when He comes will show Himself terrible to sinners and friendly to the just. His grace of speech and appearance were so attractive that he inspired with fear the powerful and rich and still more those who were impenitent and shameless and whilst the common people embraced him as a brother, the poor with almost affection venerated him as a father." [Chap XXXVII]

Like St. Martin, the record of whose life exercised a lasting influence upon him, the visions which came to him, some by night and some by (lay, helped largely to mould his character and to influence his actions. During the earlier part of his life visions were granted to him at special crises, or when he was in doubt as to his course of action, but later on they became a normal experience. Thus we read, "Inasmuch as, in accordance with the teaching of St. Paul, his conversation was always in heaven, he, though on earth, was frequently enlightened by celestial revelations. ... Thus it was that almost everything that was about to happen to him became known to him by a dream, or by mental enlightenment, or by an ecstatic vision. When we speak of mental enlightenment we think that it resembled that referred to in the Acts of the Apostles where it is written, 'The Spirit said to Philip.' For in the case of every important decision that he had to make he always desired to have time for consideration and he decided nothing rashly till, being enlightened by God's grace, he knew what was best to be done." [Chap XXXVI]

His reliance upon the aid which lie obtained from visions did not, however, make him value the less the ordinary means of grace. He was, in the truest sense, a man of prayer. On more than
one occasion we read in his biography, "being deprived of human aid he hastened, as his custom was, to seek for divine assistance."

The conditions under which Anskar and his companions worked were so different from those under which missionaries have worked in modern times that it is not easy to compare their methods of action with his. The fact that Anskar and his companions appealed and perhaps necessarily appealed in the first instance to the rulers of the countries to which they went, explains at once their initial successes and their subsequent disappointments.

Anskar lived in an age when small regard was paid to conscientious objectors, whether in the sphere of religion, or politics, but, unlike other notable missionaries of later date such as Bishop Christian of Prussia, or - to take a more notable instance - Francis Xavier in India, he made no attempt to invoke the aid of the civil power in order to overcome opposition to his teaching or even to protect his own life. The latter missionary, whose life-long self renunciation and passionate devotion to our Lord equalled those of Anskar, felt no scruples in seeking and obtaining authority from the King of Portugal to punish with death the makers of idols, and on many different occasions urged the Viceroy of India to employ force in order to hasten the conversion of India. Anskar's attitude in regard to the use of force corresponded rather with that of Raymund Lull, who wrote, "They think they can conquer by force of arms: it seems to me that the victory can be won in no other way than as Thou, O Lord Christ, didst seek to win it, by love and prayer and self-sacrifice."

The work which he accomplished was that of a pioneer. Nor can it be claimed on his behalf that the Missions which he founded developed by a natural process of expansion into National Churches. Like several of the greatest missionaries in later times, such as Raymund Lull, Henry Martyn, and Livingstone, his life was saddened by many disappointments and by the knowledge that the task which he had desired to accomplish remained at his death unfulfilled. Thus the author of the Chronicon Corbeiensis for the year 936, referring to the Christians in Sweden, states that the Christian religion which Anskar, Rimbert, Gautbert, and Nithard had preached was well nigh extinct and that the worship of idols prevailed. Adam of Bremen, referring to a period half a century or more after the death of Anskar writes, "Let it suffice us to know that up to this time all the kings of the Danes had been pagans, and amid so great changes of kingdoms or inroads of barbarians some small part of the Christianity that had been planted by Anskar had remained, the whole had not failed." [See I. 54.] But though the visible results which attended his labours tended to disappear after his death, his work was far from being transitory. His zeal, his heroism, his faith, his far reaching designs and above all his saintly life proved a help and inspiration to those who were to come after him and contributed not a little to the establishment of the Christian Church throughout Northern Europe.

Dr. Jorgensen, one of the foremost authorities on Danish history, referring to the practical wisdom displayed by Anskar, writes, "The Mission of Anskar showed a hardihood and a greatness which must surprise anyone who imagines the Apostle of the North to have been an unpractical dreamer. ... He possessed a rare eloquence both in preaching and in common talk, so that he left on all men an extraordinary impression: the mighty and haughty were frightened by his tone of authority, the poor and humble looked to him as to a father, whilst his equals loved him as a brother. ... What he carried out in the thirty-three years of his bishopric was of imperishable importance for those nations to which he devoted his efforts. The only reward that he coveted for his labours, - the palm of martyrdom - was not to be his; but what was the sorrow of the apostle ought to be the glory of the North, that it did not soil itself with his blood." [Denordiske Kirkes grundlaeggelse og forste Vdvikling, by A.D. Jorgensen pp. 147, 158, 153.]

Bishop Wordsworth writes of him, "There can be no question of Anskar's saintliness, according to the standard of any age of Christendom. His missionary zeal and courage, his uncomplaining patience, his generosity, his austere self-discipline and his diligence in the work of his calling
were all striking features of his character." [The National Church of Sweden by John Wordsworth, p. 65 f.]

His relations with Ebo, who might so readily have been regarded as his rival, seem to have been more than friendly. He clearly regarded Ebo as his counsellor and inspirer. He evidently felt the great importance and future possibilities of their joint mission, and he seems to have done his best to leave it as a legacy to be fostered by the whole Church of Germany."

Anskar was accustomed to maintain that a mission to a non-Christian country should be self-supporting. He held that a missionary ought to ask nothing of those to whom he ministered, but should follow the example of St. Paul and endeavour to support himself, by his own labour. Thus his biographer writes, "To him (Rimbert) as to all the other priests whom he had before appointed to live amongst pagans, Anskar gave strict orders that they should not desire nor seek to obtain the property of anyone, but he affectionately exhorted them that, after the example of the Apostle St. Paul, they should labour with their hands and be content with food and raiment." [Chap XXXIII finis]

At the same time he accepted from the Emperor and from Christian and non-Christian kings, and himself gave to his fellow missionaries whatever was needed for their subsistence. He also enabled and encouraged his missionaries to make presents by means of which friends and patrons amongst the heathen might be secured.

The name Anskar may perhaps be derived from the old German schar meaning a shore, Its meaning would then be "onshore" or "ashore." There is a church in Hamburg dedicated to Maria den schare, the dedication of which may perhaps be regarded as identical with that of a church in Vienna which is dedicated to Maria am gestade, i.e., Mary on the shore. It has also been suggested that the name may be derived from the old High German "ans" meaning God and the old High German "ger" or "ker," Anglo Saxon "gar" meaning "spear."

Anskar's immediate successor, who was also his biographer, made several missionary journeys in Denmark and in Sweden during the twenty-three years of his episcopate. In order to ransom Christians who had been captured by the Northmen he parted even with the gold and silver vessels of his church and with the horse which he kept for his own use. Archbishop Unmi the successor of Rimbert died at Birka in 936 whilst engaged in a missionary tour. His successor at Bremen, Adaldag, ordained a Dane named Odinkar as a bishop for Sweden and ordained a number of bishops for Denmark.