

THE CHURCH TO-DAY IN NORWAY

THE Scandinavian countries, and not least of them Norway, have long remained strongholds of Lutheranism. That is, in outward appearance, for the Norwegian State Church counts among its members an unusually large proportion of formal adherents, people who are baptised and 'confirmed' in the Lutheran State Church, but who remain for the rest of their lives totally indifferent in religious matters, never attending Church services, or otherwise manifesting any interest whatsoever.

This general apathy has now begun to react on the State Church in a marked degree. Methodists and other Free Church sects have steadily increased their influence and numbers, and have drawn over a large proportion of members, who are recruited from the same classes as in England, namely from among prosperous tradesmen and the best section of the working class population.

Catholicism, on the other hand, here as elsewhere, makes her primary appeal to the intellectual section of the community, but as the first movement broadens and deepens, she sweeps with her people of all ranks and conditions.

The first establishment of the Catholic Church in Norway was made in 1856, in Oslo, then Christiania, under the patronage of St. Olaf, the saint who brought Christianity to the heathen Norsemen. Since then Churches and chapels have sprung up in the larger towns throughout the country, and Norway numbers at present nineteen Catholic churches and twenty chapels.

The Church of St. Olaf in Oslo, which is also the seat of the bishopric, is quite an imposing building,

The Church To-day in Norway

standing high on a mound in a central position in the city. Here is also situated the residence of the bishop and priests, and the Catholic hospital of 'Vor Frue.' In Bergen, the second largest town in Norway, the Catholic Church, whose patron saint is St. Paul, is also centrally situated and here is likewise the priests' residence, and the Catholic Hospital of St. Franciskus. I have also visited Catholic Churches in some of the smaller towns, as for example in Drammen, where the building must almost be characterised as a wooden chapel, built in the style of the country. All the Norwegian Churches and Chapels, although often simple in style and with no pretensions to architecture, give a very pleasing impression of being essentially clean and well cared for. The candles and altar-linen are artistically arranged, and even though we are so far north, there is never any dearth of beautiful flowers. Even in the heart of the bitterest winter I have seen the altars of my own parish church of Bergen glowing with tulips of all shades, and at Christmas time they have the beautiful custom of decorating the high altar with two large Christmas trees. I have seldom seen any more touching, or more appropriate altar decoration than these two graceful pine-trees soaring aloft and forming a beautiful dark green background for the lights of the altar, and filling the Church with the sweet scent of pine needles.

But let us return to dryer statistical facts. In Norway there are 2,600 Catholics out of an entire population of some two and a half millions. Our Churches and Chapels are served by 18 secular priests, four of whom are Norwegians and the remainder mainly Dutch and German, and by 14 priests belonging to religious orders, all of whom are foreigners. It is here of interest to note that the establishment, of comparatively recent date, of a French Dominican mission in Oslo, has been attended with great success.

Blackfriars

Great credit must also be given to the 18 Catholic hospitals which are established in Norway. From personal experience I can say that scarcely anything brings the Catholic Faith so intimately into contact with people as the work of these good nuns. I feel sure that it is many times during an illness that the first seeds of reflection are sown, and it is not only the patient, but all who come into contact with the hospital, relatives and visitors and the many others, who see the splendid order and management of the Catholic hospitals here in Norway, who are thus influenced for good. Here I would once more like to bring Bergen to the fore, not but that I feel sure equally good work is being carried out by the nuns in the other large towns, but as a resident of this city I have naturally had more opportunity of studying local conditions.

The congregation of nuns here, of the Order of St. Francis Xavier, came originally from Luxemburg, and commenced their activities some 35 years ago in a small private house. They were chiefly engaged in private nursing. After some years of self-sacrificing and entirely successful work they were recalled to Luxemburg and the Bishop of Norway, then Monsignor Fallige, founded a special diocesan congregation for Norway with the Mother-house in Bergen, now known as the Norwegian Congregation of St. Francis Xavier. The date of this foundation was March 19th, 1901. A hospital was then built on the same plot of ground as the Church. Here they receive patients for surgical treatment for diseases of the ear, nose and throat. Some time ago—a matter of some four years or so—they acquired a beautiful modern residence which they converted into an Ophthalmic Hospital. They have also established a home for the care of the aged. Some two months ago they purchased a magnificent property situated in a commanding position on the outskirts of the town. Here it is

The Church To-day in Norway

their intention in the course of a few years to build a large hospital equipped with every modern device. Meanwhile the existing building is being temporarily converted into a hospital for the further extension of their work.

I feel this little summary may give some idea of the devotion shown by these good nuns, who in the course of a comparatively short period of years have so greatly extended their activities. Needless to say, we have a counterpart in the never-tiring energy of our good priests.

The first members of the Catholic Church in Norway were largely drawn from families of mixed nationality. A German mother, a French father, Irish descent, have been the seeds from which the first small beginnings have sprung. But the Church has now been established so long that we have reached the third and are almost on the verge of the fourth generation, where foreign influence is practically obliterated, and this coincides in a remarkable way with a new period in the history of the Church in Norway, marked by a striking number of conversions among the adult population.

One of the most noticeable of these conversions has been that of Sigrid Undset, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928.

Sigrid Undset is a monumental figure in modern Scandinavian literature, and her deep sincerity has won the respect of all denominations. Her series of historical novels of recent years are saga-like in their immensity, and are considered to reproduce an historically truthful picture of the 13th and 14th centuries. The daughter of a professor in archaeology, Sigrid Undset has from her earliest years been steeped in an atmosphere of historical research. But, not only do her novels give an accurate account of the customs, dress and so forth of that time. She has also suc-

Blackfriars

ceeded in conjuring up the simple faith of the middle ages. One of the most beautiful passages in 'Kristin Lavransdatter' is a description of a pilgrimage made by Kristin to Nidaros Abbey, the Trondhjem Cathedral of the present day. This pilgrimage was undertaken as an act of penance, and Sigrid Undset's description of Kristin's spiritual experience, carrying her first-born son with her on this journey of reparation, is extremely beautiful. These novels have a marked nationalist tendency, and recount the events, wars, feuds, politics and kingships of those days—in fact, the history of Norway at a time when Catholicism was the faith of the whole of Norway, and of Scandinavia in general. Here we come to the kernel of Sigrid Undset's influence. Once Norway realises that Catholicism is not a foreign importation, but a faith which has been intimately bound up with Norway, in one of her most prosperous periods, much will be won.

Norwegians are intensely national in their feelings. Therefore, before any real progress can be made, they must be made to realise that a return to Catholicism will mean, as it has done in England, a return to the 'faith of their fathers.'

It is of interest here to note one of the results of this growing nationalist tendency, namely the restoration of Trondhjem Cathedral. This has been marked by a violent controversy and is still the subject of lengthy discussions in the Press. This work is, however, now nearing its completion, and 1930 is to see the official re-opening.

Norway is not rich in architectural monuments, still less in cathedrals, and the abbey church of Trondhjem represents the 'pearl' amongst her possessions of this nature, so that it is with undoubted feelings of satisfaction that the whole nation has watched this work of restoration. These feelings are, however, amongst Catholics naturally tinged with deep regret, a fact

The Church To-day in Norway

which Sigrid Undset openly voiced in the public press some time ago. This abbey, a relic of Catholic times, would provide an exquisite setting for the ceremonies of the Catholic Church, but it is felt even by a large section of non-Catholics that the Lutheran ritual will seem quite out of place here after this restoration, the whole work of which has been based on the idea of preserving the original characteristics of the building. One cannot but feel it to be highly illogical to ignore the source of inspiration which created this beautiful church, namely the simple faith of the middle ages.

When her size and population are taken into account, Norway may be said to be one of the best educated nations in Europe, and Norwegians have a very real and cultured appreciation of all kinds of art, not least of music, and here is a point where I feel the Catholic Church should make a very deep appeal. It is curious to note that recently several hymns which are an integral part of the liturgy of the Catholic Church have been brought into use in the Lutheran State Church, not actually in their services perhaps, but rendered by their choirs on semi-public occasions, at concerts and so forth, where they have been regarded as marvellous works of art. The *Te Deum* and a form of *Vespers* have in this way been revived. Surely this denotes a very strong desire for a more liturgical form of service.

It seems to me that once the existing prejudices, which have their root largely in ignorance and falsehood, are cleared away, Norway will present a rich and promising harvest field.

It has been said that the average Norwegian is not of a deeply religious nature. I think this is only true in so far as it applies to any modern nation. It is a tendency of the times to ignore Almighty God, or at any rate to grant Him only a secondary position in our lives. Modern life, with its harassing competition, its

Blackfriars

struggle for many, merely to live, and its unceasing hurry, leaves many of us but a sorry portion to devote to religion. But this increasing strain of modern life is in itself the very factor that reacts in favour of all religion. There are times when we crave the inward quiet and outward peace which are only to be acquired through a definite confession of faith.

This applies as much in Norway as anywhere in our modern democratic world. People turn from the pressure of life seeking God, and where can one better lay down the burden of our modern civilisation than within the arms of Mother Church?

We few Catholics here in this far northern land see the tremendous need for a great extension of the Catholic faith. It needs to be better and more widely known, to be brought nearer to the homes and hearts, and above all to the souls and intellects of the people, and seeing this need we turn our eyes westwards to England, where the Church has lived a century now in emancipation. Surely England, with its existing wealth of religious orders, has some great part to play in the ultimate conversion of Norway?

VERONICA LORENTZEN