CHAPTER VI

# THE MISSIONS AMONG THE MONGOLS

At the beginning of the thirteenth century while the Church was still preaching the Crusade, St Francis of Assisi's Order of Friars Minor and St Dominic's Order of Preachers came into existence at one and the same time. Although these two movements were different in character, there is no reason, in our opinion, why they should be considered as in opposition to one another. Each was an answer to certain needs of the time.

Islam, or, as the phrase was, the Saracens, had behaved as a determined enemy of Catholicism in Africa and Spain. They occupied the Holy Places. By undertaking to free these from their domination, the Crusaders, as is made clear by a passage in the cartulary of the abbey of St Bertin, were seeking to increase the body of the Church and to restore to God lands and cities unjustly held by the infidels. But to these motives of a religious nature were added others of a very human kind which did not diminish as time went on.

Jerusalem was taken and lost again. This failure was salutary, we might almost be tempted to say, since it did not effect the lasting results on the intellectual and economic levels. It was when the spirit of the Crusades had revealed its weaknesses that St Francis came upon the scene and preached a missionary doctrine inspired, as was his whole life, solely by the spirit of the Gospel. We cannot say it was new, for it was

that of the early Church. The Moslems were commonly considered to be simply men whose throats were to be cut and they, in their turn, asked for nothing better than to return the compliment, so as to receive not only an eternal reward but also the golden *besant* the Sultan ordered should be given to every man who brought back the head of a Christian. St Francis suggested that men should go to them for no other purpose than to preach the Gospel and lead them to baptism without any threats or use of force.

He himself joined the crusaders in 1219 at Damietta and put his method into operation in spite of the opposition of Cardinal Pelagio. He went towards the enemy lines and succeeded in obtaining an audience of the Sultan Melck-El-Kamel. The Sultan argued that he could not change his religion without alienating his people. St Francis, having failed to achieve any result, came sadly away.

St Dominic too was prevented from realizing his desire to become a missionary but he wished that his disciples should take their share in missionary work.

It was therefore in obedience to their illustrious founders that Franciscans and Dominicans, the wandering friars of both Orders, wanted to continue the evangelization of the Gentiles in Asia.

In about the year 1223, the Dominicans, under the protection of the king of Hungary, arrived among the Comans or Qiptchaq, who lived in the Ukrainian steppes and were for the most part Shamanists. The wave of conversions caused by the baptism of one of their chiefs became considerable enough to lead the papacy to establish a bishopric among the Comans. The Dominicans then moved on to the north-east into greater Hungary or the territory situated to the east of the upper reaches of the Volga. But the Mongol invasion soon wiped out every vestige of the Comanian mission.

These Mongols had nevertheless destroyed the Moslem empires of the Middle East. Further, as a large number of Nestorians lived under their rule and apparently in reasonable

freedom, the papacy did not consider them at the outset as enemies. Innocent IV sent ambassadors to them in preference to missionaries; their task was to explore the ground and to prepare for the return to unity of the schismatics and heretics and, if possible, to persuade the Mongols to abandon violent methods.

Two Franciscans, Dominic of Aragon and John of Piano di Carpine, set out on a journey, one to the Armenians, the other to the Russians, while two Dominicans, Andrew of Longjumeau and Ascelin of Cremona, were sent, one to Syria and beyond and the other to the Mongol princes. In the end, Piano di Carpine alone made contact with one of these, Güyük. This khan gave a courteous hearing to his exposition of Christianity, refused to be baptized and took leave of the Franciscan, at the same time instructing him to tell the pope that he considered the papacy his (Güyük's) vassal.

Reports which came in later claimed that some Mongol chiefs had become converts to Christianity. This time St Louis, with the pope's approval, sent Andrew of Longjumeau on a second mission. Meanwhile Güyük had died. His widow politely accepted the presents sent by the king of France. Among these were relics of the true Cross. She herself gave presents in return to the Dominican for St Louis but refused any precise undertaking in regard to the plan for a Franco-Mongol alliance against the Moslems of Irak. She too urged a counter-claim to the right of suzerainty over the West.

Nevertheless Andrew of Longjumeau returned to report some good prospects for future missions. The Mongols were strictly neutral in religious matters. Further there were Christians at court in the higher ranks of the administration and even in the near neighbourhood of the throne. It was even said that the mother of Mangou (the emperor and a grandson of Genghis Khan) and several of his wives were Christians as well as Sartach, the khan in command between the Don and the Volga. As Matrod writes in his *Étude sur le voyage de Guillaume de Rubrouck*: "People began to dream of the days

of St Helena, Constantine Chlorus and Constantine . . . in their over-excited imaginations they already saw the Cross casting its shadow over the tents of the nomads. It was still unsteady but an apostle would be able to plant it firmly there."

The apostle chosen was a Franciscan Friar Minor, William of Rubruck, who came from the village of that name in French Flanders. The letters St Louis gave him did not mention political problems, they merely begged Prince Sartack to authorize the bearer and his companion, Bartholomew of Cremona, to remain in the territories under his command "in order to teach the word of God". The king of France had asked William to write down an account of everything of every sort which he might see among the Tartars. This embassy which at first was sent to Sartach alone, that is to the territory north and north-east of the Caspian and Aral seas, went as far as Karakorum, the capital of the empire.

Everywhere the two Friars Minor, alone in the tower of Babel of the imperial horde, succeeded in gaining a hearing from the princes Sartach, Batou and Mangou, the great khan. They even won their esteem while the courtiers did all they could to be of disservice to them. The words of farewell addressed to them by Mangou were full of meaning. This hardened sceptic—and his scepticism was doubtless due to the lack of zeal he saw among the followers of the various religions who lived at his court—paid homage to their generosity, their disinterestedness and their uprightness. In the humble and charitable conduct of the two Franciscans he caught at least a momentary glimpse of the value of the true faith.

After this isolated visit, genuine missions, profiting by the very ancient relations between East and West, went to Asia.

Between the West—especially Italy—and the Djagataï khanat, there existed means of communication which crossed the Crimea, passed through Saraï, a town on the Volga, to the north of the Caspian Sea, then south of the Sea of Aral as far as Almeligh at the centre of the middle Tartar empire. Further,

certain Italian cities had established banks for their trade, Venice at Tana on the Sea of Azov at the mouth of the Don, Genoa in several of the Black Sea ports. In all these places, the missionaries could quite safely establish posts to serve as stages for their work.

A great Venetian traveller, Marco Polo, reached China shortly before them. He left Constantinople in 1260 with his brother and when he arrived at Pekin (Kambalik) he was very courteously received by the great khan Qubilaï and was commissioned by him to ask Gregory X (1271–6) to send missionaries to his empire. The first two parties went no further than Armenia. When Qubilaï sent a second request, a very experienced Franciscan, John of Monte Corvino, set out in 1289. He travelled by sea, embarked in the Persian Gulf and reached Quilon at the southern extremity of the Malabar coast, and then continued to St Thomas on the coast of Coromandel. From there he went on to the Chinese port of Zayton and completed the final stage of his journey on foot. When he arrived at Kambalik, he handed his pontifical letters to Qubilaï's successor. His first audiences were Nestorians belonging to the kingdom of Ongüt, some hundreds of miles to the north-west of Kambalik. The king was converted and gave him every facility he needed for the building of a church at Olon-Süne, the capital. The ruins of this church were discovered a short time ago. During the following reign, a violent reaction among the Nestorians forced him to return to Kambalik, where he built a church. The progress of Christianity continued at an astonishing rate with 4,000 baptisms in one year alone (1305).

When news of these results finally reached Rome, Clement V made Kambalik a metropolitan see. John of Monte Corvino was placed in charge of it with jurisdiction over the whole Mongol empire. He established a bishopric at Zayton. His apostolate among the various Christian families worked wonders. There were mass returns of Nestorians and Armenians to Rome. The section of the Alani people who had been deported to China by the Mongols and to whom William

of Rubruck had so longed to give spiritual help, listened so religiously to John of Monte Corvino that they returned as a body to Roman Catholicism. They numbered fifteen thousand in all. Yet the illustrious Franciscan worked almost alone. Not that the papacy had abandoned him, but the missionaries were few in number and because of the distance, the length of time and the dangers of travel, the parties that set out arrived decimated. Sometimes they disappeared altogether.

Yet Odoric of Pordenone, another great missionary, reached his destination. It is from him that we learn how venerated was John of Monte Corvino by the great khan and all his court. But their frame of mind remained like that of Mangou. They listened to the apostle with great interest but, with a few exceptions, went no further than this.

After Monte Corvino's death, the see of Kambalik was vacant for ten years. The bands of missionaries had ceased to arrive. John of Marignoli eventually came to take up the work and experienced from the khan the same kindness that had been shown to John of Monte Corvino, with every facility to visit the Christian foundations in China. This state of affairs so favourable to Catholicism was only changed when the Mongol dynasty was overthrown and replaced by that of the Ming with the Chinese nationalist reaction it brought in its train. Tolerance was replaced by the re-establishment of the official Confucian worship. Further, these Chinese Christian communities had become increasingly isolated from the West as a result of the establishment of areas under Moslem rule in central Asia.

Before they came under the yoke of Islam, the central Asian lands, extending roughly from Lake Balkhach to the Don basin, had been fairly successfully evangelized as early as the end of the twelfth century. The first to arrive, Franciscans from Hungary, had obtained from the Mongol princes an ordinance allowing them to join the hordes in small groups. They moved about, dressed as Tartars, placing their portable altars on carts similar to those of their hosts. From evening till morning,

there were opportunities of teaching Christianity and bearing witness to what they taught. This continual presence brought about many conversions. The most famous of these was that of one of the khans of the Golden Horde in 1311. But this success was not to last. The elder sons of the convert were dethroned by the Islamic party which transferred power to a prince of their own persuasion.

Nevertheless, Christianity continued to progress in the East. In 1318, Saraï, hitherto dependent on Kambalik, became an episcopal see. Later it had an archbishop with jurisdiction over the khanate of the Golden Horde.

In 1333, two Dominicans, Francis of Camerino and Richard the Englishman, sent the pope news of the conversion of a prince of Alani, the governor of Vospro (Kertch) in the Crimea. John XXII made this city an archbishopric with suffragan sees in the ports of the Black Sea—Caffa, Kherson, Pera, Trebizond and Sebastopol in Abkhasia. After the Mongol governor of the Crimea had driven the Alani from Vospro, certain of these bishoprics disappeared, others lost their missionary character and the faithful under their jurisdiction were almost entirely members of the Italian colony.

The most stable of the Christian communities on the Black Sea, that of Ziquia, was the work of a local Circassian by the name of John. He had been taken to Genoa as a slave, was converted to Catholicism and returned to his native land as a Franciscan where he made many converts. In 1349, the pope appointed John of Ziquia archbishop of Matrega (Tanan), a city lying opposite Kertch. After the conversion of the Kaitat people, from the Caspian Mountains in Daghestan, Maïera, Tarki and Kumuk became episcopal sees.

Tamerlane's invasion abolished the episcopal hierarchy of these Circassian lands but did not totally destroy Christianity. It is known that there were still Franciscans and Christians of Latin rite among the Kaitats at the end of the fifteenth century.

Further east, the Franciscan missionaries had made their way as far as Almaligh, the capital of the Djagataï Khanat,

where they had founded a friary. John XXII erected a see there with Richard of Burgundy as its bishop. The khan welcomed him favourably and entrusted to him the education of his son, who was baptized and given the name John. The story of the Golden Horde was soon repeated here. After the death of the khan, who was well disposed towards Catholicism, an Islamic reaction set in, the friary was sacked, three of the friars, three lay brothers (one a native) and a Genoese merchant were martyred. Once this wave of hatred had subsided, the friary was rebuilt. But a new Islamic outburst finally obliterated the Christian community at Almaligh. In any case, it would not have survived Tamerlane.

We have still to give an account of apostolic work in the southern territories: Persia, Chaldea, Armenia, India.

Between the Mongols of Persia and the West, long-established relations existed and were improved by the fact that during the Crusades both parties had a common enemy in the sultan of Egypt. Although no military alliance had been concluded between the Crusaders and the Mongol sovereigns, the latter nevertheless gave a courteous welcome to the Dominican missionaries sent to them. John XXII withdrew Sultaniah, the capital of the khanat of Persia, from the Kambalik bishopric and erected it into an archdiocese in charge of the Dominicans. They were unable to weaken the Islamic positions. Their apostolate, with papal approval, was directed almost exclusively to the dissident Christians and they found it difficult to achieve any lasting results. The difficulties arose from the frequent disagreement between the lower clergy and the ordinary faithful on the one hand and the patriarchs on the other. The former, who were deeply attached to the idea of a national Church, had no wish to return to unity, while their spiritual leaders were often favourably disposed to such a return. In Armenia, the missionaries were very successful at first. The archbishop of Karkilisse (St Thaddeus) submitted to Rome. The Qrna monastery followed suit and superintended

the formation of the Order of the "United Brothers of St Gregory the Illuminator". The new Order showed great zeal, too much perhaps and in some respects ill-judged; in any case, a vigorous nationalist reaction became sufficiently widespread to counteract the movement towards unity.

The chief obstacle was Islam. A missionary at that time, the Florentine Ricardo of Monte Croce, suffered cruelly at its hands and in a saintly spirit deserving of mention. A fierce attack forced him to leave his place of residence at Baghdad where he had received the news that, shortly after the fall of Ptolemais, the friary at Accon had been destroyed and all the Dominicans living there massacred. He was taken prisoner, beaten, ordered to become a Saracen and on his refusal divested of the habit of his Order. He was given a camel driver's clothes and made to work at this trade. One of his letters (quoted in the *Revue Biblique*, 1893, II, p. 589) reveals the serene way in which he accepted his lot:

> Embarrassed by my strange garb, I began to lead my camel by the chain and suddenly from a neglectful friar preacher as I had hitherto been, I became a vigilant camel driver. Overcome with joy, I burst into tears and cried: "O Lord, I have been told that Mahomet was a camel driver. Have you decided to make me destroy him by wearing the same costume as he did? In any case, for your sake I do not refuse to fight in any sort of dress."

The first Latin missions in India were the outcome of an outburst of Moslem fanaticism. Missionaries on their way to China had continued for some years to follow the route taken by John of Monte Corvino. They set out from Ormuz for the west coast of India. They went by coasting vessel from port to port as far as Quilon on the Malabar coast and from this point were taken to their destination by felucca. The Malabar coast therefore was originally no more than a series of stages on the way. But on one such occasion, a party under the direction of the Franciscan Thomas of Tolentino was stopped at Thana near Bombay and there found itself violently attacked by Moslems. Four Franciscans were martyred (1320). A

Dominican in the same party, Jourdain Cathala de Séverac, had meanwhile decided not to continue on his way to China but to devote himself to the evangelization of the Nestorians scattered throughout the towns of India. The first Latin mission to India was born. In the north, he found Islam firmly entrenched and his efforts remained fruitless. He was more fortunate with the southern Nestorians and succeeded in detaching a good number of them from the form of Christianity which they were practising, distorted as it was and tainted on occasion by idolatry. It was for these reconciled Christians that the papacy established a see at Quilon. Séverac was appointed its bishop. This bishopric was still in a flourishing state when Marignolli, the pope's legate, visited it in 1360.

For a better appreciation of the quality of the missionaries in Asia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, we need only look at some of the distances on the map. From Rome to Vospro and Matrega, the two metropolitan sees on the Black Sea and stages of considerable importance for the missionaries, the distance as the crow flies is some 1,250 miles, from Vospro to Almaligh, the Djabataï bishopric, 2,250 miles, and from Almaligh to Kambalik 1,875 miles. To the south between Sultaniah and Samarkand the distance is 1,125 miles and 2,500 between Sultaniah and Quilon.

There could not have been more than a few hundred missionaries at the most to evangelize these immense areas. Communications between them were irregular except in the dioceses bordering on the Black and Caspian Seas, the only regions in which dioceses formed any sort of group. Everywhere else, there was almost complete isolation. The problem of the arrival of reinforcements became increasingly complicated the further east one went. The journey to China took some three years. If all went well, half of those who had set out arrived at their destination, the others died on the way.

Yet this handful of isolated Christians and venturers for whom outbreaks of Islamic fanaticism, epidemics, want, even famine, were constant hazards, succeeded in founding and

maintaining active Christian communities for almost a century and a half. For a long period they enjoyed the toleration of the Mongols. When Islam gained ground, they fought courageously and, as we have seen, took advantage of any opportunity that occurred to rebuild a church that had been destroyed, a friary that had been burned down, and accepted their trials like Ricardo of Monte Croce, in a spirit of genuine sanctity.

Tamerlane's invasions (1336–1405) were the final blow. The Tartar conqueror cut them off from all relations with the West, once he had established his mastery over the heart of Asia. The missions disappeared. The first Mongol empire had made the spread of Christianity possible in central Asia, the second wiped it out.

# PART II

# FROM THE DISCOVERY OF THE NEW WORLD TO GREGORY XVI