CHAPTER IV

THE EVANGELIZATION OF GERMANY AND SCANDINAVIA

Christianity had already made a few foundations in Germany when the first organized mission arrived there in the middle of the seventh century. Certain bishoprics had, in fact, been founded during the days of the Late Empire and had outlived it, e.g. Coire in the Grisons, Saben on the Italian side of the Alps, Augsburg, Trier the seat of one of the oldest bishoprics of the Roman period.

Here and there in various regions, individual and obscure members of the Frankish clergy had crossed the Rhine. Some had gone as far as the Danube basin. The first and perhaps the most active of these, St Severinus, was at Astura (now Stockerau) in 454. For thirty years he evangelized Bavaria and Austria, built churches and founded monasteries, for he had compassion on sinners and on the poor and lived in the greatest austerity.

Emmeramus evangelized Ratisbon (Regensburg). Eustace who died in 640 continued the work of St Severinus among the Boiarii of Bavaria. Rupert became bishop of Salzburg, Amandus travelled throughout Flanders, Brabant, the Tournai country, the Beauvais region and then went to preach as far away as Carinthia.

Where did they all come from? We do not know the place

of St Severinus' birth. Rupert was a Frank from the Worms district; Eustace a Burgundian and also a disciple of St Columbanus. When the latter had been expelled from Luxeuil by Thierry II, Eustace had succeeded him at the head of the illustrious abbey in the Franche-Comté which, with some six hundred monks within its walls, maintained celebrated schools and sent out colonies over a wide area. The appearance of Irish monasticism on the scene during the period preceding the arrival of the first missions in Germany should be noted. Not that it directly shared—to any great extent at least—in the preaching of the Gospel; Irish monasticism preferred the eremitical life and, in the course of his numerous journeys, St Columbanus had principally in mind the founding of monasteries. But the learning, virtues and asceticism of these monasteries were of benefit to generations of monks in various places and notably in Northumbria whence numbers of missionaries were to set out for Germany. On their arrival there, they found the ground had been prepared for them to the south of the Main. The region over which paganism held absolute sway began only to the north of this river.

We may wonder why the apostolic ardour of the Northumbrians chose Germany. The answer is that the conversion of their island was now almost completed and the continental Germans were of the same race as the Angles and Saxons who had invaded Britain and whose descendants some of these Northumbrians were.

The first point of contact was in Friesland. In a sense this was the result of an odd stroke of fortune. Wilfrid of Northumbria during the early stages of a journey to Rome in 678 was forced to spend the winter in Friesland. While there he converted several chieftains. He did not revisit the area but it was he who had provided the necessary stimulus. The missionaries sent by his fellow countryman Egbert found no signs of Christianity surviving nor were they able to revive it. Two of them, Hewald the White and Hewald the Black, were put

to death by Radbod, king of Friesland, a fierce enemy of Christ.

Willibrord (or Willibrod), another of Wilfrid's disciples, was more fortunate. He converted the Utrecht region, founded two churches and a school for the formation of a Frisian clergy. Radbod prevented Christianity from penetrating elsewhere. Willibrod, disappointed by his partial failure in Friesland, went on to Thuringia where a Christian prince was in power, and he worked out for this principality a programme of apostolic activity which he was able to carry out only in part. He did however have time to establish some of his disciples in various centres. Then, weakened by old age, he scarcely ever left the abbey of Eisenach which he had founded in Luxemburg. It was here that he died in 739. At about the same time, St Pirminus, who may have come from Aquitania, preached in Alemannia and founded the monasteries of Reichenau (on an island in Lake Constance) and Murbach. From these, numbers of monks went forth to evangelize the neighbouring territories. When Winfrid, the future Boniface, appeared on the scene, several generations of his predecessors had therefore done a work of preparation which should not be passed over in silence.

Winfrid was born in 675 in Wessex, the south-west of England. He was educated first at Exeter, then at Nursling near Southampton, two small abbeys which, under the protection of Theodore of Tarsus, the pope's envoy, were devoted to the Roman spirit at least as much as to pure Irish monasticism. His apostolic vocation was certainly indebted to this Irish monasticism, but it developed in a Roman atmosphere. This doubtless explains why he decided so early to place his missions under the authority of the papacy.

At least it is true that after his first contact with Friesland in 716, he came away convinced that the apostolate of isolated individuals could never establish anything great or lasting in this country. He therefore suggested to Gregory II that the method adopted by St Gregory in the case of England should be repeated. The pope agreed and on May 11th, 719, ordered

him to make a visitation of the German peoples. "You shall no longer be called Winfrid," he added, "but Boniface, the doer of good."

On his return, Boniface undertook the reform of the Thuringian clergy created by Willibrod. In so doing, he found himself in conflict with his predecessor. We hasten to add that the death of Radbod, the pagan tyrant, had made it possible for the missionaries to come back to Friesland, and Boniface joined Willibrod and under his orders worked for three years for the conversion of the Frisians.

He then went on to Hesse and founded there the monastery of Amöneburg whose influence rapidly brought about a number of conversions. When the pope was informed of these excellent results, he summoned Boniface to Rome, consecrated him bishop and, when he set out again, handed him letters of recommendation to Charles Martel. From then onwards, the work of Boniface was to develop on a new and wider scale. Hitherto it had been purely missionary, it was now to organize and create Churches with the support of the Frankish monarchy.

On his return, he made a confirmation tour through Hesse, destroyed the idols there and founded the celebrated abbey of Fritzlar. Passing on into Thuringia, he began by establishing a monastery at Ohrdurf near Gotha. But very soon Willibrod's missionaries, supported by the political authorities in Thuringia, clashed with those of Boniface. Willibrod decided to withdraw his men. Boniface, now sole master in the land, took advantage of the fact to found a new Church. His success was so complete that Gregory II recognized it by sending him the pallium.

With the help of monks summoned from England the new archbishop devoted all his care to the three abbeys of Fritzlar, Ohrdurf and Amöneburg, which soon had novitiates for the reception of natives of the country. Their influence was so widespread that Duke Hubert of Bavaria (*c.* 735) invited Boniface to visit his country. As we have already seen, there were Christian communities there, bishops even, but of unequal

merit. One of them was even suspected of idolatry. There, as in Thuringia, reform was necessary.

Boniface went to the pope and asked for the powers he needed. Once he had obtained them from Gregory III, he used them promptly and vigorously. Of the four bishops then in office, he kept only one, the bishop of Passau. Those of Ratisbon, Salzburg and Freising he deposed and replaced by men of his own choice. Gregory's successor, Zachary, ratified everything he had done.

He installed another bishop at Fichstätt on the border between Bavaria and Franconia, appointed bishops—all of them priests from Britain—to the sees of Würzburg, Buraburg and Erfurt. By the year 741, the hierarchy had been established everywhere from the Rhine to Bohemia.

Boniface then wished to return to the evangelization of the Frisians, his original aim, constantly postponed but never forgotten. The reform of the Church of Gaul, for which the papacy had made him responsible, took him away for another ten years. When this work was done, he went down the Rhine in 753 (he was 79) accompanied by three priests, three deacons and four monks, on the way to Friesland. He visited the Zuyderzee, spent the winter at Utrecht and, when spring came, set out northwards preaching the true faith and making a large number of converts. But the old Frisian fanaticism revived as vigorous as ever. On June 5th, a group of pagans attacked the mission at Dokkum, put Boniface to death and massacred most of his companions. Some Franks came and took away the bodies of the martyrs. That of the apostle of Germany was buried at Fulda, the monastery founded by his disciple, Sturmi.

When Charlemagne came to the throne (771), the situation was still much as it had been when Boniface died. The only new victory for Christianity had been won by Gregory, abbot of Utrecht, in the part of Friesland to the west of the Lauwers. Independent Friesland east of the Lauwers, then known as Saxony, the territory between the sea to the north, Hesse and

Thuringia to the south, the Rhine to the west and Swabia to the east, remained under the domination of the violent and fiercely anti-Roman paganism of the Saxons. One of its idols, Irmino, they had glorified on the summit of the Eresburg, under the form of a statue of Arminius, the destroyer of the legions of Varus. As long as this barbarian worship remained intact there was little hope of Roman Christianity penetrating this region and it could only be destroyed by force. Hence the part played by Charlemagne in this final phase of the conversion of Germany.

In the second year of his reign he destroyed the Irminsûl. At the time it was more important to master the Saxon forces than to conquer Saxony. In any case, after the first campaigns, the conquered troops were baptized *en masse*, the Westphalians at Paderborn (776). The division of southern and western Saxony into sectors which were to receive Christian missionaries was already in course of preparation when, in 778, Widukind, the champion of the resistance, placed himself at the head of a rising which he persuaded the Danes to join, and advanced as far as Coblenz, ravaging Hesse and sweeping the Frankish forces before him.

Charlemagne replied with a show of force that brought his armies as far as the Elbe. His object was still the evangelization of the region. Ten years previously, a Northumbrian missionary, Willehad, had converted the Frisians of the Drenthe. Charlemagne chose this exemplary apostle for the evangelization of the territory between the lower reaches of the Elbe and the Weser—Wihmodia, where the population was largely Frisian. Two years later, the Frankish troops suffered a reverse and another rising resulted. Willehad survived it without injury but several of his helpers were martyred.

Charlemagne countered with a policy of terrorization. In a single day he massacred 4,500 rebels at Verden. Draconian penal laws were promulgated. Sacrilege was punishable by death, and not only sacrilege but anyone plotting against the Christians or any unbaptized Saxon attempting to hide among

his fellows or refusing to be baptized. The choice lay between submission, that is baptism, and death. Widukind eventually chose baptism and received it in 785 at Attigny-sur-l'Aisne.

Ten years of calm followed and the missionaries made full use of them. Willehad returned to Wihmodia and established the first Saxon bishopric at Bremen. Soon afterwards, Minden also had its bishop. The Verden region was evangelized by monks from Amorbach and the Münster area by an abbot, while in southern Saxony missionaries from the Church of Eresburg preached the Gospel. But the old German spirit was still only dormant and the defeat of a Frankish force in 793 reawakened it with all that this meant in the way of hatred of Catholicism. The rebels pillaged the churches, massacred the priests. The same fate awaited the Saxon converts who refused to deny their faith. A number of them preferred martyrdom to apostasy. The true faith therefore was already firmly based. Four campaigns were needed to bring peace to Saxony. It then became possible to organize the Church. It was divided into four dioceses: Münster, Paderborn, Osnabrück and Bremen. Liudger, a Frisian, grandson of one of Willibrod's converts and who had been forced by the 784 revolt to take refuge in Italy, became bishop of Münster. Under Louis the Pious, the eastern part of Saxony was given three dioceses: Hildesheim, Halberstadt and Hamburg.

Until the final pacification of the territory, the missionaries all came from monasteries situated to the west of the Rhine, on the Frankish side. The foundations on the right bank only appeared in the last years of Charlemagne's reign, at Wisbek, Meppen on the Ems, at Corvey and Stavoren. A number of Saxons joined the Corvey community which became an active spiritual centre and was soon to share in the christianization of the Scandinavian peoples.

The Danes had taken part in the great rising of Wadukind. They had then barred the Slesvig isthmus by means of an enormous earth wall to be safe from the repressive measures the

Saxons had been obliged to endure. Louis the Pious took care not to attack it. Behind this wall and as a reaction against Christianity, the worship of Thor had taken on a new lease of life. The worshippers of the god carried his hammer round their necks in the form of an amulet and also underwent a kind of baptism which was a parody of the Christian sacrament. Nevertheless, Christianity had penetrated their ranks to a very small extent, it is true, and by methods which remind us of those we have seen at work throughout the Roman Empire. Dorestad, a port on the Rhine delta, in an area christianized under Frankish influence, was the starting-point of the road which went via the Slesvig isthmus and the Baltic and ended at Birka, the commercial centre of Sweden on an island to the west of Stockholm. Christian merchants and in particular Christian slaves came to this city in sufficient numbers to form an embryo Christian community.

Yet it was not at Birka that the first contact was made between the Frankish missions and the Scandinavians, but in Denmark which Ebbo, archbishop of Rheims, though of German birth, entered as legate of Paschal III in 823 together with the monks Halitgar and Willerich. The latter was bishop of Bremen. Their aim was to obtain the goodwill or better still the conversion of the princes in the hope that their subjects would follow them. But there were no persons of importance among the converts they baptized.

In 826 a new mission under the direction of the monk Anscar, entered Jutland. It had no greater success than had Ebbo's. Three years later, a delegation from Sweden came to Worms to inform the Emperor that certain Swedes wished to receive baptism. Anscar agreed to leave for Birka with a monk called Witmar. The king authorized them to preach and to build the first church in Scandinavia. But apart from the king's representative among the merchants and a few other private persons, Anscar's flock belonged entirely to the community of Christian slaves whose origin we have already described.

On his return to Frankish territory eighteen months later Anscar was consecrated bishop of Hamburg, and Gregory IV subsequently divided Scandinavia between him and Ebbo. Denmark was Anscar's province and Sweden Ebbo's. A bishop, Gauzbert, succeeded in remaining at Birka for some twelve years. He was alone at first but shortly afterwards was joined by another missionary, yet no new converts were made. Relations with the Swedes even became less cordial in the end. During a riot, Gauzbert's helper was killed, and he himself was unable to remain at Birka.

In Denmark, Anscar was more fortunate, thanks to the support of King Haarek who authorized him to build a church at Slesvig and another at Ribe. In 852, Anscar was once more at Birka together with the monk Erimbert. The small community of slaves had been without a pastor for some years but until Anscar's death, Birka had several priests-in-charge. Subsequently only the communities at Slesvig and Ribe survived.

We may wonder why such courageous and fervent pioneers were unable to attract a larger audience. The reason is that their first foundations were composed almost entirely of foreigners—merchants and slaves. In Scandinavia, as in the West as a whole, we may say that the native populations became Christian when the example had been set by sovereigns and public figures. It is the story of Clovis constantly repeated.

But among the Scandinavians, the first chiefs to be converted were those who obtained kingdoms by conquest in christianized territories. Marriages and alliances were sealed by baptism. Guthred, the second king of York, was baptized at the end of the ninth century. Sigtrygg and Olaf, kings of Dublin, died Christians in the tenth century. Rollo, first Duke of Normandy, received baptism and his duchy at one and the same time in 911. In all these cases, paganism began by evincing strong resistance to such examples although they were set by men of high rank. Eventually, however, it capitulated fairly quickly.

The Scandinavian territories properly so-called became Christian at a later date. In Denmark, the baptism of king

Harald is shrouded in mystery. It is at least an established fact that bishops (of German origin, it is true) represented the country at the Synod of Ingelheim (948), those of Slesvig, Ribe and Aarhus. The progress of Christianity continued to meet serious obstacles for almost a century. Then King Canute the Great, who died in 1035, established regular relations with the Holy See and these were ratified by his nephew Sven Estridsen.

Viking princes, who had been baptized outside the country, established Christianity in Norway. Haakon the Good did not show any great zeal. On the other hand, Olaf, son of Tryggvi (995–1000) and, above all, Olaf the Fat (St Olaf, 1014–30) were real apostles. At the end of the eleventh century, there were three bishoprics: Trondhjem, Bergen, Oslo.

Iceland received missionaries brought from the Continent by the Vikings. Paganism disappeared but after a long period of resistance. In the year 1000, the plenary assembly of the Icelanders decided that Christianity should be the only authorized form of worship.

Sweden's conversion followed a different, slower and more mysterious course and missionaries from outside the country played the leading part in it. The German Bruno of Querfurt, the Englishman Osmund, are the best known among these. Here again, paganism proved tenacious especially in Uppland and Götaland, a southern province, where it did not surrender until the twelfth century.