

***The Fire of Faith: A Commentary on the 125th Anniversary of  
St. Ansgar Lutheran Church in Canon Falls, Minnesota  
by Reidar Dittmann***

"What's in a name?" Shakespeare asks, adding, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." And so also your church. Had it been given a totally different name--there were after all numerous possibilities back then--you, some no doubt descendants of the founders but the majority with no direct contact with such past, would still have been here, worshipping in prayer and song and in the name of this community of saints doing the work of the Lord. Yet it is most proper in this anniversary year to consider those who came before us, those who took land in this virgin soil and made it fruitful, who built farms and villages and raised families and who, having barely gained foothold in this new world, this new existence, decided to build a church. The basic reason for such hurry to proceed with that kind of project was of course the necessity of having a spiritual gathering place as they had had in the Old Country, a sanctified place to secure God's blessing over their daily labor in an often hostile climate promising only unpredictable results. And there were children born and needing to be baptized--in one pioneer family alone twelve!--and be brought up in the faith of their forebears; young people meeting and seeking a sanctified union. And, to be sure, unavoidably, there were sickness and death. All of these concerns of the immigrant community call for the security of a spiritual center.

Now, remembering who these folks were, most of them newcomers from the European north whose faith and entire spiritual languages were Swedish, we realize that it was natural that the name of the church would reflect this particular background. Round about there were many other churches, founded by different immigrant groups or by people having moved west from the New England states, churches tending to have saint names, biblical ones, for the most part: St. Luke's, St. John's, St. Matthew; so they too, *your* founders, wanted a saint. Yet they must have wanted

very much to honor their own past and give their sanctuary a name worthy of it, so they chose Ansgar, a name of no significance at all to any of the surrounding groups--the Anglicans, the Presbyterians, the Roman Catholics--who must have been puzzled by it, but to the builders of this church a name signifying an ancient spiritual tradition in the mother-lands, Ansgar, the *Apostle of the North*. How much these founders actually knew about this early worker in God's vineyard up there in the north, is a different question, and the answer most likely is, Not very much. In fact, those devout Lutherans may not even have given any thought to the fact that this early church father so honored was a faithful catholic monk! Such lack of knowledge of the details of the life and work of Ansgar was certainly not a reflection of ignorance on the part of the settlers, for our knowledge of Ansgar derives exclusively from some dusty medieval documents, some written by a contemporary, others by much later authors, and all generously blending history and legend, with legend the more prominent of the two.

In terms of Scandinavian Christianity, the most widely known historical personage is Olav II Haraldson, Norway's patron saint, an individual of a temperament and an attitude totally different from Ansgar's. Besides, in his work as a christianizer Olav had a different agenda, wanting first and foremost to claim his kingdom, and then simultaneously, perhaps because it advanced his primary cause, spreading the gospel. Moreover, Olav's work occurred as late as in the beginning of the 11th century, nearly two hundred years after St. Ansgar's much more peace-oriented activities. At Ansgar's time, in the early 800s, in the land of the Franks--a realm then consisting of West Germany and France--not far from the city of Amiens and at the confluence of the rivers Corbie and Somme, a local queen, widowed and concerned with the ultimate destiny of her soul, turned her royal estate into a monastic community, initially supported only locally but soon gaining the attention of Roman church authorities and incorporated into the great Benedictine order. Named *Corbeia*, a combination of two Latin terms, *cor* meaning heart, and *beautum*--in the

local dialect beia--blessed, the Monastery of the Blessed Heart, under royal and papal sponsorship, grew rapidly into one of the most prominent of such establishments in Central Europe, with expansive cloisters, lofty, elaborately decorated abbeys, schools as flourishing as their flower gardens. And there were vineyards and orchards and sizable, rich agricultural lands, all worked by a host of dedicated monks and lay people. Let us try to envision a morning in this blessed compound. The cloister bells are calling the monks to matins, and we follow them into the abbey of St. Peter, hearing them chanting in Latin the opening ritual and then sing their favorite morning psalm,

'Few are the faithful  
among the children of the earth.  
I live for great and wondrous things,  
I have brought my soul into stillness.'

And with the matins over they process in reverence toward the refectory--the dining hall--and there, singing again, they fill the morning air with their own Corbeia hymn:

Let us ignite the fire of faith  
throughout the earth,  
so that all mankind  
will be part of the church

For Corbeia was a missionary monastery from where devout monks, learned not only in scripture but in the languages of still pagan tribes and always eager to ignite the fire of faith, went out to these remote parts of Europe--east across the Danube and the Oder to attempt to christianize the Slavs, and, as we will see, through the intermediary of an annex monastery, also north into *Ultima Thule*--the Utmost Part of the World, the Scandinavian realms--to spread the gospel among the fierce, unabashed worshippers of Odin and Thor.

Among the novices in this procession--according to Fulbert, himself a monk in these early days and the poet/historian who wrote what we know about Corbeia--was the young Ansgar, having been sent there when orphaned from a family of landowners in the north of the realm. Described as unusually handsome, tall and blond with finely chiseled facial features and blue, dreamy eyes, he was known to be carrying out his duties as a novice and later monk in a quiet, shy manner, seeming

to live in a world of his own. Yet according to Fulbert, this unassuming, devout monk, showed, already in his early youth, great ability in all pursuits, in singing, reading and teaching, as well as in gardening and farming, and was destined--so says Fulbert--to become the Bright Light of Corbeia. On this particular morning, with a dense mist hovering over the landscape, the monks have their simple meals in the refectory and thereafter gather in the faintly lit assembly room to listen to their abbot, who opens with the Benedictine salutation:

'Honored brethren, disciples and sons of our most holy father Benedictus, who labor for God in the holy monastery of Corbeia, I wish you peace and salvation.'

Then, having just returned from the church assembly held in Aachen, capital of the Holy Roman Empire--the year is 823--he reports on the proceedings at that great gathering and on the challenge issued by Emperor Louis the Pious concerning the christianizing of Europe's remaining pagan strongholds. For that purpose, the abbot says, a new, more northerly monastery is to be established as a spiritual stepping stone toward that goal. And slowly scanning the ranks of his monks, he asks for volunteers to go north to labor in that new vineyard. But the brethren, deeply, comfortably attached to their beautiful, tranquil, civilized Corbeia, respond with nothing more than a hushed, apprehensive silence. Then--so says Fulbert in his account--the sun, having suddenly pierced the morning mist, sent a single beam through one of the small windows of the hall, aiming it so that 'a halo was ignited around the head of young Ansgar.' With all eyes on him he blushes, not knowing why.

As a result of this remarkable singling out, by everyone considered a sign from God, and no doubt also an acknowledgment of the young monk's great knowledge and humble attitude, Ansgar, only twenty-two years of age, was appointed abbot of a New Corbeia, a mission cloister established a little south of Bremen in present-day Germany. This new monastery, under such youthful and enthusiastic leadership and patterned on its mother institution, soon developed into a principal center of worship, skilled agriculture, and advanced learning. Then, in 826, sent as a delegate to the grand assembly of the church held at Ingelheim on the Rhine, Ansgar witnessed an event never to be forgotten: the deposed king of Denmark, Harald Klak, sailing up the river at the head of a hundred viking ships, to be welcomed by the Emperor, the same Louis the Pious, and in a splendid procession brought to the imperial palace. This spectacular entry of a fleet of dragon-prowed ships on the river was a show especially staged by the king of the Danes to impress the Emperor and his people, so that they might come to Harald's aid in his effort to

re-establish himself in Denmark. Help was, in fact, provided, but only after Harald and his company were baptized and the king had sworn to bring with him back to his home-land the new faith. At the final gathering the Emperor spoke:

Lords and prelates, you know why I have called you together. Our beloved brother, King Harald of the Danes, wants to return home and deeply wishes to have someone with him to proclaim God's word in this last outpost of paganism. We know that the people of the north are belligerent and dangerous. But for that very reason, I do wish to bring them into the Christian fold. Is there someone here willing to risk his life on this journey for the sake of Christ?

Here too, as that time long ago when God through his the sun had pointed His finger at Ansgar, a long silence ensued, until the abbot of Old Corbeia rose to speak, saying,

I know a young man who is afire for our faith and most certainly willing to suffer--indeed *hoping* to suffer--for the sake of Christ. His name is Ansgar, presently the abbot of our northern outpost, New Corbeia.

The next day the young, devout monk is brought before the Emperor, who calmly and with curiosity and kindness looks him over, noting his humility and apprehension but his brightness as well; and sensing toward him a deeply paternal care, he wonders if he would have been willing to expose his own son to the perils that might lie ahead for someone confronted with the task of preaching to the northern barbarians. 'Are you willing to go?' he asks, and Ansgar responds that he is ready to do whatever is the will of God and the Emperor, whereupon the Emperor, rising from his throne and embracing him, tells him that he is to leave with the King of the Danes to proclaim the gospel of peace to the warring tribes of the north.

And indeed, Ansgar did accompany King Harald when his fleet weighed anchor, saling first down to the mouth of the Rhine in present-day Holland, then along the coast facing the North Sea to South Jutland, present-day South Schleswig. Here, residing in a royal compound, he went about meeting the local residents and from his first impression finding the Danes, as he stated in his diary, 'pleasant in appearance, blue-eyed with a russet complexion, gentle and smiling, chatty, and, in their daily activities in and around their homes, hard-working and skillful.' Yet, when admon-ishing them to change their habits and cease their raiding and pillaging abroad, he quickly learned that such first impression was not entirely accurate, for, although they treated *him* gracefully and well--he was after all a guest of their king!--they were stubbornly determined to hold on to their old ways. The blue in

their eyes, at first contributing to that pleasant appearance he had discovered, turned out to be steely rather than mellow.

But Ansgar, not easily discouraged, made use of the courtesy extended to him because he was under royal sponsorship and moved freely among the people, working with them in their fields and their gardens, mending their fish nets, digging their wells, playing with their children, thereby making himself loved and respected; and all along he kept preaching the gospel. 'A good mother loves her child as the child loves its mother,' he said. 'The mother wants only what's good for the child and so also the child in its regard for the mother. And such is the church,' he explained, 'a mother for all mankind who are the children of God, who wants us to live in peace with one another. It is therefore contrary to His will that we fight and destroy each other. God gave us the church to help us live according to His will.'

From Denmark, Ansgar, now in the company of a Norwegian skald--a bard--named Assar, proceeded farther north to the kingdom of the Goths--Sweden of our days--and after a long and hazardous journey arrived in Birka, their capital in the central lake country. And there, much to his surprise, he found the widow of a major landowner, and her teen-aged daughter, both already familiar with, although not yet baptized into, the new faith, and with their goodwill and cooperation and the support of the local ruler, he is able to build the first small church in the north, a labor watched with suspicious curiosity by the still skeptical local population. At its dedication everyone is there, and following a short but what must certainly have been a very effective sermon by the missionary monk, a flock of them, led by the widow and her daughter as well as the local ruler, beg to be baptized. And so, "By God's help I have won," Ansgar notes in his diary.

From the skald Assar, who hailed from Trøndelag, Ansgar learned much about Norway and sincerely desired to travel that far with his mission. However, in 831--by that time he had spent five years in Denmark and Sweden--he was called back to Germany to become the bishop, later the archbishop, of the northernmost see of the church, initially with headquarters in a tiny village named Hamburg. As a result, although according to Fulbert's writings always longing to see Norway and meet the Norwegians, he never got farther north than to Birka in Sweden. and it was there that his first missionary effort came to an end. Thereafter, his name is linked with and now clearly documented in Hamburg and later Bremen, bishoprics that also had the northern countries as part of their domain. Yet the contact

between the ecclesiastical headquarters and medieval Denmark and Sweden not easy to maintain, the people there soon reverted to their pagan ways. Although other monks were sent to the north, no change came about until the Archbishop himself, twenty years after he had left Sweden and at the age of fifty, this time invited by the new king of Denmark, Harald Bluetooth, once more appeared in his old mission field. Little is known about this second journey, except that it certainly took place, and although we don't know any details of the fruits of his labor at that time, there is a curious monument indirectly testifying to its success: the remarkable *Jellinge Stone* in South Jutland. This is a huge commemorative boulder with runic inscription, telling us that King Harald Bluetooth--the one having asked Ansgar to return--erected the stone to honor his mother Tyra and father Gorm. Moreover, the inscription clearly states that it was this Harald who christianized Denmark. What he ought to have said, however, was that he did so with the spiritual help of Ansgar. The king, mindful of the fact that his parents were *not* Christian and uncertain of their potential reception in the world beyond, seems to have wanted to secure a place for them in one place or the other, for, just in case his own deed might not be sufficient to bring them into heaven, he paves their way also into a pagan after-world, for the stone's decor is a strange blend of Christianity and paganism with the intergripping beast design of the Vikings filling most of the space, yet with the same decor simultaneously serving as a frame for a prominently central image of the Crucified Christ, the first such representation in Scandinavian history.

The thought of a journey to Norway seems to have remained with the archbishop throughout his life. Confiding in his friends, one of them the skald Assar who had spoken to him of the country's grandeur and its need, he says, 'Norway has always been my dream and my longing. I see the land before me, its mountains with their eternal snow, the glittering blue fjords, and the valleys with their rushing rivers and endless forests, and in the summers the lingering light of the midnight sun. What a sight it must be! The light will come from there.' And once more he intends to set out for this spiritual wilderness. However, sickness keeps him from realizing his dream, and surrounded by his friends, fellow priests and monks, he receives the last sacrament, thereafter whispering, 'In all your kindness and grace, dear God, have mercy on me a sinner.'

His body was entombed in a sarcophagus in the Cathedral of Bremen, and only two years after his death, in 867, the Pope beatified him. The day of his death--February 3--was celebrated for centuries as a Feast of Light. Later his skull was transferred to Hamburg and there placed in a silver relic box on the cathedral altar,

from where it has since disappeared. Other Ansgar relics were kept in the two Corbeia Monasteries and in three Danish cathedrals, Lund--now in Sweden but in the Middle Ages part of Denmark--Viborg, and Roskilde; and schools, churches, societies, towns and streets were named for him and dedicated to his memory throughout Scandinavia. In this sequence of testimonies to his spiritual and historical contribution you too play a role. And it is to the credit and honor of your forebears that they decided that this sanctuary, erected in a new wilderness far, far away from the one he had attempted to brighten with his fire of faith, would carry the name of the Apostle of the North, St. Ansgar, the Bright star of Corbeia, who lived to do great and wondrous things.