

## THE CHURCH IN ICELAND

ATTENTION has been focussed on this relatively far-away island owing to the fact that it celebrates this year the thousandth anniversary of its Parliament. For Catholics it is also a memorable summer as it sees the entry to his See of a first Icelandic Bishop since the 'Reformation.' The new Bishop of Holar is of Danish birth and has laboured for many years in Iceland. He has perforce to live away from his see. For Holar, in northern Iceland, which once had a fair cathedral and was a famous seat of Catholic learning is now only a name. I vividly remember arriving there in the late afterglow of a northern summer night after a long day's ride culminating in a steep mountain slope even in August deep with snow. Holar lies far below in a fertile green valley watered by many streams. Just as Holar now possesses a Bishop and no cathedral, conversely the Faroe Isles, four hundred miles away, have a cathedral without a chief pastor.

At Kirkubae, south of Thorshavn, stands an unfinished stone building in Gothic style. It was never consecrated, and yet it has not been desecrated to any profane use. It remains roofless to the sky, a perpetual reminder of the faith which built it and of those who prevented its completion.

Reykjavik, the little wooden capital of Iceland, till lately boasted only two or three buildings in stone. It now has one more in the new Catholic cathedral consecrated by Cardinal van Rossum on his apostolic visitation last year. And the first Icelander to be raised to the priesthood since the extermination of the Faith, Einar Gunnarson, has been ordained.

Twenty years ago the resident Catholic population scarcely numbered more than fifty. Now the little

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flock has reached two hundred and the congregation is augmented in summer by Catholic members of fishing trawlers harvesting in Icelandic waters. Save for the Catholic outpost at Faskrudsfjord on the eastern coast mentioned further, the new Reyjavik Cathedral is the only Mass centre in the country.

It must be premised that Iceland, an island considerably larger than Ireland, is practically without towns as we know them, with the possible exception of Reykjavik and Akuyreri in the north. There are a dozen or so trading stations round the coast. Beyond these the population resides mainly in farm houses, very scattered and often far distant from one another. These dwellings of wood, very often with turf sides and roofs, are built along the verdant valleys which constitute the 'inhabited fringe.' For the centre of Iceland is practically all snow mountain and glacier, with the mighty bulk of Vatna Jökull in summer a brilliant mass of burnished silver, under the sapphire sky, towering high above all.

Iceland possesses no real roads except over the twenty miles which separate the capital from Thingvellir, where its historic national assembly, Althing, has conducted the millenary celebrations on the very spot it held its deliberations in bygone times. Traveling is confined to locomotion by means of the native breed of ponies, which are extraordinarily hardy. Provided one is accustomed to the saddle a tour in Iceland is a most delightful and unconventional experience. The air is like champagne, and a day's journey brings the traveller a wonderful diversity of landscape. I have travelled for weeks in Iceland, from north to south and east to west. Smiling green valleys sprinkled with wild flowers of myriad hue, rocky slopes, snow mountain and glacier, sandy wastes, and inlets skirting the sea shore to cross at low water: all these may be encountered. And innumerable streams

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and rivers to cross; sometimes with the swift current coming up to saddle-bow. Sometimes not without a spice of danger, for in the glacier streams the sands are constantly shifting and often only the sure-footedness of the ponies saves travellers from disaster. Not infrequently one finds oneself in volcanic districts whose fires, although happily long extinct, have left their traces in hot springs.

At Reykholt you can bathe in the bath built by a famous Icelandic writer, Snorri Sturlusson, centuries ago, an open pool fed by hot springs, or on Lake Myvatu, famous for its wild-fowl; at Reykjahlid there is a long piece of water arched over by natural rock. It has a wonderful blue tint and its temperature of about seventy degrees Fahrenheit, never varies winter or summer.

The Icelanders are a fine people, and thanks to centuries of comparative isolation from modern 'progress,' exceptionally moral and clean-minded. It is open to doubt whether the prevalent Lutheran religion affects them greatly, although they are very punctual in attending the weekly services. The fact that Sunday morning gives the only weekly opportunity for scattered farmers and their men to meet one another may not be unaccountable for their apparent religious zeal.

The Lutheran clergy appeared to me more like farmers, which they generally also are, than clerics. In my many journeys I only met one really educated minister, theologically speaking, and he was drowned, I heard with regret on a later visit to his locality. His pony slipped through the ice of a frozen river one dark winter's night as he was returning from a sick call.

Except in the townlets there are no hotels or inns. The farm houses supply this deficiency and most hospitably entertain passing travellers. You can be sure of a comfortable bed, excellent coffee, and milk in

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abundance. Lake and river fish, such as trout and char, is a staple dish. Smoked mutton and dried fish is always obtainable. Just as there are no snakes to be found in Ireland, so there are no trees in Iceland, except in isolated spots a thicket of brushwood. Although sulphur necessarily abounds in the volcanic regions and there are more than traces of iron and coal, the absence of railways prevents the exploiting of these mineral resources to any extent.

In summer the French fishing fleets from Dunkirk and Paimpol make their headquarters at the townlet on the head of Faskruds fjord in eastern Iceland. There is an exceptionally well equipped Catholic hospital staffed by Danish nuns, and a lovely little oratory where the two Fathers in charge of the station say Mass. They are Assumptionist Fathers and remain in Iceland for the whole summer and care spiritually for the Breton fisher folk who are constantly going and returning on their lawful occasions.

JOSCELYNE LECHMERE.