

## DOMINICANS AND THE NESTORIAN CHURCH IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

IN 1286 the Dominican Mission in the Mongol Ilkhanate of Persia was reinforced by the Friar who was the destined instrument of its greatest triumph: Fra Ricold of Monte Croce. The mission was then more than forty years old, for it had been established in 1240, less than two years after the armies of Charmaghan and Baachu, lieutenants of Okkadai, successor to the terrible Ghengis Khan, had swept like a devastating flame over the land.

Pope Gregory IX had in that year sent eight friars to Tiflis, and in 1254 William de Rubruck, the Franciscan envoy of St. Louis to the Grand Khan, met one of them Bernard of Catalonia, in the half desolated city of Naxua, near Ararat. He had mastered the Tartar tongue and was still preaching zealously to the savage conquerors, with no companion in his isolation but a German lay brother whose language he did not understand.

At the time of Fra Ricold's arrival in the Ilkhanate the Mongols had lost some of their brutal savagery, but their character had suffered no change. If the Ilkhan and his court no longer went dressed in ox hides nor ate dog flesh and drank blood with the gusto of their parents, they remained deceitful, treacherous and insolent towards all not of their race, and still accounted the slaughter of others as naught.<sup>1</sup>

Fra Ricold, born in the Tuscan village of Monte Croce in 1242, entered the Dominican noviciate at Santa Maria Novella, Florence, in his twenty-fifth year. In 1272 he graduated as Master of Arts, and was then sent to St. Catherine's Convent, Pisa, where he soon gained renown as a Thomist and masterly expositor of the Angelic Doctor. He was sent to the East in 1285 at his own request, and in

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<sup>1</sup> See the description of the Mongols given by John de Plano Carpini, O.F.M., Ambassador of Pope Innocent IV to the Grand Khan. English translation, ed. C. R. Beazley, Hakluyt Society, 1903.

the early summer of that year landed at Acre, the last crusading stronghold standing before the engulfing flood of Islam.

Undeterred by the hostility of the Moslems he visited Jerusalem, where he was horrorstruck to find the churches converted into stables, and was but little comforted by witnessing the Epiphany baptism of 10,000 catechumens in the waters of the Jordan. Returning to Acre he sailed to Lajazzo in Lesser Armenia, where he took the great highroad across the Taurus Mountains to Tabriz and Baghdad.

He passed some months at Tabriz preaching to the Turcomans, who—*homines bestiales* he calls them—inspired him with loathing and disgust. Towards the end of the year he set out for Baghdad, whither he felt himself called to meet and refute the errors of Mahomet in the principal city of Islam. It was in vain that he debated with the cadis and imans, but before he came to grips with them he successfully subdued the Nestorian heretics.

In the persecution that followed the condemnation of Nestorius, numbers of his followers fled to Persia, where, with the support of the king, they established a national Church with the Patriarch of Babylon as its Catholicus. Cut off from Christendom this heretical Church developed and grew in strength, and in the sixth century embarked on the conversion of the East. Central Asia, India, the Islands and China were the scenes of varying missionary success until, in the last decades of the seventh century, it seemed that all Asia would be converted.

Persecution, however, intervened and withered the greatness of the Nestorian Church, but even in its diminished state it remained sufficiently powerful in the thirteenth century. The Catholicus at Baghdad still had under his jurisdiction a chain of Metropolitan Sees—Jerusalem, Armenia, Mosul, Samarkand, Malabar, Peking—from Jordan to the Yellow Sea, and from Ceylon to Siberia.

It is difficult, however, to ascertain the beliefs of this far-scattered body of Christians. Subjection to the Catholicus was only nominal, his control being generally confined to

approving the bishop, and with the total lack of Church discipline each group tended to deteriorate on its own lines, relinquishing more or less rapidly, and in a greater or less degree, Christian doctrines and absorbing customs and rites from the surrounding pagans or Moslems. In the course of centuries this disintegration of their Faith has gone far.

Fra Rubruck, who met them at Karakorum (Mongolia), says the Nestorian priests were quite ignorant of the contents of their missals which were written in Old Syriac, a language they did not understand but merely recited parrot-wise; they ate meat on Fridays, which they kept as the Sabbath in Moslem fashion; they were drunkards and usurers, and strove rather for personal gain than the spread of the Gospel, even to the extent of administering no Sacrament without a fee.<sup>2</sup> Fra John of Montecorvino, the Apostle of China, wrote that while they professed the Christian name they strayed greatly from the Christian Faith.<sup>3</sup>

Nearer the Metropolitan See they were in no better state. Fra Ricold, who knew them in all parts of the Ilkhanate, perhaps better than any other missionary, declares their life was a standing defiance to Our Lord's word, "Narrow is the way that leadeth unto life." They were corrupt with idolatrous superstitions; they held drunkenness no vice and lying no sin. He sums up thus: "They say it suffices for a Christian that he make the sign of the Cross on his forehead, faces East to pray, and eats pork." All that was required, apparently, was a public distinction between them and the Moslems or Jews.

The Catholicus at this time was Mar Yaballaha III, a Uigur Tartar monk from Peking, who, while on a pilgrimage had been forcibly raised to the Patriarchate, in 1281. His protest to the assembled bishops that he was deficient in the ecclesiastical and doctrinal education necessary for the post was overruled from a mistaken idea that he had been sent to

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<sup>2</sup> *The Journey of William de Rubruck*, ed. W. W. Rockhill. Hakluyt Society, 1900.

<sup>3</sup> Montecorvino, Letter I (1305), Bib. Nat., Paris, MS. 5006; English translation, A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before 1550*, London, 1930.

Persia by Kubilai Khan, the Mongol Emperor, and therefore was possessed of considerable political influence.

On Fra Ricold's arrival at Baghdad he was welcomed by the Dominicans and Franciscans, both of whom had had a mission station there for some years. It was not long before he came into contact with the Nestorian Catholicus, with whom he disputed, expounding the Catholic Faith step by step. Finally Mar Yaballaha admitted himself vanquished, convinced by the logic of the pupil of St. Thomas; he abjured his errors and allowed the Friars the use of his cathedral and churches.

His Visitor-General, the monk Bar Sauma, a fellow-countryman who had accompanied him on his pilgrimage, was despatched to Rome to bear the submission of the Catholicus to the Holy Father.<sup>4</sup> It was indeed a day of rejoicing at Rome, for with the co-operation of the re-united Patriarchal See, and the use of its Nestorian communities as missionary bases, the Christianisation of Asia seemed assured. Divine Providence however ordered otherwise, and this epoch making event was destined, viewed from a human standpoint, to prove as ephemeral as the mission's other triumphs.

Mar Yaballaha may have been sincere in his conversion, but his bishops and flock had no intention of giving up their easy way of life and freedom of dogmas for the discipline of the Church. Before the Patriarchal envoy returned from Rome the union was denounced and repudiated. The Catholic missionaries were contumeliously thrust from the churches, which were then scrubbed with rose-water to cleanse them from the "Roman pollution."

Bar Sauma wrote an account of his travels in the West which, unfortunately, is only known to survive in a Syriac translation and abridgement. It is a singular fact that it contains no reference to the reconciliation of the Nestorian Church which was as much a reason for his journey as his

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<sup>4</sup> He also carried letters from Arghon, Ilkhan of Persia, to the Western Kings, suggesting an alliance against the Mamelukes for the recovery of the Holy Land.

mission for King Arghon. This strange silence has caused the authenticity of the reunion to be questioned and even denied by critics who, accustomed to thinking of the Church in the plural, see in the "exchange of pulpits" by clergy of different obediences a normal occurrence. To a Catholic, on the other hand, the fact that Bar Sauma sedulously refrains from mentioning it stands out in his pages as clearly as if he had stated it in so many words: unless his whole story is a fabrication, which no one has yet suggested.

He tells us that on arriving at Rome, shortly after the death of Pope Honorius IV, he had a discussion with the assembled cardinals on the Faith, during which he declared his belief. This was the "orthodox" Nestorian creed; he denied the procession of the Holy Ghost from the Son as well as the Father and maintained two Persons in Our Lord. After visiting the kings of France and England on behalf of King Arghon he returned to Rome, where Cardinal Jerome of Ascoli, one of those with whom he had disputed, had been elected as Nicolas IV. To him Bar Sauma presented the letter of Mar Yaballaha, at which "Mar Papa rejoiced and was glad, and he honoured Rabban Sauma with more honour than was customary." Pope Nicolas retained him in Rome to witness the Holy Week ceremonies, allowed him to celebrate according to the Nestorian rite and, after hearing his confession, gave him Holy Communion at the Papal Mass.

When he was leaving the Pope gave him some relics, although he told him they had constantly to be refused to suppliants "who come in myriads." Bar Sauma also carried back rich presents for the Catholicus, including a golden tiara set with precious stones, and a Papal Bull appointing him Patriarch of the East.

While it can be plausibly argued that the honour paid Bar Sauma was due to his character as envoy of the powerful Mongol Ilkhan, Catholics will realise that his story involves much more than mere political courtesy. His claim to Papal Confession and Communion strikes to the root of matters, and makes it plain his declaration of Nestorianism before

the cardinals is an emendation of the interview to suit the conditions when he wrote. No ambassadorial character, however exalted, would induce the Pope, or any Catholic priest, to admit an avowed heretic to the Sacraments. He was received as a reconciled son of the Church.

Pope Nicolas' letter to Mar Yaballaha provides further evidence. To it was appended a statement of the Catholic Faith and Teaching, which was introduced in this manner: "Since the clergy and people under your rule are removed by a long distance of sea and land from the Roman Church, and cannot conveniently go to her nor easily have recourse to her to receive teaching and instruction in the Faith, we desiring the said clergy and people to hold the pure Faith which the Roman Church holds and possesses have thought it good to send you this Faith and the statement of it which is written below, very anxiously exhorting you that with diligent zeal and with the eyes of your mind lifted up to the Lord, you wisely lead and instruct the same clergy and people in this Faith and get it generally embraced and carefully observed, so that like a good servant you may be able to lead the clergy and people to places of the pasture of Salvation."<sup>5</sup>

It has been contended that the Mar Jaballaha's letter, far from being of ecclesiastical importance, was simply one of courtesy, supporting Arghon's request for alliance with the Christian powers. That this was not the case can be seen so clearly from the phrasing of the Pope's reply, which only one circumstance could justify, that any discussion of this contention would be but a waste of time.

On his return to Persia Bar Sauma was appointed court chaplain to King Arghon, for the Mongols, although publicly still professing the amorphous religion of their ancestors. supported, from superstitious motives, priests of all creeds at their courts.

Fra Ricold remained in Persia until 1301, when he returned to Florence. He had kept a diary during his years in

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<sup>5</sup> Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

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the East, from which he compiled his *Itinerary*. This and his earlier and more vivid *Epistolae ad Ecclesiam Triumphantem*, written in the isolation and loneliness of the mission field, paint a graphic picture of the conditions in the Ilkhanate when Islam was rapidly conquering its Mongol conquerors. He also wrote several polemical works (notably the *Confutatio Alcorani*, refuting the errors of the Koran) before he died at the advanced age of seventy-eight, on October 21st, 1320.

Mar Jaballaha made a second attempt at reconciliation with the Holy See in 1314. In that year he wrote to Pope Benedict XI, addressing him as "the Successor of St. Peter, Vicar of Jesus Christ over the whole Christian Church, both East and West." Besides this acceptance of Rome's authority we see from his letter that the Catholicus acknowledged One Person in Our Lord and the procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father and the Son, entitled Our Lady "Mother of God," and accepted the Canons of the Council of Nicea. But such was the anarchy of belief prevailing in the Nestorian Church that this attempt too was frustrated. He died in his monastery at Maragha in 1317, aged 72, after a Patriarchate of twenty-six years.

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