

Bishop Guðmundr, once more!

I shall begin with a definition. Contrary to the common opinion among our French journalists, among others, Old Iceland was not a democracy, nor was it a republic. The usual comparison with ancient Greece is not appropriate. The present paper would like to be a little reflection about this fact, applied to Bishop Guðmundr Arason, one of the chief responsible people for his country's decadence and final fall. Independent Iceland was a plutocratic oligarchy, which means that a few people had the power because they were rich. A few number of people who did not belong to the commoners were aristocrats. Another definition now: aristocracy applies to the form of government where power belongs to a small number of persons because they are members of a hereditary class: this privileged class holds the authority. And such is so obviously the case in Iceland since the very beginnings of its history that I have always been surprised it must have been ignored! All the heroes, without exception, of the Icelandic sagas (I mean *konungasögur*, *islandingasögur* and *samtíðarsögur*) belong to so called great families or, conversely, the common people simply do not appear in these texts. Such – could I say clans? – like the *Oddaverjar*, the *Haukdœlir* or the *Asbirningar* have such important origins that it is hard to justify the above opinion as dealing with a democracy...

What I should like to show here is that Guðmundr Arason (1161-1237) was a true witness of his time and that his personal history and fate is strictly parallel and akin to St. Francis of Assisi's (1181-1226) and Thomas à Becket's (1118-1170). All three are, of course, great saints for Medieval Christendom; all three were renowned for their ascetism and care for the poor, as well as for their particular connivance with such natural elements as water or animals, but all three are a pure expression of a typical conflict between their original milieu and the new kind of faith they wanted to promulgate.

This is particularly true, it seems to me, of St. Francis of Assisi. Guðmundr and Francesco were born of noble parents. From their very youth, they proved to be superior to other young people: both knew an adventurous life when young (I wrote, forty years ago, of Guðmundr as being "God's viking"). Both were transformed by very important events (his broken leg and then Thorgeirr's death, for Guðmundr) and they came back to Church where they became soldiers of *rex justus*. This is very clear if we compare Guðmundr and Thomas à Becket: Turville-Petre thought the Icelandic priest had been deeply influenced by the English cleric. The resemblance between both is striking, and it is a commonplace statement to say that that time has known a lot of admirable and so to speak paradigmatic figures such as the three ones which occupy us here, but we could as well add Bernard of Clairvaux, who is just a bit older (1199-1153). As for Thomas à Becket, we know that Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, who was a great friend of Guðmundr, went, when Guðmundr was about to be consecrated, to Norway together with Bergir Gunnsteinsson who is the author of *Tomas saga erkibyskups*. This is precisely the text which was read to Thorgils skarði a few days before his death (and we remember that Thorgils is supposed to have said that it would be a fine death, receiving such one as Thomas had got. Of course, it is exactly the kind of death Thorgils will suffer a few days later). There are also, in *Míðsaga Guðmundar goða*, two lines by Kolbeinn Tumason, saying:

*Guð hefir byskup görvan
Glikan Toma at ríki.*

The same things could be told about St. Francis of Assisi. I said his life bore some resemblances with Guðmundr's. The most striking feature, however, concerns his character: he knew of no natural limits, he lived in communion with "Sister Water", "our Brother Fire", "Mother Earth". He practised a cult of poverty, living of continuous privations, spending his

whole time wandering from place to place with an impressive following of beggars, vagrants and the like.

Thomas of Canterbury was an unmanageable fighter too, he wanted fiercely an independent Church (against his friend the king!). He became a martyr because of that. Important people did not like him, but he was a kind of idol for poor people and he was banished abroad for that reason – just like Guðmundr was! It is certainly not by chance that Hrafn, already mentioned here, made a pilgrimage on Thomas's grave.

These simple facts only demonstrate that it is obviously significant that we have four different texts about bishop Guðmundr preserved, although, as Stefan Karlsson points it, the ecclesiastical authorities of Iceland tried, after Bishop Guðmundr's death, to diminish public veneration for the saint at least during the first few generations afterwards: we have to wait for Bishop Auðunn rauði Thorbergsson (1315) to go back to a better understanding. This means that the above mentioned four texts on Guðmundr could be considered to be some kind of propaganda intended for a foreign audience, style being: we too have a saint Francis, he had the same grounds and was facing identical problems, etc. Seen from our present eyes, after all, the identities are great: these God's apostles are running about, begging, singing, trying to reconcile enemies, preaching God's word, teaching penance and eucharist...

I have simply tried to establish astonishing resemblances in biographies and facts between the three men – and, I am sure, others as well.

*

Now, striking too is the sort of apostolate – already suggested – that characterizes the three saints (although I am well aware that Guðmundr has never been canonized, and surprising as it is, the fact could receive a solution in the present paper?).

A word can sum up their situation: they were anticonformists. Maybe because they wanted to imitate Christ, who was equally somewhat of a vagrant, poor indeed, preaching everywhere and to everybody, and much attentive to wretched and destitute people. They granted priority to action onto intellectual research or pure contemplation. Without exaggeration: some sort of tenderheartedness defines their action, the point is clearly visible in the popular devotions attached to them. Do remember, for instance, the way Guðmundr behaved with the old woman, sick and dying, according to *Prestssaga Guðmundar goða* (chap.146 in Órnolfur Thorsson's edition). There is certainly a deliberate will to follow foreign examples in this way of practising intentional poverty. And never forget the so called scandalous point of view: these very important men, belonging to high families were not behaving according to the habits of their respective circles, it was certainly difficult for contemporaries to admit such conduct.

And as for popularity, we could develop this theme at length. We saw that Guðmundr was extremely loved by the small people: a thing that is rather paradoxical, as we will see later. His goodness towards children and old people must have been true, *thessi förumunkr i biskupssæti*, as he has been qualified. He played a decisive part in the belief into miracles, that takes such a place in the *jarteinabækur* – in a sense and since these *bækur* were written after his death, we get here a good proof of the depth of the faith he inspired. We also know that nobody else gave his name to so many sources, wells, natural places. Olafur Laruson ("Guðmundr goði i thjóðtru Islendinga", p. 137) has noticed the way the bishop survived in popular beliefs, up to the present day! First by consecrating fountains, wells, etc. They were supposed to cure diseases, to bring to life again animals and even human persons, to extinguish fires, or, on the contrary, to act as fuel in the lamps of poor people. Guðmundr was strong equally to struggle against *illar vættir*: the *flagð* Selkolla being a good illustration of this kind of quarrel. And, through exorcisms or blessings, he was able to confer sanctity to various places or things. Such was the case of places where he had pitched his tent, of fords, lanes, mountains, lakes, rocks, waterfalls, vales and so on. Olafur concludes: *hann hefur lifað*

freður sem goður maður en som helgur maður i minni thjóðarinnar. This is an interesting point, methinks. One could insist on his alms, but his *hjátru* was for more impressive because far closer to everyday life. By his steadfast faith, his personal confidence into the strength of prayer, his sincere cult of the saints (and as well of the relics), he had everything suitable to become a very popular saint. But it was the man who impressed firstly his contemporaries. The fact is that his faith I just was talking about, is very close to superstition – a thing which explains why great rational scholars like Peter G.Foote disapprove of the behaviour of "that pitiful and disastrous man" (in "Sturlusaga" p. 237). Here you get also the explanation why *Prestssaga Guðmundar goða* establishes so frequently clear links between events where Guðmundr is implied and *thjóðsögur*, for instance about the huge hand which cuts the rope to on which the fisherman hangs, or these ghosts attacking Guðmundr himself, in a context reminding us of so called magical poems (*hér sofa drengir og hér sofa drengir*). We must admit the reasons why Guðmundr tolerated the *dansar* that were so strictly condemned by another bishop, Jon Ögmundarson, among others.

Yes, he was popular indeed, and, let us not forget this point, not exclusively with small people. Do remember: bishop Brandr, who was really not a superstitious nor popular man, had Guðmundr be his personal spiritual master; Guðmundr was invited to take part into all public ceremonies, by other bishops; he was chosen to proclaim great decisions at the Althing; he was the object of impressive processions; Gizurr Hallsson, one of the best Icelanders of the time, delivered a most flattering speech in his honour; some of the best men and biggest chiefs of the XIIIth century like Thorðr Sturluson, Hrafn Sveibjarnarson, were his friends. And so on. This is important since we are no longer, here, into a popular sphere, if one may say so. Let us express ourselves this way: Guðmundr gained everybody's admiration, in Iceland, in his time, for his courage and his faith.

*

This constatation, which will be hardly contradicted, leads me to my third and most important point, the main reason for the present paper. Which could be formulated, in first instance, so: why, considering all these conditions, has bishop Guðmundr not been canonized? We see quite well the merits and qualities of Thorlák Thorhallsson or Jon Ögmundarson: Guðmundr's ones are still more visible. Anyway, he remained an "ordinary" priest or bishop and, if we compare the three men, we discover quite easily that Guðmundr could (or should?) have prevailed upon the other two. Which he did not do. Why?

The answer relies on History (with a capital H), I think. And here, the instances I quoted in the beginning of the present paper, of St. Francis of Assisi or Thomas à Becket are in the same time edifying and useful. The spirit of the time, the model provided by the Italian and the English saints are eloquent. The question was to know how one can assume *the passage from the let us say mystical to the political, or the contrary a well*. I studied the problem some thirty years ago (in *Etudes Germaniques*, 22:3, 1967) to conclude that the difficulties Guðmundr encountered were due to his special temper, I saw the clue to his destiny according to psychological values. I spoke indeed of *viking de Dieu*, which was, I believe, a double mistake, both about Guðmundr himself and about the notion of Viking. I have come to better – I think – opinions nowadays, and they are the reason why I am exposing my views here. You all know that, in these decisive centuries in Western Europe, there reigned a violent and deep quarrel between Church and State. Which of the two powers would get the supremacy? Nearly everywhere, the problem was very complicated by the fact that most of the important persons were in the same time owners of the temporal and of the spiritual power. They had to make a choice and in the majority of cases, they did indeed. They preferred gathering both in the same hands. But what with the ones who refused this sort of confusion and decided to live according to the Gospel? At least for a start, that is before the intervention of well- to-do people belonging to their families?

Let us see why this man, who has been and is still so admired by most of his compatriots, has provoked the violent wrath of such great scholars as Sigurður Nordal. Who is sure that the interventions of Guðmundr in his manner, for instance, of administrating the Church of Iceland in the XIIIth century, is one of the three major causes of the final catastrophe: he *var í senn vikingur og guðsmaður, höfðingi og beiningamaður [...]* *Með framferði sínu rauf Guðmundur ekki einungis öll boð borgarlegra eygirnda og velsæmis, heldur allar skorður, sem skynsemd í barattu fyrir aukna kirkjuvaldi atti að setja homum (Íslenzk menning p. 319).*

St. Francis of Assisi's case is perfect here to help us understanding Guðmundr. We have not to suspect the sincerity of his decision of becoming really poor, belonging as he was to a rich family which we would call *bourgeoise* to day, but which belonged, in fact, to what I called aristocracy. What we know, is that, very swiftly, he discovered, by force, that it was hard indeed to become poor. In other words, History teaches us that after a few years, this *bourgeois* wanted, so to speak spontaneously or by dint of habits (the milieu, of course) to institutionalize the order he was starting. He had founded a begging order (un ordre mendiant), he decided rapidly to transform it into an intellectual order, which we call Franciscan. The friars had begun by being beggars, hermits and popular preachers in the same time but the rule of things wanted them to reach an organization, to preserve certain values: they were men of action and of meditation, they had the reputation of being pious and pure, but they could not abstain of being also self-willed and somewhat arbitrary. Which, by the way, will be also bishop Guðmundr's case: as everybody knows, he will make ill use of excommunications, he will, in spite of his genuine good will, encourage bloody battles. In many cases the situation suffered by Thomas à Becket is the same: he had to maintain a certain sense of evangelical values but he remained close to the world and, accordingly, could not exclude the respect of other values.

Because Francis, Thomas or Guðmundr, who belonged to a society which – we would say nowadays – was a class that admitted willingly sacrifices and virtues, but could not abdicate some fundamental notions, family, power, rank, statute and the like. Could I say it was a matter of education? I am not sure. Milieu would be better, doubtless. Do not forget this Egill who appears in a dream to one of his descendants, to tell him, in substance: when one belongs to the family of the Myramenn, there are things one does not do... I think the whole Guðmundr's problem is here.

And I would like to insist on the point that this dilemma was not special to my three instances here. The XIIth and XIIIth centuries, in Europe, have certainly known, everywhere, such a dramatic situation. We have not to deny the quality of the Christian religion that was adopted by the whole Western world at that time: its sincerity is not contestable, and the practice, in all our countries, is unquestionable. The matter we are dealing with here is not directly relevant to religion, at least to established religion such as it was everywhere in our world. Simply, in the XIIth and XIIIth centuries, a new trend manifested itself, tending towards more purity, more authenticity, more faithfulness to the evangelical message. Christianity, Christ's message, was not a religion for rich people, for well-to-do people (which, of course, does not mean it could not interest them as well!). After eleven or twelve centuries, evolution being what it is, it goes without saying that the distance between the genuine evangelical precepts and the reality had greatly increased. It is the reason why, in most of the so called advanced countries, a deep and honest reflection was to lead to an examination, a criticism especially among the most eminent minds (or souls) of the time. The desire was increasing to return to the purity of the origins. And therefore, in Italy, in France, in England, in Iceland, there arose spirits who wanted sincerely to come back to the sources and live in truth their faith. Such is the case of Guðmundr. In the beginning, he was a fervent adept of the Church that tried to reestablish a christianism worthy of its definition.

The rest is well known. Let us recall the desire of the begging orders to take part into the school and university life. We all know the efforts Guðmundr displayed to support the will of the Church: to be alone to judge clerics, to be alone to have the right of judging on spiritual matters, and we are all well aware that this was not a specific Icelandic situation: do not forget the Danish kings' quarrel with bishop Jakob or the history of king Sverrir in Norway. Or Thomas à Becket's part in English history. Some coincidences are striking: on the 17.3.1196, Pope Celestianus III sent a letter to Niðaros to forbid lay people to judge clerics: it is the exact moment when Guðmundr is consecrated a bishop. A few years later, Guðmundr will demand the right of judging his clerics alone. On the 30.6.1198, Pope Innocentius III sends a letter to the Icelandic clergy in order to exhort them to fight against the lay chieftains. Bishop Pall takes this order with some moderation, but bishop Guðmundr accepts this order in earnest.

Let us come back to St. Francis. He would obviously have liked to become a true "saint", a worthy disciple of Christ. He did his best to follow and match his divine model. But he had, to be faithful to his ancestors, to become an important man, he possessed privileges that his family had acquired after long and harsh struggles, he lived in a milieu where intrigues and coteries were the normal state of things. So, the moment came when he had, *nolens volens*, to substitute politico-social criteria to psychological ones. In other words, he was obliged to renounce more or less to his evangelical ideals in order to create a well organized, correctly conceived according to hierarchy, order. Such too was the reflex or perhaps reflection (I do not dare to speak of conscious reaction) of Guðmundr. I understand why Jón Jóhannesson declares that he *hefur verið kallaður einn hinn otharfasti maður í sögu vorri (Íslendinga saga, p. 250)*: he tried to act according to two different lines of behaviour, the result could not be satisfactory! As Einar Ólafur Sveinsson said: he was only a *halfheilagur* and we do agree. He was a great man, after all, he had to behave according the example of his ancestors. One has to quote the well known passage where Thorvarðr admonishes him: "You know, parent, that I have been the chieftain of our family and my father before me. You father obeyed my previsions and so did the other parents of mine, and I advise you to do so. You must be intended to become a chieftain, after me." The importance of this passage cannot be underrated since it gives us the clue of the whole problem. Guðmundr may be a good Christian, a real apostle, but he has before all to be faithful to the tradition of his family and to the aristocratic ideal that has prevailed inside the circle of his kinsmen. Once more, the situation is exactly the same as Francis' one in Italy practically at the same time. And we understand why the "lay" spirit is well alive in the soul of the restless bishop.

What I should like to suggest is that Guðmundr's ideal towards asceticism and poverty goes against the old aristocratic ideal of the Icelanders. Guðmundr represents the militant Church which was so active in his century, according, moreover, to Gregorian reform. Let us say that he symbolized *guðs lög* against *lands lög*. But as a man, as a member of the venerable family of Thorgeirr Hallason, he had to obey the unwritten laws dictated by Fate, concentrating his honour, that had reigned for centuries into his mind and in kinsmen's souls.

I should not say that Guðmundr represented the fight between Church and State, as would have been the case elsewhere in Europe, nor, more precisely, between Holar and himself as an individual, but between an immemorial and living tradition and the spirit of new times that could not coincide with such sacred and ancient principles.