



HOLY DIOCESE OF STOCKHOLM SWEDEN

A Small Pilgrimage in search of early remnants of Christianity in Sweden

With the blessing of His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle, on August 6, 2016 (Old Style), following the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord at the Convent of St. Philothei in Villberga, a small group, consisting of the convent's serving Priest, Fader Anders Åkerström, two nuns, and two laypeople, set out on a small pilgrimage in search of early remnants of Christianity in Sweden.

As Orthodox Christians, we often forget that the Christian Faith came to the Scandinavian lands before the Great Schism between the Orthodox Church and Rome. Thus, the pre-Schism Saints of Scandinavia are naturally also venerated in the Orthodox Church. Moreover, one should not indiscriminately regard the year 1054 as a definitive "cutoff point" at which the entire West was deprived of Divine Grace all at once. As was the case in Orthodox England, the Schism at first passed almost unnoticed in the North. One could, then, tentatively point to the year 1080 as a critical juncture, when Rome sent papal legates to the Swedish Church province to enforce its authority.

* * *

Our trek followed in the footsteps of St. Eskil (†1080). An Anglo-Saxon monk and disciple of St. Sigfrid (February 15), St. Eskil left England at the beginning of the eleventh century to help evangelize Sweden during the reign of the Christian King Inge the Elder, with whose consent he was consecrated Bishop by St. Sigfrid.



Helige Eskil



His preaching touched the hearts of the people, who built new, Christian sanctuaries, demolished the pagan temples, and hewed down the sacrificial groves.

After some time, however, when King Inge refused to perform the sacrificial rituals at the Temple at Uppsala, he

was exiled and replaced by his heathen brother-in-law, Blot-Swelyn, who restored pagan traditions.

A great sacrificial feast was held in Strängnäs, to which St. Eskil set off in order to preach repentance. He stood fearlessly among the people until they began to rail against his word. He then prayed to God for a sign from Heaven, whereupon a violent storm of snow, rain, and hail suddenly broke out, which destroyed their sacrificial altar, while St. Eskil himself remained untouched by so much as a drop.

The heathen were all the more enraged, and a soothsayer struck him a blow on the head with a stone while another hit him with an axe. Severely injured, St. Eskil was dragged to Blot-Swelyn, who condemned him to death. He was stoned at a pagan place of sacrifice on a hill, which to this day bears the name Munkbacken ("monk-hill"), and on which site the Strängnäs Cathedral was later built.

His mangled remains were then borne off to be buried in his own Church. On the way, at a place now called Eskilstuna, a dark and heavy fog suddenly set in, preventing them from going any further, and his body grew so heavy that they could no longer move it. That night, the person who had cast the first stone received a revelation that they should build a Church on that spot in honor of the martyr, which is what came to pass. Another narrative says that spring named after St. Eskil near Strängnäs sprang forth for the first time when his body was carried by. A Church and monastery were later built over his grave, and his Relics—which were unfortunately lost during the Reformation—worked many miracles. St. Eskil is commemorated on June 12.



Our ultimate destination was St. Eskil's spring, but our first stop was in Eskilstuna, where the Serbian Orthodox Church has a cemetery chapel dedicated to another Swedish Saint, namely St. Anna of Novgorod.

The daughter of King Olof Skötkonung, St. Anna was born around 1000 and named Ingegerd. In 1017, she married the Great Prince Yaroslav the Wise of Novgorod (the son of St. Vladimir, the "Enlightener of Rus"). With strength of heart and soul, she used her many gifts to serve her new homeland, and was a faithful assistant and advisor to her husband. She also helped establish good relations with all of the Nordic countries.

St. Anna founded a convent in Kiev and was later tonsured a nun, whereupon she received the name Anna. She reposed on February 10, 1051 and was buried at the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Kiev.¹

In 1991, her Relics were returned to the Church of the Holy Apostle Philip in Novgorod, and later a small portion of her Relics was given to the Church dedicated to her in Eskilstuna. We were very grateful for the opportunity to venerate these Relics, and also several beautiful Icons of the Saint in the simple and Grace-filled chapel.



* * *

¹ For more on the Life of St. Anna of Novgorod, see *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XXXI, No. 1, 2014, pp. 50-54.



The next stop on our little pilgrimage was to Fors Church in central Eskilstuna, where St. Eskil lived. On St. Eskil's initiative, the original wooden Church was rebuilt on a larger scale in stone, one of the walls of which remains to this day (the rest of the Church having been renovated in various ways over the years). There are several medieval wooden sculptures of Scandinavian Saints preserved in the Church, including one of St. Eskil holding three stones, indicating the manner of his martyrdom.

* * *

On the way from Eskilstuna to Strängnäs, we stopped at the ruins of the medieval Vårfruberga ("Mountain of Our Lady") Abbey near the village of Fogdö. Here, we were met by Lars Adolfsson, a vicar in the Swedish Lutheran Church, who was to astonish us over the next three hours with his sincere love for the Mother of God, the Saints and their Relics, and the monastic life. With expertise and enthusiasm, he told us about the life of the nuns who once lived here.

In the eleventh century, Fogdö received its first parish Church. Later, a new Church, dedicated to St. Alban the Protomartyr of Britain (commemorated June 22), was built at its present location, and a convent was founded at the original Church.

In 1233, the convent moved to the Church of St. Alban, which was then used by both the laypeople and the monastics, as is testified by an inset opening in the south wall—a so-called "nun's



portal." The choir area was also widened so as better to accommodate the nuns.

Some years later, the convent was formally accepted into the Cistercian Order (founded in 1098). Cistercian life was centered on a return to a strict observance of the Rule of St. Benedict, a sixth-century monk who is commemorated in the Orthodox Church on March 14. It is not so surprising, then, that there were a number of similarities between their way of life and life in an Orthodox monastery.



Possibly in search of greater solitude more conducive to prayer, the nuns moved again three kilometers to the east, on the shores of Lake Mälaren, where the aforementioned ruins now lie. Here, they built a full monastic complex in accordance with the Cistercian principles of monastery construction and layout.

Vårfruberga Abbey was self-governing, led by an Abbess that was frequently chosen from among the educated nobility. Up to forty nuns may have lived there at any given time, but judging by the small refectory, it is more likely that it housed around twelve nuns and their Abbess.

The nuns were divided into "choir sisters" and "lay sisters." The former seldom left the convent and mostly occupied themselves with daily prayer, whereas the latter did more practical tasks and worked outside on the convent grounds, for example in their large apple orchard. They had the right to interrupt their work to perform the seven canonical hours of prayer outside of the Church.



An Abbess' gravestone

The first of these seven prayer hours was at two o'clock in the morning, Matins was celebrated at daybreak, and Vespers and the Compline were read in the evening.

The nuns observed a rule of silence, and spiritual conversation was only permitted in a special

room. There were two meals a day—only one during fasting times—at which spiritual texts were read aloud. The sisters were permitted to leave a portion of their food for the poor waiting outside.



During the winter, the nuns would offer instruction to novices and children, copy manuscripts, and weave textiles for use in the Church. A tapestry 8.5 x 0.9 meters in length, with scenes from the Passion of Christ and of various Saints, which was produced at the Abbey is now preserved in Stockholm’s historic museum.

Vårfruberga Abbey functioned for more than two and a half centuries. During the Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century by King Gustav Vasa, the nuns were forced to leave their convent. The King had the convent demolished and used the bricks to build Gripsholm castle.

* * *



With our guide, Lars Adolfsson, leading the way, we drove along the narrow and winding gravel roads to the Church in Fogdö. Nowadays, Churches in Sweden are commonly named after the place in which they are located, so it was with some pleasure that we heard our guide refer to this Church as “St. Alban’s,” as it was known in medieval times. “Once dedicated to a Saint, always dedicated to that Saint,” he said with emphasis. The Church itself was closed for renovation, but we were able to examine the model displayed there which shows how the Vårfruberga Abbey may have looked.

* * *

We then continued on to the nearby Vansö Church, the oldest part of which probably dates to the twelfth century. It seems to have been dedicated to the Apostles Peter and Paul, judging by the prominence of these Saints in the frescoes by the celebrated Swedish painter Albertus Pictor. The frescos were whitewashed during the reformation, but an attempt was made to restore them in the twentieth century.



The four Holy Virgin-Martyrs Catherine (November 25), Marina/Margaret (July 17), Dorothea (February 6) and Barbara (December 4) have a central place in this Church, both in the frescos and on the sculpted altar-screen, which dates to the fifteenth century.

Depicted on the altar-screen are the Crucifixion, St. Anna bearing the Virgin Mary and Christ as a Child, the Apostle Andrew, St. John the Baptist, St. Laurentios the Archdeacon (August 10), and the two Swedish Saints Eskil and Botvid (July 28).

On the left of the altar, there is an altarpiece dedicated to the Mother of God with scenes from her life, and on the right a particularly well-preserved altarpiece dedicated to St. Olaf of Norway (July 29).



* * *

Just a few kilometers away, we came to what is now



known as Härad Church, but which was originally dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene (July 22). The oldest part of this Church dates to the twelfth century. There is a unique altarpiece dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene with scenes from her life. We were also shown a large stone reliquary with depictions of the Apostles carved along the sides.

* * *

We thanked our knowledgeable and amicable guide for devoting his entire afternoon to us, and before we left he again exalted the monastic life, expressing his belief that the world is upheld through the prayers of monks and nuns.

We then finished off our pilgrimage by visiting St. Eskil's spring, not far from the city of Strängnäs, which sprung up when his body was carried by after his martyrdom 1000 years ago.

* * *



Even though Sweden is one of the most secularized countries in the world today, with very few people who consider themselves Christians, and even fewer who venerate the Mother of God and the Saints, one can still find remnants of an entirely different era, when the Swedish people were baptized in great numbers, and

when the Theotokos, the Saints and their Relics were loved and held in great honor—a time when the Church had a central place in people’s lives.

May the Mother of God and all the Saints—and especially those who were active on Swedish soil—intercede for us with the Lord that we all come to repentance and return to a life with Christ and His True Church at its center.

*Mother Magdalene and Sister Lydia
Convent of St. Philothei*



A stained glass window depicting scenes from the life of St. Eskil, in Fors Church, Eskilstuna.