

Ansgar often wore a hair shirt, lived on bread and water when his health permitted it, and added short personal prayers to each Psalm in his Psalter, thus contributing to a form of devotion that soon became widespread.

Miracles were said to have been worked by him. After Ansgar's death, the work he had begun came to a stop and the area reverted to paganism. Christianity did not begin to make headway in Scandinavia until two centuries later with the work of Saint Sigfried and others. A life story was written about Ansgar by his fellow missionary in Scandinavia, Saint Rembert (Attwater, Attwater2, Benedictines, Bentley, Coulson, Delaney, Encyclopedia, Fanner, Gill, Robinson, White)

In art Ansgar is shown with converted Danes with him (White), wearing a fur pelisse (Roeder). He may sometimes be shown otherwise in a boat with King Harold and companions or in a cape and miter Hamburg Cathedral (Roeder).

Saint Ansgar is the patron of Denmark, Germany and Iceland (White). He is venerated in Old Corbie (Picardy) and New Corbie (Saxony) as well as in Scandinavia (Roeder).



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Saint Ansgar

Feast Day: February 3



Patron of Denmark, Germany and Iceland

Saint Ansgar

(Also known as Anskar, Anschar, Anscharius, Scharies)

Born near Amiens, Picardy, France in 801, died in Bremen, Germany on February 3, 865.

With the coming of the barbarian after the death of Charlemagne, darkness fell upon Europe. From the forests and the fjords of the north, defying storm and danger, came a horde of pirate invaders, prowling round the undefended coasts, sweeping up the broad estuaries, and spreading havoc and fear. No town, however fair, no church, however sacred, and no community, however strong, was immune from their fury. Like a river of death the Vikings poured across Europe.

It's hard to believe that there would be an outbreak of missionary activity at such a time, but in Europe's darkest hour there were those who never faltered, and who set out to convert the pagan invader. St. Ansgar was such a man. As a young boy of a noble family he was received at Corbie monastery in Picardy and educated under Saint Abelard and Paschasius Radbert. Once professed, he was transferred to New Corbie at Westphalia. He once said to a friend, "One miracle I would, if worthy, ask the Lord to grant me, and that is, that by his grace, he would make me a good man."

In France a call was made for a priest to go as a missionary to the Danes, and Ansgar, a young monk, volunteered. His friends tried to dissuade him, so dangerous was the mission. Nevertheless, when King Harold, who had become a Christian during his exile, returned to Denmark, Ansgar and another monk accompanied him. Equipped with tents and books, these two monks set out in 826 and founded a school in Denmark. Here Ansgar's companion died, and Ansgar was obliged to move on to Sweden alone when his success in missionary work led King Bjørn to invite him to Sweden.

On the way his boat was attacked by pirates and he lost all his possessions, arriving destitute at a small Swedish village. After his unpromising start, he succeeded forming the nucleus of a church -- the first Christian church in Sweden -- and penetrated inland, confronting the heathen in their strongholds and converting the pagan chiefs.

Ansgar became the first archbishop of Hamburg, Germany and abbot of New Corbie in Westphalia c. 831. The Pope Gregory IV appointed him legate to the Scandinavian countries and confided the Scandinavian souls to his care. He evangelized there for the next 14 years, building churches in Norway, Denmark and northern Germany.

He saw his accomplishments obliterated when pagan Vikings invaded in 845, overran Scandinavia, and destroyed Hamburg. Thereafter the natives reverted to paganism. Ansgar was then appointed archbishop of Bremen around 848, but he was unable to establish himself there for a time and Pope Nicholas 1 united that see with Hamburg. Nicholas also gave him jurisdiction over Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

Ansgar returned to Denmark and Sweden in 854 to resume spreading the Gospel. When he returned to Denmark he saw the church and school he had built there, destroyed before his eyes by an invading army.

His heart almost broke as he saw his work reduced to ashes" The Lord gave," he said, "and the Lord have taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." With a handful of followers he wandered through his ruined diocese, but it was a grim and weary time. "Be assured my dear brother, " said the primate of France, who had commissioned him to this task, "that what we have striven to accomplish for the glory of Christ will yet, by God's help, bring forth fruit."

Heartened by these words, and with unflinching courage, Ansgar pursued his Swedish mission. Though he had but four churches left and could find no one willing to go in his place, he established new outposts and consolidated his work.

King Olaf had cast a die to decide whether to allow entrance of Christians, an action that Ansgar mourned as callous and unbefitting. He was encouraged, however, by a council of chiefs at which an aged man spoke in his defense. "Those who bring to us this new faith," he said" by their voyage here have been exposed to many dangers. We see our own deities failing us. Why reject a religion thus brought to our very doors? Why not permit the servants of God to remain among us? Listen to my council and reject not what is plainly for our advantage."

As a result, Ansgar was free to preach the Christian faith, and though he met with many setbacks, he continued his work until he died at the age of 64 and was buried at Bremen. He was a great missionary, an indefatigable, outstanding preacher, renowned for his austerity, holiness of life, and charity to the poor. He built schools and was a great liberator of slaves captured by the Vikings. He converted King Erik of Jutland and was called the "Apostle of the North", yet Sweden reverted completely to paganism shortly after Ansgar's death.