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Papal Letters Concerning the
Bishopric of Gardar in Greenland
during the Fifteenth Century

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C O N T E N T S

Letter of Nicholas V.....	70
Letter of Alexander VI.....	73

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PAPAL LETTERS CONCERNING THE BISH-
OPRIC OF GARDAR IN GREENLAND
DURING THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY¹

LETTER OF NICHOLAS V., *September 20, 1448*

CALLED by a command from on high to preside over all the churches in the exercise of our apostolic duty, with the Lord's help we employ all our solicitude in laboring for the salvation of souls redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and we strive earnestly to restore to a state of peace and tranquillity, not only those who are frequently tossed about by the storms of impiety and error, but also those who are involved in the hardships and whirlwinds of persecution. Profoundly im-

¹ In 1893 an American in Rome, Mr. J. C. Heywood, one of the papal chamberlains, brought out, in a very small edition (twenty-five copies), a book of photographic facsimiles of documents in the Vatican relating to Greenland and the discovery of America, *Documenta Selecta e Tabulario Secreto Vaticano*. The Latin text of those here presented may be found in Fischer, *Discoveries of the Northmen*, pp. 49-51. A translation of all was made for the Tennessee Historical Society by Rev. John B. Morris and printed in Vol. IX. of the society's organ, the *American Historical Magazine*. Using this translation, we have printed Letters IX. and X. as the only ones that contain anything of particular interest concerning the Gardar bishopric in Greenland, excepting, possibly, the following sentence from Letter II. (December 4, 1276), to the Archbishop of Drontheim: "Your Fraternity having been explicitly directed by letters apostolic to visit personally all parts of the kingdom of Norway, for the purpose of collecting the tithes due the Holy Land, has informed us that this seems almost impossible, when it is taken into consideration that the diocese of Gardar in Greenland is so remote from your metropolitan see and kingdom, that five years or more would be consumed in going thither and returning." It has been inferred, on account of the length of this time, that the Vinland colony was included. There is no documentary evidence of this. The papal letters contain no reference to Vinland.

pressed therefore with the responsibility of our position, it is not difficult to understand how our mind was filled with bitterness by the tearful lamentations ¹ which have reached our ears from our beloved children, the native and other inhabitants of the island of Greenland, a region situated at the uttermost end of the earth. The island, belonging ² to the kingdom of Norway, and under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Drontheim, ³ received the faith of Christ almost six ⁴ centuries ago, through the piety of blessed King Olaf, and preserved it steadfastly and inviolably in accordance with the tradition of the Roman Church, and the Apostolic See. After their conversion, the people of this island, with untiring and characteristic devotion, erected many temples ⁵ to the worship of God and his saints, as well as a magnificent cathedral, ⁶ in which divine worship was diligently celebrated, until about thirty ⁷ years ago, when God permitting it, a barbarous and pagan fleet from neighboring shores ⁸ invaded the island, lay-

¹ No record of these reports from Greenland has been found.

² Both Iceland and Greenland came under Norwegian rule in 1261, during the reign of Haakon Haakonson (1217-1263).

³ In Norway.

⁴ Only four and a half centuries before this time. Olaf Tryggvason, who reigned from 995 to 1000, sent Leif Ericson as a missionary to Greenland in the year 1000.

⁵ According to Northern chorography, the Eastern Settlement had one hundred and ninety farmsteads, twelve churches, and two monasteries; the Western Settlement had ninety farmsteads and three churches.

⁶ The cathedral (hardly magnificent) was in the Eastern Settlement (*i.e.*, in southern Greenland), no doubt the present Kakortok. The village of Gardar, which gave its name to the bishopric, was at the present Kaksiarsuk. The authority which makes this identification possible, is Ivar Bardsen's description of Greenland written in that country in the fourteenth century. He was for many years steward to the Gardar bishopric. An English version of Bardsen's description is printed in Major's *The Voyages of the Venetian Brothers Zeno* (London, 1873). See also Fiske, *The Discovery of America*, pp. 239 and 242.

⁷ That is, about 1418. The last notice of Greenland based on Northern tradition is from the year 1409, telling of a marriage ceremony performed by Endride Andreson, the last bishop. See Laing's *The Sagas of the Norse Kings* (London, 1889), p. 177.

⁸ From Ivar Bardsen's description of Greenland it is known that the Greenlanders first came in conflict with the Eskimos during the fourteenth

ing waste the land with fire and sword, and destroying the sacred temples. Just nine parish churches were left standing. To these are attached, it is said, parishes of very great extent. These churches are left intact, because being situated in the mountain fastnesses, they were inaccessible to the barbarian hordes, who, after completing their work of destruction, led captive to their shores the unfortunate inhabitants of both sexes, and more particularly those who seemed best able to bear the hardships of servitude and tyranny. But as the same complaint sets forth, many of these captives, after a time, returned to their native land. They set to work to rebuild their ruined homes, and were particularly desirous of restoring divine worship to its former splendor. Because, however, of their past calamities, as well as the added trials of famine and want, they had not wherewith to support priests or bishop. They have been consequently during these thirty years past without the comfort and ministry of bishop or priest, unless some one of a very zealous disposition, and at long intervals, and in spite of danger from the raging sea, ventured to visit the island and minister to them in those churches which the barbarians had left standing. Having acquainted us with this deplorable state of affairs, and knowing our paternal solicitude, they have supplicated us to come to their rescue in this their hour of spiritual need. Our hearts have been moved by the prayers of the people of Greenland, but not being sufficiently acquainted with the circumstances,

century. He was appointed to lead an expedition from the Eastern Settlement against the Skrellings (Eskimos), who had taken possession of the Western Settlement. When he arrived there the Skrellings had departed, and they found nothing but ruins and some cattle running wild. See *Antiquitates Americanae*, p. 316.

The letter of Nicholas V. refers to an attack on the Western Settlement, of which there is no other recorded evidence. It is not likely that it will ever be possible to determine whether the settlement owed its final destruction to the irruptions of the Eskimos, "to the ravages of pestilence, to the enforced neglect of the mother country — itself during the fifteenth century too often in sore straits — to the iniquitous restrictions in commerce imposed by the home government, or to a combination of several of these evils." There was a regular succession of bishops from 1124 to the end of the fourteenth, or perhaps the beginning of the fifteenth century.

we direct and command you, or either of you,¹ beloved brothers, who as we understand are the bishops living nearest to that island, to institute a diligent inquiry as to whether things are as they have been reported to us, and if you should find them so, and the number of people warrant it, and if they are in a condition to provide sufficiently, we command you or either of you, to send worthy priests who will minister to them, erect churches, govern parishes, and administer the sacraments.

Moreover, if you or either of you should deem it expedient, and in this you will consult, of course, the metropolitan,² if his residence be not too far away from you, we empower you to select and consecrate a bishop, having first required him to take the usual oath to us and the Roman See. Be mindful, however, that we burden your conscience with this work, and we grant you, or either of you, full authority to carry it out, even if there should exist any constitution of the Apostolic See, general councils, canonical or other statutes to the contrary.

Given at Rome as dated above in the second year of our pontificate.

LETTER OF ALEXANDER VI.; WRITTEN IN THE FIRST YEARS OF HIS PONTIFICATE³

It has been reported to us that in the diocese of Gardar in Greenland, situated at the confines of the known world, the inhabitants, because of the scarcity of bread, wine and oil, live for the most part on dried fish and milk products. Wherefore because of the difficulty of passing through such immense quantities of ice, and likewise because of the poverty of the land, and the scant means of living, ships rarely visit its shores. We have learned in fact that no vessel has touched there during the past eighty years, and if a voyage be made at all, it must be in the month of August, when the ice has

¹ Addressed to the two bishops of Skalholt and Holar, in Iceland.

² The Archbishop of Drontheim in Norway.

³ Alexander VI. was pope from 1492 to 1503.

broken up. On this account, during eighty years no bishop or priest has resided personally among those people, and by reason of this, we are informed that many who were formerly Catholics have forgotten the faith of their baptism, and that no memory of the Christian religion is found, except a corporal, which is shown to the people once a year, and on which it is said the last priest who officiated there consecrated the body of Christ a hundred years ago.¹ In consideration of these things, Innocent the VIII., our predecessor of happy memory, wishing to provide a proper pastor for those forlorn people, conferred with his brethren, of whom we were one, and elected Matthias, our venerable brother, a member of the Order of St. Benedict, as well as professed monk, at our suggestion, and while we were still in minor orders, to be Bishop of Gardar. This good man, fired with great zeal to recall those people from the way of error to the practice of their faith, is about to undertake this perilous voyage and laborious duty.² We, on our part, accordingly, recognizing the pious and praiseworthy purpose of the same elect, and wishing to succor in some manner his poverty, which is very great indeed, command the officials of our chancery, as well as those of our palace, under pain of excommunication *ipso facto* to be incurred, that all apostolic letters destined for the church of Gardar, be written gratis for the glory of God alone, without exacting or charging any stipend; and we command the clergy and notaries of our palace to forward all letters to the above mentioned bishop, without demanding any payment whatsoever for services rendered.

To him everything must be free, other things to the contrary notwithstanding.

¹ Evidently this is only an approximate statement.

² There are no records that this man ever reached either Greenland or Iceland. The Greenland colony was not entirely forgotten by the home government (Denmark-Norway). In the beginning of the sixteenth century, Archbishop Valkendorf of Drontheim had agitated the question of searching for the Greenland colony. During the reign of Frederick II. of Denmark-Norway, Mogens Heinesen was in 1579 sent out, but he did not reach the island. The Englishman John Davis, in 1585, visited the western coast of Greenland, but found no Europeans.