

# *Norway's Millennium of Christianity and Decade of Celebration*

by IDAR KJØLSVIK

The Church of Norway and the Kingdom of Norway are celebrating a millennium of Christianity, a span that includes the first Christians in North America. Therefore, Norwegians and others are about to start a decade of celebrating and discussing Christian, Lutheran, and national identity for a new millennium. Specifically, Norway is focusing on July 29, 2030, as the anniversary, celebrating one Christian millennium in order to prepare for a new and different one.

The Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, Norway, is the largest and most powerful medieval building in this part of the world, and the center of pilgrimages and church life for a thousand years and counting. The cathedral is built around the tomb of King Olav II Haraldsson, who became a martyr on July 29, 1030, and was shortly thereafter known as Saint Olav. The story about Christianity in the North is at the same time a story about him, both as King and Saint.

When the future Pope Hadrian IV arrived in 1153 to establish the northernmost seat of his church government at Saint Olav's tomb, there had already been a basilica on these Atlantic Shores for more than a century. As the crush of pilgrims became greater after the installation of the archbishop, the cathedral in Trondheim was rebuilt, expanded, and decorated. The shrine of Saint Olav became one of the most important sacred places for pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. From 1163 Norwegian kings were crowned in the Nidaros cathedral, in the octagonal choir at the altar of St. Olav. This octagonal choir was—and still is—known as “Cor Norvegiae”—The Heart of Norway (fig. 1).

Christianity always appears in a specific form, in a certain political and cultural context. The Norwegian “St. Olav's Christianity” is Western, Germanic, influenced by Celtic faith and the monastic tradition, and formed through the reciprocal correspondence between



fig. 1. “Cor Norvegiae,” The Heart of Norway. The octagonal high altar with the shrine of Saint Olav underneath it, in the Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim.

a kingdom, a people, and a church with an episcopal structure. This kind of faith was also the first form of Christianity to reach American shores, because the Christianization of the Northern world followed the Viking travels (fig. 2). According to the Sagas of Icelanders, and recently confirmed archeologically, the Norwegian leader Leif



fig. 2. The Christianization of the Northern world follows the Viking Travels during the 8.–11. centuries. Source: “Viking,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viking-people>.

Erikson established a Norse settlement at Vinland, America. This was first identified with the Norse L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland in modern-day Canada. This happened around 1000, when the later Saint Olav still was a young Viking chief. The latest archaeological evidence suggests that the Norwegian “Vinland” was rather the area around the Gulf of St. Lawrence and that the L'Anse aux Meadows site was instead a ship repair station. The Norwegian bishops of Gardar in Greenland, Skálholt and Holar in Iceland, and their archbishop in Nidaros on mainland Norway must have played a part in the colonization that came afterwards.<sup>1</sup> This makes America part of the Norwegian millennium celebrations.

### *Centers of the Celebration*

#### *The Personal Center*

The personal and historical center of the millennial celebration of Christianity is a Norwegian king. He was born as Olav the Son of

Harald, a little northwest of Oslo, no later than 993, probably some years earlier.<sup>2</sup> He was a king's grandson and was raised as a pagan Viking chief. During his lifetime, he was baptized and became the third of three kings known as "The Missionary Kings," the other two being Håkon den Gode and Olav Tryggvasson. Olav's baptism took place in the French Cathedral of Rouen in Normandy, October 16, 1014.<sup>3</sup> Olav established the Kingdom of Norway as a "modern" European state through Christian law. He was later driven out of the country by pagan chieftains, but returned and died as the Christian King of Norway in the battle of Stiklestad on July 29, 1030. Olav was known afterwards both as the Church's Saint Olav, and as the Kingdom's King Olav II.

Olav therefore had two functions. First, he was the one who established the Kingdom of Norway as a hereditary monarchy, as confirmed in the Constitution of May 17, 1814, and still valid today. Second, he was a saint, namely the Patron Saint of Norway and of Northern Europe. These two functions were combined in his official title on August 3, 1031. Here, King Olav II was beatified and became Saint Olav. The Norwegian people now belonged to church and state at the same time, and believed that Olav possessed the power of Christ, which was stronger than the power of the old gods. Olav's official title was *Rex Perpetuus Norvegiae*, meaning Norway's Eternal King. And so he was for almost a thousand years—and still is today, in the twenty-first century.

Both the history of King Olav II Haraldsson and the mythology of Norway's Eternal King, Saint Olav, are theologically and constitutionally of great importance, although it is difficult to describe in both modern theology and modern law. The church is now a modern Evangelical-Lutheran church, and officially should not have saints and holy relics. The state is a parliamentary democracy and officially should not have kings and state religions. But historically, the Saint Olav tradition created both the state and the church, which became a state-church system from the Reformation until 2017.<sup>4</sup> Although the King of Norway is no longer crowned by the church, and no longer appoints the bishops personally, the Church of Norway is mentioned particularly in the latest version of the Constitution and the kings are blessed in the Nidaros Cathedral by the

presiding bishop. When a bishop is consecrated in the Church, the King will still be present, voluntarily. In other words, this thousand-year history and mythology is of great importance for both the Christian and the political identity of Norway in the twenty-first century.

Of course “church and state” in Norway cannot be reduced to one man or even the whole Olav tradition, just as that tradition politically has included some gross nationalistic distortions, among them Nazi activities on these sites. But the millennium is dated from this man’s death date, and so the Olav story from Trøndelag is the personal center.

### *The Ecclesiastical Center*

The ecclesiastical center of the millennial celebrations is the Church of Norway, with its presiding bishop in Trondheim and the eleven dioceses throughout the country. Olav Fykse Tveit, until recently the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, has become the new presiding bishop of Norway,<sup>5</sup> and will lead the church into this decade of celebration. Also the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church in Norway are working to have their share of the famous King and Saint. Norway also has a respectable number of Protestant churches other than the Lutheran, and they are watching these developments closely.

### *The Geographical Center*

The geographical center of the celebration is Stiklestad and Trondheim, both in the County (fylke) of Trøndelag, Central Norway. Stiklestad is the place of the King’s death, because this was the center of Viking power in pagan times. Trondheim is the place of the King’s “resurrection,” because this was the Capital of the Christian Kingdom of Norway. To illustrate the importance of Saint Olav and this geographic region, we have to know about the mythological parallel between Jesus Christ and Saint Olav. The core of the St. Olav mythology is that Olav represented Christ; indeed, he is the Nordic Christ in Northern Europe.

Briefly summarized, according to this mythology Saint Olav entered Norway just as Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He

prayed and slept amongst his disciples like Jesus in Gethsemane. Olav suffered and died in Stiklestad as Jesus did on the Via Dolorosa and the cross on Golgotha. Saint Olav's body was brought to Trondheim as Jesus was brought to Joseph's tomb. Saint Olav embodied the powers of Christ's resurrection, and was "raised from the dead" through the church's beatification in Trondheim as Jesus was raised from the dead in his tomb. The most important pilgrimage through a thousand years is still Saint Olav's own "Via Dolorosa" through Sweden and eastern Norway to Stiklestad. The Church of Stiklestad was built as a tomb, while the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim makes the beatification of Olav and resurrection of Christ visible. This mythic pattern determines spiritual practices at these sacred places.

The original altar cloth of Nidaros Cathedral is a colored painting on wood (fig. 3) and the correct definition is therefore not a "cloth" but an "antemensale," meaning "in front of the table." The



fig. 3. The altar cloth at Nidaros Cathedral

antemensale in Nidaros Cathedral tells the story of Saint Olav and the mythology, almost like a cartoon, starting on the upper left and going counter-clockwise. 1. The Night in Agony with the dream of the stairs up to Heaven, 2. Procession into Jerusalem/Stiklestad, 3. Death by three (not five!) wounds, 4. Resurrection. In the middle, formed like a cross, is Olav as Christ, in the middle of the evangelists and holding an ax, and under a Gothic arch—the Church.

### *A National Anniversary*

The former Norwegian Government's Minister of Church and Education, Gudmund Hernes, wrote in 2014 that the celebrations in 2030 should be a Norwegian National Anniversary. The State should also celebrate, not just the Church. "In order to succeed, a breadth of professional communities in Norway must be involved, many places of the country must join and be linked in the long run towards 2030."<sup>6</sup>

Important for the celebration of the Christian millennium is The Norwegian National Cultural Center on St. Olav's Heritage (SNK). It was established by a parliamentary decision in 1995 with the main purpose of conveying political, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of the St. Olav heritage. This federal Cultural Center is located at Stiklestad, the place of Olav's death. The Cultural Center has followed up on the Minister's advice. Together with the Church of Norway, it has set up a program for the whole decade, starting now in 2020. The final report on the planning for the decade was made in February of 2019. Some started the celebration already the very same summer. The eleven dioceses of the Church of Norway along with the eleven administrative regions of the Kingdom of Norway are in different ways to celebrate each of the eleven years of the anniversary decade, from 2020 throughout 2030, as listed below.

According to the Cultural Center, the National Jubilee of 2030 should lift up "Social Community" as a central motif. A well-functioning democracy is characterized by, among other things, room for differences: a community of disagreement. "This requires a public conversation that invites everyone in. The National Jubilee in 2030 is a good opportunity to build on this by inviting to the Great Conversation on Norway. The over-all question is: What are

the pillars on which Norwegian society is based and which will carry it forward?"<sup>7</sup> This overall question will be discussed in various ways during the next ten years.

### *The Decade*

Major themes for the celebrations are here combined with two things, first, the major historical events from Olav's life and, second, the different geographical sites where these events happened. This combination shows clearly that all regions of mainland Norway are included both in the historical events of the eleventh century, as well as in the millennial celebrations in present, modern Norway.

It is most important that both the past and the future, as well as the church and the kingdom are all taken into consideration. And all elements should be more or less represented in all parts of Norway and all parts of the celebrations. The reason lies in the core of the celebrations: Olav. It is neither possible nor correct to "divide" Olav. He is both King and Saint. And the celebrations are of both church and state, they are ecclesiastic and national. This has led to a schedule for an entire decade of celebration. Not everything can be planned in detail so many years ahead, but the basic plan looks like this:<sup>8</sup>

<i>Year</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Church Diocese</i>	<i>State Region</i>
2020	Olav gets married to a Swedish princess	Alliance	Borg	Østfold, Akershus
2021	Olav is challenged by pagans	Cultural change	Hamar	Hedmark, Oppland
2022	Olav erected Court and Law of Eidsivathing	Democracy	Oslo, Borg	Oslo, Akershus
2023	Olav meets the Chiefs of the Arctic North	Resources, Wealth	Nord-og Sør-Hålogaland	Nordland, Troms
2024	Introduction of Christian Law	Law, Development	Bjørgvin	Hordaland, Sogn og Fjordane

*continued*



<i>Year</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Church Diocese</i>	<i>State Region</i>
2025	Olav's Journeys in the Atlantics, Europe and Moslem world	Local-Global	Stavanger	Rogaland
2026	Olav's Family and Clans	Family	Borg	Østfold
2027	Olav and the indigenous Sami People of the North	Indigenous peoples	Hålogaland	Troms, Finnmark
2028	Olav creates literature in Snorre and Ibsen	Literature	Agder and Tunsberg	Telemark, Vestfold
2029	Olav in the people's mind and traditions	Folk Traditions	Møre	Møre og Romsdal
2030	Olav's struggle and death	Battle, suffering and Death	All over the Church	All over the Country
2031	Olav's beatification	Resurrection	All over the Church, Nidaros	Trøndelag

### *Theological Themes of importance*

The Norwegian National Cultural Center on St. Olav's Heritage has worked out a number of themes to be researched further during the decade of celebration.<sup>9</sup> There is no need to give the whole list here, but two main clusters of questions and discussions need to be mentioned.<sup>10</sup>

#### *National and Ecclesiastical identity*

Who are we? What creates an identity? How do we understand and define ourselves in dealing with others? How does a sense of belonging arise? Does a community require unity? What does national identity mean today? The Norwegian Constitution states that "The foundation of values must be our Christian and humanistic heritage," but values will always be challenged, discussed and

potentially changed. Is there a foundation of values that is indispensable for the state?

What does church or ecclesiastical identity mean? And is the church's identity different from the national identity, when this state's constitution claims to build on Christian values? This cluster of questions on both state and church values and identity is one of the main issues for the millennium celebrations. A specific question arises, for example, in the church's very name. The celebrating church is called "The Church of Norway." It has no denomination or confession in its name. Neither is it the church "in" Norway—as for example the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. So what does "Norwegian" mean for a church? In other words, what significance does a nation have for a Christian identity? Exactly the same global question can of course be asked about an American identity.

#### *Protestant Saints, Lutheran Relics and Holy Places*

A second main issue is the role of cultural heritage and how it influences and changes present identity. How is a nation and a church shaped by the tension between tradition and renewal? And how important is change for a viable society? How did we become who we are? To what extent are we characterized by our surroundings and how much do we choose for ourselves?

To make it more specific, church history gave Norway saints and relics—and a Lutheran confession. This combination is ought to be impossible. What does it mean to have saints and relics in a Protestant church? Or is it no longer Protestant when you have saints and their relics? Perhaps this Lutheran church is not Protestant at all? The communion with those who have "died in the Lord" was a vivid reality to the early Christians. It was this devotion that gave rise to the cult of the saints.<sup>11</sup> Still today pilgrims visit the "St. Olav Stone" (fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> What does this mean? In short, how do the Lutheran Confessions co-exist with the Olav traditions of a saint and a relic?

The same goes for holy places.<sup>13</sup> Neither Protestant theology in general nor the Evangelical-Lutheran Confessions in particular provide any theology of holy places. Yet Protestant and Lutheran believers indeed have their holy places and sanctuaries.



fig. 4. “Olavssteinen” The St. Olav Stone, on which King Olav lay as he was killed. In the altar of Stiklestad Church, this is one of the two main centers of the St. Olav Pilgrimage. The other one is “Norway’s Heart,” the altar in Nidaros Cathedral (in Fig. 1).

### *Conclusion*

Norway, with Northern Europe in general, is changing and developing on the turn to a new ecclesiastical millennium. From the very beginning, this has included North America and is also now a new possibility for a common European and American outlook into the future. There are vast numbers of issues, questions, subjects, and disciplines to be discussed in the next ten years. But it is also possible to boil all this down to two main issues for the decade of celebrations. It can be summed up in the keywords: identity and heritage.

What does identity mean? Church identity, Lutheran identity, National identity? And what does our cultural and religious heritage mean for us looking into the future? We have holy places, holy persons, and holy relics at the same time that we have Lutheran confessions and Protestant theologies. The decade of celebrations of the millennium starts right now, and may give new answers to these

questions and open up new perspectives to us all, both in North America and Northern Europe.

## LITERATURE

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## NOTES

1. Until the Reformation in 1537, The Church of Norway as well as the Kingdom of Norway included not only the mainland, but «all islands in North-Atlantic Ocean». Britain and Ireland, however were not considered as «islands», and were not a part of Norway. A part of “all islands in the Ocean” was the “islands” we now know as “North-America,” although nobody then of course knew how large these “islands” really were.

2. Norwegian Encyclopedia: [https://snl.no/Olav\\_den\\_hellige](https://snl.no/Olav_den_hellige).

3. We do not know the exact day with certainty, but the Roman Catholic Church has officially chosen October 16th as the Day of St. Olav’s Conviction/Baptism: <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/Bjd1G/kilden-til-olav-den-helliges-daap-finner-og-feires-i-frankrike>. The Millennium was celebrated in Rouen, France: <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/normandie/2014/10/19/le-millenaire-du-bapteme-de-saint-olav-la-cathedrale-de-rouen-574612.html>. <https://unitedeschretiens.fr/Millenaire-du-bapteme-de-saint-Olav.html>.

4. This site is the Government of Norway: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/farvel-til-statskirken—fortsatt-folkekirke/id2525748/>

5. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/people/olav-fykse-tveit-nominated-head-bishops-conference-church-norway>.

6. Norwegian Cultural Minister Gudmund Hernes. <https://stiklestad.no/nasjonaltjubileet2030/>.

7. Translated by the author from *Nasjonaltjubileet 2030—Norge i Tusen År* (Stiklestad: Stiklestad Nasjonale Kultursenter, 2016), 10. <https://stiklestad.no/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/sluttrapport-forstudie-nasjonaltjubileet-2030.pdf>.

8. <https://stiklestad.no/nasjonaltjubileet2030/>.

9. <https://stiklestad.no/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/fagrappport-forstudie-visjon-og-plattformbygging-2030.pdf>.

10. The consultants were: Jonas Gahr Støre, former minister of foreign affairs; Professor Inge Lønning, Theology, former president of the University of Oslo; Professor Eivind Smith, Law, UiO; Professor Sverre Bagge, History, CMS-UiB; Professor Vidar L. Haanes, Church History, MF; Professor og rektor Lisbeth Mikaelsson, Religion, UiB; Professor Janne Haaland Matlary, Statsvitenskap UiO; Professor Idar Kjølsvik, Theology, NORD; Dr. Øystein Ekroll, Archeology, NDR; Researcher Tor Einar Fagerland, History, NTNU; Dr. Roger Jensen, Theology; Dr. Rolf Grankvist, History, NTNU/Ped.sem; Dr. Caroline Serck-Hanssen, History of Culture, UiB; Researcher Steinar Pedersen, History, Samisk Høgskole; Professor Axel Christophersen, Archeology, VM; Professor Shoab M. Sultan, Statsvitenskap Antirasistisk senter; Journalist Gudleiv Forr, Dagbladet.

11. Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for our Time* (New York: Crossroads, 1997), 1.

12. To the left of the stone is the main scriptural verse for the St. Olav tradition, John 12: 24:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

To the right is a Norwegian prayer to be used by the pilgrims to Stiklestad:

“Dear Lord Jesus Christ,

As a grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die to bear fruit,  
As Saint Olav fell here and died to bring fruitful faith to Norway,  
As you gave your life for us so that we may live,  
I thank you for that and ask you, Lord,  
to let me become more and more like you  
so that I can let go of myself for something greater than myself. Amen”

<https://gammel.stiklestad.no/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Notat-2030-Teolog-Idar-Kjolsvik.pdf>.

*Greetings from Bishop Finnset  
Trondheim, Norway*

Greetings from the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, Norway!

In this edition of *Lutheran Quarterly* you can read an article by Idar Kjølsvik on the preparations for our National Millennium in 2030, one thousand years from the death of St. Olav. The consolidation of Norway as a nation and of the old Norse church makes this ecclesial anniversary a *national* millennium. There are many important questions to ask: How do we Norwegians understand ourselves as a nation? How has the Christian faith influenced us? What kind of society do we want to build for the future? What are “Norwegian values” for tomorrow? How do we look upon our Christian heritage as a source of life for tomorrow? The millennium provides an opportunity for the church to join others in these important conversations on our common future. As the bishop in the diocese and the area of Norway that has carried on the St. Olav traditions in a special way, I look forward to taking part in these talks and developments.

Today we are experiencing a renaissance and revival of the pilgrimage tradition in the Nordic countries: a spiritual connection between heaven and earth nearly forgotten, a way of connecting to the holy moments in life that can bring you closer to The Living God, but also to your inner self. I invite you to come here to St. Olav’s festive days, the old *olsok* celebration at the end of July, maybe to take part in the long or short pilgrimage in the landscape of the countryside of Trøndelag and the Nidaros diocese.

Herborg Finnset  
Bishop of Nidaros Diocese  
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Herborg Finnset  
Bishop of Nidaros Diocese, Church of Norway  
Photo Courtesy of Nidaros Diocese