

Today the formal (registered) number of Catholics in Norway is around 150 000 (February 2016). Most Norwegians are members of what is known as the “Folk Church”, the Norwegian Lutheran State Church.

To understand the time in which King Olav Haraldsson lived, some historical knowledge is necessary. Olav’s conversion and life of faith show his long way from heathen brutality to a life more in harmony with the will of the Lord Jesus Christ. Olav defeated evil by giving his life for Christian justice and for Norway’s unity. Olav was the first of the European rulers who was afforded the title «Rex Perpetuus» - «eternal king». Olav is Norway’s eternal king. His definition of what «royal» implies, would later guide his successors and ensure justice and security for the people.



***Almighty, eternal God, you sent Olav Haraldsson
to Norway to convert the people to Christianity.***

You let him build churches and induct priests.

Let many - on his intercession - receive the call to priestly vocation today.

Amen.

The day of Olav Haraldsson’s death, 29. July, Olav’s-mass (Olsok), is a feast day in the Catholic Church in Norway every year with a solemn pontifical mass in Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim. We also invite everyone to the Catholic Church’s Olsok Celebrations in Trondheim and to participate in the Catholic pilgrimage from Trondheim - either on foot or by coach – to Stiklestad, on the Sunday closest to 29. July. See the Olsok Programme at «katolsk.no» and «trondheim.katolsk.no»)



THE ST. OLAV’S CROSS: Olav Haraldsson lived in pre-heraldic times and did not have his own coat of arms. The crosses which are associated with the Saint-King are part of the Olav’s tradition. The coat of arms with the clover leaf and the two axes was originally the coat of arms of the Norwegian Catholic Diocese and was first used by Erik Walkendorf, archbishop in Nidaros 1510–22. During Walkendorf’s time and later also his successor Olav Engelbretsson (1523–1537), Norwegian coin was minted with the Olav’s Cross – a clover leaf cross and axes. The clover leaf cross – as a symbol of Christianity - is placed together with two axes, the attribute of St. Olav’s martyrdom.

OLAV HARALDSSON – ST. OLAV



PRAY FOR US, ST. OLAV



Be for oss, hel-lig O-lav, Nor-ges e-vi-ge kon-ge!
Du som krist-net folk og land, Kris-ti tje-ner, kong O-lav,
Be for oss, hel-lig O-lav, Nor-ges e-vi-ge kon-ge!

Pray for us, St. Olav, Norway's eternal king.

You who christened the people and our land, Christ's servant, King Olav.

Pray for us, St. Olav, Norway's eternal king.

The Catholic Church in Norway has, from its inception, been firmly based on the Saint-King Olav. He is – as proclaimed by the Liturgy of «Olsok» (St. Olav Feast) - Rex Perpetuus Norvegiae, Norway's eternal king. His martyrdom at Stiklestad in 1030 – was in the eyes of the world a defeat, but it gave Catholic Christianity the final victory among our people.

Olav Haraldsson was the son of Åsta Gudbrandsdatter and Harald Grenske, who probably was the great-grandson of King Harald Hårfagre, the first king to attempt to unite Norway. Olav's childhood was spent with Sigurd Syr, his step-father, a farmer at Ringerike. It was customary in Norway that sons of rich chiefs and farmers set off in their Viking ships to raid and kill, and in that way gather riches – both in Norway and abroad. Olav's mother sent her son off when he was only twelve years old.

Later on, Olav entered the service of the English King Ethelred II's and followed him to Normandy in France. Here he served as leader of the mercenary troops under Duke Richard II (1002 – 1026). Olav's reputation was that of an able strategist and fearless warrior and he and his men were greatly feared. Olav then set sail for Jorsalaheim (Jerusalem). In Cádiz he had a prophetic dream: *In the dream a man came to him, the kind of man that you notice, strong and imposing. The man spoke to him and told him to cease his Viking-raids. "Return to your inheritance, for you shall be king of Norway for eternity". This dream made Olav abandon his plan of reaching Jorsalaheim. He turns north and winters in Rouen (1013 - 1014) at the residence of Duke Richard II.*

While wintering in Rouen, Olav Haraldsson was introduced to Christianity. He was given thorough instruction about the Lord Jesus Christ and his visible community here on earth, the Catholic Church. Archbishop Robert himself prepared the heir to the Norwegian throne for baptism.

The Catholic Church celebrates **St. Olav's conversion and baptism** as a feast or commemoration on **16. October**. At the St. Olav's Altar, the Norwegian national altar in Rome, the day is celebrated as a feast day.

From Duke Richard II Olav learnt what a modern, civilized state implies. When Olav later became king of Norway, he introduced Catholic Christian Law. For the first time in our history this protected the weak against the strong. This would have been unthinkable without the instruction he had received in Rouen. He had also learnt about emperor Charlemagne (768 – 814) and his dream of building a large Frankish and Catholic empire. This man served as Olav's ideal; «Rex iustus». Olav wanted to unite Norway into one, Christian country, founded on fair and right law. After a year in Rouen he went to England and then on to Norway to conquer the land.

On palm Sunday, 25. March 1016, in the sea battle at Nesjar, Olav gained victory over the mightiest chieftains in the land. Later that year Olav was elected King of Norway.

Since ancient times, Norway had been ruled by strong families who were constantly at war. When Olav returned to Norway, this family structure was partly disintegrating. The traditional head of the family had become chief of whole communities and ruled over vast areas. These chiefs often misused the power they possessed. At the Thing, where they sat in judgement over farmers and crofters, they would rule according to the law of the land, but for themselves they would claim prerogatives which threatened the peace of the land.

As law maker and law enforcer, Olav faced his most important challenges: To make laws that protected infants, women, slaves and other vulnerable individuals and to punish those who broke the laws of the land. These laws were long known as «St. Olav's Christian Laws». Even today, parts of our judicial system are based on these laws.

King Olav had about ten relatively peaceful years as regent, and during this period the unification of Norway was brought several steps forward. Among his achievements the following can be found:

- 1) He ruled over a large country. Olav was probably the first national king who gained real power over the interior areas of Trøndelag and Opplandene.
- 2) Olav Haraldsson formed the basis for a nation-wide local government. He placed local rulers answerable to himself in all the regions of the country.
- 3) Olav's role in the introduction of Christianity is fundamental. At the Thing-meet at Møster in 1024, Norway gained a national church structure with churches and priests, a Christian law book, and above all, prohibition against all other religious activity. Christianity (The Catholic Church) was - as the religion of the king – the only permitted religion. During his reign, the king became the ruling leader of the Church, until the church later gained independence.
- 4) Through his battles with political opponents King Olav increased royal properties and goods considerably. He was the first national king who minted coin and he was the first national king to establish effective rule over the entire country of Norway.

He also undertook missionary journeys to the regions which had not been christened and thus provided a firm and lasting foothold for Christianity. But dissatisfaction grew among the Norwegian chieftains against Olav's will to rule. They preferred a ruler who granted them freedom to practice their own might. They rose up against him and drove him from the land and called back Håkon, Eirik Jarls son, whom Olav had exiled in 1015, to become Earl of Norway. But in 1029, while on his way home to Norway, Håkon died during a shipwreck, and Olav saw the possibility of regaining his country. With an army of supporters from Jemtland, Sweden, Iceland and Norway he arrived in North-Trøndelag.

The decisive battle was fought at Stiklestad by Verdalen on 29. July 1030. The opponents, an army of Norwegian farmers led by chieftains, had both superior power and more men. King Olav was *wounded with an axe in the left leg*. He lent against a stone, threw his own sword away and asked God to help him. Then Tore Hund pierced him with a spear. *The spear went under his coat of mail and into the stomach*. Finally he was dealt *a deep cut on the left side of the neck*. These three wounds killed King Olav.

After his death, miracles started to happen. An eclipse of the sun was immediately linked to the battle at Stiklestad and seen as evidence of the wrath of heaven. Several miraculous healings were reported, among them a wound which one of his former opponents had sustained and which was healed when a drop of King Olav's blood fell on it.

Around a year after the death of the king, his body was exhumed and on 3. August 1031 the bishop pronounced him a saint. This was greeted with approval both by his friends and earlier enemies, and later papal approval was also given. He was placed in a shrine on the high altar in the Clement's Church in Nidaros, as Trondheim was called then. Later the shrine was moved to the chancel in the Nidaros Cathedral. The St. Olav cult spread rapidly throughout Northern Europe. Miracles occurred when people in Norway and abroad asked for his intercession, as still happens today. A great number of churches dedicated to St. Olav were built, not only in Scandinavia, but also in cities such as Novgorod, London and York. Olav was sainted as martyr because he died under the sign of the cross. He is honored as Norway's Eternal King and the Patron Saint of the land and people. It was he who completed the long process of christening Norway and Norwegians.

Next to the Virgin Mary, St. Olav is the saint most often represented in Medieval Nordic painting and sculpture. These representations reach from the 12. century up to the time of the reformation. Olav is presented either standing, wearing a crown and with an axe in his hand, or sitting - frequently with a monster under his feet – a symbol of the evil powers he has overcome. The strong folk tradition about St. Olav bears witness to the powerful influence he had on the life of the faithful in Norway – not only during the time of the Catholic Church, but also long after the Reformation in 1537.

Norway was a Catholic country until 1537. With the Reformation, the Danish king, Christian III. forcefully brought Protestantism and Lutheranism to the country. It became illegal for Catholics to remain in Norway. Not until 1843 could Catholics form a parish and celebrate mass with their own priest.