It is incumbent upon Us in view of the apostolic duty entrusted to Us to watch over the whole Church. Faithful to the call of Our Lord to surround with Our concern the souls of those redeemed by his precious blood. We are now exerting Ourselves to bring peace and tranquility again to those churches too often buffeted by the tempests of impiety and error and more especially to those which have been assailed by the convulsions and painful torments of persecution.

To wit, concerning Our dear sons, native dwellers and settlers in the island of Greenland (situated We are told at the extreme limits of the Ocean, in the region north of the Kingdom of Norway in the ecclesiastical see of Nidaros) a pitiful lament has come to Our ears and thrown bitterness in Our heart: in this island the inhabitants and indigenous peoples have, for nearly 600 years, preserved their faith in Christ (received through the teaching of His glorious and blessed apostle King Olaf) according to the laws of the Holy Roman Church and the Apostolic See; throughout the years numerous sacred edifices and a notable cathedral have been erected by the fervent piety of the peoples of this island;

Devine service was regularly celebrated until (according to the will of Him who in his wisdom and hidden purposes chastises and chastens by temporal reverses those whom he loves, to purify them) thirty years ago, when barbaric pagans came by sea from the neighboring coasts and invaded the country, bringing low all the people established in this island with their bloody aggression, devastating their native land and its sacred edifices by fire and the sword until there was nothing left in this island (which is said to be very extensive) but nine parish churches difficult of access to the raiders because of the steepness of the mountains. The unfortunate indigenous people, men and women, particularly those who looked strong and fit enough to withstand the yoke of slavery were deported into captivity in their own regions, as if they were under sway of this tyrannical power.

To continue the same lamentation, after a number of years a good many of the native inhabitants returned to their country and having rebuilt their ruined villages they were then desirous of reestablishing divine worship as in the past and even augmenting it if possible. However, the effect of the calamity which had befallen them was such that they suffered want and famine themselves to such a degree that they were unable to supply the needs of a few priests and a bishop; for the last thirty years except in one or two instances where those, desirous of taking part in Divine worship, have undertaken a long and arduous journey and succeeded in reaching one of the churches left intact by the barbarians. They have therefore sent us a humble petition asking Us to come to look upon their salutary plea for help with a paternal eye that in Our charity and with the grace of the Apostolic See We should fill the spiritual void in which they find themselves.

Touched as We are by these just and worthy requests and by the desires expressed by the indigenous people and the general inhabitants of this island of Greenland nevertheless We do not have at Our command
sufficient information about the described situation. We are therefore asking for your fraternal help.

In the event that both of you or one of you decide that the grounds of their plea is well founded after mature perusal of the information provided and that the number and resources of the inhabitants and native peoples are in a sufficiently good state to warrant carrying out their wishes We give you, who are the nearest bishops to the above mentioned island, the authority to ordain suitable worthy priests, to appoint pastors and to install rectors able to govern the rebuilt parishes and churches and to administer the sacraments.

If, in addition, it seems opportune to one of you or both of you, having taken the advice (distance permitting) of your metropolitan bishop on this point, to give them a bishop in the person of an upright and able man in communion with Us and the Holy See.

We invest one or both of you with the authority to consecrate a bishop in Our name and following the usual practices of the Church to confer on him the spiritual and temporal government in his charge, provided he has taken the oath of fidelity to Us and the Holy Roman Church.

We entrust you with all this in conscience and We grant to both of you or one of you full and unconfined papal authority according to the terms of the present disposition and We derogate, if need be, any law to the contrary even if promulgated by the Papal See or the General Synod.

[seal]  Nicolai V

Written in Rome, near to St. Pudentienne, in the year 1448, the 12th calends of October, in the second year of Our Pontificate.


Apostolate letter from Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455) addressed to the Bishops of Skalholt and Holar in Iceland, the Metropolitan of Drondheim in Norway being absent, enjoining them to verify information about the lamentable state of the Church in Greenland and conferring on them powers to institute priests, vicars and a bishop there. The document was recovered by Dr. Rasmus B. Anderson during his four year United States’ embassy to Copenhagen, Denmark, during which time he had been granted access to Vatican Archives by Cardinal Merry del Val for mutual examination of Catholic history in Iceland. It is one of the very few, possibly only, surviving records of the four century long Norse settlement of Greenland. Of interest is Pope Nicolas’ report of 600 years of Christianity of Greenland, true enough for Iceland, but questionable for Greenland, which is popularly thought to have been first occupied by Erick the Red in AD 984. Note also the mysterious invasion of “thirty years prior”, (i.e. 1418) and nine churches remaining in the hinterlands. The Church pictured on Home page is apparently one of these survivors, being well inland, two days travel from the Greenland Sea and near slopes of the great ice-cap mountains.