

Beginning again: Where New and Old Worlds meet

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

September 11, the war in Afghanistan, the impending war in Iraq, the devastating conflict between Israel and Palestine, the crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, the crisis in big business, children missing, snipers shooting, politicians sniping, ethnic cleansing, famines: it's one of those times when one wishes it were possible to return to the beginning, unravel the ancient enmities and start the world over again.

Recently I heard a lecture by a Franciscan sister who is a children's rights advocate. At one point she stopped as if arrested in midstream. It is all shattered, she said, all quite shattered. Nothing whole remains of the church, of our culture, of our families, except for a few bright shards of personal intimacy such as are given to us when we gaze into the eyes of a child. Well, yes, I thought, gazing into the eyes of child is a powerful way of reconnecting to reality. It is chastening, too, when the child returns our gaze, expecting us to explain our adult ways. Try relating the fine points of abortion to a child. The way a society treats children, the helpless, and the dependent is the measure of its sanity and dignity—children know this, even if we have forgotten it.

Nevertheless, we have a long way to go before it is all shattered. Augustine thought it was all shattered too; a Japanese tradition holds that the Buddha foresaw the world entering an age of *mappo*, degeneration; Confucius said he had yet to meet a person of humaneness to match the true gentlemen of the past. It's the familiar trope of the senectitude of the world, which sounds ever more plausible as we ourselves begin to grow old. It can't be me growing old, we think; it must be the world.

Last month we spent three days in Iceland, which geologically and culturally is a very young world, young enough to remember the day it became Christian as vividly as it remembers the day a new island surfaced off its volcanic coast. Iceland's first inhabitants were Irish monks who sailed in over the North Atlantic on their skin

coracles, established hermit cells and oratories, and disappeared in the wake of the Vikings. The Vikings brought their Norse religion, a warrior creed for farmers with its blood feuds and visceral sacrifices. But they also brought more Christian Celtic folk with them, and together they settled down to herd, farm and fish, living in scattered long houses and turf-enclosed hobbit-holds under the protection of local chieftains. Celtic Christianity bubbled under the lava fields.

Beginning in the late tenth century there was a series of missionary visits from Saxony and Norway, with mixed results. Then in the summer of the year 1000, the Christian chieftains Gissur the White of Mosfell and Hjalti Skeggjason traveled to Norway to persuade King Olafur Tryggvason to sponsor another mission. They returned, summoned their allies and rode in on horseback to Thingvellir, the "Assembly Plains."

Thingvellir sits on the fissure zone created by the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, a 10,000-mile-long crack in the ocean floor caused by the separation of the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. On this midsummer day in the year 1000, poised between Europe and America, Iceland was holding its 70th annual parliament. The 36 chieftains (representing the 12 local assemblies) were in attendance, dwelling for the fortnight in booths built of imported timber, stone and turf, with householders and servants, musicians and bards, craftsmen and tradespeople crowded into tents. Presiding was Thorgeir, a pagan chieftain who held the office of law-speaker. It was his job to memorize the laws and recite them at the beginning of the Althing (All-Assembly). Sensing a violent confrontation between the Christian and heathen parties, Thorgeir lay down under his pelt cloak and said nothing for two days. When he rose again, speeches were made, a vote taken and the decision made without force: Icelanders were to be baptized and Christianity would become the public faith.

We drove out to Thingvellir, stopping along the way at roadsides marked by travelers' cairns to scamper over acres of hardened lava flow carpeted with silvery lichen and springy moss; the feel of the ground underfoot kept changing from asphalt to sponge. Where the moss grew furry and golden, it was like walking on reindeer antlers. Steam rising from the ground reminded us how geothermally excitable this land is.

At Thingvellir, we walked through the great rift called Almannagja to the spot where the law-speaker stood. On the western side the rift forms a huge perpendicular cliff with lava pillars that look like rows of giants in council. On its eastern side, shorter

troll-shaped cliffs form a pilgrim's passageway. Our sons Andy and John went racing along, scrambling over the heads of the trolls and disappearing from time to time into small caves.

Standing where the New and Old Worlds meet, one imagines being here on that midsummer day in the year 1000, a mere 30 generations ago, and facing the question, "What do you think, are you willing to embrace this new religion? Of course, it will come with a price; eventually, you will have to give up your blood feuds and stop throwing unwanted infants into the sea. But it will bring you into the new world that is God's kingdom." From here it's only another 30 generations back to the midsummer of Pentecost, the birthday of the church. And so the world begins again. As G. K. Chesterton says in *The Everlasting Man*, "The faith has not only often died but it has often died of old age. It has not only been often killed but it has often died a natural death; in the sense of coming to a natural and necessary end. . . . It ended and it began again."