



Sacre Coeur

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The last of Europe's great churches.

ALTHOUGH KNOWN to the world as the "eldest daughter" of the Church, France may best be described as her prodigal son. Like her Biblical counterpart, France has often returned to the bosom of the Church with the same force of spirit and energy that has as often led her away.

The long history of France that rises out of the annals of the Roman Empire and Gaul is a veritable "agony and ecstasy" of religious feeling. In no other country does the pinnacle of sanctity follow so closely upon the heels of hellish degradation with an almost uniform regularity.

As well, so clearly has the hand of Divine intervention shown itself in the history of France that one is not surprised to sense a corresponding demonic influence as in the days of the French Revolution. Yet, the "eldest daughter" has oft turned to her Father and He has, as often, responded.

This response was most significantly manifested in the seventeenth century when Our Lord revealed His Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary, promising so much for so little.

Margaret Mary Alacoque was born and baptized in Burgundy in 1647. Her childhood was marked by a deep devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and a mature awareness of sin. While yet a child she was stricken with paralysis and was confined to her bed for four

years. It was then that she promised to enter a convent in return for her cure.

A Divine Reproach

Fully recovered at the age of seventeen, Margaret had become convinced that the vow she had made during her illness was not binding. She, therefore, embarked upon a pious but worldly life fraught with innocent pleasures. Our Lord, however, had plans of a different order for her.

One evening, after returning from some local amusement, Margaret was vouchsafed the first of many visions. Christ appeared to her and reproached her for having forgotten her promise to Him. Quite overcome, she resolved to enter a convent as soon as possible.

At the age of twenty-three, Margaret entered a convent of the Visitation order at Paray-le-Monial on May 25, 1671. It was here that the seeds of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus were first sown.

Kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament on December 27, 1673, she was favored with the first great apparition. In her own words: "Jesus said to me: 'My divine heart is so full of love for men, and for you in particular, that it is unable to contain within itself the flames of its burning love.'"

In the face of the uncompromising onslaught of Jansenism, which had so successfully insinuated itself into the

fabric of the Church of France, the Creator offered His Heart once more to His creatures. St. Margaret Mary was to be the fragile instrument He would use to establish this devotion to His Most Sacred Heart.

"The Divine Heart was represented to me as upon a throne of fire and flames. It shed rays on every side brighter than the sun and transparent as crystal. The wound which He received on the cross appeared visible. A crown of thorns encircled the Divine Heart, and it was surmounted by a cross."

Enjoined in the fourth great apparition to make this devotion public, St. Margaret Mary labored to do so until her death on October 17, 1690.

Although eclipsed by the horrors of the French Revolution and the Commune, this devotion to the Sacred Heart was renewed in the nineteenth century.

Spiritual Resurgence

Once again heavenly assistance was lavished on France. Our Lady had appeared to St. Bernadette in Lourdes, St. Catherine Laboure in Paris, and the children of La Salette. And, while St. Bernadette and St. Catherine knelt before the Mother of God, St. Jean Vianney wrestled with the devil, and St. Therese of Lisieux pursued her "little way."

Fortified by the wealth of new graces poured out upon her, France experienced a resurgence of religious enthusiasm. Reeling from the effects of the disastrous Franco-Prussian War and the wracking internal struggle between the Commune and the forces of the Third Republic, France turned to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In 1873 a public outcry called for a national subscription to fund the building of a church dedicated to the Sacred

Heart [Sacre Coeur]. The National Assembly, cowed by public enthusiasm, reluctantly voted the subscription.

The site chosen was the hilltop of Montmartre. Believed by many to be a corruption of "Mons Martyrum" [Mount of Martyrs], Montmartre is traditionally accepted to be the site where St. Denis, the first Bishop of Paris, and his companions were beheaded in 272 A.D.

All Manner of Men

Forty million francs were collected. Rich and poor alike gave generously. Donations were made by people of such diverse backgrounds as St. Therese of Lisieux and the painter Utrillo who lived in the artists' quarter that, to this day, surrounds the basilica. The diocese of Savoy donated an enormous bell weighing some nineteen tons, today referred to as the "Savojarde," and countless donations flowed in from beyond the borders of France as the devotion to the Sacred Heart spread.

The architect Abadie began the work on the Romano-Byzantine structure in 1876 but died before the foundation was completed. Magno was to complete the work with the help of other architects despite some opposition to its decidedly oriental style. Objections were also raised to its "whiteness" which proved too jarring a contrast with the heavy gray stone landmarks that dominate Paris.

Ultimately, however, the work was completed and the basilica consecrated in 1910. Surmounted by four small domes and one large almost conical central dome set atop a high drum, Sacre Coeur overlooks the city of Paris from the distant hilltop of Montmartre. Criticized by architectural purists for its confused blend of styles, and for

continued on page 44

Sacre Coeur
continued from page 37

many of the faithful for its uninspiring coldness, Sacre Coeur is, nevertheless, the last great architectural "Opus Dei" in Europe.

Immense flights of stairs lead up to the porticoed facade from the Place St. Pierre, and equestrian statues of King St. Louis IX and St. Joan of Arc guard the final approach to the basilica.

The original stained glass, calculated to encourage devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, was largely destroyed in 1944 and was replaced by some sterile modern work. The mosaics, however, remain intact.

Above the main altar is an enormous mosaic of the Sacred Heart, arms extended in the form of a cross, and St. Margaret Mary standing to His right in an attitude of adoration. The crystal clear windows in the drum of the central dome filter in the sunlight softly spotlighting the main altar, leaving the

remote reaches of the basilica in semi-darkness.

More than two hundred agonizing years had passed since Our Lord had appeared to St. Margaret Mary before France succumbed to the almost plaintive plea of her God:

"Behold this Heart which has so loved mankind that It has spared itself nothing, even to being consumed to prove Its love for men. And yet It has received in return from the majority of mankind only ingratitude, coldness and neglect of Me in the sacrament of My Love."

In 1885, as the basilica neared completion, the practice of Perpetual Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament was begun. Uninterrupted through two world wars, this practice continued in the fervent hope that, "...the Heart of Jesus, in the Most Blessed Sacrament, be praised, adored, and loved with grateful affection, at every moment, in all the tabernacles of the world, even to the end of time." ●