

## LEGENDS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN

### Our Lady of Paris

*Mater Castissima – Mother Most Chaste*

The veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Paris, can be traced to the first apostles of this great city.

When Childebert, its king, in 537 rebuilt its church, it was dedicated to our Lady. Fortunatus, the poet, wrote a pompous eulogy of this edifice, which he saw completed. The Normans left it untouched; but not so the band of time, which gradually caused its decay until the commencement of the twelfth century, when it fell in ruins.

A poor scholar, named Maurice, born of an obscure family, at Sully, in Orléannais, had risen in the Church by his virtue and his learning. Being elected bishop of Paris, he resolved to rebuild Childebert's church, and endow his adopted city with a cathedral far surpassing any which had hitherto been built. He himself traced the plan, and the building was commenced in 1162. It is said that the first stone was laid by Pope Alexander III, who had taken refuge in France.

The first crusade carried into Asia not only hundreds of thousands of our warriors, but a multitude of priests and prelates. who earnestly undertook religious pilgrimages to the holy places in Palestine. On their return to Europe, they brought back a taste for the elegant Saracenic architecture. \*\* The arts made also their conquests in the holy war. The religious edifices henceforth erected threw off that heavy massiveness, hitherto their principal characteristic, and put on the graceful lightness of the Pointed style. Then, during the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, the spirit of religious zeal covered Europe with those productions of the mason's skill, which still excite our admiration and wonder. All the gold of their and our times, with ordinary resources, could not have erected a twentieth part of those gigantic cathedrals, and of those elegant churches, which, with all our boasted wealth, we are unable to keep in proper repair. Christian piety, sincere zeal, and national spirit everywhere directed these grand works. Nationality, in those days, was more local than at present. Each Christian then saw his country in his church, which he dearly loved, and whose banner alone he would follow. The spirit of centralization has now placed all the religious edifices in France in the hands of the government, so that the parishioners no longer really possess their church. We know not whether this be the most prudent course to adopt.

In the times we write of, the sacred cause of religion was either forwarded by joining the crusades for the Holy Sepulcher, or in some other active labor for the benefit of the Church. They, whose courage failed at the thought of engaging in foreign warfare, built churches with wealth, or by their personal labor. During a great part of the century, under the direction of skillful masons, the works for the construction of Our Lad 's church of Paris were proceeded with. The number of workmen was immense; they were chiefly Parisians, though many others from distant parts, through devotion or a spirit of penance, devoted them to the great work.

Of those who were too feeble to work, some gave money, while others provided food for workmen, which the women prepared. Indulgences were to be gained by all who in any way contributed to the erection of the sacred edifice; and who was not able and did not yield some assistance?

\*\*The idea of the Eastern origin of Pointed architecture has been quite abandoned by modern writers, who see in it, necessary development from the Norman or preceding style.

The possessor of a forest supplied the timber; farmers and others having carts and horses brought it to the spot; the Jess skillful drew the stone from the quarry and carried mortar to the masons. No helping hand, however humble, was refused. The poor widow mended the workmen's clothes, and asked for nothing in return. Every butcher sent a certain quantity of meat. and the gardeners supplied vegetables and fruit. Did any of the workmen's families stand in need of their absence from the work, they were readily allowed to depart.

When funds failed, processions of the statue of our Lady, or some saint's shrine, were proposed, and instantly some wealthy noble sent a sum of money to have the privilege of the procession passing through his grounds. And many were the offerings of jewels and precious stones made by noble lords and fair ladies. The erection was surrounded by cabins, in which the workmen slept They were awakened each morning by the sound of a bell. An altar had been erected, and the day's work was sanctified by attendance at the holy sacrifice of the mass. All were obliged to assist at it, and the holy chant announced to the neighborhood that the day's work was about to commence. In the evening tapers were lit, and, assembled round the statue of our Lady, canticles were sung, and prayers recited by the workmen, before they retired to rest.

It was by these means, and the concurrent assistance of the masses, that all the great churches were erected at this period. The cathedrals of our Lady of Paris and of Rheims, were specially favored by their heavenly patroness in a manner which the people did not fail to appreciate. During the whole time of the erection of these churches, not one accident happened, and no laborer was killed, or even dangerously wounded. It is even said that on several occasions Our Lady herself appeared to the masons, and brought them through their difficulties. The statuaries and carvers attributed the idea of some of their happiest efforts to the visions they had seen. And many an inspiration was obtained at prayer before her image, which is believed to be the same as the one which is now in the chapel on the right of the gate which separates the choir from the nave.

After nearly a century's labor, the vast cathedral, the pride and delight of the Parisians, was finished. The Immaculate Virgin was their queen, to whom they had recourse in all their necessities. Nor did they ever apply to her in vain.

In 1304, King Philip the Fair, being hotly pursued by the Flemish, on the great day of Mons-en-puelle, gave himself and his army up for lost. He invoked our Lady of Paris in an ardent prayer; the contest was renewed, and he won the day. His first visit on his re- entering his capital was to the cathedral, to return thanks for his success. He also ordered a monument to be erected and placed before lady's image, representing him on horseback, with his vizor down, as he was on the day of battle, at the moment he besought the assistance of the Blessed Virgin. This monument was destroyed at the revolution.

When King John was made prisoner by the English in 1356, at the battle of Poitiers, the Parisians vowed to our Lady to offer her every year a wax candle, the same height as the tower, to obtain the deliverance of their king. The king returned, and the citizens faithfully fulfilled their vow for the space of two hundred and fifty years. But in 1605 they obtained permission to commute their vow by the present of a massive silver lamp, in the shape of a ship.

We must say one word concerning the vow of Louis XIII. Through the intercession of Mary, this king obtained a noble heir to his Crown, and in thanksgiving, the happy father of Louis XIV placed his kingdom and people under the special protection of the Queen of Heaven. The nation cordially seconded the pious vow of their king, and again recognized our Lady of Paris as their gracious patroness. The sole exterior sign of their homage consisted in an annual procession dear to all Paris. It disturbed no other business, as it was observed on a holiday—the glorious day of Mary's Assumption. The empire afterwards re-established this custom, which was also observed in neighboring cities. But Paris, of all cities, should ever celebrate this festival with the greatest pomp can she forget all the Blessed Virgin has done for her? Has she not preserved and brought her through terrible trials, protected her Church from heresy and schism, constantly blessed her clergy, ever renowned for their learning and virtue ; and did she not, when the schools of Paris were under her patronage, send missionaries to every part Of the globe ?

In 1793, some of the children of Paris, with horrid impiety, chased our Lady from her temple, and prostituted its sacred precincts to the Goddess of Reason I Yet did our dear Lady preserve her sacred shrine from destruction. The cathedral was actually offered for sale, as affording a quantity of available material, and the Marquis of St. Simon (then called Citizen Simon, bid 240,000 francs, with the intention of pulling it down. Happily, it was necessary, before the destructive axe was allowed to strike its sacred walls, raised by the wealth, labor, and piety of its ancient citizens, to pay the whole sum at once, which the bidder was fortunately unable to do.

A complete restoration of this venerable sanctuary of our Blessed Mother has been projected, and in part effected. May our Lady obtain for those who are to be engaged in this holy work the same spirit of faith and devotion which animated the founders and builders of this magnificent cathedral !