

WHY IS THERE A PILGRIMAGE TO CHARTRES ?



I. THE VIRGIN'S VEIL

In 876, Emperor Charles the Bald gave to Chartres the relic of Our Lady's veil, which he held from his grandfather Charlemagne. According to tradition, this veil was worn by the Blessed Virgin Mary during the Annunciation, and kept in Constantinople, before being offered by the Byzantine Empress Irene to Charlemagne. This creamed-coloured piece of silk (5,35m by 0,46m) is dated from the first century. While the cathedral was devastated by a fire in 1194 (allowing the magnificent rebuilding that we can still admire today), the veil was spared, thanks to the monks who kept it for three days in the crypt. Unfortunately, the French revolution proved to be more destructive, for the veil was cut into several pieces, of which only two have been saved. Nowadays, they can be seen in the great and small reliquaries, respectively kept in the absidial chapel and in the crypt.

II. PRESTIGE OF A MARIAL SANCTUARY

While being very ancient, the cult of Our Lady in Chartres has known a further development during the Middle Ages, thanks to the miracles which invigorated the popular faith. Mary cured the sick, protected the city and pregnant women. During the 12th century, the West was transformed by the devotion of numerous saints to the Blessed Virgin (of whom Bernard of Clairvaux), for everywhere churches and cathedrals were raised in her honour. The veil, which became in popular memory "the Virgin's shirt", was kept on the cathedral's altar. It attracted a joyful crowd of faithful, from which the canons tried to protect themselves by withdrawing into the choir. Thanks to the gifts of these numerous pilgrims, the cathedral-reliquary could be rebuilt. There, no prince or cleric was entitled to be buried, out of respect for the mystery of Mary's Assumption. But among the crowds of pilgrims, lords and poor, sick and sinners, several kings of France and England came to this sanctuary to seek the Blessed Virgin's assistance in their earthly pilgrimage, including Saint Louis (five times) and Henry IV, who was crowned there. After a time of decline, and the most difficult hours of the

Revolution, the devotion for Our Lady of Chartres was revived, thanks to the poet Charles Péguy. While he walked toward Chartres to entrust the life of his sick son to Mary, his example inspired thousands of young people, including pilgrimages of students. In 1983 was founded the "pèlerinage de chrétienté" to which you participate today, under the auspices of the "Centre Charlier" and then "Notre-Dame de Chrétienté".

III. The "THREE MARIES" OF THE CATHEDRAL

While the veneration of Our Lady's veil is truly the height of the pilgrim's meeting with his heavenly mother, three images of the Blessed Virgin remained venerated through centuries:

- "Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre" is venerated in the crypt, probably from the 12th century if not before. Burnt in 1793, the current statue is a copy from 1976. Mary, seated on a throne, holds on her knees her son, who blesses the World.
- "Notre-Dame du Pilier", formerly erected on a pillar, in front of the rood screen which closed the choir, and now in the northern ambulatory. This statue is known by mistake under the name of "black virgin". Mary, as the new Eva participating in their redemption of mankind, holds a pear in her hand.
- "Notre-Dame de la Belle-Verrière", one of the oldest stained glass on earth, probably from the 12th century, as it has been saved from the 1194 fire. Our Lady is represented as a virgin-mother.