

The Abbey Church of Our Lady of the Star

100th anniversary of the reconstruction of the abbey church (1898-1998) (2/2)

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III

Reconstruction by the Brothers of Mercy of Montebourg

But restoration was near at hand.

Some 20 kilometres from Montebourg, St Marie Madeleine Postel, Foundress of the Christian Schools of Mercy, had set up her community in the abbey of St Sauveur le Vicomte. The conditions under which she restored the abbey church were nothing short of miraculous.

Under pressure from her, Mgr Delamare, vicar general of Coutances, soon to become Bishop of Luçon and subsequently Archbishop of Auch, founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Mercy. As in the case of the Sisters founded by the Norman Saint, he gave these Brothers the Rules of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

In 1842, Mgr Delamare bought the abbey of Our Lady of the Star for his new-born congregation. The Brothers moved in two years later. In the 19th century, the Brothers of Montebourg opened 30 or so schools in the diocese of Coutances. For more than 50 years, the "new monks" dreamt of rebuilding the abbey church.

In 1892, Mgr Germain, the local bishop, asked the Brothers to rebuild the abbey church. He was the first to contribute funds to the amount of 500 francs. He forbade the Brothers to incur debts on the pain of the immediate cessation of work. To dare begin construction work of this nature under such conditions was to fly in the face of all human prudence. Our Lady of the Star, however, wanted her pilgrimages to start again.

All who took part in what was a true saga inspired by Mary - Brothers, architects, local businessmen, donors and benefactors - were caught up in a surge of fervour whose mysterious source lay in great confidence in the Blessed Virgin, and which recalls that of the builders of the great cathedrals in the Middle Ages.

The first stone was laid by Mgr Germain on August 19th 1892. Work progressed rapidly, and devotion to Our Lady of the Star quickly spread in the Cotentin peninsula and all over France. The former statue, too damaged to be restored, was replaced by a new one from the St Luc workshops in Tournai, Belgium.

On August 18 1898, capitular vicars Mgrs Durel and Vigoux, presided over the official opening of the new church, 18 metres high at its highest point and 40 metres long, and gratefully recalled the memory of the recently deceased Mgr Germain.

And then, once again, the powers of hell began to wreak havoc. The 1903 Combes Laws aimed at teaching congregations drove the Brothers out of Montebourg, and they took refuge in Belgium. When they left, the central nave was completely rebuilt, and the walls of the transept and choir were still under construction.

Some of the Brothers returned in 1922, having grown old in exile, and in 1933 they took up the building work where they had left off. In 1936, with the completion of the walls of the transept and apse, and of the vaulting and roof, the choir was inaugurated. Three years later, the paving was laid. The main part of the construction work took 19 years in all.

How can such rapid construction be explained without attributing it to the miraculous intervention of Our Lady of the Star? Surely it was her way of rewarding the unshakeable faith of the Brothers of Montebourg. Despite the great costs involved, the stipulation of Mgr Germain was respected. At the end of the week, there was always money available to pay the workers. The reconstruction of the abbey church was based on the research of a certain Abbé Cauchon, an architect, who rebuilt the church on a ground plan of the foundations of the former church which were still visible.

The builders and craftsmen of this great edifice created something marvellous, a "miracle in stone", in the Norman romanesque style which surpasses the expectations of even the most demanding visitors. Connoisseurs recognise in it the beautifully elegant lines and harmony of space of the 12th century abbey church of St Georges de Boscherville on the banks of the Seine.

Its proportions even are similar: 65 metres long, 3 naves, 3 bays and vaulting that is 18 metres high. The abbey church of Montebourg is a song of praise to the Mother of God, worthy to be counted among her most beautiful shrines.

What in fact did Providence have in mind when it brought into existence the Congregation of the Brothers of Montebourg? They sacrificed everything to rebuild their abbey church and to restore devotion to Our Lady of the Star. When its work was almost completed (there remained only the main transept tower to build), this teaching congregation disappeared. In 1936, its remaining members asked to be admitted into the Institute of St John Baptist de La Salle. In 1951, two surviving members were present at the solemn consecration of the rebuilt abbey church by Mgr Guyot, Bishop of Coutances and Avranches. Was this twofold restoration the profound reason for their foundation? Once their mission was fulfilled, they passed the torch onto the the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

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Worldwide diffusion of the devotion to Our Lady of the Star by the Brothers of the Christian Schools

Founded in Rheims in 1682, the Brothers of the Christian Schools are a congregation of lay religious devoted to education. Their Founder, St John Baptist de La Salle, subsequently moved the Mother House to Paris, and from here the Institute expanded throughout France. Later on, the Mother House moved to Rouen. It was here that the Founder died in 1719. Pope Benedict XIII granted the Institute a Bull of Approbation in 1725.

The Institute was suppressed at the French Revolution, but was restored by Napoleon Bonaparte, First Consul at the time, thanks to the efforts of Cardinal Fesch, the Emperor's uncle. A decree of the Council of State in 1808 made it a part of the the university.

The number of Brothers of the Christian Schools rose rapidly up to 1904. Brothers were sent to all parts of the New and Old World. They could not, however, meet all the outstanding needs. In the 19th century, other founders such as Mgr Delamare, inspired by the work of De La Salle, started up a multiplicity of teaching congregations of Brothers.

In 1904, the 11,000 Brothers in France were deeply affected by the anti-religious laws. A great number of them went abroad, bringing about a providential worldwide expansion of their institute. The Brothers who accepted secularisation continued to run schools in their native country. Another result of the anti-religious laws was the transfer of the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools to Belgium where it stayed for about 30 years. In 1936, it moved to Via Aurelia in Rome.

As of December 1996, the Institute of the Brothers numbers 7,000 members in 87 countries, teaching 8,000,000 students, and working with 60,000 men and women colleagues. In France there are 1,100 Brothers, many of whom are past the official retirement age.

In 1986, the Brothers' community withdrew from Montebourg. However, the work at Montebourg continues to be dependent on the Congregation through its membership of the "Association La Salle".

In the abbey property, there is a thriving secondary school, an agricultural college and an adult professional training centre, all under the supervision of a director general.

The departure of the Brothers called into question the continued existence and activity of the "Association des Amis de l'Abbatiale". The statutory purpose of this Association was essentially spiritual and cultural: to promote the growth of devotion to the Blessed Virgin under the title of "Our Lady of the Star", to make known the shrine of the abbey church of Montebourg, and to provide for the needs of pilgrims.

Such was the heritage bequeathed by the Brothers of Mercy of Montebourg, who restored in an almost miraculous fashion both the abbey church and the pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Star.

Providence saw to it, however, that Montebourg should be blessed by the presence of a certain M. Auguste Lebarbanchon, a man of faith, very practical and good at public relations. He soon became the key-person where solving problems was concerned. Here is what he says:

"Before turning our backs on a long history, it would be good to glance briefly at the past of the abbey which, in the course of centuries, suffered many trials which it always overcame thanks to the courage, tenacity and especially the unshakeable faith of the religious who successively resided in it.

"It is now the turn of the laity to take up the torch and become the guardians of the shrine, and to maintain and develop the devotion to Our Lady of the Star.

"We have the duty to give priority always to the spiritual vocation of the abbey, otherwise we will run the risk of being asked: «What have you done with your Abbey of Montebourg?»"

Today, thanks to the dynamism and dedication of the lay members of the "Association des Amis de l'Abbatiale", of the parish priest of Montebourg, of those in charge of the permanent community appointed by the bishop, of the teachers committed to the service of the Church, of the many volunteers who are so active in their participation, thanks to the efforts of all these, devotion to Our Lady of the Star continues to grow, and the abbey church is constantly embellished by the generous gifts of the faithful of Montebourg, of the pilgrims, and of those the world over who pray to Our Lady of the Star. •

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