

Les Halles Is a Go
 Le Bistro, Le Gaigne
 The Ultimate Survivor
 Musée de l'Informatique
 Duc des Lombards
 Cinematic Strolls

Euro Oct 27: .797
 Euro Sept 30: .673
 Rain Days: 15
 High Temp: 50°F/10°C
 Low Temp: 40°F/4°C
 Nat'l Holidays: Nov 1, 11

PARIS

n o t e s

NOVEMBER 2008

VOLUME 17 ISSUE 9

SPIRIT OF SAINT LOUIS

By Paul B. Franklin

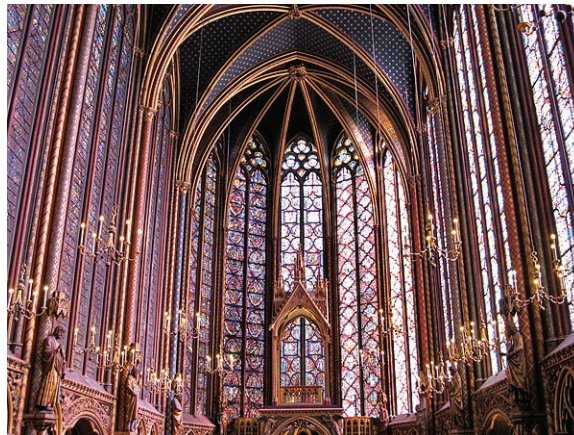
Aside from his talents as a leader and politician, Louis IX had a penchant for architecture

When Louis IX (1214-1270) ascended the throne in 1226 at the tender age of 12 and was crowned king of France, few could have predicted that the teenage sovereign would reign so successfully or leave behind such an extraordinary legacy. Eighth monarch in the Capetian dynasty—the incomparable patrilineal house, founded by and named for Hugh Capet, that ruled non-stop between 987 and 1792, and again from 1814 to 1848—he continues to occupy a revered status in French history on par with Clovis and Charlemagne, his two most celebrated predecessors.

Not only did Louis trounce England's Henry III (his brother-in-law) and reap as spoils the regions of Normandy, Maine, Anjou and the Poitou (making his empire the largest and wealthiest in Europe), he radically reformed the administration of his kingdom in order to squelch abuses of power by royal officials. Profoundly devout, he also spearheaded the last two crusades in hopes of smiting Islam and extending Christianity's reach. Hailed far and wide for his sagacity, benevolence and piety, the ruler was canonized a mere 27 years after his death. Saint Louis was the sole French monarch upon whom such a distinction had ever been bestowed, and he remained wildly popular for centuries, as the Missouri city named in his honor by a 17th-century French explorer attests.

Aside from his talents as a leader and politician, Louis IX had a penchant for architecture. The Gothic cathedrals of Amiens and Beauvais soared majestically heavenward during his supremacy. In Paris, he ordered the construction of the Sorbonne and the Quinze-Vingts, a hospital for the blind. None of these monuments, however, compare to Sainte-Chapelle (shown), an intimate bejeweled sanctuary that Louis had built in the 1240s. Erected in the courtyard of the royal palace (now the Palais de Justice) on the Ile de la Cité, this Gothic marvel with walls almost entirely of stained glass has long been one of the capital's most crowd-pleasing attractions. Hugo and Proust wrote euphoric prose in praise

of it. Who among us has not stood inside with mouth agape as rays of sunlight seeped through its colorful panes, transforming the interior into a veritable kaleidoscope? Despite the chapel's renown, most Parisians and tourists alike are unaware of its intriguing history. When you delve into the past, though, you discover that Louis built Sainte-Chapelle to snub the overly



influential and less than altruistic fiefdom of clerics who presided at Notre Dame.

Louis' decision to construct Sainte-Chapelle only steps from Notre Dame was a strategic one. Back in 1163, with approval from King Louis VII (Louis' great-grandfather), Bishop Maurice de Sully razed a lackluster Romanesque edifice and designed the glorious new cathedral to be the "parish church of the kings of Europe." Work to complete the monumental structure—including the elaborate sculptural programs on its facades, the bell towers, flying buttresses and numerous subsidiary chapels—continued until around 1250, well into Louis' reign.

There is no evidence, however, that Louis himself contributed financially to the church's construction or upkeep or, for that matter, to parish coffers in general. He broke the long-standing tradition of his Capetian forebears who regularly had endowed masses for their souls, ensuring their commemoration in the cathedral's calendar. Notre Dame, for instance,

was a principal object of patronage for King Philippe II (Louis' grandfather) and his family. His first spouse, Isabella of Hainault, requested to be interred in the church. The king in turn earmarked royal funds to sustain two chaplains to "continually serve our church" as well as to celebrate masses for her soul, his soul and the souls of all the dead. Philippe also provided monies for an annual mass to be celebrated in his name on All Saints' Day and donated important relics to the cathedral. When Louis' oldest brother died in 1218, he was buried in Notre Dame. Their mother, Blanche of Castille, subsequently subsidized a chaplaincy to say daily mass for the soul of the deceased prince, "no less than for the souls of the king and the queen and for all the faithful." Louis' father underwrote a second chaplaincy in 1225 for the sake of his and Blanche's souls. As generous benefactors to Notre Dame, members of the monarchy actively acknowledged and legitimized the role of the clergy in obtaining divine salvation and thus guaranteed their future place in Paradise.

Evidence of the royal family's indispensable patronage of Notre Dame is visible on the front facade of the church. Over the southern doorway appear several scenes from the life of the Virgin. On the tympanum, for example, Mary sits in majesty with Christ on her lap and is flanked by two angels. Bishop de Sully stands on the left sporting a miter and clutching his crosier, while the bearded and crowned Louis VII (great-grandfather to Louis) kneels on the right. Scholars believe these sculptures were begun in the mid-1160s, soon after the cornerstone was laid. The narrative originally may have depicted the Adoration of the Magi, but the theme probably was altered in the wake of the long-awaited birth of Philippe II on August 21, 1165. After nearly 30 years of marriage to three different women, Louis VII finally produced a male heir. The crown prince's arrival was widely considered miraculous, and contemporaries repeatedly likened it to the Nativity. In recognition of the magnitude (continued on page 7)

of this event, artisans seem to have scrapped their initial scheme for the doorway and instead sculpted the bishop, who baptized the royal heir the day after his birth, and the proud, aged father, who reverently pays homage to the Virgin for enabling him to assure the succession of the throne.

Throughout his long reign, ever-virtuous Louis distanced himself from the power-hungry and greedy Notre Dame clerics, who were as interested in lining their pockets as they were in saving sinners. Never seduced by their pomp or braggadocio, he preferred the humility and piety of the monks and friars who made up newer fringe mendicant orders like the Franciscans, Augustinians and Dominicans. These religious men took strict vows of poverty and depended solely on alms for survival. Louis welcomed them to Paris, encouraging them in their philanthropic activities directed toward the poor. Much to the chagrin of their Notre Dame brethren, he also sanctioned their presence at court and generously funded the construction of their convents around the capital and as far away as Jerusalem.

Detractors worried about the influence that the mendicant orders, which they chided as falsely Christian, exercised over the king. They even reproached Louis for imitating their example. He would awaken in the middle of the night, for instance, to pray and occasionally donned the dress of a peasant. Such comportment was judged to be less than regal and was thought to besmirch the dignity of the crown. But Louis ignored his critics and embraced the modesty, self-sacrifice and faithfulness of these seemingly heretical monks and friars as kingly virtues.

In rebuffing the religious hierarchy of Notre Dame, Louis wished to prove once and for all that the French monarchy no longer needed these priests to intercede on its behalf to pave the road to Heaven. In so doing, he attempted to drive a wedge between Church and State, and in the process confirmed that the Capetian dynasty answered to no one but God. Sainte-Chapelle embodied these radical notions both in its conception and design.

The tale of Sainte-Chapelle began in 1239, when Louis acquired the most venerated of all Christian relics—the Crown of Thorns. Unlike many sovereigns of the period, who sacked holy sites and absconded with their precious artifacts, he willingly purchased the treasure. He paid the astronomical sum of 135,000 livres (about half the country's annual budget) to a Venetian merchant to whom Baudouin II, a French nobleman and the emperor of Constantinople, had pawned it. To showcase the coveted possession, Louis commissioned the chapel. Construction was completed in fewer than three years at a cost of 40,000 livres.

During the building's consecration on April 26, 1248 Louis supposedly placed the hallowed object on his own head. (One cannot help but wonder whether Napoleon wanted to

imitate him when he crowned himself emperor in 1804.) Louis also plucked three thorns from the relic before it was enshrined and affixed them to his own crown. Both poignant gestures indisputably conflated the French crown and Christ's circlet, heralding the sacrality of Louis and proclaiming Paris as the New Jerusalem. Gauthier Cornut, archbishop of Sens, made this very observation after witnessing the reception of the Crown of Thorns in Paris: "Just as the Lord Jesus Christ chose the Holy Land for the display of the mysteries of his redemption, he [has] specially chosen our France for the more devoted veneration of the triumph of his Passion." Louis' departure on his first crusade barely four months after the dedication of Sainte-Chapelle also exemplified his desire to forge new religious and political links between France and the cradle of Christianity. These actions were intended in part to shift attention to Sainte-Chapelle and in the process ebb the influence and privilege that Notre Dame had accrued.

The chapel's architectural plan and iconography went a long way to achieving the same objective. The building was designed as a two-story structure, the modest lower level serving as a house of worship for underlings in the king's employ. The upper level, far loftier, was reserved exclusively for Louis and specially invited guests. A small gallery ensured easy access to the latter from his private apartments. The Crown of Thorns was displayed in an elaborate reliquary in the apse of the upper sanctuary and was framed by 15 sets of stained glass windows. Consisting of 1,134 individual scenes, the luminescent panes climb to between 14 and 16 meters and stretch more than 600 square meters, nearly the entire circumference of the interior.

The intricately animated glazed walls illustrate stories from the Old and New Testaments. The cycle aptly commences with Genesis (first bay on the north side), the initial chapter in the story of human salvation. It continues with episodes devoted to iconic figures like Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Job as well as Kings Samuel, David and Solomon. The chronicles end with the window opposite Genesis, which recounts the saga of the True Cross and Louis' acquisition of the Crown of Thorns. Salvation through Christ and the king (guardian of the sacred relic of the Passion) was, therefore, equated with God's creation of the world, while the origin of French kingship was proclaimed to be biblical. To prevent anyone from overlooking this genealogy, however mythical, coats of arms of the Capetians and the kings of Castille (in honor of Louis' mother's family) as well as numerous representations of crowns were sutured here and there throughout the stained glass.

In the ultimate affront to Notre Dame, Louis appealed to Pope Innocent IV. In May 1244, the Vatican granted the sovereign's request to found a special college of clergy to serve the new royal chapel. Over a dozen priests from Louis' preferred mendicant orders took up residence and ministered to him, his family,

guests and servants. Three times a year, they staged elaborate religious processions focused on the Crown of Thorns. Thanks to such publicity, not to mention the shrine's exceptional craftsmanship and jaw-dropping architecture, it soon was the talk of Europe and quickly became the model for other palatine chapels. As one art historian perceptively discerned, Sainte-Chapelle was a kind of "supershrine," a jewel of a building that was nothing short of a monumental reliquary turned outside in.

At once angered and awed by Sainte-Chapelle's precipitous rise to fame across the Christian world, the high priests of Notre Dame planned their riposte. Beginning in 1254, a mere six years after Louis' sanctuary was consecrated, they undertook a massive overhaul of the east end of the cathedral. The project included a small private entrance known as the Porte Rouge (Red Door) along the northern side of the church. It allowed clerics direct entry from the cloister into the chancel to perform mass and other sacraments around the altar. During the final decade of Louis' reign, a relief depicting Christ crowing the Virgin was sculpted over the doorway. While the theme was trendy at the time, its invocation was somewhat redundant, since the same subject also prominently figured on the front facade. The choice was nonetheless a logical one, Notre Dame (Our Lady) being dedicated to Christ's mother, herself the symbol of the Church. The cathedral's canons also tactically opted to incorporate into the biblical account representations of a king and queen kneeling as patrons and supplicants in adoration of the enthroned queen of heaven.

Since the 19th century, the royal couple decorating the Porte Rouge traditionally, but erroneously, has been identified as Louis and his wife, Marguerite of Provence. Rather than specific individuals, they portray conventional types. And their original function was purely rhetorical. In portraying a prostrated king and queen before Christ and the Virgin above a doorway to which only parish priests had access, Notre Dame's leaders strove to reassert their authority over the monarchy, stressing their requisite position as intercessors between the earthly and heavenly realms. The Porte Rouge, therefore, offered an idealized image of the relationship between church and crown in which the king was spiritual patron (which he was not), a loyal devotee to the cathedral (which he was not) and above all subservient to the church (which, according to the clergy, he should have been). As such, this deceptively unimportant entrance categorically rejected the model of sacred kingship advocated by Louis at Sainte-Chapelle.

Even if the contentious rivalry between Louis IX and his religious counterparts at Notre Dame has long been forgotten, public fervor for Sainte-Chapelle and Paris' cathedral endures unabated. Both of these inimitable monuments continue to possess a unique luster and contribute immeasurably to the sparkle that is the City of Light.