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TRO BREIZH: A PILGRIMAGE TO THE SEVEN SAINTS OF BRITTANY



In the summer of 2002, thirty-five Russians and one American set out by bus from Moscow, not to one of the many holy sites of Russia, but to France's northeastern coast to follow the 1,300 year-old Tro Breizh pilgrimage. After the Holy Land, Tro Breizh is one of the oldest Orthodox pilgrimage routes in the world still in use. The 1,200 kilometer pilgrimage takes six weeks by foot, and seven to ten days by car to visit the major shrines. The route honors the 6th and 7th century founding bishops of Brittany – St. Samson, St. Patern, St. Corentin, St. Pol, St. Tugdual, St. Brieuc and St. Malo, as well as St. Guenole and St. Genden, both abbots of early Brittany.

Our first stop in France, late at night on the fourth day from Moscow, is Strasbourg, a city so beautiful that when we arrive, well after midnight, the dark quiet streets look like a medieval storybook. I step from the bus and understand that we have been met at this late hour by a true daughter of the *pays* – Jeanne d'Arc. A life-size statue of the famous Catholic warrior-saint looms in front of us, every line cast in relief by the full moon overhead. Horsed, armored, grim, sword drawn in the warm night air, she floods the forgotten corners of my childhood imaginings of France, and the excitement of the medieval West springs to life. But our goal is farther back, to the very roots of Christianity – Orthodox and Catholic, in the heart of France's northernmost province.

Two days later we arrive in Dol, our first stop in Brittany and the home of the region's founding father, St. Samson. We are met by a Celtic ecclesiastical bagpiper and the local church-warden, who lead us in procession into the

ОБЩЕЕ ДЕЛО

“Common Cause”

✠
**The Seven
 Saints of
 Brittany**

1. St. Samson
2. St. Patern
3. St. Corentin
4. St. Pol
5. St. Tugdual
6. St. Brieuc
7. St. Malo



1,000 year-old Dol cathedral for a moleben to St. Samson. The abstract cloth banners decorating the aisles are what one has come to expect in modern western Catholic churches, but the stone cathedral and the sober intensity of the Breton church warden as she leads us towards the altar are from an older time. The bagpipes were played here long before Christianity arrived, in worship and in war, and on their native soil they command reverent attention.

Led by Fr. Dimiti Rumiantsev of the Moscow Patriarchate and Fr. Maxime Le Dirisain, a young Breton Orthodox priest under the Ecumenical Patriarchate, we sing the moleben to St. Samson in Russian, our first prayer on the Tro Breizh. Breton visitors gather to listen. I wonder if this is the first time St. Samson has been glorified in Russian, but then remember that it is very likely that Archbishop John Maximovitch knew of him fifty years ago. Who else could have led us here?



Fr. Dimiti Rumiantsev

From the massive, darkened church, we go blinking into the sunshine. Beyond the church is a lush green lawn shaded with trees and tented pavilions, set with beautiful tables of food and wine. A few distinguished-looking French people circulate between the tables. Some of us drift towards the pavilions, trying not to seem unduly curious about the preparations for what is obviously an official reception. After five days of instant soups and gas station food, I think of medieval banquets, grateful for this first glimpse of France's legendary ability to make common things exquisitely beautiful. One the Russians whispers that if he wasn't Orthodox he would wonder where the *houris* are. He's right. This isn't

Arthur, it's the Arabian Nights.

At the edge of the lawn, we pretend to look in other directions until we are spotted by two older men tending tables, who quickly come towards us. We expect to be asked, quietly but kindly, to move along, but instead, they thrust full wine glasses into our hands. A few of us marvel at the extravagantly democratic hospitality of the French, while the rest nervously chide ourselves for standing too close, wondering what will happen when the real guests arrive and our imposture is discovered. It takes another fifteen minutes to realize that this is all for us!

We sit under the shady awnings, staring at one another in disbelief. Travel weary after four stifling midsummer days from Moscow on a Russian bus with a six-inch circulating fan and two roof vents for air; bus sleepovers and endless filling stations; a ten-hour wait on hot asphalt at the Belorussian border in choking traffic; a day of dusty Polish fields; Berlin with its overpowering monumental architecture; the industrial outskirts of Paris – and now, on this rich green lawn, set down to a feast, we are between tears and laughter. Somehow, our being here – their first Russian pilgrims – is important to these kind people, and we are as awed as gypsy children at a tsar's banquet.

As the meal goes on, an accordion player arrives to play us Breton folk songs. The young Russians are soon up and dancing to his music – line and folk dances *à la Russe*. As the afternoon passes, the pilgrims give him rousing choruses of Slavic folk music.



Celtic ecclesiastical bagpiper

Someone sits down at the opposite side of the table – Fr. Maxime, the young Breton priest. I hope he speaks English, and he does. We ply him with questions and he tells us stories of Tro Breizh and Brittany, and of St. Samson, the most venerated of the seven founding bishops.

“We know quite a lot about him actually. St. Samson lived in the 6th century, and probably reposed around 565. His father was Amon of Dyfed and his mother was Anna. He was born to her very late, in answer to prayer, and, according to some sources, as an infant he was dedicated to God and entrusted to the care of St. Illtyd. St. Gildas, writing in the *Exidio Brittanæ*, says that Illtyd’s spiritual father had been a soldier of King Arthur. Illtyd was from an extremely ascetic island monastery and Gildas reports that he had earlier traveled to the East to learn from the desert fathers. When his abbot died, twenty year-old Samson was elected in his place and lived for some time with Irish ascetics. He moved to Brittany near the Severn river, and after many years of strict monasticism had a vision of the Apostles Andrew, James and John, telling him that he was not to be a hermit but was to serve others. A fortnight later he was made Bishop of Dol, and as bishop brought peace to the fighting chieftans, consolidating the region into what today is Brittany.

“One of my own favorite stories is that when he first arrived in mainland France, a man came him and begged him to heal his sick family, “Holy man, heal them!” St. Samson replied, “I did not come to pretend to work miracles, I came to preach the true God in Three Persons.” It looked as if it was only theology that St. Samson was giving the poor man, but, when he returned home, he found his wife and children cured. I like this because it means that St. Samson believed that true health is true faith, and this will heal everything. Look first for the kingdom of God and all else will be added.

“In thanksgiving the man gave St. Samson a parcel of land on which he built cells and a church. Within a few years fifty monks had gathered around him. Until the end of his very long life he ploughed the fields and helped gather crops. The monastery grew into the village of Dol, where we are today. Unfortunately, none of his original buildings are left and the present church is from the 13th century. St. Samson gathered hundreds of monks in his lifetime and is considered the father of Brittany. More than anyone else, his sanctity and influence helped to create the nation.

“In later centuries, Brittany was laid waste by the Normans on one side and the Saxons on the other. To preserve the church treasures, the monks



of Dol made a tunnel between the tower at the top of Mont Dol and the cathedral where we sit, where they hid the church treasures during the years of invasion and persecution. Unfortunately, the tunnels are now filled with a natural poisonous gas and cannot be entered.

“The relics of St. Samson were in Dol for many centuries. During the Viking invasions they were hidden in Gaul (modern-day France) because at that period Brittany and France were two separate countries. They were saved a second time during the French Revolution, but very recently they were stolen. The Catholic priest of Dol told me that they were perhaps taken by an Orthodox person. I said that if they had been I certainly would have heard, but of course, such things do happen, and contemporary Orthodox, unfortunately, have a reputation for stealing relics. Some Orthodox think

they are right in this. They say, “Catholics no longer venerate relics,” (which is not always true) and “many of the relics were first stolen from Constantinople, from Syria, Egypt and the Middle East.”

I don’t know if it was Orthodox people who took St. Samson’s relics or not, but they are gone, and it is a very complex

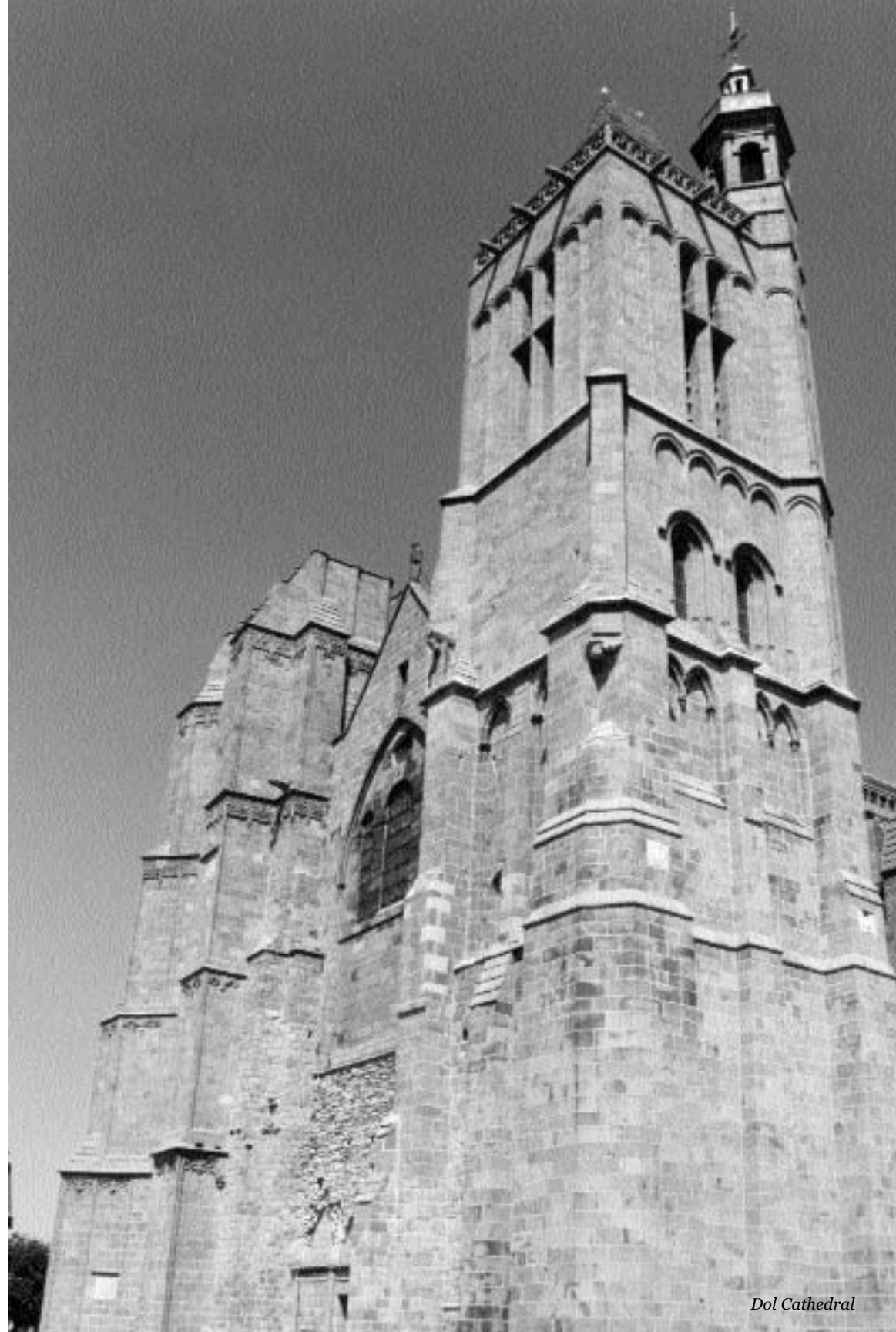


Moleben at St. Malo.

thing to get to the bottom of because there are also people in France who call themselves Orthodox but are not. We still have a small portion of his relics at the Catholic convent at Boquan, where they have a shrine with relics of the Seven Saints of Brittany.”

Around Brittany: Saints, Land, and Pilgrimage

We stop one day at the Landevennec monastery to serve a moleben before the relics of St. Guenole. Since its foundation by the saint in 500 until the French Revolution, there was a continual monastic presence here, earlier even than at St. Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai. Landevennec’s original monks settled on this isolated spot near a spring at the conjunction of the Faou and Aulne rivers, and it was only during the French Revolution in the 18th century that the monastery was finally destroyed and the monks killed and driven away. Brittany held out the longest against the spiritual and physical ravages of the revolution. Unwilling to renounce the monarchy and



Dol Cathedral

allow the desecration of their Christian holy places, the people refused to secularize and there was a terrible and bloody civil war, which ended in their defeat. Landevennec was reestablished only in this century.

Brittany's loyalty to the monarchy had been sealed by the pilgrimage of a French queen on the Tro Breizh two centuries before. Among the stained glass windows of St. Malo's Church in Dinan we found a striking representation of pious Anne of Brittany's 16th century visit to the town. In 1505, as the Queen of France and wife of Louis XII, Anne began the Tro Breizh on foot. As she progressed through Brittany her piety and oneness of soul with her subjects made her wildly popular, but, by God's providence, her prayers that she might present her royal husband with a son were never answered.

After Dol our pilgrimage, molebens and liturgies continued to Vannes (St. Patern), Boquan (the relics of the Seven Founding Saints), Quimper (Saint Corentin), Landevennec (St. Guenole), St. Pol de Leon (St. Pol), Treguier

(St. Tugdual), St. Briec (St. Briec) and St. Malo (St. Malo). The villages and towns are out of a storybook; each house, street, garden is more beautiful than the last. Half-pillared houses and shops, medieval churches, bell towers and cloisters fill the old centers. The Middle Ages are alive in these crowd-



Vannes

ed, narrow streets which have hardly changed in 700 years. One day, near Treguier, one of the Russian pilgrims turned to me, "How could anyone ever sin living in such a wonderful place? Such beauty would purify your soul."

Although secular French *départements* (regional counties) have existed for over 200 years, in Brittany they are not a conscious landmark and have never achieved more than bureaucratic status. Until today, each Breton church diocese retains its own cultural and historical identity. During the *ancien régime*, bishoprics, not *départements*, were the reference for local geography. The dioceses of ancient lower Brittany were named after the seven founders: Quimper, Cornouaillais, Leonard, which was San Pol de Leon, Vannes, and Tregorois, from Treguier. These *pays*, or dioceses, each spoke their own local variant of the Breton language.



Dol Cathedral

Besides being a diocese, a *pays* was generally the region of economic and cultural influence around an important market town. The population of local parishes would meet on regular market and fair days and led to common dress, distinctive Breton or Gallic dialects, cooking, musical traditions, as well as a local style of building and furniture. In time this became a local mentality, a psychology, a way of life, a deep “local consciousness.”

Halfway through the pilgrimage we stop in the town of Vannes for a city festival. Few other Breton towns have managed to preserve so many elements of their thousand-year history. Originally the capital of a Gallic tribe, then a Gallo-Roman town and seat of a bishopric, early Vannes was the capital of Nominoe, the first Breton King, and later, the site of the formal declaration of unity between Brittany and France in 1532. The streets of the old city look down on us unchanged. It is not quaint; it is unsettling: we are the ones out of place with our modern clothes and thoughts, our foreign tongues.

Little Brittany has also left its mark on secular folk literature. While the rugged coastline is filled with estuaries and islands, Brittany for centuries was called the *argot*, the land of the woods. Brittany’s most famous forest, the ancient *Broceliande* is the place of Arthurian legends, and the haunt of Merlin and the beautiful Viviane, who imprisoned him eternally with her spell. The remains of a megalithic monument set deep in the forest is said to be Merlin’s place of captivity.

Brittany is also the native country and setting for the medieval tale of Tristan and Isolde. Although the stuff of legend, *Ile Tristan* lies off the western coast near the town of Douamenez, where Tristan is said to be buried in a common grave with Isolde of Cornwall.

Nearby, the 4,000 standing stones of Carnac are an ancient mystery. The field’s many dolmans and mounds were burial places for nobles and chiefs, but the purpose of the immense rows of standing stones (much smaller though far greater in number than those at Stonehenge) is still unknown. Believed to have been erected before 2000 BC, the ancient field was perhaps a center of ceremonial worship. We stop there to walk among the stones, speculating about those ancient peoples who labored with such energy over their worship.

Brittany is still considered the most pious corner of France. Christian devotion is alive and there is a lingering sense of an older way of life. One night we stop near Quimper at an old stone chapel – built 600 years ago as a night-stop for pilgrims walking the Tro Breizh. Recently restored by the



volunteer labor of retired residents of the community, the chapel had a remarkable feeling of sanctity. I asked the church warden, “What makes this chapel feel so special?” His eyes twinkling, he replied, “Ah, you feel it. Come, we have a piece of the veil of the Mother of God, brought by crusaders from Constantinople.”

St. Anne and St. Yves

St. Anne, the Mother of the Virgin Mary, is venerated everywhere in Brittany, and is called “Grandmother” by the Bretons. Numerous churches, monasteries, hospitals, and orphanages were all dedicated to St. Anne, and every church we visited had a chapel set apart for her.

The actual patron saint of modern Brittany is St. Yves, (*Erhwon* in Breton.) His feast is on the 19th of May, and this is the national holiday of

Brittany. As Fr. Maxime told us, “Even though the schism was in the eleventh century and St. Yves was only born in Treguir in 1235, it took centuries for the break to affect the Church in remote places like Brittany, and even the Orthodox here consider him a saint.”

After studying law in Paris, Yves returned to Brittany as a judge. In the 13th century judges were both an integral part of the Church structure and the center of the social order. Yves was a masterful speaker and acted to uphold the rights of the poor against the powerful of his own class. He gave away his own goods and lived in poverty.

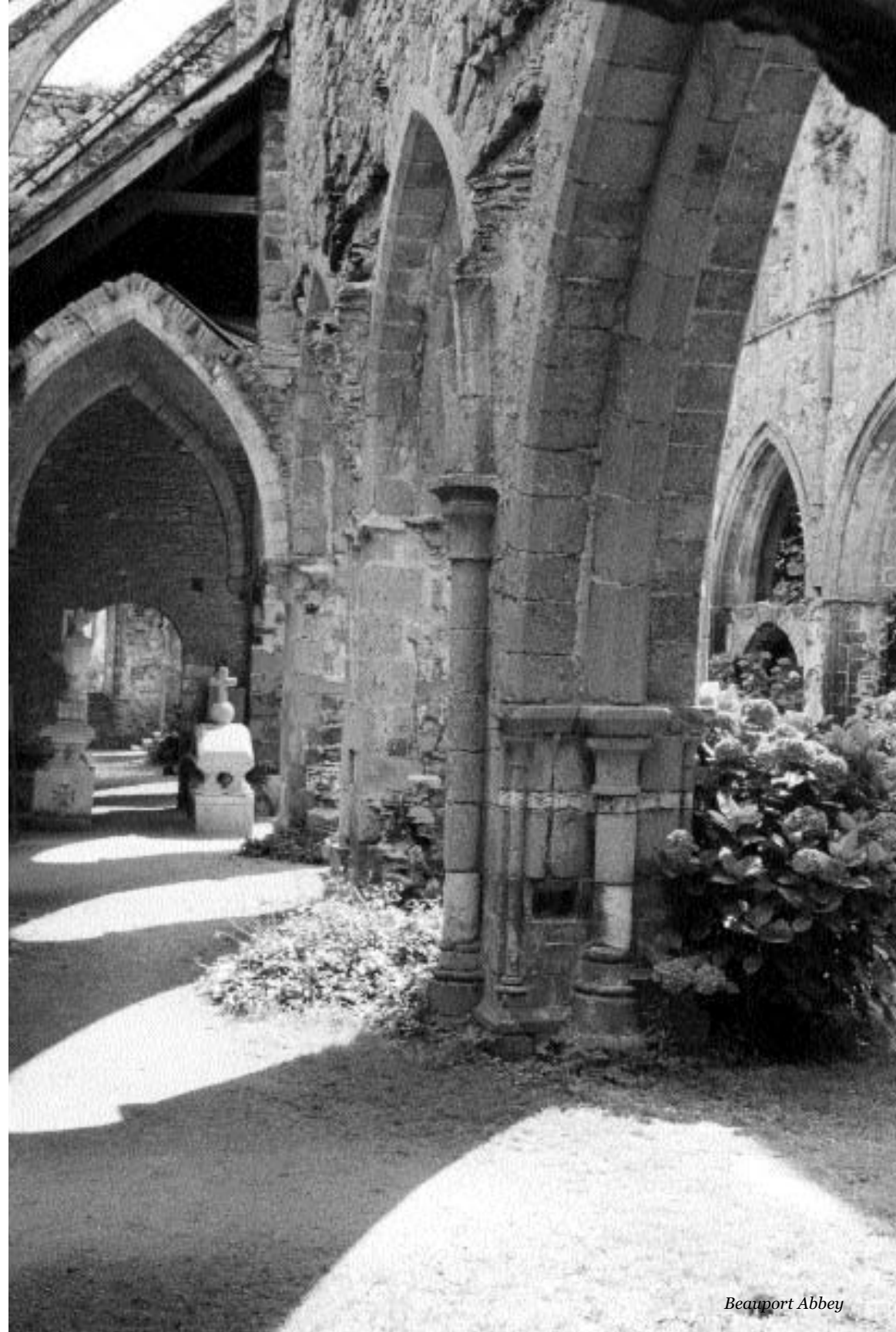
Fr. Maxime continues, “St. Yves knew human nature. One of my favorite stories is about a miserly innkeeper who complained that there were poor

people who loitered near his shop to smell the cooking food. He wanted them to pay for the smell. His complaint reached St. Yves in the court, who told the innkeeper that he was already paid, ‘because you hear the sound of the money, while the poor only have the smell of the food.’”

Although not a monk, St. Yves spent his nights in prayer, living on bread and water, and his poor life was a scandal to well-off townspeople. Once, a very repellent man came to him asking for a meal. St. Yves fed the man him-



Statue of St. Anna



self, but after serving him, the face of the pauper began to shine with an otherworldly light, and he disappeared. After Yves' death and burial in Treguir, the Duke of Brittany asked that a church commission be set up to investigate his canonization. Within days, thousands of people arrived, eager to testify to his holiness. Even today, May 19th calls forth processions in his honor in every church in the region, and the cathedral at Treguir hosts the largest annual gathering of Christians in Brittany.

Over and over we heard of local summer *pardons*, a centuries-old tradition of small Breton villages, in which Christians walk in procession in their native costumes to the nearest shrine of one of the founding bishops to beg pardon for their sins and to ask a blessing on their animals and crops. The *pardon* lasts for days and ends with a village feast.

St. Cornely (Cornelius), Roman pope in the year 251, is Brittany's patron of farm animals. Until the last war, horses, oxen and sometimes even sheep would be groomed and decorated with ribbons, then taken along on the *pardon* and blessed with holy water. A tuft of hair from the animal's tail was offered to the saint as a request for protection and fertility. In every town, we came across announcements of dates of the local village *pardons*, still held in every village every year.

Mont Saint-Michel

The last stop on our pilgrimage is the breathtaking monastery of Mont Saint-Michel, founded in pre-schism Normandy by Aubert, Bishop of Avranches, who in 780 had a vision of St. Michael telling him to build a monastery upon this rock.

Mont Saint-Michel is an island, or rather, a precipitous rock rising straight out of one of the strongest tidal seas in the world. From the northern shore, one looks at the far off monastery across the immense tidal flats that have greeted Christian pilgrims for 1,220 years. At high tide the mount is cut off by a boisterous sea; at low tide, a huge flat expanse of rippled greyish sand separates the dry fields of Normandy from the monastery, the only route to the mount until the 20th century. We arrive early on the north shore and wait for the tide to retreat. A hundred other pilgrims wait with us on this sunny August morning, and as soon as the all-clear horn is blown, we take off our shoes and spread out over the flats. We face a three-hour



Quimper Cathedral

walk and are cautioned to keep moving and not rest too long at the midpoint – at high tide the water reaches forty feet and surges in as fast as a galloping horse. Those left on the flats can easily drown.

The rippled wet sand is painful to walk on, its contoured ridges cutting into the feet. Shoes or sandals are impossible; with each step one sinks deeply into the fine wet sand and any kind of footwear would have to be pulled up out of the muck with each step. There are seven streams to ford and we are often knee-deep in sea water. At the largest stream, as wide as a river, the water reaches almost to our waists. The smaller women and children are carried across on accommodating shoulders. Horse-drawn carts with supplies for the townspeople who live on the mount are silhouetted in the distance. A few of the pilgrims themselves are on horseback. The mount itself is so far off that we can only make it out as a small vague outline.



Mont Dol

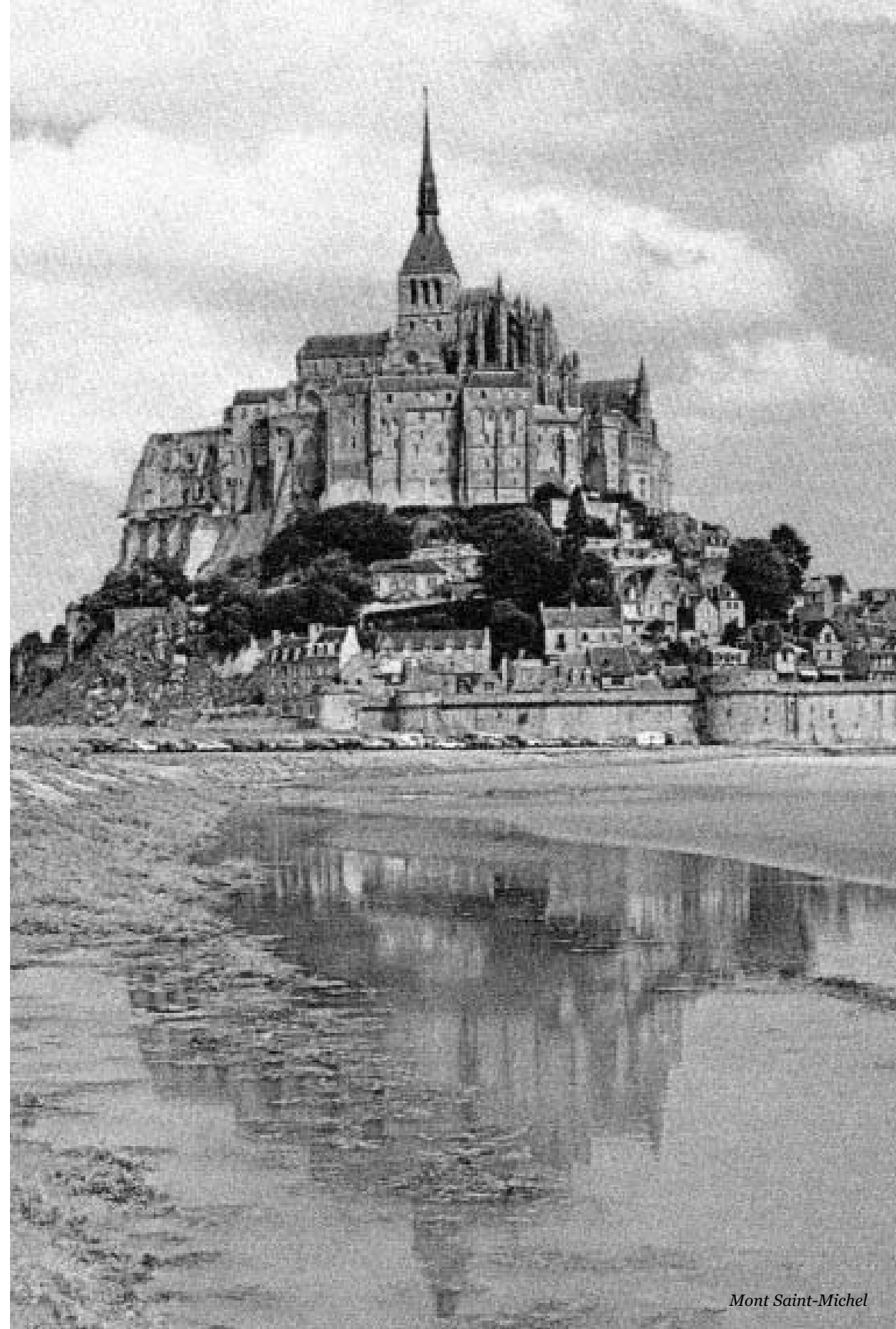
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Along the way, we hear an old folk legend connecting Mont Saint-Michel with St. Samson's Dol:

“The devil was jealous when St. Michael's Mount, justly known as the marvel of the West, was built. He claimed the mount as his own, and said that the buildings upon it belonged to him and would be named as he wished. St. Michael

would have none of this, and they decided to compete for its possession. The test would be to see who could jump the farthest, and the victor would be the guardian (or bane) of the mount. They both set off at a run, and as St. Michael and the devil leapt from the mount, the prince of darkness fell into the Couenon, the river separating Normandy from Brittany, whose waters lose themselves in quicksand. St. Michael, held up by his spread of wings and God's grace, landed on Mont Dol, which stands like a pyramid in the middle of the plain. On a rock near the church, local Christians point out the 'footprint' of St. Michael and the 'marks of the devil's claws,' in anguish over his loss.”

However entertaining the legend, the real Christian history of the mount is serious and ascetic. Hours later we arrive muddy, tired, and sunburnt, but bound in spirit to the centuries of Christians who had crossed those penitential flats to worship at the most dramatic and impenetrable monastery of western Christendom. ✚

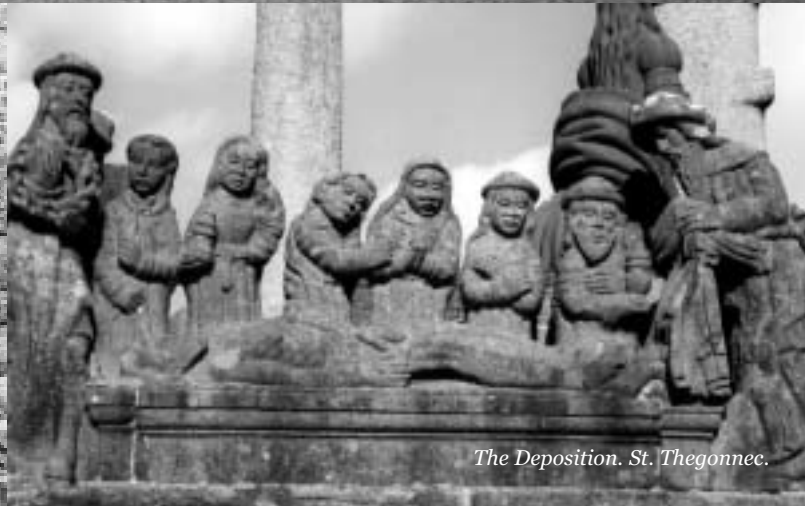




Crossing tidal sands to Mont Saint-Michel.



*Ania defending our
"Common Cause."*



The Deposition. St. Thegonnec.



Statue of peasant girl, Quimper.



Frs. Philippe, Dimitri and Maxime at Boquen.



Relics of Seven Saints of Brittany at Boquen.



Royal sepulchre. Quimper.



Moleben at Boquen



Mont Saint-Michel



Waiting for low tide to cross the tidal sands to Mont Saint-Michel



*Barbara Volokovik,
painter of this issue's cover*



St. Yves at Treguir.