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THREE SAINTS OF ALSACE

Archimandrite Philip Ryabykh and Sergiy Volosenko on the lives and veneration of three women saints – Odile of Alsace, Sophia of Rome, and Richarde of Andlau – whose influence rooted Christianity in eastern France. An armchair pilgrimage to Alsace and beyond.

I. Saint Odile: A Visit to Mont Sainte-Odile's Hohenburg Abbey

SERGIY: Saint Odile is one of the most venerated local saints of Alsace, as well as being a saint of the undivided Church before the schism. She was considered holy in her own lifetime and her influence on monastic life was so profound that she was named the heavenly protectress of the region of Alsace.

Living here, we follow St. John Maximovitch and Fr. Seraphim Rose, who advised Orthodox Christians, especially those of us living in Western Europe, to study the saints of the pre-schism Church and spread the news about them to Orthodox countries, because these saints unite us.

We study the life of St. Odile in our parish of All Saints in Strasbourg, we pray to her, and we even have an icon with a small portion of her relics. As we are doing today, we often visit this monastery founded by her and are very fortunate to have several contemporary versions of her life. The earliest and most reliable is from the eighth century, soon after her repose, the original of which is in the Abbey Library of St. Gall (Monastery of St. Gallen) in Switzerland.

Saint Odile lived in the seventh to eighth centuries, a little after St. Brigid of Ireland (+523). Her story is interesting because she was the daughter of Alderich, a wealthy and powerful Frankish ruler whose territory was near today's Obernai. This was still a rather pagan land and although her father was baptized, he was only nominally Christian. When his daughter was born

Opposite: Mont Ste. Odile-Hohenburg Abbey, built on a precipice towering 2000 feet above the Rhine Gorge.

blind, Alderich considered it a sign of misfortune and ordered that she be left to die. In our days, this is unimaginable, but research confirms that this was a common practice for unwanted girls among pre-Christian peoples and throughout much of the Roman Empire. Particularly, if born with a handicap or defect, they would never be able to marry, so the practice was to expose them in a deserted place. There are many modern archeological finds of large caches of bones of infant girls. Some people have been skeptical of this, but we know now that the practice was indeed widespread. A newborn only became a son or daughter if and when the father named them; until then the infant was not truly human. Naming was an acknowledgment of personhood.

So, it happened also to St. Odile (in German *Ottilia*) that her father wanted to expose her to the elements. Her mother begged that she be spared and, either as a compromise or in secrecy, she was sent to a convent in Burgundy, where her mother had relatives. She grew up among the nuns. When she was twelve, a traveling bishop from Regensburg who was preaching in these semi-pagan areas, had a vision that he would baptize a young blind girl. Arriving at the monastery in Burgundy, he found Odile. Perhaps the early Christian custom of not baptizing until adulthood still held on there, but in any case, she had remained unbaptized. After the baptism, her sight was restored and she vowed to dedicate her life to Christ as a nun.

After discovering that his daughter could see, her father accepted her back, only to arrange a marriage to a neighboring nobleman. Odile refused, and when Alderich insisted, she fled. We know that she made her way to the other side of the Rhine River, about sixty miles away. When her father and his men chased her on horseback, she miraculously found a niche in a rock where she could hide until they passed by. Retracing their steps, they followed her trail until an avalanche of stones suddenly crashed onto the road in front of them. The ruler shrewdly decided that this was a sign that he should not force her to marry, and later gave her this mountaintop site to found a monastery. This had been a strategic spot for centuries, and from this mountaintop you can see far down onto the plains and valleys of Alsace. The Romans built an observation tower here, and we still have the remains of early Celtic walls and other structures indicating a continuous military presence.

Odile's prayerfulness attracted women from Alsace and beyond, and even some of her female relatives joined the monastery, which soon became a

major point of Christianity for the region. A few years later, in 700, she founded a second monastery (Niedermünster) and a hospital at the bottom of the mountain to accommodate the overflow of pilgrims.

One story told about the saint is that she once came across a pilgrim climbing the road to the upper monastery who told her that he had problems with his eyes. Odile struck a rock with her staff, the stone fell aside, a spring appeared, and when the saint washed the man's eyes with the water, he was healed. This spring is still here, and it is interesting for us Orthodox to see that many Catholics have the same respect for holy springs that we do. They come here with bottles to carry water home; they wash their faces and eyes. For me this is something that unites us, that tells me that they venerate this saintly woman as we do. She really is a saint of the undivided Church.

Saint Odile lived to deep old age, dying in 720 at the convent of Niedermünster, but at the insistent prayers of the sisters who surrounded her deathbed, she was returned to life. After describing the beauties of the afterlife to them, she took Holy Communion and, this time by herself, reposed again. From the moment of her repose, she was venerated as a saint. Next year will mark the 1300th anniversary of her repose and it will be a very big celebration here.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: What is generally known about St. Odile is that she was very full of love, even though she had lived through such difficulties. One day a leper came to the monastery, and the smell was so overpowering that the hospital sisters called the saint, asking what to do. She went out to meet him, and after serving him and praying over him, he recovered from his leprosy. Although she was from a noble family, she was open to simple people and everyone came to her in their difficulties.

Another story is that, although Alderich had given her the land, he remained an unscrupulous and despotic ruler, and his murderous raiding and pillaging continued until his death. He suffered greatly before he died, and afterwards appeared to Odile in the flames of hell, begging for her help. She knelt on a stone (which is still in the monastery), fasting from food and drink for four days and four nights, entreating God's mercy. Afterwards, she dreamt that her father had been saved.

Photo page 44: Reliquary of St. Odile, Mont Ste. Odile (Hohenburg Abbey).

Photo page 45: Chapel of the Angels, Mont Ste. Odile-Hohenburg Abbey.



SERGIY: It is interesting that St. Odile was the one who rescued her father, but she was also the one who was supposed to have been exposed to die at birth. It is a mirror of the Lord's saying "The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

The major portion of her relics have remained here at her monastery in Alsace. One famous incident related to the relics concerns the fourteenth-century ruler Charles the IV of Prague (later Holy Roman Emperor) who, on his travels, was eager to obtain local relics. We know from different sources that when he came to St. Odile's monastery, they opened the sarcophagus (the same one we will venerate today) and gave him a portion of bone, along with the statement of authenticity. This relic is still enshrined at Prague, in the Cathedral of St. Vitus.

But Charles of Prague was not the first. Portions of St. Odile's relics had already been given away soon after her repose. There is a map from the early eighteenth-century with about four hundred sites marked in Europe where there were churches or altars dedicated to St. Odile, often enshrining bits of her relics. These were mostly in Germany, Switzerland, and Northern Italy, but also as far east as the Czech Republic and Eastern Poland.

To this day, she is still greatly venerated in Germany, where there are many churches dedicated to her and a number of villages that hold annual feasts in her honor. In Switzerland, Northern Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, baby girls are still being named after her. In our own, mostly Slavic, Moldavian, and Georgian parish we already have several girls baptized with the name Odile. Although the name is not as widespread as it was fifty years ago, we can trace the use of it from the moment of the saint's repose forward, and many elderly women of Alsace still bear her name. Her feast day is December 13/26.

Touring the Monastery: The Outer Round

SERGIY: Here, near the entrance of the ancient monastery is a large map showing the area's pilgrimage routes and hiking paths; Mont Sainte-Odile was a well-known stopping point for pilgrims on the way from Germany to Rome and to the Camino de Santiago in Spain. They would have been given food and shelter, as well as medical care if they were ill. Even today pilgrims (and hikers) often park at the bottom of the mountain and then walk the two

or three hours up to the monastery. Many backpackers also hike through the Vosges mountains, and although people think they are coming here as tourists, they also discover the saint.

The Hohenburg Mont Sainte-Odile Abbey is not only a popular place for pilgrims and tourists, but for school trips as well – every child in Alsace has been here at least once or twice. There is even a public bus.

RTE: Is the monastery still active?

SERGIY: It is no longer a working monastery but a very active parish church. The parish offers daily liturgy, confession, spiritual guidance, and one of the most interesting things for me is that they have the Roman Catholic practice of the perpetual adoration of the Holy Sacrament. This is what we Orthodox would call the "reserved Gifts," which are left on the altar for the priest to take Holy Communion to the sick or to give to people who need the sacrament outside of liturgy. Catholic churches will sometimes bring the monstrance (which we call the *daronositsa*) out at certain hours, and people come to church to pray in the presence of the Body of Christ. At Sainte-Odile they also keep this practice. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, someone is here praying before the monstrance on the church altar. Alsatian laypeople themselves began this in the 1930's, and local people still sign up for set times. The prayer has never been interrupted, even during the worst years of World War II.

The parish also has a spiritual center with conferences on spiritual and historical topics, as well as a marvelous library of early and modern works, two restaurants, and a guest hotel where visitors can stay.

We are now at the gate of the monastery with a statue of St. Odile over the archway. She is always shown with an open book, and here on the facing "pages" of the stone book you can see the image of eyes. She is the heavenly protector of those with eye problems and with headaches.

The monastery is built right on the edge of a cliff – over 900 meters (3000 feet) to the valley floor, and, as you can see, the view to the plain below is magnificent. You can imagine how important this was strategically.

RTE: For such an otherworldly place, the monastery and its nuns seem to have had more than their share of tribulation. For our readers, on the way

Photo page 48: Chapel of Tears, with the stone where St. Odile prayed for her father.

Photo page 49: Statue of St. Odile over doorway of Mont Ste. Odile-Hohenburg Abbey.



up here, I read that the first monastery church founded by St. Odile burnt within a century or two and was rebuilt on a grander scale in 1050. This second church lasted for 500 years until it was burnt to the ground again, this time by Reformation Protestants in 1556. Rebuilt a third time in 1661, it was seized again a century later and sold off by the French revolutionary government. The territory and buildings were finally reacquired by the Catholic bishop of Strasbourg in 1883, when monastic life was reestablished.

SERGIY: Yes. Monastic life in France has never been particularly peaceful or easy. So now we are walking around the outside of the monastery, with the outer walls on one side of the path and this amazing view on the other. If you notice, on the monastery walls facing the walkway at the edge of the cliff, they have affixed beautiful ceramic representations of the “stations of the Cross,” which local people use as a devotion. Set prayers at each station commemorate the Lord’s trial, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Here is the outside wall of the chapel where the relics of St. Odile are enshrined, and if you look straight up, you will see the large statue of her at the pinnacle of the monastery facing out over the Rhine gorge and blessing the Alsatian land. In the nineteenth century, Pope Pius X proclaimed her the patroness of Alsace.

RTE: So, here we are on a weekday in April, with a beautiful fog covering the mountaintop. Where the fog has lifted, we have an amazing view over forested hills, green valleys, ruined castles, and vineyards. What else can you tell us about this hilltop?

SERGIY: We are perched above the Rhine Gorge, an area so famous for its wonderful white wines that people travel from village to village to taste them. Many centuries ago, the Rhine River flooded regularly, covering the plains with a rich sediment, and the region has since been famous for its cabbages and wine grapes.

The Rhine Gorge is a location where two tectonic plates meet and overlap, and as the earth and the plates shifted over tens of thousands of years, this mountain range also split, forming the corridor that the Rhine River flows through. The plates are still moving (about two centimeters a decade) and between them is the river. If there were no exits from the corridor, this whole plain would have been a lake, fed by spring runoff from the mountains.

This region has a unique climate as the mountains protect it from outside winds and, even though we are so close to Germany, there is enough sun to grow grapes. It also has its own unique culture, called the Rhine Culture because, although the east bank of the Rhine belongs to Germany and the west to France, culturally they are very close. The entire gorge is now a UNESCO site.

RTE: How good that it’s protected. Here we’ve come to the end of the cliffside path and are facing an area that looks like an archeological site.

SERGIY: This is the old medieval monastery cemetery. The ground here is extremely rocky and very difficult to dig, so for centuries the monastery followed the same custom that they still have today in many parts of Greece and the Middle East. They would dig out a few graves where they would bury newly-reposed nuns under a large stone plinth. After a certain period, the bones were taken out, washed, and then put into the charnel house, which reverently stored the bones of all of the sisters who died here over the centuries. Then the graves would be reused. In old pictures we see that the cemetery went further on, but some of it has crumbled away as the cliff top is quite unstable. They have installed sensors now to detect any shifting of the earth.

RTE: Are they worried about the monastery as well?

SERGIY: Not that I know of. I’ve only heard them express concern about this cemetery. Next to this cemetery are two chapels. Facing them from the courtyard, the one on the right is called the Chapel of Tears, which is the spot where St. Odile prayed fasting for four days and nights to save her father from hell. The chapel was named for the intensity of her prayer. The stone on which she knelt is still here, embedded in the chapel floor. There are old and new mosaics here; the old ones are similar to those of Ravenna... flowers, stars, birds, and cherubim. The new are from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Here is a mosaic of Pope Leo IX, the last Roman pope of the undivided church, who died just before the schism. He was born here in Alsace and he visited this area many times after he became pope. He was a generous patron to the region, and later a saint of the Roman Catholic Church. Here are mosaics of other local saints: Maternus, Amandus, Arbogast and Florian, all early enlighteners of Alsace who brought Christianity to this region. On

the right are the abbesses of the monastery after St. Odile, several of whom were saints as well. And finally, here is Christ portrayed with the monastery nuns, who hold symbols of the virtues.

The second chapel is the Chapel of the Angels with newer mosaics of a modern style. The idea was to portray the appearances of angels and archangels as described in the Old and New Testaments. It is dedicated to the angels because St. Odile's father built a very early church here in honor of St. Michael the Archangel, over a pagan site.

RTE: We are now facing the other end of the courtyard which, with the lingering fog, has an otherworldly atmosphere. Do we know why there are three very old linden trees lining the center?

SERGIY: One account says that a man brought three small linden trees to the monastery and asked the sisters to plant them here in the courtyard. They didn't want to, but St. Odile said, "Yes, we will keep them in honor of the Holy Trinity," and she planted them herself. The trees died after several hundred years, but the sisters always kept up the tradition, and so we have these three trees. Within one of the original trees was a space large enough to pray in, and here we have the same hollow in this tree – we can even stand up inside. Also, the monastery courtyard contains dressed stones from St. Odile's second monastery at the bottom of the hill.

It is very interesting to me that saints who didn't know of each other, and lived in distant places and at different times were doing similar things, such as St. Odile and St. Seraphim both kneeling on rocks to pray. Here we have her praying inside the tree, as did St. David of Thessalonica, and later, the Russian St. Tikhon of Kaluga.

The Reliquary Chapel and Monastery Church

We are going into the monastery itself now, down a wide corridor that leads to the relic chapel and, at the end of the hall, the main church. In this hallway you see ceramic portrayals of Christ and the saints, as well as intricate wooden mosaics of saints and scenes which have been a specialty of this region for centuries. The stations of the cross in the main church are also done in this very complex genre.

Now, here in this small chapel off of the corridor are the relics of St. Odile in her original stone sarcophagus. On the walls, you can see painted depic-

tions of her life. We are very fortunate to have an icon of St. Odile and a portion of her relics in our church in Strasbourg.

Further on, at the end of the hall, is the site of the church erected by St. Odile to St. John the Baptist whom she greatly venerated, and who appeared to show her the spot on which to build the church. This is one of the oldest parts of the monastery, from the eleventh century, but the stones lining the wall may well be from Odile's original monastery. Near the back wall is the sarcophagus in which her father Alderich was buried.

The saint also built a larger church dedicated to the Holy Cross and another to the Mother of God. Today, in keeping with this tradition, the monastery church is dedicated to the Mother of God and is officially a minor basilica; an honorific usually given to Roman Catholic churches because of their importance as pilgrimage places.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: The twelfth century was the golden age for the monastery. The abbess, Herrard of Landsburg, was a very cultivated woman who encouraged both prayer and education. She compiled the *Hortus deliciarum* (*The Garden of Delights*), a kind of encyclopedia for her nuns to study the church fathers, as well as spiritual, historical and philosophical ideas. It also included long selections on the natural world. The entire work was about 45,000 lines and included 322 painted miniatures. She wrote "Like a bee, I've gathered this honey for you from different flowers, and in this way, you can follow the direct path to salvation."

We visit very often, and I can confirm that every time we come here, I feel lightness and spiritual joy.

Photo page 54: Church of St. Trophime, Eschau, where the relics of St. Sophia are enshrined. Photo courtesy of the Base Mérimée of the French Ministry of Culture.

Photo page 55: Relief Carving of St. Sophia and her daughters. Church of St. Trophime, Eschau. Photo courtesy of the Base Mérimée of the French Ministry of Culture.



II. Saint Sophia and Her Daughters: Faith, Hope and Charity

Rome, Lombardy, and Eschau, France.

RTE: I know that your parish is also very devoted to St. Sophia, who died in Rome after witnessing the martyrdom of her young daughters Nadezhda, Vera, and Lyubov (Faith, Hope, and Charity). What can you tell us about their veneration?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Yes, they were martyrs of early Rome, and in the eighth-century a portion of their relics was translated to the abbey church dedicated now to Saint Trophim of Arles in the village of Eschau, south of Strasbourg. Dedicated to the Mother of God, this convent was built by Bishop Remigius of Strasbourg on a forested area of his family property, and when the bishop accompanied Charlemagne to Rome for talks with Pope Adrian I, the pope gave Remigius relics of St. Sophia. A document from Bishop Remigius still exists confirming his translation of the relics to Eschau on May 10, 777.

He built a new church for the relics, which attracted novices and pilgrims, and the monastery flourished for a century and a half until it was razed by Hungarian invaders in 926. The bishop of Strasbourg at that time had a dream in which the Mother of God told him that it was God's will that he restore the monastery. Although this second monastery was eventually pillaged and burnt, the bishop's small tenth-century Romanesque church has survived the centuries. Monastery chronicles also tell us that an elaborately-painted stone reliquary was commissioned to enshrine the relics.

Five hundred years later, the monastery was again pillaged, this time by local peasants, who we know were agitated by Reformation propaganda as they had lost any respect for sacred objects. Manuscripts describing the disaster tell of the nuns' astonishment at seeing the very peasants who had attended church there, stealing everything of value and destroying the monastery. It was a tragedy, of course, and during the devastation, the relics of St. Sophia and her daughters disappeared and were never recovered. There is no oral or written tradition that they were destroyed or burnt, but if they were hidden, we do not know where or by whom.

The nuns were able to save other holy objects from desecration, and some years after the tragedy, the bishop of Strasbourg wrote repeatedly to the

abbess proposing to restore the monastery, but she always replied, "No, it's completely ruined, and we don't know if this will happen again." (In this she was right, as the Reformation began soon after.) So, the nuns stayed in Strasbourg and what was left of the monastery functioned as a parish church.

During the French Revolution, even the Church of St. Trophim was forcibly closed and turned into a tavern. In 1822, it was returned to the Church but in very bad condition. Later, it was declared an historical monument, restored by believers, and re-consecrated. The tenth-century church and the original stone reliquary survived this repeated devastation, but without the relics, while St. Sophia and her daughters continued to be widely venerated as patrons of Alsace.

In 1938, an Alsatian priest serving in Rome was given small portions of the relics of St. Sophia and her daughters, which were again enshrined in the church in Eschau. So, these bits of relics are what we venerate in Eschau today. After World War II, the church was restored to its original Romanesque style.

Today, the parish continues to function, but without a permanent rector. In France generally, the Catholic church does not have enough priests, so four or five churches are grouped into a single parish and one priest serves them all. Because the priest for Eschau doesn't live here, he can only serve occasionally. As recently as the twentieth century, there were well-attended processions to celebrate the feast-day of St. Sophia and her daughters and for other holidays, but this ceased decades ago, and they have only recently reawakened to the importance of the relics with busloads of Orthodox coming to venerate. Until now, the parish doesn't celebrate the feast of St. Sophia and the church feels a little abandoned. It's a pity.

The Russian Orthodox priest in Strasbourg before me commissioned an icon to be painted of St. Sofia and her daughters, and we consider them our parish's patrons. As a parish, we tried to visit Eschau to serve molebens before the relics, and sometimes celebrated liturgies there, depending on relations with succeeding rectors. One of them was particularly friendly to us and we were allowed to serve whenever we liked; I was given the keys to the church, and it was all very simple. Later rectors, however, were suspicious

Photo page 58: Interior, Monastery of San Salvatore, Brescia, Italy. Courtesy of Stephen Bolognini.

Photo page 59: Church of Sts. Peter and Paul, Virle, Italy where the relics of St. Sophia and her daughters were taken. Courtesy of Wolfgang Moroder.



that we were perhaps trying to take over the church, although I don't know how they thought we would have accomplished this. It wasn't true, of course, but these later relations were difficult. Now we only go as private individuals to pray and venerate the relics.

The *Life*, Relics, and Veneration

The *Life* of St. Sophia and her daughters in Russian is a seventeenth-century version by St. Dimitry of Rostov from Latin sources that ends with their martyrdom and burial in a Roman cemetery. The earliest mention of their veneration in Greek or Latin is from the seventh and eighth centuries, but nothing closer to the period of their martyrdom survives. Some modern critics claim that because of this late date and certain legendary elements in their lives, they were invented. I was discouraged but felt it couldn't be true, especially because these critics had only worked from the written lives of Greek and Latin sources, ignoring Syriac and Ethiopian sources and archeological findings. Fortunately, this theory has been laid to rest. In the ruins of a fourth-century Christian church near Algiers, archeologists found an inscribed plaque in the altar saying that it was dedicated to St. Sophia and her daughters. If they were venerated in fourth-century North Africa, they were also venerated from the time of their deaths in Rome and around the Mediterranean.

It was only in the late nineteenth century that more detailed saints' lives began appearing in Russia and, in this case, mentioned the relic of St. Sophia given to the bishop of Strasbourg. There are also local historical documents and chronicles in Strasbourg that mention and one Eschau historian dedicated his life to writing about St. Sophia and her daughters. His research on their lives and the translation of their relics is quite meticulous. For instance, he demonstrates that because these records spoke only of the bodies of the martyrs, that the skulls were not part of the original gift to Bishop Remigius. And, as he points out, the stone reliquary was too small to be used for anything but as a shrine for pieces of bone.

Rome, Brescia, and Virle

ARCHIM. PHILIP: As we know now, the bodies of St. Sophia and her daughters were originally buried in the Roman catacombs near the relics of the

early martyr St. Pangratius (now known as the Catacomb of San Pancrazio on the Via Aurelia). Starting in the eighth century, the catacombs were repeatedly robbed by invaders, and succeeding popes ordered the bodies of the saints and martyrs removed into the city for protection. In 761, Pope Paul I finished building the Church of San Silvestro in Capite, part of a new monastery intended to receive the catacomb relics. Sergiy and I visited this church and found ancient marble plaques inscribed with the names and feast-days of the saints who are buried there, including St. Sophia and her daughters. In 777, as I mentioned, Pope Adrian I gave portions of their relics to the bishop of Strasbourg.

Earlier, portions of their relics had also been offered to the monastery of San Salvatore (the Holy Saviour), built by the Lombard King Desiderius and his wife Ansa in Brescia. Remains of St. Sophia and her daughters, including parts of their skulls, were translated from Rome and enshrined in the monastery church.

We found almost nothing in English or French sources, but there is much more information in Italian. San Salvatore is now a museum under UNESCO, but the eighth-century church has frescoes from the time of its founding, including depictions of the lives of St. Sophia and her daughters. This is hardly remembered outside of Italy, and even the Bollandists don't mention it.¹ Art historians from Italy and other parts of the world now agree that these frescoes were painted because the relics of the saint and her daughters were already there. Thus, not only written sources attest to this, but archeological findings as well.

The relics sent from Rome were buried under the San Salvatore altar, but when Napoleon occupied northern Italy, he closed many monasteries and churches, secularizing and selling off their properties. The confiscated relics went to local bishops, who distributed them to parishes and monasteries. The skulls and other relics of St. Sophia and her daughters were given to the parish of Sts. Peter and Paul in Virle near the town of Brescia, the capital of Lombardy.

¹ Ed. Note: The Bollandists or Bollandist Society is an association of Roman Catholic scholars, philologists, and historians (originally all Jesuits, but now including non-Jesuits) who from the early seventeenth century have studied the lives and veneration of both Eastern and Western Christian Saints. Named after Jean Bolland, an early editor, their most noted publication is the *Acta Sanctorum* (*The Lives of the Saints*). Within a few decades of their first publications, St. Dimitry of Rostov used their material in Russia for his own collection of saints' lives.

These saints, their martyrdom and the relics are so important to our region and our parish that Sergiy and I went to Italy where, from the steps of the Church of St. Silvester in Rome, we followed the route taken by those who carried the relics to Brescia and Virle, as well as the journey from Rome to Eschau, France.

Today, the parish church of Sts. Peter and Paul in Virle is quite remote and difficult to get to. The reliquary is still there and uniquely round in shape as if it contains skulls. The elderly Catholic priest was extremely kind, a very good and helpful man.

Parish Pilgrimage and a Priceless Gift

When we returned to Strasbourg, we organized a parish pilgrimage to these places related to the life and relics of St. Sophia and her daughters. In Rome, with the permission of the Catholic authorities, we celebrated liturgy in the Catacombs of St. Pangratius, where they showed us the place where St. Sophia and her daughters may have been buried – an ancient chapel with four graves, one large and three smaller. On this visit, we also served liturgy in the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul in Virle.

Before we left, I asked the Russian Orthodox bishop of Italy to help us obtain relics of St. Sophia and her daughters from Virle. In Brescia, we have a Russian parish dedicated to the Mother of God, Joy of the Afflicted and served by Fr. Vladimir Porubin. The bishop asked Fr. Vladimir to assist us and when we came, he accompanied us everywhere. After liturgy, he presented us with relics of St. Sophia and their daughters, which he had received from the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Brescia. He told us that within the Virle reliquary are skulls, bones, and even bits of hair and that they had given him some rather large pieces. He, in turn, gave portions of these relics to us, along with a certification from the Roman Catholic archbishop that these are authentic. So, we have four pieces of the relics, some bones and some hair. Because the original relics were all mixed together, we don't know precisely which relics belong to which woman.

We brought the relics back here to Strasbourg where they are enshrined in our new church, and now we can serve in front of them as much as we want. Saint Sophia and her daughters have helped us very much, and the foundation stone for our church was laid on their feast day, September 30. When

we had difficulties in construction, we would serve a moleben to them and help would come.

Sergiy and I are now preparing a book on the relics of Saint Sophia and her daughters in which we will provide much interesting information that is still unknown to Orthodox Christians.

SERGIY: These relics are also very important to Russians, because almost every family has a Sophia, Vera, Nadezhda, or Lyubov. Now, Women's Day in Russia is the eighth of March, but before the Russian Revolution, it was on this family's feast day, September 17/30, because every single Russian family had one or more women with these names.

Many women in Orthodox countries who are named after these saints would like to come to venerate their relics. Before, they not only had to come to France and would have had to find transport to the village of Eschau, whereas now the relics are here in the center of the city. In our side chapel we have an icon and reliquary with a portion of the relics, so that people can come and pray any time the church is open.

III. Richarde of Andlau: Empress and Saint

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Saint Richarde (Richardis) was born near Alsace in 840, the daughter of a local count, and was married to Charles the III, a great-grandson of Charlemagne. In 881, Charles was crowned the Holy Roman Emperor by Pope John the VIII, and Richarde was crowned empress. When her husband fell prey to fits of madness and was incapable of ruling, the empress worked with Charles' episcopal archchancellor to govern the empire. She exchanged letters with the pope and other leaders, and many of these have been saved.

While she was still empress, Richarde founded a women's monastery at Andlau. Tradition says that after praying before the relics of St. Odile, she received a heavenly sign that she should establish the monastery at a place where she would see a bear digging in the ground. Later, while passing through her home region, she did indeed see a bear digging and understood that Andlau was that site.

A very pious woman, Richarde took an active role in politics until court nobles, who wanted to unseat her and the archchancellor, found a pretext to accuse her to Charles, claiming that they had betrayed him by commit-



ting adultery. Charles believed the accusation and, before an assembly of the nobility of the empire, accused his wife of unfaithfulness, revealing that their own marriage was unconsummated. Richarde could have proven her virginity, of course, but out of modesty preferred to leave it to the judgement of God and requested a trial by fire. She went through the fire untouched, and her innocence was acknowledged.

After her acquittal, she petitioned Charles to allow her to step down and return to her parents, which he granted, but before going home, she made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, returning through Constantinople in 890. This was the same year that the Byzantine Emperor Leo VI had the newly-discovered relics of St. Lazarus brought to Constantinople to great acclaim. At that time “relic diplomacy” was very developed between Christian rulers, so it was natural for the Byzantine Empire to also present portions of precious relics to Christian rulers in influential positions. According to local tradition, the emperor received Richarde with honor and offered her the skull of St. Lazarus. She brought the relic to Andlau where she lived in retirement in the monastery until her death in 895.

When Pope Leo IX, the last pope of the undivided church, visited in 1050, he proclaimed Richarde a saint. The monastery was closed during the Reformation and is now a parish, but the relics are still enshrined here. The crypt of the parish church that stands today is the remains of the original church founded by St. Richarde and dedicated to the Mother of God. Although the region has a long and tumultuous history, St. Richarde’s relics are still present in her raised sepulcher. The skull of St. Lazarus is enshrined in a showcase with the inscription “Saint Lazar”. It would be interesting to see research done on the authenticity of this relic.

Saint Richarde is prayed to by those who are falsely accused. Her feast day is September 18. ✝

Opposite: Abbey of Andlau, built by St. Richarde. Photo courtesy Base Mérimée of the French Ministry of Culture.