

The Millennium Jubilee of the Crypt of Chartres Cathedral



Dear Pilgrims,

In 2025, we celebrate many significant anniversaries:

- The 100th anniversary of *Quas Primas*, the encyclical by Pius XI on Christ the King,
- The 350th anniversary of the apparitions of the Sacred Heart in Paray-le-Monial,
- The Jubilee of the Universal Church, with the Holy Year proclaimed by Pope Francis on the occasion of 2025 years since the Incarnation.

There is yet another anniversary, no less significant: the 1000th anniversary of the crypt of Chartres Cathedral, built in 1024 by Bishop Saint Fulbert. On this occasion, Bishop Christory has decreed a year of thanksgiving, from September 8, 2024, to August 15, 2025, and grants pilgrims to Chartres a plenary indulgence under certain conditions. As we near the conclusion of our pilgrimage, let us prepare ourselves spiritually by rediscovering the history and symbolism of this magnificent cathedral.

The History of Chartres Cathedral

The history of Chartres Cathedral dates back to the very beginnings of Christianity. In the crypt lies the "Well of the Strong Saints," named after the martyrs of the 1st and 2nd centuries who, according to tradition, were thrown into this 30-meter-deep cavity. A first structure, known as the "Cathedral of Aventin," was built in the 4th or 5th century before being burned down by the Visigoths in 743. A second cathedral was also destroyed, this time by the Vikings, on June 12, 858.

A pivotal event then occurred: in 876, Charles the Bald, King of France and Emperor of the West, gifted the Bishop of Chartres a precious relic inherited from his grandfather Charlemagne: the veil of the Virgin Mary. According to tradition, this veil, worn by the Blessed Virgin during the Annunciation and the Nativity, was preserved in Constantinople before being gifted by the Empress of the East. The veil is a piece of plain cream silk measuring 5.35 meters by 0.46 meters and dates back to the 1st century.

(It would be great to include an image of the Virgin's veil and, perhaps, the crypt!)

Around this veil, a fourth cathedral was constructed, but it was struck by lightning and burned down in 1020. It was then that Bishop Fulbert of Chartres decided to build a new structure, the remains of which include the crypt, completed in 1024. This crypt features an expansive ambulatory over 200 meters long, allowing large groups of pilgrims to enter and walk around a lower church. The rest of the cathedral, as we know it today, was built following a devastating fire in 1194.

The Virgin Mary's veil was spared by the fire but only partially survived the revolutionary fury of 1793. It was cut into pieces, and only two large fragments have reached us today. These are displayed in an apse chapel to the left of the cathedral's choir in a reliquary.

The Cult of Our Lady of Chartres

The devotion to Our Lady at Chartres quickly gained immense significance. The many miracles attributed to her fostered the vibrant faith of the Middle Ages. Mary healed illnesses, protected the city, and watched over pregnant women. It became customary to consecrate unborn children to Our Lady of Chartres. In the past, Christian mothers (including queens of France) would touch the Virgin Mary's garment, praying for a safe childbirth.

Humble individuals, the sick or sinners, merchants and nobles, kings of France and England—including Saint Louis, who came to Chartres five times on pilgrimage, and Henry IV, who was crowned there—princes, prelates, and faithful of all statuses, all came to pray before Our Lady, who could heal them but, above all, guide them on their earthly pilgrimage toward heaven, to which the bold spires of the cathedral point.

After a period of decline and the dark times of the Revolution, it was a poet, Charles Péguy, who reignited Marian devotion in Chartres. His walk to the cathedral to entrust his ill son and his personal spiritual struggles to Our Lady became a powerful example of faith and conversion, inspiring thousands of young people, particularly in student pilgrimages.

In 1983, the *Pilgrimage of Christendom* was founded, the very one you are undertaking today, first under the auspices of the Centre Charlier and now under *Notre-Dame de Chrétienté*.

A Marian Cathedral: The Three "Our Ladies" of Chartres

The Virgin Mary appears 181 times in the representations throughout the cathedral. Among these, three hold special significance.

(Including images of the three "Our Ladies" would be ideal.)

As early as the 1st century BC, the site is said to have housed a druidic cave with a statue of a *Virgo paritura*, meaning a "Virgin about to give birth"—a prophetic announcement of the virginal motherhood of Mary. In the 11th century, this tradition was Christianized, giving rise to **Notre-Dame-de-Sous-Terre**, the Virgin who has given birth, holding Christ in her arms. Burned in 1793, the current statue is a replica from 1976. The Virgin, seated on a throne, holds her Son on her lap, who blesses the world. This statue is venerated in the crypt of the cathedral, hence the name "Sous-Terre" (underground). In the darkness of our earthly pilgrimage, Mary shines as a luminous star in the night, guiding us.

Notre-Dame du Pilier, originally placed on a pillar before the rood screen that once closed off the choir, is now venerated in the north ambulatory, near the Virgin's veil. She holds a pear in her hand, symbolizing her status as the new Eve, participating in the redemption of humanity. It is to this statue that pilgrims bring thousands of small notes with their prayer intentions, confidently entrusting them into Mary's hands at the conclusion of their pilgrimage.

Finally, **Notre-Dame de la Belle-Verrière** is a stained glass window in the Royal Portal, one of the oldest in the world, likely from the 12th century, which survived the fire of 1194. Mary is depicted as the Virgin Mother, dressed in radiant garments and a luminous blue halo, making this window exceptionally famous.

Dear Pilgrims, for centuries, Christians have understood that to experience the consoling beauty of Our Lady of Chartres, one must make an effort, undertake penance, and embark on a pilgrimage. To seek beauty in life is to accept the cross, the struggle, the falls, and the renewal. Our Lady helps us understand that to keep our souls pure and beautiful like hers, we must fight, for all beauty requires effort, and all holiness demands staying at the foot of the Cross, as Mary did. The grace of Chartres inspires us to embrace the effort of setting out again with a free soul, a pilgrim journeying toward eternity, accompanied by Our Lady.

The Plenary Indulgence

With the agreement of the Apostolic See, Bishop Philippe Christory of Chartres grants a plenary indulgence to those who undertake a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Chartres during the jubilee year and pass through the holy door. A plenary indulgence is the full remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins that have already been forgiven. The Church dispenses and applies to the faithful the treasury of reparations and satisfactions of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints.

Requirements for the plenary indulgence:

- Be baptized,
- Have the genuine intention of obtaining the indulgence,
- Perform the prescribed act (in this case: undertake a pilgrimage to Chartres and pass through the holy door),
- Be in a state of grace, having gone to confession within 8 days before or after,
- Be detached from all sin, even venial sin,

- Receive Holy Communion on the same day, the day before, or within the following 8 days,
- Pray for the intentions of the Holy Father (reciting the *Our Father*, *Hail Mary*, and *Glory Be*).

Jubilee Prayer to Our Lady of Chartres

Prayer for the Jubilee by Bishop Philippe Christory, Bishop of Chartres

Our Lady of Chartres, O my most gentle Mother,
 I come to you as a child, with full confidence.
 With deep reverence, I bow before you.
 Shelter me under your veil of tenderness.
 Pour out your love on all who pray to you.
 Carry our intentions to Jesus, your Son.
 Sovereign and tender Mother, obtain for us the graces
 (Name the graces) that we ask of you.
 Console those who weep, touch the hearts of sinners,
 Protect families, safeguard children,
 Comfort the sick, visit the lonely,
 Support the Church and encourage Christians,
 Grant us holy priests and strengthen them.
 Bring peace to our world and to every heart.

From your crypt, Our Lady of Sous-Terre,
 Be the mediatrix of all graces!
 From your sacred throne, Our Lady of the Pillar,
 Be the dispenser of heavenly treasures!
 O Immaculate Virgin, Mother of God and Mother of men,
 Be my mother for life in this world and for eternity.
 I give myself to you, welcome me, so that,
 Born through you, I may forever resemble Jesus.

Amen.