



Why is Chartres a place of pilgrimage?

The veil of the Virgin

In 876, Charles the Bald, King of France and Emperor of the West, gave Chartres a remarkable relic that he had 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 kept in Constantinople, before being given by the Empress of the East... It is a piece of plain cream silk measuring 5.35 m by 0.46 m, dated to the first century.

Although it was spared the fire of 1194 that ravaged the cathedral and was the indirect origin of the magnificent reconstruction that we can imagine today – by remaining protected by monks for three days in the crypt – it only partially escaped the revolutionary fury of 1793. Cut, only two pieces have come down to us, visible today in the large reliquary, in the apsidal chapel on the left, or the small reliquary, in the crypt.

The influence of a Marian shrine

Even though it had already existed for several centuries, the cult of Notre-Dame in Chartres very quickly took on a gigantic scale: the miracles that multiplied maintained the living faith of the Middle Ages. Mary heals diseases, protects the city, and... watches over pregnant women. In the twelfth century, the devotion of Saint Bernard and many saints to the Virgin transformed the West: churches and cathedrals were erected everywhere in her honour.

The veil, which has become in popular memory "the shirt of the Virgin", preserved on the altar of the cathedral, attracts the crowds, who procession as close as possible, in the great ambulatory, in a joyful tumult from which the canons of this country will try to protect themselves more and more by locking themselves in the choir... This influx of pilgrims was the source of the donations that made it possible to build this cathedral-reliquary, where no prince or cleric could ever claim to be buried, in respect of the mystery of the Assumption of Mary.

And yet, humble anonymous, sick or sinners, bourgeois and lords, kings of France and England – including Saint Louis, who came to Chartres five times on pilgrimage, and Henry IV who was crowned there – princes and prelates, faithful of all conditions, all come to pray to her who can heal them, but above all help them to progress in the pilgrimage of their earthly life to heaven towards which daring arrows soar.

After a decline, then the dark hours of the Revolution, it was one day a poet, Charles Péguy, who revived the Marian impulse. His journey to Chartres to entrust his sick son to Our Lady and his personal despair are an example of faith and conversion that touches and draws thousands of young people to follow him, especially in the pilgrimages of students. In 1983, the pilgrimage of Christianity that you are making today was founded, under the aegis of the Charlier Centre, then of Notre-Dame de Chrétienté.

The "three Notre-Dames" of the cathedral

If the veneration of Our Lady's veil remains the ultimate place of the pilgrim's encounter with his tender Mother in heaven, three images of the Virgin Mary remain highly venerated by pilgrims of all ages:

- ▶ **Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre** has been venerated in the crypt since probably the twelfth century, although some attribute a more ancient origin to it. Burned in 1793, the current statue is a copy of 1976; the Virgin, seated on a throne, holds her son seated on her knees, who gives the blessing to the world.





- **Our Lady of the Pillar**, once erected on a pillar in front of the rood screen that closed the choir, is now prayed to in the north ambulatory, not far from the veil of the Virgin. Often known by mistake as the Black Madonna, she holds in her hand a pear evoking her status as the new Eve, who contributes to the redemption of humanity.

- **Notre-Dame de la Belle-Verrière** is one of the oldest stained glass windows in the world, probably from the twelfth century, having escaped the fire of 1194, venerated specifically since its installation, by a candle lit in front of it permanently. Mary is represented as the virgin mother, with luminous blue garments...

