

A FAVOURITE CATHEDRAL, BOURGES

by Joan Gill

A personal memoir and an edited translation of a description of the Cathedral by the Archbishop of the diocese from the guidebook of 1959—a choice example of Gallic pride and hyperbole rarely matched in English guidebooks

More than thirty years ago some very dear French friends of mine went to live in Mehun-sur-Yevre, a little village (un coin perdu) tucked away in the depths of Le Berry, a region which had lain forgotten by the rest of the world for many years, but which had been of importance in the time of Joan of Arc—indeed she had put up at the village inn on her way to Bourges, 17 kilometres away. These good friends assured me that I, never a lover of French cathedrals, always finding them none-too-well cared for and overcrowded with chattering and irreverent tourists, would find Bourges altogether different. Somewhat sceptical about this, I was not reassured by the exterior which, viewed from the flat fields on our way, looked to me lumpish and heavy after the grace and soaring spire of Salisbury.

But inside, how right they were. There I found something altogether missing from modern life—the blessing of silence. No-one else was in that building besides us, there was no sound, only the forest of slender arches mutely pointing the way up to God and an overwhelming feeling of the presence of God and the prayers of the saints. At that moment the sun came out, and the whole church was flooded in blue light, that glorious dark blue of mediaeval glass. These windows have the most magnificent stained glass I have ever seen, more delicate than Chartres and even than the Sainte Chapelle in Paris. They do not, as the windows in the new Coventry cathedral, merely reflect glorious surges of colour, but they tell in the mediaeval way the stories of the Bible—in exceptional detail.

There are very few monuments to the dead in this cathedral: apart from Jacques Coeur and his family and the Dukes of Le Berry, there do not seem to have been many local notables, and there is a great absence of memorial tablets which so often break up the line of a building, and clutter its walls with inharmonious designs, as at Rocamadour. But then Bourges was never a place of pilgrimage. Just one memorial remains in my mind—the tomb of Duc Jean de Berry in the crypt: an odd sort of crypt, for it is above ground and lighter than the main church, for all round are plain glass windows, and so large it dwarfs the solitary tomb, lost amidst the sturdy piers with their clustered colonnettes bearing the weight of the cathedral above. I came back again and again to the tomb with its figure of the Duc: a kindly face and smiling, surely a portrait of a good man. Then we came out into the sun again and the sleepy life of a provincial town. It is some years now since I have been back to Bourges: I wonder if it has changed.

THE ARCHBISHOP OF BOURGES' INTRODUCTION

Le Berry, right in the centre of France, is a region the essence of which is reticence. We do not get to know it simply by looking at it. We must love it first if we would find out its ways, and spend a long time examining it if we are little by little, to discover its secret riches. Its landscapes,—neither grandiose nor vivid in colour—do not command our attention; they are bathed in a soft, changing light, and they slowly beguile us with the delicacy of their colours and the cool harmony of their lines. The inhabitants of this region are by nature reserved; a kind of modesty prevents them from showing their feelings too easily even, and above all, when these are both lively and profound.

This region, expressed only in nuances, takes a long time to discover. This, perhaps, is one of the reasons for the kind of failure to appreciate Bourges cathedral, a failure from which it has long suffered, eclipsed, it would seem, by its sister cathedrals of Paris, Amiens, Chartres and Rheims. Yet this wonderful flower of the arts, which grew in our soil in the warm religious air of the Middle Ages, is a triumphant success. It expresses in a wonderful way the soul of this privileged epoch when the sturdy faith of the whole people raised mountains of stones as an offering to God, a sacrifice of beauty. The traveller who comes to Bourges by road sees the cathedral from afar off, dominating the surrounding countryside and lost as it were in haughty solitude. As he draws near, he discovers the town, whose houses, roofs covered with old tiles, crowded together, rise towards the cathedral as if to form an enormous pedestal. The narrow tortuous road of the ancient city into which he is entering, hide the cathedral from his eyes for a time. But it will soon be suddenly revealed to him again in all its majesty. His surprise will be all the greater, his emotion the deeper, since the distinguished monument has not altogether lost the whole of its mediaeval setting. What a joy, as we go uphill, to discover beyond a tithe barn — extremely well preserved — , the long flight of steps crowned with a beautiful porch , under which shelters one of the wonderful romanesque portals of the earlier church! How delightful to see the North tower emerging little by little, soon to be seen in all its slender beauty! Take another road, and the immense facade will gradually be revealed and then stand out before you in all its wide expanse. And if you arrive from yet another direction, you will suddenly come out into this little almost rustic village, with its unadorned well, its curious gables and its quaint old houses seeming to clasp in tender embrace this cathedral, which for centuries has cast its shadow over them and seems to watch over them like an ever-loving grandfather.

And now, at the top of the steps of the very wide parvis, comes the impressive revelation of the facade which, this time, is seen from the front. The 2 towers, rising up against the light, support

it solidly with their bulk and, in the shadow of the lofty buttresses, the ten twin doors of the five great portals open wide. In the centre, in the glory of its fine Gothic arches and its dazzling rose window, the fenestration of "*le grand housteau*" soars with extraordinary lightness up to the pinnacle. In the hollows of the curving arches peopled with countless figures, the tympana are remarkably sculpted: one of the principal portal reveals for us the famous page on which the scene of the Last Judgment is inscribed.

Alas! the niches are empty. They no longer shelter under their richly ornamented canopies the images of the saints for which they were destined. A few noble fragments, simple and vigorous in line, allow us to imagine what these statues should have been; there is no doubt at all—pure works of art. The blind fury of the wars of religion have wrought their destruction here. They have destroyed in one moment, in an insane gesture, what was to have excited the admiration of centuries to come.

However, round these pedestals which no longer support anything, the artists have patiently sculpted the stone. Each spandrel, enclosed in delicate floral ornament, contains a little scene from the Old or New Testament, treated with incomparable charm.

And now let us push open the heavy leaves of the central door. Let us go into the edifice. And then, it takes our breath away! The superhuman grandeur of this nave, where countless pillars, supremely elegant, spring up from the ground to a height of 17 metres to support the impossibly delicate Gothic arches, strikes us dumb with amazement. Between the principal nave with its powerful lyricism and the wide side-aisles, mysterious and withdrawn, the main aisle soars to dizzy heights, emphasising with its narrowness the extraordinary dimensions of the edifice.

This wonderful nave has clear affinities with that of the Paris cathedral. As was intended by Archbishop Henri de Sully, brother of Eudes de Sully who, at the same time was completing part of the great work of Notre Dame, it is like the latter, completely straight without any transept to break the line of its walls. And in the interior itself, the transept has disappeared, and there is nothing left to break the continuous alignment of the columns. Here, as at Paris, the total area is exactly 5,900 sq. m., but the width has been slightly increased at the expense of the length. Here, the vaults of the main aisles are at the same height as the vaults of the galleries in Paris, but the mighty external flying buttresses which support the whole have enabled the builder to do away with galleries and to fill everywhere with light. The vault which covers the central nave in Bourges, 2.15 metres higher than that of Notre Dame, is a sexpartite vault. This arrangement, which gives it rather the appearance of

a sail, firmly set and billowing in the wind, makes it seem even more lofty. The overriding impression is one of vase size, of an enormous empty space to which the forest of columns and the slender lines of the Gothic arches impart a solemn rhythm. Everywhere—in the chapels, in the aisles, in the nave, the light is diffused, increasing the mystery of the chancel where the most beautiful stained glass in the world scintillates in splendour.

These wonderful stained glass windows, rivalling those at Chartres and probably from the same workshops, glow with marvellously harmonised hues. From a distance they resemble Persian carpets woven with precious stones. The changing rays of the sun come to play and delight in these splendid jewels with their thousand shimmering reflections. If you slowly come towards these countless, indistinct, gleaming fires, you can gradually distinguish a fairyland of varied pictures illustrating and commenting on the Bible, the Life of the Saints and the Golden Legend. In the topmost lancet windows you will see the apostles standing round Christ and his divine Mother: the first having prepared the way for the Saviour, the second having continued His work by founding the Church, His Mystical Body, with Him, in their martyrs' blood. Beneath this you will see Our Lord and the Virgin Mary seated on their thrones, accompanied this time by St. Ursin, the first apostle of Le Berry, St. Stephen, patron saint of the cathedral, and the holy archbishops who ruled the Church of Bourges and edified it with their virtues. Lastly, in the periphery of the chancel and in its graceful chapels, you will find illustrated the teachings of Scripture and the Gospel which the Church proclaims, and the scenes of the lives of the saints which, in the light of its preaching, have risen to the realms of glory. And so we are reminded of Christ and His Mother and the Church, in its preparation, its founding, its life and its work, by the magnificent stained glass of this cathedral church, mother of all the churches of Le Berry. In this rippling light—amethyst, sapphire, ruby, emerald and topaz—there appears before us the whole history of this Kingdom of God whose Master has told us that it is like a glittering jewel.

All you need to do now, in order to admire more adequately the lightness and loftiness of this temple raised by men to the glory of God, is to move forwards. As you do so, you will be better placed to observe the manifold pillars, columns and colonnettes. At each step they seem to move and form new harmonies under the interlacing of the pointed arches. Here you will breathe in an atmosphere of meditation, grandeur, nobleness and beauty: let it penetrate you to the depths of your soul. Then you will feel overwhelmed by an emotion of quite a new dimension, you will be conscious how much, in conceiving and realising such a miracle,

the men of the Middle Ages must have found their inspiration in the depth of their faith and the strength of their love for God.

For 700 years, how many Christians, how many saints of God have come to pray in this church, seeking light and consolation! Bourges cathedral to be sure has not been so burdened with memorials as certain of our sister churches. Less fortunate than Notre Dame de Chartres, it has not welcomed beneath its vaulted roof the huge crowds of Christians on the great mediaeval pilgrimages. Unlike Rheims, it has not known the sumptuous ceremonies surrounding the crowning of our kings; except for one—the Romanesque church which preceded it saw the coronation of Louis VII. Unlike Notre Dame de Paris, it has not been associated with all the major events of our national life. However, many very moving memories linger in these old stones.

While France in the 15th century was at the point of death under the stranglehold of the English occupation, was it not true to say that something of its life took refuge in this town of Charles VII's, he who was called "the little king of Bourges" derisively? In this ancient city which then became the bulwark of the kingdom, was the cathedral not the high place of prayer where all the hopes of the Fatherland were so to say crystallised? It was on its flagstones that the valiant Berry captains knelt, those who supported the Maid of Orleans in her superhuman enterprise. It was to this church, where the future great creator of French unity, Louis XI, was baptised in 1423, that Joan of Arc came herself six years later to entrust to God in all her heartfelt eagerness, the outcome of what she felt to be her mission. It is from here that she left to reconquer and save France, first by her victories and then, much more, by her martyrdom. Sixty-six years later, in this same cathedral, another St. Joan came, St. Joan of France, daughter of Louis XI, sister of Charles VIII, wife of King Louis XII, perhaps making atonement for the errors, faults and neglect of those near to her, as she knelt. She offered to God her sorrow as a repudiated wife, and her firm resolve to serve her dear duchy of Le Berry with unwearying goodwill.

At the beginning of the 17th century, another Joan, St. Joan of Chantal, came to Bourges to see her brother the archbishop, Monseigneur André Frémiot de Chantal, who wanted to establish a monastery of the Visitation in his diocese. She also prayed in the cathedral of St. Stephen, as, in his turn, a few years later, would the one who guided her in the ways of the love of God and in the total giving of herself, St. Francis de Sales.

But now, when we have recalled these saintly heroes placed by the Church on its altars, it is good in this house of meditation

to think of the countless numbers of the faithful who have come here all down the centuries to find enlightenment in their doubts and comfort in their times of trial: it is good to remember these Christians of all ranks and all cultures, who have united in brotherly love in this house of God to help each other by their prayers and example, to fight courageously the good fight of life: it is very moving to think of this infinite multitude of nameless saints, unknown to men but known to God, who have crossed the shining threshold of blissful eternity, after they had come into this church, this house of prayer so pure in line, to nourish their souls on the word of God and the grace of the Sacraments. We then discover the true reality of the cathedral: the mystic vessel which bears away the souls of the redeemed to the port of the heavenly Jerusalem, city of peace and everlasting bliss.

The visitor will understand it even better if, leaving the cathedral by the South door, he admires the edifice from this side, completely free of its surroundings in all the purity of its lines.

Let him go into the Archbishop's garden and stand back. He will then see the nave in its unique splendour. Seen among its soaring flying buttresses, it resembles a splendid ship gliding across the azure sky under full sail. The person who has spent long in contemplating the cathedral of Bourges in all its sturdy peaceful majesty, can never forget it. If he feels the desire to return to it to admire it again and meditate under its wing, he must not resist it. It will always be welcoming, and will reveal to him each time some new beauty, some detail hitherto unperceived. Perhaps even, if he has succeeded in understanding its language, he may hear it murmur some lofty salutary lesson to him in the depths of his soul.