

# Our Lady

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# Our Lady of the Snows

(Smoke Signal # 41, February 2004)

I was baptised in my home town of Masson (for now part of Gatineau, but I trust not for long) in a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows at the age of two days because I was premature and not expected to live. The chapel had been built in 11 days as a temporary and very cheap replacement of the parish church which burned down in 1930 along with half of the village. The parish priest, Fr. Routhier, on that occasion, had telegraphed the bishop, "*Church and rectory destroyed by fire, Blessed Sacrament rescued.*"

There was over the altar a large painting of Our Lady of the Snows made in 1930 by Miss Routhier, the niece of the parish priest to replace an earlier painting commissioned ca 1890 for the first church which burned with the second church in 1930. The painting represented Our Lady breast-feeding the Holy Child - Bp. Duhamel of Ottawa had promised to bless it, if the "Virgin was beautiful and decent". The name "Notre-Dame-des-Neiges" was part of a series of designations for parishes along the Lièvre River which included Notre-Dame-du-Laus, Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette, Notre-Dame-de-la-Défense (Val-des-Bois) and Notre-Dame-de-Pontmain, all founded by émigré French priests, particularly Father Michel, with great Marian devotions. There is also a shrine to Our Lady of Knock in Mayo, but that is from the Irish tradition.

The vocable "*Our Lady of the Snows*" refers to the foundation of the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome also known as the "Sacrosancta Patriarchalis Basilica Liberiana" from the name of its founder Pope Liberius. While the good pope pondered on the location of a future church to be dedicated to Our Lady, the first in Christendom, he saw in a dream during the night of the nones of August (our 4-5<sup>th</sup> of August) in 358 the Virgin asking him to build a chapel on the site she would designate by snowfall. On the morning, they found snow on the Esquiline Hill, the highest of the Hills of Rome, and the pope traced the limits of the future church in the snow. In 431, the Council of Ephesus would proclaim Mary the Mother of God and acknowledge her cult.

So to this day, the dedication of the basilica is remembered on August the 5<sup>th</sup>, which is therefore the Feast of Our Lady of the Snows. By a happy coincidence, I found myself two summers ago in Rome on that day. In Italy, dedication feasts for great churches and cathedrals are celebrated in a grand manner. There are generally three days of special events in preparation for the day, and the dedication itself is marked by three solemn services, the First Vespers on the eve, a Solemn Mass in the morning, and the Second Vespers in the evening. St. Mary Major is no exception.

I first went to visit the Church and to reconnoitre the terrain. It is a vast building built on the basilican plan. The apse is semicircular and two great side chapels form a transept of a sort. The chapel to the North is the Borghese Chapel which serves as the Sacrament chapel and its riches are beyond imagining. Precious marbles everywhere

As I walked around the church, I noticed a number of confessionals in operation; a surprising large number of people were going to confession, but others just knelt in front of the priest sitting behind his half-door. The priest then took a small rod, about

six inches long, and held it to their head, while reciting some blessing. I found a confessional with a multilingual priest and knelt to ask about the rod. The priest was a good blackfriar (they are in charge of the basilica) who happened to have lived in Montreal and I finally got my touch of the rod after a very long conversation kneeling at his feet. The priest assured me that he felt the time spent in the box was a very useful way to spend his retirement years and that I would be surprised how many distressed people came up to him.

On the eve of the feast, I attended the First Vespers. Casing the joint, I sat up front on the right next to a small group of Roman women who appeared to me to be church-wise and to have chosen the best seats – I also benefited from the hand fans which they used throughout the service. The attendance was poor and the service was taken by a Roman auxiliary bishop of some sort (he carried a crozier), attended by half a dozen canons in purple cassock with red sleeves. The bishop and two of the canons wore Baroque white and gold copes; the servers were in grey habit and I thought they were Theatine seminarians. There were two masters of ceremony, both in purple cassock, the major who directed everything and the minor whose main job appeared to deal with the prelate's reading glasses.

The procession came from the back, singing the Magnificat; it turned south into the Borghese Chapel to reverence the Sacrament. The service was then taken from the high altar. One of my lady companions sang the first two psalms in Latin with great gusto, but then shut up as a clam when they imposed Ephesians 1:3-10 in lieu of the third psalm. The others chatted throughout. A group of some two dozen seminarians in black cassocks came in late and sat north of the altar; half them participated in the service, but the other half just sat through looking bored, neither singing, nor even standing for the Magnificat; future bishops, I thought. The service ended with an interminable sermon in Italian.

The next morning, I arrived early for High Mass, and again sat with the ladies who had this time moved to the north side of the nave just behind the rows of chairs reserved for the Diplomatic Corps. Only one person was escorted to these reserved seats, so the place was eventually taken over by elderly nuns, which my lady friends repeatedly tried to shoo away, as the good self-appointed guardians of the temple they are, but to no avail; nothing this side of heaven, I learned, will budge an elderly nun. The nave was filled to the rafters, a good percentage of the congregation being nuns of all stripes and colours of habit and skin and varying hemlines (all decent and proper).

The Mass was the high point of the festival, and it was celebrated by the Cardinal Archpriest of the Basilica, assisted by two bishops and a deacon. This was Carlo Cardinal Furno, a short pudgy man who appeared not to lack any self-confidence, whatever else he might lack. A retired Curia diplomat and erstwhile nuncio to Peru, Lebanon, Brazil and Italy, he is since 1995 the Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. He did, as they do in Rome, a very credible mass (which they cannot seem to export into the rest of Christendom), facing East, which in these old churches means also facing the people.

But the crowd had really gathered for the Gloria when, after the opening bars, all

the eyes went to the ceiling; slowly one of the coffers of the great gold panelled ceiling opened and a few white flower petals drifted down. Then to the applause of the congregation, the flowers came down by the bushel-full in a magnificent "snowstorm in August".

# Black Virgins

(Smoke Signals # 38, May 2000)

## "I Am Black but Comely", Song of Solomon 1:5

I am sitting in the South transept of the Gesù, the ever so lovely Jesuit Church on Bleury Street: behind me on the wall are numerous ex-voto marble plaques recalling favours and graces obtained on this site. Before me is the shrine of Our lady of Liesse. Over the altar on a carved wooden pedestal and surrounded by silver votive hearts, the miraculous statue of Our lady holding on her lap the Holy Child is held up by two angels; a banner reads "*Causa nostrae laetitiae - Cause of our Happiness*".

The church has long been a pilgrimage site to Our Lady of Liesse and since 1977 the statues of the mother and child have been crowned. Our Lady under the title of Liesse has been venerated in Liesse, near the cathedral city of Laon in France, since the Middle Ages. At the Revolution the shrine was desecrated and the statue burned. The ashes piously gathered by the faithful were inserted in a makeshift new statue erected in the shrine shortly after the end of the "Terreur". By the late 1850s a new statue was commissioned for the shrine. The old one, with some of the ashes, was remade and eventually offered to two Canadian Jesuits studying in France. In 1877, it was enthroned in the Church of the Gesù, the flagship of Jesuit presence in Montreal since 1865; the church became a Marian shrine, though it retains its dedication to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

### Something Terribly Wrong

The statue is nice, a product of the syrupy taste of Second Empire French ecclesiastical artists. The Madonna is fine-featured with pinkish pale skin ... pink skin? There is something wrong here... Our Lady of Liesse should be black! Indeed, the statue now venerated in the original shrine in France is made of ebony, though the features are not particularly negroid. The statue burned at the Revolution was certainly black. Black Madonnas are often said to be miraculous and their fame is such that in many countries they have become national symbols: take, for instance, Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, Our Lady of Aparecida in Brazil, Our Lady of Monserrat in Spain, Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland, Our Lady of Einsiedeln in Switzerland, Our Lady of Mariazell in Austria, Our Lady of Altötting in Germany, Our Lady of Dublin in Ireland, and Our Lady of Loreto in Italy. Some of these, however, are not statues but icons. In England there are few black Madonnas: Our lady of Walsingham is white, though there are dark copies, based on the old seal of the shrine. Before the Reformation, there were, however, at Walsingham, as well as at Glastonbury, 16<sup>th</sup> c. replicas of Our Lady of Loreto which were black. The only authentic Black Madonna in England is the 14<sup>th</sup> c. Our Lady of Mayfield, which,

however, may be of Flemish origin and was never the object of any popular cult. Since it has a hand missing, it has often been speculated that it might be the same as Notre-Dame de Boulogne across the channel - of which only a hand remains!

France is the land of the cult of the Black Virgin. There are some three hundred examples surviving mostly in the centre and the south, below a line that goes from Bayonne to Vichy. The most famous are Notre-Dame de Boulogne (or du Grand Retour) at Boulogne-sur-Mer, Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre at Chartres, Notre-Dame du Port at Clermont-Ferrand, Notre-Dame de la Délivrance at Orcival, Notre-Dame du Puy at Le-Puy, Notre-Dame de Rocamadour, and Notre-Dame de Vassivière. Paris has two, Notre-Dame de la Paix and Notre-Dame de Bonne Délivrance. The first Black Madonna I remember seeing was Notre-Dame de la Daurade in her small shrine on the banks of the Garonne in Toulouse.

### **The Black Madonna**

The typical Black Madonna is represented sitting upright on a throne holding the Holy Child on her lap and presenting Him to the adoration (of the Magi). She is often referred to as a "Virgin in Majesty" or a "Seat of Wisdom", being herself the throne from which her Son reigns. She wears a pre-Medieval hooded robe with long hanging sleeves, while the Child is barefoot and dressed in a toga - he sometimes holds a book and has an arm raised in blessing. She has curiously enlarged hands with long equal fingers. Mother and Child bear an uncanny resemblance of facial features - he is after all the flesh of her flesh.

The statue is carved out of a single block of wood and is commonly about 24-28 inches (an Egyptian cubit!) high. The wood of various kinds is covered with canvas and tape onto which the colour is applied. The skin is dark and the clothing is generally green and red (the blue and white Virgins we know are much more recent). The statue bears no religious attributes or decorations. Most if not all statues carry in the back of the throne a small door which opens into a relic chamber, though it is not known what it might have contained.

Some Black Virgins are said to come from the Near East. Notre-Dame du Puy was given by King Saint Louis on his return from the Crusade in Egypt. Notre-Dame de Liesse was also brought back from Egypt by Crusaders. Indeed, the Crusaders found many shrines of Our Lady in the Holy land, in which the statue venerated was undoubtedly a recycled representation of the Egyptian Goddess Isis holding on her lap her son Horus. The implication of an Egyptian princess by the name of Ismeria (Isis - Maria) in the story of Notre-Dame de Liesse only adds credence to this pagan origin. Others are said to be carved by the Angels or by Saint Luke (this is the case of Our Lady of Montserrat, *La Moreneta* - the little dark one - also known as *La Jerosolimitana* - the Jerusalemite). These are typically lost - after being hidden from the invading Saracens. and later found by children,

shepherds or woodsmen under miraculous conditions in a felled tree, a sacred spring, a cave, or a lake. Else, they are unearthed in a plowed field, discovered by the bulls which refuse to budge until the plowman digs out the Madonna. The statue is then carried into the town from which it keeps "escaping" back to its place of origin, till a shrine is built to honour her in the sacred site.

Nearly all Black Madonnas were primitively found in rural areas (only secondarily are they city-dwellers), often far from human dwellings. Their setting is commonly associated with ancient Celtic high places and there are often monoliths and sacred wells nearby. The Black Virgins sometimes take over the shrine of an ancient pagan goddess; in Chartres, she replaced on prehistoric *Virgo paritura* (= virgin that will give birth) venerated by the Celts. Oftentimes, their sites are on or near the great pilgrim-ways to Compostella. In truth, most of them were made In 10-12<sup>th</sup> c. France; their inspiration owes much to the Byzantine Icons, the Roman mosaics, and the early Medieval manuscript illuminations

All Black Madonnas are wonder-workers and the miracles attributed to them are of two types: first and curiously (since most are far inland), protection of mariners at sea, which may have something to do with the "*boat of wisdom*" associated with the goddess Isis, the "*lady of seafaring*"; secondly, the temporary revival of stillborn children in order that they be baptized. From there, arose the habit of invoking her for childbirth and fertility; as such Our Lady of Montserrat presides over marriage and sex.

### **Why is She Black?**

The blackness of the Madonna and Child has always been the subject of much speculation, but no one explanation is entirely satisfactory. There are too many black virgins for their existence to be explained by the sole whim of the sculptor.

- The materials used are rarely black, such as ebony or basalt. So the black colouring is a deliberate addition.
- Another simple explanation that the blackness represents accumulated soot from the votive candles over the centuries does not account for the fact that generally only the hands and faces are black. The male clergy are often contemptuous of black virgins, explaining their darkness by a secular accumulation of dirt ("dirty virgins") or by damage due to ancient fires.
- The idea that the dark complexion of the mother and child are related to the fact that they were from the Middle East and that their skins were sunburnt is plausible, but why does it not apply to the Apostles or St. Joseph?
- Others see the influence of the Song of Songs and the glorification of the black Shulamite; the book was, however, popularized too late by St. Bernard to have anything much to do with the origin of the black Virgins.
- Some authors see the Black Virgin as an image of doom and gloom in the Dark Ages and the coming Reformation or as the representation of the sufferings of Our Lady. But they are probably only fanciful afterthoughts.
- Is there a link between the Black Virgins of the West and the so-called Nicopeion

Icons (= victory-maker images) of the East, which are often dark skinned? There is a famous one at St. Mark's in Venice, part of the loot of the Fourth Crusade pillaged from Constantinople, but she is not dark-skinned.

- A more convincing explanation is that there is a link between the Black Madonnas and the goddesses of the pagan world. Some of these virgins were found to contain in their small relic-chamber tiny statues and amulets of ancient fecundity goddesses. When the statue at Le Puy was burned at the French Revolution, the relic chamber revealed the presence of a parchment (which went up in flames) and a green and red chalcedony inscribed with symbols related to the cult of Isis. And it is of significance that the spectators to the burning cried "*Death to the Egyptian*".

- There is also a link with the dark colour of the earth, whose blackness is a symbol of fecundity and fertility. Black, now the colour of death, devils and the occult, was in ancient times a symbol of the bountiful richness and regeneration of the soil. Some see a connection with the dark phase of the Moon, hence with the mysterious and occult dimensions of life.

- Modern-day feminists describe a link between the Black Madonna and the ancient Mother Goddess which represents the ageless Wisdom of Nature, the mystery of the Soul of the World, the archetype of the Eternal Feminine Principle in the universe, feminine consciousness, hermetic knowledge ... all elements obliterated by centuries of patriarchal Christianity. Many scholars recognize in the Black Virgin elements of the worship of the beloved goddesses of the ancient Mediterranean civilizations: Ceres, Demeter, Diana, Cybele, Artemis-Venus and especially Isis. She has become the "*dea abscondita*" the hidden goddess who is still worshipped regardless, but under a different guise. Isis was commonly represented seated on a throne holding her child Horus - she is the stone seat, the mother of the king from whom he derives his power. Isis is also the devoted mother and the sorrowing wife, images applied to Our Lady. Statues of Isis/Horus were carried throughout Europe by the conquering Roman armies. They were later christianized and renamed Mary and Jesus and are the original source of the black Madonnas. Isis was also referred to as the Great Mother and was particularly venerated in spring (May the month of the Virgin Mothers)

- There has been a recent tendency to relate the presence of the Black Madonnas to megalithic earth grids and ley-lines and "highly charged earth centres" in France, as well as to the sacred geometry of Romanesque churches and the electromagnetic field that energize chakra points.

- Finally the Black Virgin is not unrelated to Mary Magdalene and the Black Sarah (Sara la Kali) venerated by gypsies. She is thus connected as is everything else in the world to the Knights Templar, the Cathars, and the August Priory of Sion, hence the Merovingian royal blood-line. It is not fortuitous that Montserrat the shrine of the Black Virgin is also the setting of Parsifal's quest for the Holy Grail. Ultimately, the Black Virgin may symbolize the other Church, that of Mary Magdalene, James, Zacchaeus, the Gnostics, the Cathars, the alchemists, and the troubadours. When the



troubadour sings of his wife and mistress, he is also singing of the Church of Rome and the underground church of Catharism, the former nagging and stifling, the latter mysterious but enlightening and liberating.

It is also said that originally the statues bore black African features, but that they were replaced by statues with dark-complexioned Caucasian traits and many have been whitened. And in modern times, nearly all such statues are white and many of the black ones have been put away and replaced by innocuous white ones. The white Notre-Dame de Liesse in our local Gesù church is a prime example of such a movement. Engaged scholars write of the phenomenon as the "*obliteration of the African origin of our whitewashed religions*".

There is no surprise that ancient religions come ultimately from Africa, since no one now disputes that humankind is of African origin. If there was a garden of Eden, it was somewhere in Africa about 150 000 years ago. There are even some very credible scientists who have traced back a "mitochondrial Eve" who is the mother of all humans and indeed the original black Madonna. The evidence is based on the study of the DNA in mitochondria; mitochondria are ancient bacteria which now live inside cells where they have become the cells' powerhouses. They still contain some of their genetic material as DNA and this is transmitted only through the maternal line; one gets all one's mitochondrial DNA from one's mother. It is therefore possible to trace maternal lines back through evolution. All American Indians can thus be connected to four maternal lineages and all Europeans to nine; these lines are called the daughters of Eve and they can be themselves traced back to the primeval single African Eve, the mother of us all. There is also research to trace a paternal line through the Y-chromosome (which men inherit from their fathers) to a primeval Adam. Linguists and anthropologists are busy fitting language patterns, migrations and cultural diversity to these evolutionary lines. [There was a good write-up on this in the National Post last Wednesday, May 3 - if you are of European origin through your mother you can have your ancestry traced back by examination of cells from the lining of your mouth for a small fee of 100 pounds - see [www.oxfordancestors.com](http://www.oxfordancestors.com).]

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## August 15<sup>th</sup>

(Smoke Signals # 17, July 1996)

At the last Liturgy and Music Committee meeting, it was suggested that we mark August 15th in a special way. I commented, somewhat facetiously, "*Good, we will celebrate St. Napoleon's Day!*", which only drew blank stares. Well, no worry, we are going to keep the Feast of Our Lady in Harvest (also known, according to one's churchmanship, as the Dormition or the Assumption). Still, my remark had some foundation.

In 1804 France, the Concordat had recently been signed, Napoleon had just been named Emperor and he would soon be crowned by the Pope (or in fact crown himself) on December 2. There was a need for a holiday that would place the new regime under the protection of a great patron. The first thought was for Saint Charlemagne, but the old Emperor had been canonised by Antipope Paschal III, and besides his feastday was in late January, a poor season for celebrations. The Old Regime had kept its patronal feast on Ladyday, August 15. Since the date was also Napoleon's own birthday, it was thought convenient to reconvert the old holiday to celebrate "**the pact Victory made with Napoleon's armies!**" But there was no patron readily available. Portalis, then Minister of Cults, suggested St. Napoleon, the Emperor's patron saint. So the scholars set to work, but none could come up with such a saint, the name probably meaning Neapolitan, an inhabitant of Naples. The papal legate Cardinal Caprara then found a solution: St. Jerome's Martyrology mentions a saint called Neopolus martyred at Alexandria in 297 under Diocletian: he was said - well not explicitly, but one could with a little imagination read between the lines - to be a military man of noble extraction. One only then need suppose that the name changed slightly over the years, and there was your St. Napoleon. For his ingeniousness Caprara was later buried in the Pantheon, then dedicated jointly to St. Genevieve and St. Napoleon. The first celebration of the new "*protector of the armies*" was held in 1806 amid of the enthusiastic participation of the people and the military. Portalis was so happy with the whole business that he pronounced that "*this new feast has become, what shall I say,.. antique!*", not bad for a member of the French Academy.

The construction of a great church in Paris in honour of the new saint was planned, but Waterloo put an end to that nonsense. Yet, a few venerable churches changed their name to accommodate the saint, among them Holy Cross in Quimperlé (Brittany) and St. Hillary at Melle (Poitou). The Second Empire (1852-1870) resurrected the feast for a while, but with little conviction: it has now disappeared, though a Roman St. Neopolus still survives in the Roman Martyrology and is briefly remembered each year together with his martyred companions Saturnine, Germanus, and Celestine on May 2. A fleeting glory indeed. In the meanwhile, the true Napoleon lies in the Church of the Invalides, the most visited (and venerated?) relic in Paris.

The French do not hold the exclusivity for such flattery. Ever wonder about

Victoriaville? This is a French-speaking town in Québec named in 1861 in honour of Queen Victoria (the other name they considered at the time was Demersville!). Well, would you believe that the parish erected in 1863 is dedicated to Ste Victoire? This was a Roman virgin and martyr who refused to sacrifice to the gods; neither would she marry a pagan named Eugene, so she was killed by the executioner's sword at the request of her spurned betrothed. At least, St. Victoria was a legitimate saint with a long-standing feast on December 23 and did not have to be invented for the occasion.