

ROBERTA VANDERMAST

The Cathedral at Chartres:

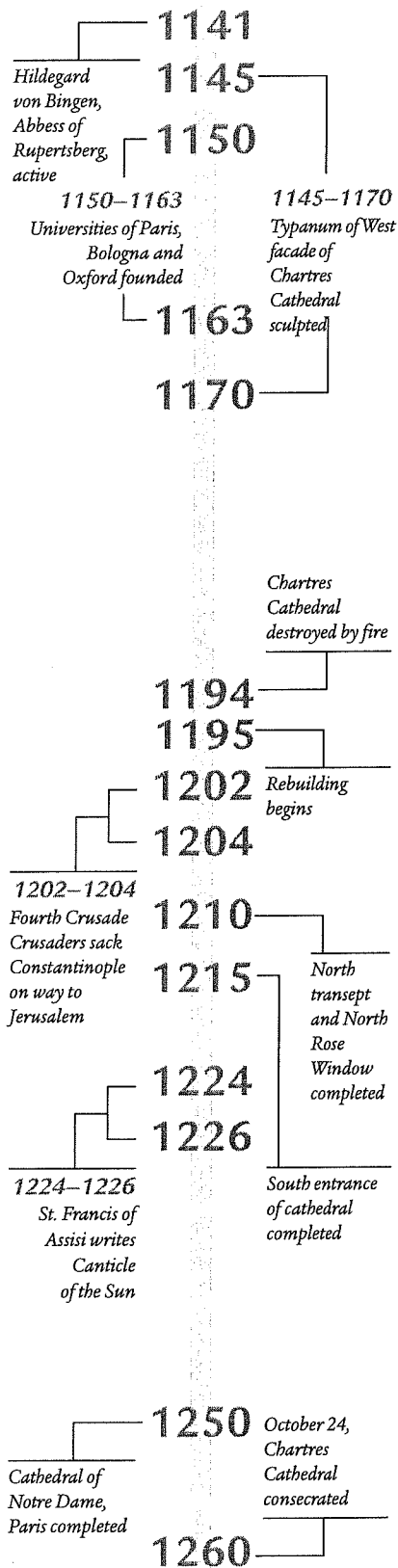
A Bible in Stone

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Most modern pilgrims arrive at Chartres Cathedral faster than did their medieval counterparts. Most come today to marvel at its Gothic architecture, a relic of the cultural past, rather than to be inspired by the religiosity of the site. Yet few pilgrims can leave it without being touched by how beautifully this building speaks of the relationship between the human and the divine. Chartres is one of the many Gothic cathedrals which sprang up across Northern Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In some ways, Chartres is special because it is one of the first of the great Gothic cathedrals; in other ways, it is typical of all churches of this type and stands as a living reminder of the relationship between man and God which existed in the latter part of the Middle Ages (1100-1300).

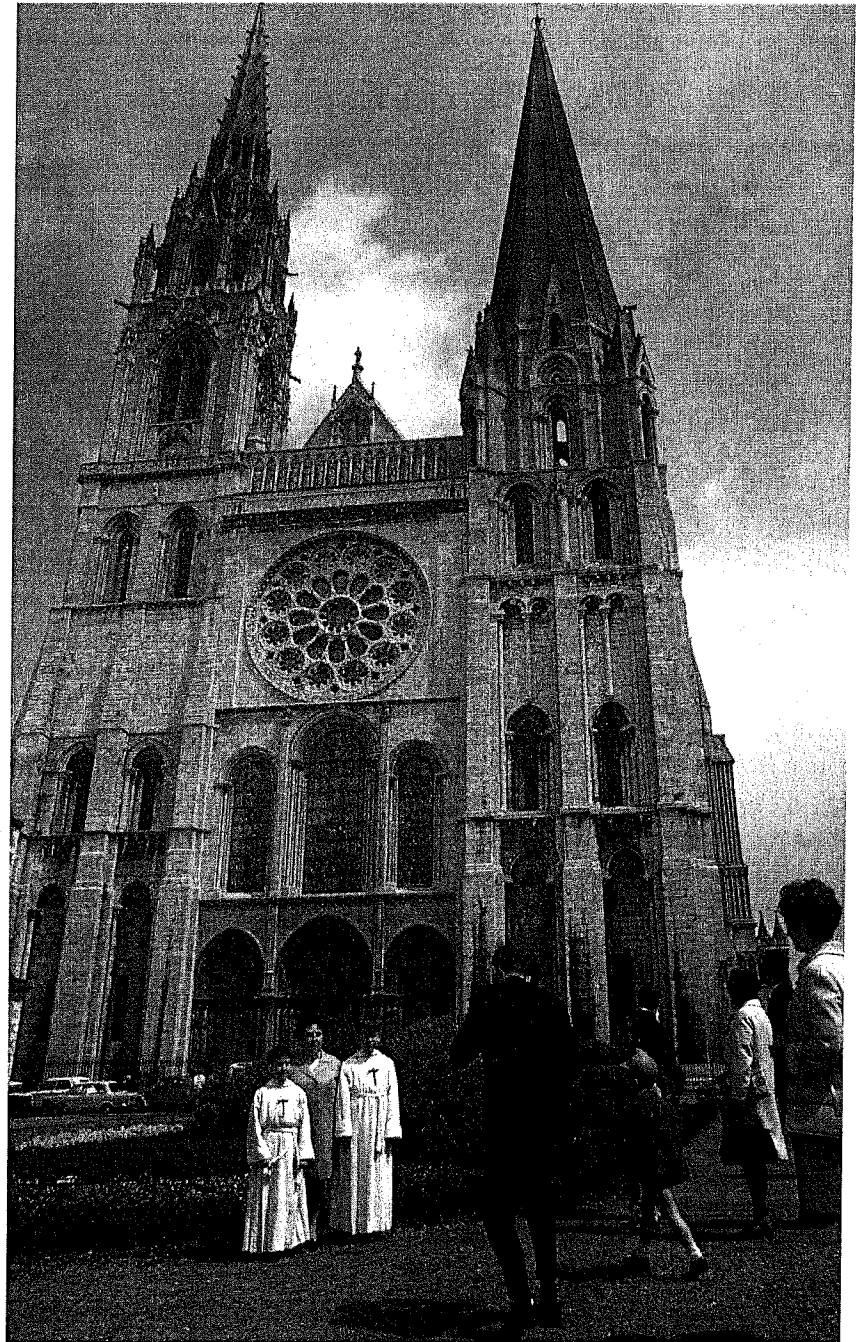
THE CATHEDRAL AT CHARTRES (1145-1260) began rising over the grain fields of northern France as its walls started to go up, and by the time it was completed, it literally towered over the countryside (Color Plate 11). Even today, it can be seen for miles before one actually arrives at the cathedral. Imagine how much more inspiring it must have been in the

Middle Ages when people came by foot, cart, or horse. Then, the cathedral would have been seen for the better part of a day before the pilgrim arrived after an arduous journey. Yet then, as now, pilgrims came in large numbers to stand in awe at its architecture. Medieval pilgrims, however, also came to renew their faith and, perhaps, to witness a miracle.



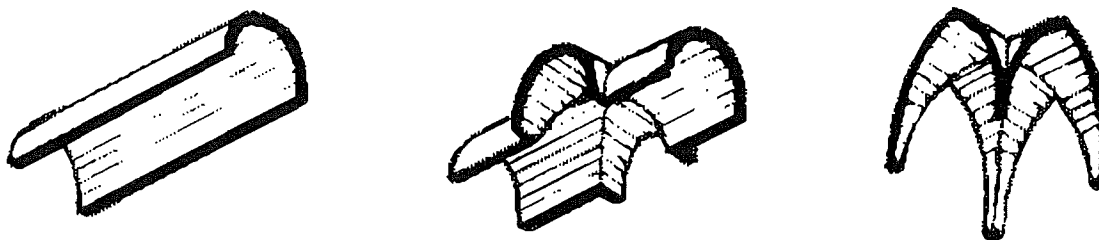
In the Middle Ages, the pilgrimage and the pilgrimage church were the spiritual goals of every man, woman, or child. Life was focused on God and the people of this time believed that everything in their world had a direct and immediate relationship to him. God was not only the source of all creation, he was the divine power working in all created things. Every element of creation, from the most important person to the most common plant, had a place in God's ultimate design for the universe. Every stratum of life reaffirmed the presence of God. Thus, the role of God's church was to help man understand and participate in the spiritual dimension of life which lay in and beyond everyday existence. It followed that life on earth, even though temporal and finite, was a prelude to an eternal life in either Heaven or Hell. To the people of the Middle Ages, the church established their essential link with God by providing them with instruction in Christian beliefs and necessary rituals to be received into Heaven. Since most people in the Middle Ages could not read, a Gothic cathedral, such as Chartres, became a Bible in stone, with the building itself serving as a visual statement of their beliefs.

To make a pilgrimage to a church like Chartres during the Middle Ages meant considerable personal and financial hardship. Money was scarce and personal safety was jeopardized by the bands of armed robbers which preyed on defenseless travellers. Nevertheless, thousands came to Notre Dame de Chartres, "Our Lady of Chartres," to marvel at the magnificent church, to renew their faith, and to see first-hand its major relic, the tunic of the Virgin Mary. According to the legend recounted by Vincent Sablon in his *Historie* written in 1671: when the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was



WEST FACADE

Exterior of the Cathedral Of Chartres, 1194-1240.



CROSS VAULTING

Interior of the Cathedral of Chartres, 1194–1240.

near death, she told the apostles gathered at her bed to give her clothes to a poor woman who had been attending her. From there, her tunic, a type of undergarment, passed through many hands, working miracles each time, until it fell into the hands of a Jewish woman. This woman had extended her hospitality to two brothers who were returning to Constantinople (modern Istanbul) after making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to see its holy sites. The brothers repaid the kind woman's hospitality by stealing the tunic. They replaced the box in which the tunic was kept with a fake one and returned to Constantinople with the original. From there, the tunic in its reliquary, a jewel-encrusted box specially constructed to hold an important relic like this one, was given to the great Franco-German king, Charlemagne. His grandson, Charles the Bald, transferred the reliquary to Chartres where it continued to work miracles. The reliquary was reputed to have saved the city from invasion, healed the sick, and survived a disastrous fire which had levelled the previous cathedral. No wonder pilgrims made such sacrifices to see it! Undertaking such an arduous and dangerous journey in an era when roads were rutted trails and

robbers lurked at every bend would certainly be proof of one's faith and offered the chance of witnessing yet another miracle worked by the tunic of "Our Lady," the Virgin Mary.

The presence of a relic as important as the Virgin Mary's tunic brought thousands of travellers to the town. These travellers needed rooms to sleep in, meals to eat, and souvenirs to remind them of their journey. To live in a town where such an important relic was housed put one closer to the presence of God and, equally important to many, it led to economic gain. Economic benefits came from the medieval tourists who flocked to the site and also from the Catholic Church itself, which was the largest, most well-organized institution in this period. Attached to the great cathedrals were the schools whose job it was to produce the priests and clergymen needed to staff these great churches. The schools supplied the educated people of the era and attracted scholars from all over Europe. The Church also supported the local economy by sponsoring the most extensive building programs of the era which employed thousands of architects, sculptors, painters, stone masons, carpenters, and apprentices to construct these huge edifices. The

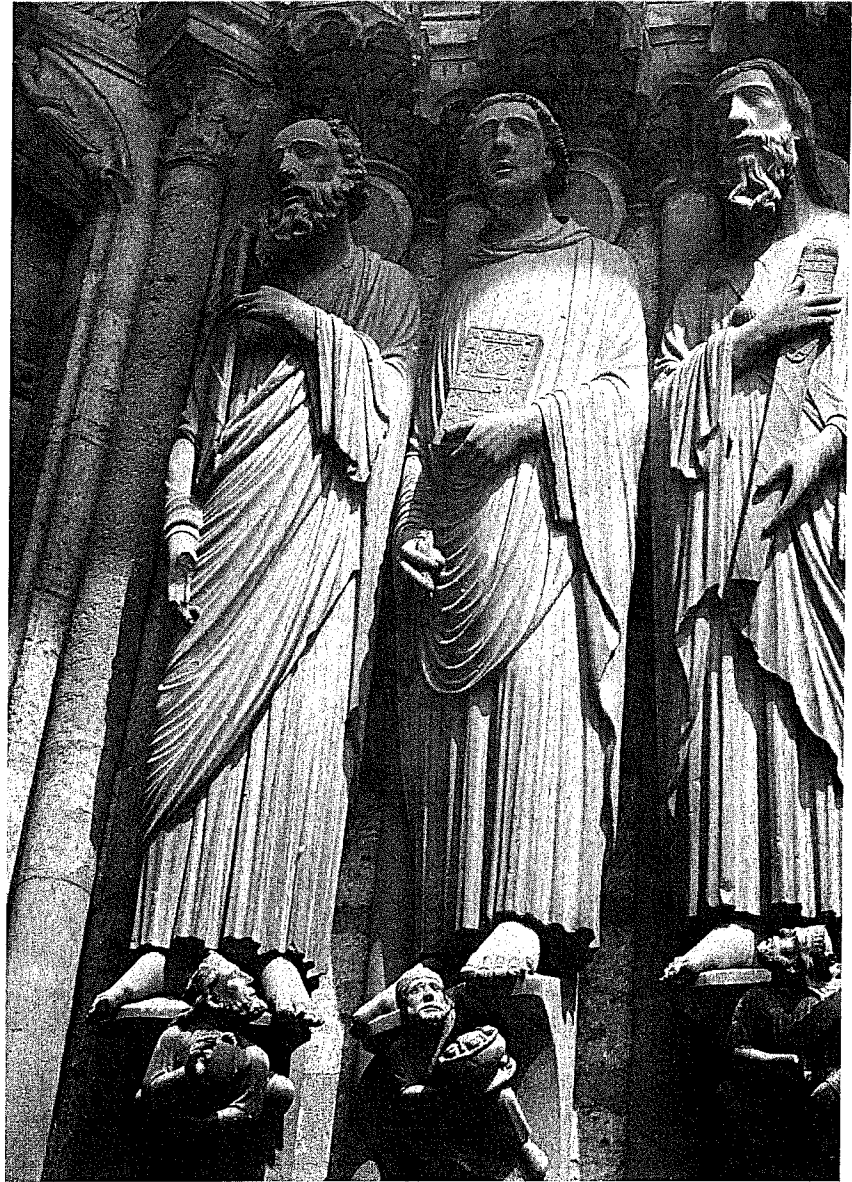
economic impact of a Gothic cathedral was enormous. It provided employment and job security for generations of local townspeople, as well as for skilled artists, craftsmen, and scholars throughout Europe. To a town like Chartres, the cathedral was the major factor in the local economy.

Aside from the economic conditions which accompanied the construction of these great churches, their primary function was religious — a fact no medieval pilgrim ever lost sight of. As one approached the church, the building itself testified to its religious purpose. Longer, wider, and taller than any other structure conceivable in the Middle Ages, the building itself seemed to ascend to heaven. A tall roof and elaborate external supports give the cathedral its vertical thrust. In addition, two tall towers rise on either side of the front of the church, each of which is topped with a large spire. At Chartres, the taller of these spires rises 377 feet (115 meters) into the air, the equivalent of a forty-story building!

The amazing height achieved by these cathedrals was made possible by the invention of cross vaulting and buttressing. In Northern Europe, stone was preferred for large buildings because of its fire-resistant ca-

pabilities. (The three major fires at Chartres which demolished earlier wooden churches give ample evidence of the need for fireproof stone buildings.) Since stone is dense and weighty, it requires heavy, thick walls for support. New building techniques invented during the Late Middle Ages allowed higher ceilings and larger windows. These building techniques originated with improvements to the system of cross vaulting, the basic system that was used to construct the ceilings of the cathedral. Cross vaulting occurs at the intersection of two barrel vaults, so named because they resemble a barrel cut in half and seen from the inside. The intersection of two barrel vaults creates a structure in which the downward thrust of the weight of the stone components is born by large piers or posts at the four "corners" of the intersection. This eliminates the need for thick stone walls, while creating a less weighty, highly stable structure. Originally, cross vaults were created with rounded barrel vaults, but in order to achieve the height wanted, medieval builders created vaults with "pointed" arches which allowed additional height. However, these pointed vaults created another structural problem which medieval architects had to solve.

While pointed vaults gave a greater distance from the floor to ceiling, they also made the structure less stable. Pointed vaults direct the thrust of the weight of their stones down, as well as out. If not counterbalanced, the weight of the pointed vaults can push the supporting walls out, causing the structure to collapse. To stabilize this outward thrust, buttressing was developed. A buttress is a heavy, thick, external "rib" which helps support the walls of the building. It is a tall, vertical member, constructed outside of the main walls of the building, which pushes inward



ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Detail from the Facade of the Cathedral of Chartres 1194-1240.



DEMON LEADING A MISER TO HELL

Column capital from the Interior of the Cathedral of Chartres, 1194-1240.

on these walls. Buttresses transfer to the ground the outward thrust of the pointed vaults, thus stabilizing the building. With buttressing, the main walls of the cathedral no longer have to bear the total weight and thrust of the ceiling; therefore, these walls can be made thinner and less weighty. This, in turn, permits greater height and the inclusion of more windows. In the Gothic cathedral, buttresses were topped with spires and were called "flying" buttresses because they appeared to be flying upward toward heaven. Chartres was one of the first

Gothic cathedrals to incorporate the use of these flying buttresses which have become hallmarks of Gothic architecture.

To the pilgrim approaching the Cathedral at Chartres, the height of the building, its twin towers and tall spires, as well as its flying buttresses, pointed to the direction that life should take. Life should focus not only on the everyday things of this world, it must prepare one for eternity which one hoped to spend above, in Heaven. This belief was reinforced by the representations of religious fig-

ures decorating the outside of the cathedral.

The outside of every Gothic cathedral is covered by the most elaborate sculptural display imaginable. Surrounding each of the major entrances, capping the buttresses, and protruding from along its roof are sculptures of people and animals, real and imagined. Famous among these are the gargoyles, imaginary monsters which often double as rain spouts. Since they represented the monsters waiting in Hell to torture the unfaithful, gargoyles must have struck terrible fear into the hearts of many medieval children and adults. These frightful monsters reminded medieval pilgrims to keep their eyes focused on Heaven. Along with the gargoyles, large sculptures of saints and holy persons offered the hope of paradise at each of the cathedral's main entrances. Medieval cathedrals were oriented so that the main entrances were on the north, south and west sides of the building. Over each set of doors were figures from the Old and New Testaments, accompanied by representations of the subjects studied in the cathedral's school. On these portals, a pilgrim could find Abraham, a man of faith, alongside Aristotle, a Greek philosopher. These figures served not only to remind pilgrims of the wisdom and learning which emanated from the Church, they also served as a stone "book" from which priests could dramatize the stories from the Bible, by pointing to the sculptures as they retold the stories from the Scriptures or informed listeners about the lives of the saints. Thus, the portals of the cathedral served to both usher in the faithful and to educate them in their religion.

While there were three entrances to Chartres Cathedral, most pilgrims would not have been deemed worthy enough to enter from either the north or the south. In the highly stratified

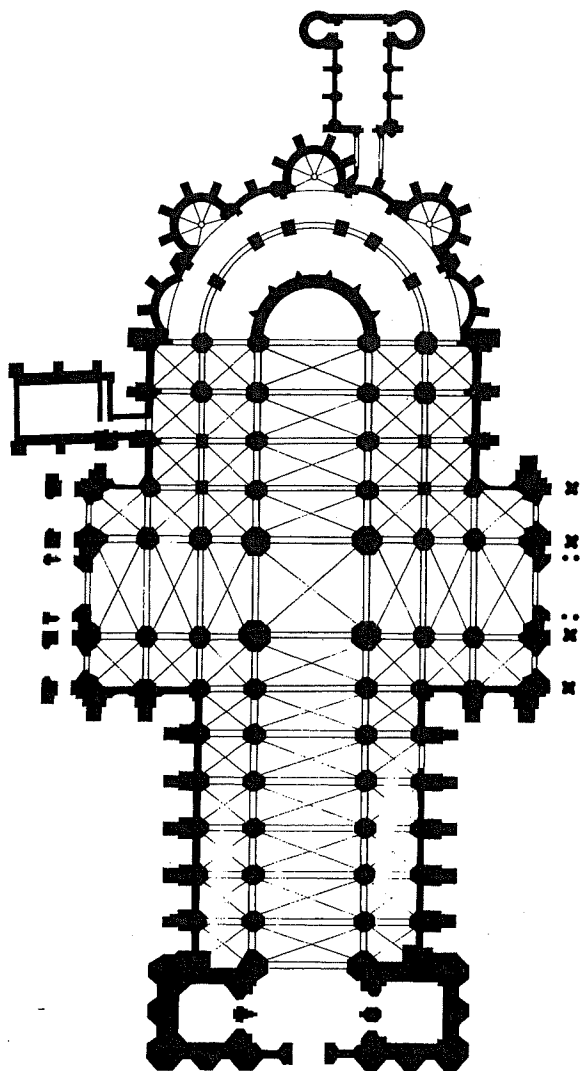
society of the Middle Ages, these entrances would have been reserved for the highest classes: clergy and royalty. “Commoners” would have entered the cathedral on its west side, through the cathedral’s main entrance. Flanked by its twin towers and decorated with a rose window, the west facade is also the oldest portion of Chartres Cathedral. Its entrance is a remnant from an older church built on the same site and destroyed by fire. This is atypical of Gothic churches which were usually of one style. This Romanesque entrance depicts Jesus surrounded by symbols of the four apostles who recorded his life: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Typically, a Gothic cathedral had at its entrance a depiction of the Last judgment when, according to Christian belief, Jesus would return to earth to separate the faithful from the unfaithful. (In a Romanesque church, the Last judgment is typically depicted inside the church, while in a Gothic church, the Last judgment appears on the outside.) Imagine what an impression a scene of the Last judgment made on these medieval pilgrims. As they entered the church, they could see graphic depictions of the damnation of the unbelievers and of the salvation of the faithful. From these sculptures, medieval pilgrims knew that both angels and devils hovered overhead, contending for their souls.

Inside the church, pilgrims could begin to glimpse the shape of the building and unravel its symbolism. Entering from the west placed them in the darkest portion of the church, although they would be facing the altar which was flooded with daylight. The journey to the altar represented the journey of the pilgrim from the darkness of sin to the presence of God or light. Symbolic, too, was the fact that the most significant religious services took place at the central al-



ARISTOTLE

Detail from the Facade of the Cathedral of Chartres, 1194–1240.



FLOOR PLAN
of the Cathedral of Chartres, 1194-1240.

tar, attended by bishops and other important clergy. The altar, then, was the heart of the Gothic cathedral: the place symbolic of salvation. Salvation was signified not only by the presence of sunlight streaming in and the clergy at the altar, but also by the floor plan of the Gothic cathedral which traced the shape of a cross. Thus, the location of the altar approximated the position of Jesus' heart when he

died on the cross. Therefore, when the clergy offered the symbols of Jesus' Last Supper, the bread and the wine, to the congregation during the Mass, participants were literally standing at the heart of the church.

To arrive at the altar at Chartres, medieval pilgrims had to walk more than two hundred feet down the nave, the main aisle of the church, which was illuminated on either side by the

windows of the clerestory. The clerestory forms the upper tier of the side walls and separates the inside and outside of the cathedral. The windows which light the nave of the church are located here. In addition to the main aisle of the church formed by the nave, there are two parallel aisles which are visible through the openings created by the cross vaults supporting these aisles. Above these aisles is the triforium gallery, supported by the roof of the aisles. The triforium gallery is an elevated platform which could be used to hold a choir or choirs. A special mass celebrated in the cathedral might include a pair of choirs singing either together or responsorially from either side of the nave. The inclusion of this music, echoing through the cavernous nave and drifting down from above, increased the pilgrims' feeling that they had come into the presence of God.

As the pilgrim approached the altar, the arms of the cross inscribed in the floor plan became visible. These arms are the transepts of the cathedral and at the end of each transept is a rose window. Rose windows, so called because they resemble the pattern of a fully-opened rose, are filled with beautifully colored and patterned stained glass. The light filtering through each window casts a kaleidoscope of colors across the grey stone of the interior. As the patterns of light cast by the rose windows continually changed, medieval pilgrims were reminded of the wondrous nature of God, the process of change in the universe, and the majesty and grandeur of the church which had been provided for their salvation (Color Plate 13).

At Chartres, the rose window in the north transept is referred to as the Rose of France. At its center, in a circular panel, is depicted the Virgin Mary, "Our Lady," holding the infant Jesus. This circular panel is resplen-



THE TRADEPT
of the Cathedral of Chartres, 1194–1240.

dent with red, blue, and gold — colors which were both popular and symbolic. Blue and gold represent the splendors and riches of heaven, while red represents the blood Jesus shed for the salvation of humanity. Surrounding this central circle containing Mary and Jesus are small semi-circles containing white fleur-de-lis, lilies of the valley, which were symbols of the French monarchy. These symbols identify the donor of the window, Blanche of Castile, mother of King Louis IX of France, who became St. Louis. The identification of the donor reveals another important aspect of the cathedral: that all facets of society played a part in its construction. This is evidenced, too, by the many stained glass windows signed by the various medieval guilds or trade unions. Signature windows show carpenters, barrel makers, and teamsters, as well as butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers. These donor signatures reminded pilgrims that it took all levels of society to build a church as great as this one — from the lowliest brick layer to the most exalted queen — and reflected the medieval belief that every social class played an essential role in God's great design.

Behind the altar is the apse, corresponding to the spot which held Jesus' head on the cross. This section of the church separated the clergy from the laity or non-clergy. This separation was very significant. In the Middle Ages, the clergy were not only the "heads" of the church, but also its "brains," in the sense that they were the most educated class in medieval society. Educated in religion and charged with the care of both parishioners and pilgrims, they were responsible for guiding souls to God and, thereby, to Heaven. This was a serious responsibility in an age when ascending to heaven was the focal point of every person's life. Thus, peo-

ple of the Middle Ages felt that the clergy deserved this honored spot in the cathedral.

Even though medieval pilgrims and parishioners could not sit in the apse during services, they could enter the many chapels behind it. A carved screen separated these chapels from the apse. Running behind this screen was an ambulatory, or passageway (Color Plate 12). On occasions when only a small congregation might be on hand for a marriage or baptism, these small chapels were used instead of the main nave of the church. The carved screen and the stained glass windows which decorated the chapels also provided lessons in religion for, like the outside of the church, they retold Biblical and other religious stories. For medieval pilgrims, a walk around the ambulatory and a return trip down the nave completed their viewing of the interior of the church. Walking around the church, both outside and inside, helped pilgrims learn about their religion and, in doing so, helped them trace a pathway to Heaven.

Every aspect of the medieval cathedral is designed to remind the viewer, medieval or modern, of the immanent presence of God. The size and shape of the church, and its sculpture and stained glass windows were all constructed to glorify the relationship between God and man. Without a doubt, the impact on medieval pilgrims was awe-inspiring. After journeying many difficult miles, the site of the Cathedral at Chartres, rising above the wheat fields of northern France, instilled the excitement and anticipation. Entering through the elaborately carved portal of the entrance reminded them of why they had come so far, and their reverent pilgrimage through the building drew them nearer to God. For the people of the Middle Ages, the Cathedral at Chartres was more than a Bible in

stone, it was the living embodiment of their relationship to God and an affirmation of His presence in all things.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What are three of the most important ways in which a Gothic cathedral like Chartres emphasized the relationship between the pilgrim and God?
2. In your opinion, what is the most impressive feature of the Cathedral at Chartres?

TALK ABOUT IT

3. How do modern churches differ from the Cathedral at Chartres? What do these differences say about the modern relationship between people and God?
4. Why do religions feel the need to build structures as large as Chartres Cathedral? What other religions have buildings of comparable size and scope?

WRITE ABOUT IT

5. Compare the Cathedral at Chartres to a large structure from another religious tradition. What does each say about God?
6. Describe the ideal space in which to worship. What would it look like?

READ MORE ABOUT IT

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