

France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart



STUDIES ON THE HISTORY OF SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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*France and the Cult of
the Sacred Heart*



An Epic Tale for Modern Times

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For Patricia



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The Sacred Heart as an object of religious devotion, as a Parisian monument, and as an emblem of counter-revolution, is a richly visual topic. The images I have collected over the course of my research and included here as illustrations are from among dozens I have gathered in archives and libraries. I offer sincere gratitude to the archivists and curators who allowed me to photograph this material while working with their collections.

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A book so much about the uses of memory has generated a few fond memories of its own. Thanks to funding awarded to me as a Fulbright Senior Scholar, my family and I lived in a village in the Vendée. On weekends and holidays we made site visits throughout the west of France. Sometimes research was a combination of serendipity and good training—my daughter Elizabeth, then just ten years old, discovered a framed souvenir of an 1865 diocesan consecration to the Sacré-Coeur among a stack of prints in a second-hand shop in Machecoul. Her discovery alerted me to the importance of diocesan consecrations to the cultivation of a popular piety. Anthony and Katherine had their share of discoveries of Sacred Heart artifacts

and stained glass, too. My wife, Patricia, sustained me with thoughtful questions and (apparently) unfeigned interest in the visionaries and lunatics, relics and reliquaries, heroes and scoundrels, builders and iconoclasts, persecutors and martyrs who have populated my imagination for the duration of this project. This book is for her.

AN EPIC TALE FOR MODERN TIMES

An Introduction

ON ONE OF MY FIRST VISITS to Paris, a solicitous friend—who also happens to be a distinguished historian of modern France—graciously took me on a tour of historic sites around the city. Montmartre was on our itinerary and we reached it as most tourists do, by leaving the Métro at Anvers, walking northward to the Place Saint-Pierre, then ascending the steep stairway to the basilica of the Sacré-Coeur. As we ascended Montmartre, the basilica and its domes gradually appeared, rising above the crest of the hill, their details taking shape through the brown haze of a Parisian summer day. Toward the top of our climb, we encountered clutches of tourists who had installed themselves on the steps, making the most of the deep August sun. We had to pick our path through the bodies and backpacks and vendors.

When we reached the basilica my friend stopped and sat down on the steps. I stopped beside him, puzzled. Ours had been no easy ascent, but this was not a matter of fatigue. He simply refused to enter. I asked my friend why we weren't going to join the hundreds of tourists milling through the front doors of the basilica. He responded with a brief history of the Sacré-Coeur. I listened attentively. He told me that the revolutionary Commune of Paris had begun on Montmartre in March of 1871, and the church had been built as a kind of monumental reappropriation of the terrain, the result of a vow taken

by a chastened and devout bourgeoisie. My friend's reluctance to enter was a principled statement, a refusal to set foot within a structure that celebrated the defeat of the people of Paris. I admired my friend's moral conviction, but his story only increased my curiosity. With an earnest tone and dialogue worthy of an American G. I. movie, I looked reassuringly at my friend and said, "Wait here. I'm going in."

I left Montmartre that day moved by the power of the place and the legends constructed around it. My friend's attempt to turn our visit to Montmartre into a "teachable moment" raised more questions than it answered. What had begun as a simple tourist visit turned into something much more. I "made a vow" to return to the basilica and explore its history. But when I began work on the project I soon became convinced that the story that I wanted to tell could not be neatly organized around the basilica of the Sacré-Coeur. It certainly could not be confined to the history of Paris, much less that of the Commune. The basilica could not be understood outside of the context of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, itself deeply implicated in the history of modern France.

The key episodes in the saga of France and the Sacré-Coeur played out at sites throughout France and over an expanse of some two hundred years. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, visionaries reported that Jesus had appeared to them and displayed his heart as a source of grace and love but also as the recipient of the wounds of human disdain and indifference. The most important of these visionaries, Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, described numerous visions and conversations with Jesus in the 1680s. The central message of these communications was that France was elect among nations, that the French were a chosen people, and that to seal this alliance the king of France—it happened to be Louis XIV—need only consecrate France to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, build a chapel in honor of the Sacred Heart, and put the image of the heart of Jesus on the royal colors.

It's hardly surprising that Louis did not fulfill this request—if, indeed, he ever heard of it. Louis had plenty of lively interests and appetites, but the imaginings, threats, and demands of cloistered nuns from the Charollais were not among them. The more eccentric features of the Sacred Heart devotion would fall away in years to come, except among a minority of Catholics who looked upon Louis's failure as a sin of pride and a missed opportunity for national greatness. This notion would be revived as an explanation for every subsequent national setback, notably after 1789. Outside of

these circles, however, what endured in the eighteenth century was the image of the heart of Jesus as a devotional object of enormous popularity.

The Jesuit order, largely with the support of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, promoted the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as a symbol of divine love for humanity. Lay Catholics, with the approval of Catholic clergy and hierarchy, wore the emblem as a talisman for protection against danger, illness, and evil. Images of a heart with the inscription “Arrête! Le Coeur de Jesus est là!” were credited with halting catastrophic plague in Marseille in 1720. In 1789 and after, as Catholics became increasingly troubled by the course of the Revolution, they again wore the Sacré-Coeur for protection, a sure sign of their conviction that the Revolution signaled a real demonic presence. In the west of France, in an area known as the Vendée, peasants stitched the Sacré-Coeur to their clothing for protection when they took up arms to fight against the Revolution: little wonder that the Sacré-Coeur soon became the dominant symbol of royal and Catholic counter-revolution.

The entry of the Sacred Heart of Jesus into French political culture thus coincided with the Revolution. Prior to 1789, the Sacred Heart addressed anxieties about apostasy, error, and schism; afterward, it challenged a revolution held to be hostile to Catholic belief, public order, and the essentially Catholic nature and vocation of France. Henceforth the Sacred Heart related to republican political culture as a symbol of opposition and as a Christian patriotic alternative to the idealized Republic. Historians including Maurice Agulhon, Frank Bowman, Lynn Hunt, James Leith, Mona Ozouf, and Michel Vovelle have shown how after 1789 the French Left developed a secular, republican political culture—sometimes through republican parody of Catholic ritual (the cult of Marianne for the cult of Mary, the devotion to the Sacré-Coeur de Marat), sometimes through iconoclasm (de-Christianization, vandalism, and anti-clericalism), but always in a self-conscious rejection of royalist and Catholic rituals and symbols. This book is about how French Catholics responded with a bitter condemnation of the Revolution and the secular republican ideal and a promise of national redemption through the re-Christianization of public life, notably via a national consecration to the Sacré-Coeur. Whenever Marianne went into combat, she encountered the Sacré-Coeur.

Sustaining the critical discourse of the Sacré-Coeur in nineteenth-century France was a task assumed by Catholic clergy and relayed by Catholic laity. Diocesan consecrations to the Sacré-Coeur served as local rehearsals for the

national consecration so ardently sought; some dioceses were actually *re*-consecrated to the Sacré-Coeur after a respectable interval. Catholic families were encouraged to consecrate themselves to the Sacré-Coeur in lieu of a national consecration; in devout villages, municipal leaders were urged to consecrate their municipalities—many obliged. Large-scale pilgrimages, one of the characteristic features of nineteenth-century popular culture as well as one of its most neglected, became occasions for ritualized revival of a tale of post-revolutionary French decline and the promise of regeneration through the Sacré-Coeur. Clergy distributed Sacré-Coeur emblems to pilgrims with instructions to pin them to their chests, a gesture whose seditious significance was lost on no one. At a time when strikes were still relatively small and infrequent, pilgrimage eclipsed all other forms of popular mobilization. And no strike or demonstration could mobilize on a national scale in the way that pilgrimage shrines and rituals could. Moreover, from Béziers (where pilgrims waved Bourbon-white kerchiefs and sang “Give us a king in the name of the Sacred Heart!”) to Paray-le-Monial (where, in 1873, more than a hundred deputies from the National Assembly participated in a ceremony dedicating France to the Sacré-Coeur) pilgrimages blended the sacred and the profane, prayer and politics. The anthropologist Victor Turner’s classic works on pilgrimage argue that pilgrimage was essentially “anarchical” and “anti-clerical”—a kind of Mardi Gras masquerading as piety. Turner was wrong. The French episcopate effectively disciplined and channeled the practice of pilgrimage in pursuit of their vision of the moral and political regeneration of France. Pilgrimages were penitential plebiscites.

Pilgrimage linked communities to a network of sites. Throughout France, stained-glass windows, chapels, and entire churches served as landmarks on the Sacré-Coeur landscape. They could serve as mnemonic devices, evoking memories of victims of the Revolution and the heroic resistance of those who opposed it in the name of the Sacré-Coeur. Many of these sites, including the Sacré-Coeur de Montmartre, were destination shrines. They also fulfilled a didactic purpose, going beyond instructing the faithful about Jesus, the lives of the saints, and the basic tenets of Catholic faith and morals: they explicitly addressed questions of French identity. Using familiar historical allusions and self-consciously medievalized artistic style, these sites conferred on certain responses to the challenges of the present a holy and heroic pedigree. Stained-glass windows are the Bible of the people. A window representing the Vendéen general Jacques Cathelineau (known colloquially as