

LIFE OF SAINT YON, PRIEST AND MARTYR

On September 22 the church celebrates the feast of Saint Yon, priest and martyr, who suffered in the district of Hurepoix, diocese of Paris. The history of his glorious martyrdom is related by a devout and ancient author of the ninth century, who learned it from the best writers of those days.

Saint Yon lived in the early years of the infant Church. He accompanied Saint Denis, first Bishop of Paris, when the latter came to France, and was associated with the work of this evangelical mission. The fact that the apostle of France chose Saint Yon to help him in a ministry at once so difficult and so important, allows us to presume that Saint Yon possessed all the qualities needed by an excellent Gospel worker, even by an apostle. Thus we can judge of the zeal he showed for the glory of God in spreading faith in Jesus Christ, of the charity he displayed in making the idolaters abandon their errors and the vices in which they were immersed, and in procuring eternal salvation for them. Above all, we can be sure that he possessed courage and patience to overcome the obstacles and to despise dangers, insults, and threats.

The holiness of Saint Yon's life contributed no less than his preaching and his miracles to the conversion of the pagans, for God had made him mighty in word and in deeds,¹⁰³⁶ which are graces which he customarily imparts to those whom he sends as pioneers bringing the light of the Gospel to countries still plunged in the darkness of paganism and the shadow of death.¹⁰³⁷

Once he was ordained priest, Saint Yon labored mainly in the area where Saint Denis sent him to work, namely in that section of the territory of Paris which has since received the name of Hurepoix, and where the diocese of Paris adjoins those of Sens and Chartres. The main center of his mission was the little town of Chartres on the river Orge. After having established the faith of Jesus Christ there very successfully, Saint Yon merited to see his efforts crowned by martyrdom some time after the death of Saint Denis. He was arrested by an officer named Julian, following the order given him by the governor of Paris, the same person who had Saint Lucian put to death at Beauvais and Saint Piat at Tournay.

Saint Yon was condemned by the judge to be beheaded, according to the edicts of the emperors against the Christians, either the one that the Emperor Aurelian had published a few days before his death or the one that Maximian Herculeus, Diocletian's colleague, had published in Gaul at the beginning of his reign, about the year 287. Be that as it may, Saint Yon was led to execution on a neighboring hill, about a league from Chartres, and it was there that he consummated his glorious martyrdom on August 5, the day given in his Acts as the day of his martyrdom. This was already the day on which his feast was celebrated when his Acts were compiled toward the end of the ninth or the beginning of the tenth century. This is also the day on which the church of Paris has chosen to celebrate the feast. It is not known why the authors of the Roman martyrology, where the saint is called Jonas, placed the feast on September 22.

A widespread tradition throughout the area holds that Saint Yon was beheaded near the little river Orge which traverses the town of Chartres. The scaffold stood on a little eminence, and the saint's head tumbled down into the river. His body then walked down and retrieved the head, a sight that terrorized the executioner as well as the spectators. Once Saint Yon was dead the faithful of Chartres came and took his body from the hill and gave it honorable burial near the walls of their city. There it rested in great veneration, especially after peace had been restored to the Church in the time of the Emperor Constantine.

The body remained there until it was transferred to Corbeil, another town in the diocese of Paris located on the Seine, about five or six leagues from Chartres. It seems, however, that only a part of the saint's body was brought there; what remained at Chartres is kept in a silver reliquary beneath the altar, following the ancient custom. These relics are so important that the Breviary of Paris states that the body of Saint Yon is still kept in this church, saying nothing about what was transferred to Corbeil.

We do not know exactly when this transfer was effected; it is celebrated at Corbeil on the same day as the principal feast of the saint, namely, August 5. His relics are still preserved in the church of Notre Dame, which is the principal one of the locality. This is what tradition relates as certain regarding the transfer of Saint Yon's relics to Corbeil-sur-Seine. This city possesses only the holy martyr's head and got possession of it as follows.

Through the relics of Saint Yon many miracles were accomplished; his head, in particular, enjoyed this power. When the river was at flood stage and there was a danger of inundation, all the citizens had to do was to bring the head of the saint close to the river bank and at once the flood subsided and the waters returned to their normal channel. On one occasion the Seine had risen very high and threatened to submerge the entire city of Corbeil. So the clergy and the people of that city sent a deputation to the officials of Chartres asking them to lend them the head of the saint, promising to return it with all due honors once they were delivered from the danger. This plea was granted, but only on condition that hostages be given. When they heard this, the people of Corbeil thought of a stratagem to be able to keep the precious relic permanently within their walls. They dressed some little orphans in magnificent clothes and sent them over with much pomp, after which the inhabitants of Chartres delivered the head of Saint Yon and kept these children, whom they believed to be the sons of the most outstanding citizens of the city. The precious relic having made the waters recede as usual, the clergy and the people of Corbeil enthroned it in their church and resolved not to give it back to Chartres. The deputies who came to demand the return of Saint Yon's head were told that they could keep instead the children whom they had accepted as hostages. Ever since, the saint's head has remained in Corbeil, where it works many great miracles.

The hill which had witnessed the shedding of the saint's blood, although no longer possessing his holy remains, did not fail to become an object of respect and veneration on the part of the people. Their devotion and gratitude urged them to go there to honor the memory of the holy martyr on the very spot where the earth had received his blood as the seal on the truth that he had preached. A church was built there in his honor, and a monastery founded, but in the course of time, as happened to many other monasteries, this one was reduced to a simple priory, which exists to this day along with a parish. So many people came there that an important town grew up with some fortifications around it bearing the name of Hautefeuille. There the local lord maintained a garrison for defense in the time of Hugh Capet. Later wars devastated the locality and there remains only a tiny village named Saint-Yon; the local lord still retains some of his feudal rights with the title of his ancient barony.