



## *THE CHURCH OF RENNES-LE-CHÂTEAU*

### *RUMORS AND TRUTH*

#### **HISTORY...**

That at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a pastor of a village restores and remodels a church is not surprising. What is more original is that afterward he buys land, builds a villa, creates a park and builds a tower. Where did the money come from? This is the question the Bishop of Carcassonne asks the Pastor of Rennes-le-Château, Bérenger Saunière (born in 1852). Accounts not very convincing, a lifestyle over and above the income of a servant of a small Parish and a reputation of demands for donations outside the Diocese to celebrate Masses. A process is opened. The verdict is pronounced. The priest is sanctioned for misappropriation of funds and relieved of his duties. In the village, rumors that he discovered a pot of gold during excavations, stop quickly after his death in 1917.

#### **... AND THE NOVEL**

During the years 1950 in the hotel/restaurant established on the former estate of the pastor the meals are spiced with tales of the adventures of the priest who became “The Pastor of Billions” : marketing scheme of the owner of said establishment. In the community they begin to dig, in case something is left of a treasure. Among the clients of the hotel is the author Gérard de Sède who will catapult the affair. In 1967 he publishes *L'OR de RENNES* (The Gold of Rennes), a fictitious novel that sounds like history. The story becomes the indisputable reference of the treasure hunters. Among the tracks he initiates is that the pastor has left clues during the renovations of the church between 1887 and 1897. Messages encrypted in the building is the platform from which will spring most of the hypotheses of “the mystery of Rennes le Château”. They take for certain truths, no matter the type of investigation, ranging from treasure hunt to a big secret which will make the church quake.



## FAR-FETCHED INTERPRETATIONS

Little is necessary for the inflammation of the imagination. A Latin inscription, a devil under the holy water font, two statues of baby Jesus in the Sanctuary...These are enough indications from which to construct one's own scenarios. The goal of the game is of course to show oneself the most original.



An example : With this sign you will defeat him (Par ce signe tu le vaincras). This is the inscription above the devil. The sentence (in French) has 22 letters, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Certain see in this already a hidden meaning. Let's zoom in on the *le*, found in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> position of the sentence. The year 1314 is the year of the execution of the last Grand Master of the Order of the Templars. The Pastor would have unearthed their treasure, or better yet, the treasure of Jerusalem brought here by the Visigoths...

With this type of illogical arguments nothing hinders to transform the Stations of the Cross into a map for the treasure hunt which supposedly indicates the different environments leading to a gold mine in the area.

It's imagination mixed with extravagance when, on seeing the statues of Mary and Joseph in the Sanctuary each holding a baby Jesus, to conclude they were twins ! (There is even a third baby in the arms of the statue of St. Antoine of Padua) Here is one piece of "evidence" from which originates the story that Jesus came to Rennes-le-Château with Mary Magdalene (his twin brother died on the cross !). This is the terrible secret supposedly discovered by L'abbé Saunière which would shake the foundations of the church and for which, to buy his silence, he was paid millions.

Another track is that of the Encounters of Third Kind. The strange blue apples that appear on the wall each January 17<sup>th</sup> when the light filters through one of the stained glass windows, like vessels come from outer space. The pastor was to have met the Aliens ! (Bugarach is not far away with it's story of the end of the world on Dec. 21<sup>st</sup> 2012)

Before the dream borders on insanity we have to come back to history, which is much more mundane. What would it serve to engrave in the plaster with such precision a treasure map, materiel or "mystic", to which the "Millionaire Pastor" himself had no longer access, because we know he ended his days

ruined and in debt. Certainly there remains an enigma about the origin of his finances : Precious objects found, gifts, embezzlement ? All this serves to maintain the myth of Rennes without rendering justice to what Saunière intended with the restoration of his church.

### WHAT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH SAYS

We enter into the church by the evocation of an episode in the book of Genesis - Jacob's dream - the citation which is written on the pediment in Latin : *terribilis est locus iste*. Sending us back to the location of the vision of the Patriarch : Bethel, which is Hebrew for *The House of God*. The sacred character of the building is strongly brought to mind, which underlies another biblical verse - still in Latin - *My House is a House of Prayer*. This is a citation from the book of the prophet Isaiah, which is later quoted by Jesus in the episode of chasing the merchants from the Temple. A strong reminder by a Pastor, well versed in Scripture, to adopt in this building the required attitude of respect and meditation.

However, despite the oddity of a devil/demon under the holy water font, not to worry. He is grimacing because he is being brought down ! Four angels above, remind us of the sign that brings and brought his downfall : The Cross! A new invitation by the Pastor for his parishioners to make the sign of the cross in memory of their Baptism. The Baptismal Font is located across. It suggests to draw a parallel between the two. The bended knee of Jesus contrasts with the forced kneeling of the devil. Jesus is not crushed but has voluntarily and humbly lowered himself.

More than on Mary Magdalene, under whose protection the church is placed, the attention is focused on the person of Christ, living center of Christianity. This is evidenced by the polychrome bas-relief which takes up the back wall. It represents a



synthesis of Jesus' missionary activity. A Jesus with a gentle face full of mercy. A quotation from the Gospels: "Come to me all who....", reinforces the call to trust which is portrayed by the painting. The sculpture above the confessional also gives witness. There is no point in explaining the motif through a local legend where in the 17<sup>th</sup> century a shepherd-boy found a treasure in a cave. Rather the scene depicts the Gospel Parable of the shepherd going in search of

a single lost sheep, the image of the real treasure that each human being is to God.

The Stations of the Cross, like most of the other decorative items, were ordered by the abbé from a catalog. The instructions they give are a continuation of the initial lowering of Jesus shown in the Baptismal scene, to the free choice of giving one's entire life in service and love.

And Mary Magdalene? She is depicted as we often imagine her: the prostitute forgiven her sins by Jesus. The skull at her feet is representative of that period as a sign of conversion: the rejection of a former way of life to reborn in the Gospel. The message of a renewed existence through Christ is also present in each of the statues of the other Saints. Their ethereal faces, reflecting again the taste of that time, witness to the faith in a life after this life in the wake of the resurrection of the Savior.

### **Maria Magdalene**

Originally from Magdala in Galilee, a name which means “tower” in Hebrew, was part of the group of disciples who followed Jesus to Jerusalem. Witness to the Crucifixion she was the first to receive the message of the Resurrection on Easter Morning. Since the 4<sup>th</sup> century she was assimilated - by mistake - to other women in the Gospels, the prostitute and Mary of Bethanie. This combination is manifested in the representations (statues, stained glass windows) in the church of Rennes.



On the walls of the church of Rennes no need to imagine a route of initiation ! Marked by the standard of religious art before 1900, the church gives witness of the project of a country Pastor, who certainly was somewhat different and perhaps no saint, to offer his parishioners *a catechism in images*.

For those who know to welcome the intention, a treasure map is nonetheless open : *The Message of the Gospel*.