

# Centres of Pilgrimage in Québec. The largest gatherings of devout believers north of Mexico.

## A population of staunch believers



The Calvary cross at Oka  
Photo : François Brault

There are over 80 places of pilgrimage in the province of Québec. Most of these are very simple and attract believers from the locality. "A grotto, a statue, a Calvary cross, an oratory, an alcove, a chapel, an open-air altar for a particular occasion or a wayside cross"<sup>1</sup> become the focal points for popular beliefs.

Others, a little more important, have a diocesan and regional following. The Calvary cross at Oka was built by the Sulpicians in order to help evangelise the indigenous population. In the first half of the 18th century people from four Amerindian nations (Algonquin, Nipissing, Agnies and Huron) came together at the seigneurie of Oka. They built seven shrines forming the Way of the Cross with seven stations.

This is the only example in Québec of its kind. It is also the oldest Calvary cross in North America. It was visited for a long time by the Amerindians, and between the end of the 19th century and the nineteen-sixties it became an important pilgrimage place for people living in the Montréal area.

Saint-Antoine-de-Padoue chapel in Lac-Bouchette, between Trois-Rivières and Lac Saint-Jean, along with the adjoining Calvary cross, by Louis Jobin, is another regional pilgrimage place. This place has strong connections with the history of the colonisation of Lac Saint-Jean. It was first (in 1907), the retreat of Father Delamarre, the first Principal at the Chicoutimi Seminary. A chapel was built there in 1909. Charles Huot (1855-1930), a friend of Father Delamarre, made twenty-three paintings about the life of Saint-Antoine de Padoue. They were painted between 1908 and 1922, and this artistic treasure is gradually attracting a crowd of pilgrims wishing to immerse themselves in the atmosphere of the place.



The Calvary cross at Oka  
Photo : François Brault

The main pilgrimage centres in the province of Québec are much more impressive. They constitute the most important popular places of devotion north of Mexico. Saint-Anne-de-Beaupré, Notre-Dame-du-Cap and Saint Joseph's Oratory attract hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year.

## Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, devotion to the patron saint of Québec.

The Côte de Beaupré was one of the first places to be colonised in the 17th century. It stretches to the east of Québec city on the North Shore of the Saint Lawrence river as far as Cap-Tourmante. A letter of Marie de l'Incarnation dated 1665 indicates the existence of a chapel dedicated to Saint Anne just a short distance from Québec city:

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<sup>1</sup> Simard, Jean, *L'art religieux des routes du Québec*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1995, p.12.

"Seven leagues from here there is a town called the petit Cap where there is a church dedicated to Saint Anne in which our Lord performs great wonders through the intercession of this saint, mother of the Virgin Mary. We can see the paralytic walk, the blind receive sight and the sick, no matter what the sickness, receive health"<sup>2</sup>.



The statue of Saint Anne  
Photo : François Brault

The reputation of the place was gradually built up during the 17th century. A sanctuary was constructed in the sixteen-fifties. In 1661 Father Thomas Morel, a priest in the area, affirmed that a local inhabitant had felt "suddenly relieved of a great pain in his lower back after having laid as an act of devotion three stones in the foundations of Saint Anne's church"<sup>3</sup>. People who had been shipwrecked and had miraculously survived had implored Saint Anne in their distress, and merchants and the military had asked for protection. The presence of Amerindian, Algonquin, Malecite, Abenaki, Micmac and Montagnais people who left

offerings for Saint Anne towards the end of the century can be attested from at least 1698. However, it was only in the 19th century that things really took shape. Saint Anne was chosen as the patron saint of Québec in 1876. The Redemptorists took charge of the sanctuary in 1878 and the church finally became a Basilica in 1887 under Pope Leo XIII. From this moment on it became an international pilgrimage centre. Today it attracts one and a half million pilgrims a year!

The present building was started in 1923 and only finished in 1963. The architects were Maxime Roisin from Paris, J.-É.-C. Daoust from Montréal and L.-N. Audet from Sherbrooke. This majestic structure borders the Saint Lawrence river, and in the distance one can see the île d'Orléans. The first foothills of the Charlevoix mountains restrict the space around the building to a thin strip of land.



General view  
Photo : François Brault

A neo-roman style in the Beaux-Arts tradition was selected for the façade after the fashion of the time. The magnificent symmetrical two-tower façade surprises the visitor. Inspired by the great French medieval structures, its rose window is displayed in a colossal archway. It has three semicircular portals, and it also boasts several splendid sculptures at the entrances and some fine sculptures in the archway surrounding the rose window..



Sculptures on the façade  
Photo : François Brault

It is the interior, however, which can be considered the most interesting. As a basilica with a three storey elevation, it presents many sophisticated details. The capitals, in the purest Romanesque tradition, swarm with attractive carvings. The most striking feature, however, is the relationship between the stained glass windows and the mosaics. These two art forms are hardly ever combined because they both use the effects of light in very different ways. Usually either one or the other is chosen. In this instance, however, the bringing together of these two art forms has been successfully accomplished, with each enhancing the other. Twenty-four of the sixty-three scenes in stained glass

witness to the increasing devotion to Saint Anne in North America whilst the mosaics portray a "life divided into three acts and twenty-six scenes, from the hermits' vision and the announcement of Anne's birth to her parents right up to her death, her interment, and her glorification"<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Gagné et Asselin, *Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré. Trois cents ans de pèlerinage*, Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, 1984, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Simard, Jean, *L'art religieux des routes du Québec*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1995, p. 10

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p. 25

## Notre-Dame du Cap-de-la-Madeleine and the importance of devotion to the rosary and the Virgin Mary

The three main places of pilgrimage in Québec can all be found close to one of the three most important urban centres. Near Trois-Rivières, in the heart of the province, Cap-de-la-Madeleine houses a sanctuary dedicated to the Virgin Mary. As is often the case, there is a fascinating anecdote preceding the piety:



Exterior view of the new basilica  
Photo : François Brault

In 1867, when entering his church, the priest, Désilets, caught sight of a pig with a rosary in its mouth. Taking this for a sign indicating the approaching renewal of devotion to Mary in his parish, the priest set up a brotherhood of The Holy Rosary which soon numbered 3000 people. The pilgrimages didn't start, however, until after the miracle of "the bridge of rosaries". In 1879, Désilets noticed that the church was no longer able to hold the 1300 parishioners whose religious fervour was continuously increasing. The stone with which he was hoping to build a new church needed to be taken from the other side of the river. It was March, mild weather was predicted and people no longer thought that the ice bridge was going to form. On

19 March, the bridge hardened and a group of men brought all the stone over in a single night. After the last crossing, the bridge broke. A few years later, in 1888, to fulfil his promise of dedicating the former church of 1714 to Notre-Dame-du-Très-Saint-Rosaire, Désilets moved the statue of the Virgin Mary from the side altar to the main altar. During the inaugural prayer, the priest, the good Father Frédéric, and Pierre Lacroix who accompanied him were all witness to the miracle. «There,» wrote Lacroix who was paraplegic, «after beginning my prayer, I glanced at the statue of the Virgin Mary facing me and immediately noticed very clearly, that the eyes of the statue were wide open but in a natural way as if she were looking above us and seemed to me to be looking at the Trois-Rivières.»<sup>5</sup>.

The former church here, which dated back to the French regime, has been preserved. It was here that some of the miraculous events took place. It forms part of an interesting site where one can admire a curious bridge decorated with rosaries and the present basilica built by Adrien Dufresne, disciple of Dom Bellot, between 1944 and 1964. The exterior with its concrete arches, symmetrical plan and monumental façades clearly shows the transition towards a certain modernism where rationality and expression unite in an impressive construction.



Interior of the former  
parish church  
Photo : François Brault

"In Notre-Dame-du-Cap, Dufresne's creation was much more personal; he had assimilated the principles and techniques of his master, and transformed them into a unique style [...] The general layout of the plan, adapted to the needs of a basilica, along with the elevation [...] were an original idea of Dufresne. The interior dome, where the lines converge to a central point forming a crown, and the walls which seem to close upon us, are also peculiarities which move away from the dom-bellot style [...] As for the exterior, there are absolutely no traces of any influence of Dom Bellot<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Tardif-Painchaud, Nicole, *Dom Bellot et l'architecture religieuse au Québec*. Québec, PUL, 1978, pp. 79-80.

## Saint Joseph's Oratory and the Blessed Brother André

The last of the three great pilgrimage centres in Québec, Saint Joseph's Oratory, occupies an almost central position in the heart of the metropolis, beside Mount Royal. The origins of the devotion to Brother André go back to the beginning of the century. At this time, Alfred Bessette, secular name of the Blessed Brother of the Order of the Holy Cross, held the position of porter at Notre-Dame College opposite the Oratory. He was responsible for a chapel being built on the mountain in 1904, and it was here that the first thaumaturgic healings took place thanks to the use of the oil of Saint Joseph. In 1908 the chapel was enlarged, a counter was set up to sell religious objects, and a restaurant, office and waiting room were added. This was all proof of the growing vitality of the people's devotion.



Exterior view  
Photo : François Brault

In 1917, the construction of the present Oratory was undertaken and continued until 1966. Brother André did not live to see the completion of the project. He died in 1937 at the age of 91. The first architect of this important complex was Alphonse Venne. He designed the structural work and saw to the installation of the building on the site. The imposing octahedral cupola and the interior were the work of dom Bellot, and were begun in 1937.

"The procedure of proportion was applied according to his architectural principles, and this not only for the dome and turrets (still incomplete), but also for all the interior forms which were radically transformed. [...] Gérard Notebaert and Jean-Claude Leclerc took up the work and completed the interior in 1967. [...] However [...] he (dom Bellot) designed a very high, very large dome (about 38 metres diameter and 29 metres high) at the crossing of the transept, which is much reminiscent of the one of Saint-Marie-de-la-fleur in Florence. The dome is made of two thin veils of concrete, two ovoid shells, which are entirely independent from each other and rest freely on regular polygonal arches; there is no metallic structure"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, pp. 57-58.