

The first popular penitent pilgrimage to the holy land :
the ultimate crusade
(Summary)

All through the nineteenth century, French pilgrims, some of them more tourists or adventurous than fervent catholics, were still attracted and fascinated by the Original Land.

Chateaubriand remained the pilgrim reference for the first half of the nineteenth century, the one who opened the path during his journey in the East in 1806. After *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* was published in 1811, many pilgrims threw themselves into the venture. But it was not until 1853 that the first French catholic pilgrimage to the land of Christ was organized by -les Conférences de St Vincent de Paul-

Forty people were in this "pacific crusaders' " caravan, the first since the failed crusades.

Fifty four caravans were to follow, but the elitism, lack of fervour of the participants and the hardship of such a journey, got the better of this organization during the 1870's.

This first massive French pilgrimage to the Holy Land paved the way for even more numerous and fervent catholic caravans. This was to be the "Augustins de l'Assomption" 's achievement ,who, after becoming masters in organizing pilgrimages in France during the period of the estate (l'Ordre Moral), then decided to organize THE pilgrimage.

The Assumptionnists : the new crusaders

The congregation was founded in Nîmes in 1845 by Emmanuel d'Alzon. It distinguished itself in two ways which made them proud ultramontanist knights : the press and pilgrimages.

La Croix and *Le Pèlerin* were emblematic of the congregation's mediatization and the support of their ultramontanist ideas, and at first, monarchic ideas.

During the 1870 's, they gained a well deserved reputation for being the organizers of pilgrimages by founding the association -Notre Dame du Salut.

1872 was the starting point of the pilgrimages to La Salette, then Lourdes, Rome and finally Jerusalem in 1882.

The tremendous passion of French catholics for the Marian apparitions' places, the pope then Christ's tumb corresponded to the penitent era which is

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known as "l'Ordre Moral". The failure of the 1870's war, the "imprisonment" of the pope in the Vatican, and the Paris Commune convinced the believers that France had to do penance.

The Assumptionists were the ones who led and emboldened this catholic community through the pilgrimages to the sacral Lands.

From 1881, the idea of organizing a pilgrimage to the Holy places seemed to be the ultimate salvation for a catholic community grappling with a French anticlerical government.

Thus, the project of a penitent crusade became a reality in spring 1882.

The pilgrimage of the thousand

On the 5th may 1882, 1013 pilgrims landed to Jaffa. They were impressively numerous, with the will from the Assumptionists to prove this was a crusade to Christ's tomb to expiate the sins of an anticlerical France. It was also a pilgrimage meant to be popular, that is to say for any woman or man from any social background, as a symbol of a united nation on the land of Christ.

They were divided into 3 groups in line with each's wish according to the place of travel.

The first group just visited Jaffa. The other two, almost half of the pilgrims, joined Jerusalem via Samaria. These "fous de Samarie" led by the Father superior Picard were true crusaders taking on a difficult voyage -conditions ,insecurity in the region not too inclined in greeting 500 zealous catholics-.

The 12th of May, the pilgrims entered solemnly in the Holy City. Each group, in particular the "Samaritans" arrived safely at the foot of the city walls.

The "celestial moment" for the 1000 crusaders that arrived within the divine place, was the procession from Jaffa's door to the St Sepulchre: "it is not a conquerors' army trumpeting and rattling their swords. It's the army of Jesus Christ's pacific soldiers. The Cross and the Rosary, these are the arms that shine in our hands and upon our chests". It is Jerusalem's storming by the pacific crusaders. Father Picard and Assumptionists monks, at this very moment, really do feel they've touched God's Kingdom, the pacific takeover of Jerusalem.

The 1000 pilgrims' stay in Jerusalem consists in visiting the Holy places and religious ceremonies. All the catholic congregations of the city provide accomodation for the crusaders, lay people or clerical.

The golden age of French and Latin influence

France with its rich oriental history since the crusades and capitulations, was known in the nineteenth century as the bestowed nation of the Mediterranean East.

This feeling was even greater since the Napoleonian saga and the links between Mohamet Ali's Egypt and the French "Monarchie de Juillet".

The Crimean war's victory reinforced this preeminence.

1882, year of the first pilgrimage, seemed to be the peak of this golden age, from a religious point of view as well as a political one.

From the religious side, the French congregations' presence in Palestine, particularly in Jerusalem was very important.

In 1882, all the women's convents in Palestine (except the "Soeurs du Rosaire") were French and most of men's monasteries.

From a political point of view, France, due to the consequences of the capitulations, still was the protector of catholics in the Ottoman Empire.

Despite the political tribulations, buffeted from one regime to another, France has always kept a watchful eye on the Eastern affairs.

The 9th crusade on its way, there were be less pilgrimages organized by the Assumptionists. France was then to face the important rivalries, especially Germany's. Guillaume II 's visit puts a symbolic end to France's golden age.

The 1000 French catholic pilgrimage to the Holy Land seemed to be the ultimate crusade, the remarkable feat of these glorious francs, almost down to their knees.

It was the last ditch stand of uncompromising and legitimist catholics, proud of their ancestors, crusaders themselves, but who could not understand France anymore. Why their nation abandoned them, and neglected the Original Land to the benefits of schismatic nations.

Bertrand Lamure