

Report on the Dedication Day of the Altar by Richard de Seze

At the heart of the altar, Our Lady of the Rosary gazes upon the faithful with attentive eyes. She has unfurled her cloak to reveal, nestled against her and sheltered, a vibrant assembly of carved and colored figures, a congregation of religious members. The painted doors of the altarpiece have been opened; the pontifical Mass in honor of Our Lady of the Rosary is about to begin, presided over by Mgr. Alain Castet, Bishop Emeritus of Luçon, who graciously accepted to stand in for Cardinal Sarah, detained by the consistory on that same day.

Praying with Beauty

The opening of the altarpiece marks the culmination of three years of anticipation, donations, and prayers: the church of the Convent of Saint Thomas Aquinas at Chéméré-le-Roi has at last witnessed the consecration of its altar—a monumental Gothic artwork, a veritable jewel - painted, sculpted, gilt, engraved, and expressive. During these three years, the community saw an expanding group of friends and neighbors grow and strengthen around it (over a thousand of them are crowded inside and outside the church), enticed by the idea of prayer with the beautiful. One of them quotes Saint Pius X: "I desire my people to pray amid beauty." Another recalls the Saint Curé of Ars, who felt that "nothing was too beautiful for God" and who, clad in his meager cassock, would go and buy

the most sumptuous ornaments for the church. One of the donors confides, "It's incredibly unique and magnificent to see a community that brings the Lord an offering of beauty! Beauty captivates people; when they leave the church, their very faith is different — it is as if they've glimpsed paradise. They walk out brimming with happiness." This feeling is shared by all present, from the youngest to the oldest. For this generous donor, as well as for the artist who designed and sculpted the Virgin on the altar, the encounter with the friars of the Fraternity of Saint Vincent Ferrer (known as the apostle of troubling times), was a decisive life experience. The former feels that he was able to rediscover what he had lost and to realign his life, while the sculptor, Remy Insam, confides how fruitful and transformative was the Holy Week that he spent at Chémeré-le-Roi in 2021. Bishop Castet expresses similar sentiments. This embodied altar delights him, as does this growing community: "God's world touches the world of men through statuary; we begin to penetrate the mystery. I appreciate these communities who are directed towards the future, who maintain hope, and who do not measure their lives by the standards of this world."

The Altar is Christ

Before the altarpiece doors were opened, Mgr. Castet had consecrated the altar. In a meticulous and magnificent ritual, lasting nearly an hour, the altar, representing Christ, is as it were brought to life, is welcomed into

the community, and becomes its focal point: "the entire community turns towards Christ, advancing towards the world of God who approaches us through the presence of the Eucharist," remarks the bishop. The church faces due east, towards the coming Christ, and the rays of sunlight, traversing the grand stained glass windows, illuminate the slow, drifting clouds of incense: "And there was given to him much incense, that he should offer of the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar, which is before the throne of God," chants the choir. Within the great stone table, there is an aperture—a sepulcher—that will soon enshrine the relics of saints. Several unhurried minutes pass as the meticulous preparation of the sealing mortar out of salt, ash, wine, and water takes place ("God Most High, who guards what is above, amid, and below, who envelopes and encloses all creation within Yourself, bless this mortar, Your creation"). Having placed the relics of two Dominican martyrs, Saint Peter of Verona and Saint John of Gorcum, inside the sepulcher, the bishop seals it with a stone: "O God, who founded your eternal abode on the congregation of saints, grant to your edifice celestial growth; may those whose relics we here enshrine in pious custom always assist us by their merits." Remy Insam, creator of the altarpiece, assists him.

Then, Mgr. Castet turns his attention to the five crosses engraved upon the broad altar stone, designed according to the Dominican rite, symbolizing the five wounds of Christ. He anoints them with holy chrism, traces upon them five crosses of incense to be burned, just as the holy

women had embalmed the body of Christ. Outside, the devout crowd is able to follow the ceremony on screens. Inside, the choir loft is filled with all friends of the Saint Vincent Ferrier Fraternity, including Father Komorowski, Superior General of the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter, Dom Pateau and Dom Louis-Marie, abbots of Fontgombault and Le Barroux, respectively—all in all forty superious, priests, and consecrated members: all have come to celebrate as friends, relations, brethren, this significant moment in the life of the Saint Thomas Aquinas Convent. Their community is expanding, now an integral part of Mayenne, and the "authenticity of their prayer and the quality of their intellectual life command respect and goodwill even amongst those otherwise disposed," points out Mgr. Castet.

A Living Community

Within the folds of the Virgin's cloak, a beret-topped man evokes France, a spectacled nun is contemporary, and the sculptor of his own accord has endowed the monks with features reminiscent of the community friars. However, in one of the cards given out to visitors, Our Lady of the Rosary is portrayed slightly differently: to her right, the religious; to her left, the laity,—a small segment of those who have been coming here to pray, ever-increasing in number, for over forty years. Following the service, nearly a thousand guests celebrate with a festive meal. Two young ladies who attend mass in La Roë shared their joy of witnessing a "magnificent,

timeless ceremony, a symbol of transcendence that surpasses us, not bound by a single era." Another faithful guest, coming as "a friend, a neighbor, a Christian," expresses delight at seeing the Fraternity planted, flourishing, and making their contribution to "creating masterpieces in the name of God." All feel unified in the fraternal sharing of beauty and truth, under the auspices of Our Lady: "In me is all grace of the way and the truth. I have flowered forth like a rose planted by the brooks of water."

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Some Figures

- Three years to design and manufacture the altar
- 6 meters wide, 9 meters high
- 6 statues and 4 bas-reliefs, two paintings on wood, depicting 68 characters
- 6 workshops from the village of Sankt Ulrich in Tyrol were involved, coordinated by Remy Insam
- 2000 donors

An Artist Fulfilled

"This consecration is the crowning achievement of two years of friendship and exchange with the brothers. Never has a collaboration been so intense and profound, and thus this altar is the most beautiful of those that I've created," shares Remy Insam, who visited Chémeré-le-Roi multiple times and prayed with the brothers. It was this spiritual experience that guided him in sculpting the Virgin of the Rosary, at the altar's center. "The most difficult part was capturing the expression of the Virgin: the attentive Virgin who truly listens to those praying to her, not a 'saccharine sweet' Virgin. At first, I was a little surprised that she wasn't always in view, but I came to understand that it's even more beautiful that her splendor is revealed only at certain liturgical moments. The fact that the doors of the altarpiece open and close with the rhythm of the seasons and of our prayers, represents life. And indeed, having brought forth this altar, it must now have a life of its own!" This altar will not be the last of his career as he initially thought; his work for Chémeré-le-Roi has sparked two more commissions, in North Carolina and Wigratzbad. "If God is willing, I shall continue!"

The Fraternity of Saint Vincent Ferrer (FSVF), whose priory is located in Chémeré-le-Roi (France), is a traditional religious community inspired by the Dominican spirit. Disciples of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Brothers are apostles whose preaching is oriented to the salvation of souls. The priests of the Fraternity celebrate Holy Mass exclusively according to the

traditional Dominican rite (1962 missal). The Fraternity's founder, Fr. Louis-Marie de Blignières, is known to traditional Catholics in the US for his powerful statement on the Motu Proprio «Traditionis Custodes.»

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