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Thematic Issue (Inspiring Faith)

SAGI: The Greatest Experiment

## St. Louis IX of France

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**Words of Wisdom:** *"In the old pagan proverb about kings being philosophers or philosophers kings, there was a certain miscalculation, connected with a mystery that only Christianity could reveal. For while it is possible for a king to wish much to be a saint, it is not possible for a saint to wish very much to be a king. A good man will hardly be always dreaming of being a great monarch; but, such is the liberality of the Church, that she cannot forbid even a great monarch to dream of being a good man." (G.K. Chesterton, in St. Thomas Aquinas) (1).*

### A YOUNG AND HOLY MONARCH

Thirteenth-century Paris was home to such acclaimed figures of sanctity and learning as St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Bonaventure: holy friars and devoted theologians, vowed to poverty and lives of self-denial, who would all eventually be raised to the altars of the Church as saints. Not far from the university in which they studied and taught, however, lived another holy man — neither a friar nor a theologian — under the roof of the palace of the French monarchy. Could one have suspected that the name of this man, who wore the crown of the king of France, would become immortal, not only in the annals of the French monarchy, but also in the Holy Catholic Church as a canonized saint — an intercessor in heaven and an example of righteous living for Christians everywhere?

St. Louis IX sprang from the royal Capetian dynasty of France. His father, King Louis VIII, died in 1226, bequeathing the throne to his young prince who was then twelve years old. Queen Blanche of Castile, Louis IX's mother, acted as regent for her son; meanwhile, she saw to his education, directing him carefully in Christian virtue (2). Her instruction was deeply impressed upon his memory: throughout his life, Louis often brought to mind his mother's admonitions, especially "that [she] had sometimes told him that she would rather he died than that he committed a mortal sin" (3). During Louis' childhood, Queen Blanche took him regularly to the chanting of the Divine Office and to hear sermons preached on feast days (4). Louis would continue to hold great esteem for the Divine Office throughout his life, remaining faithful to its daily recitation (5).

Having come of age to rule, Louis applied himself diligently to the duties of a monarch. He is described as having possessed a peaceful and humble disposition as well as having been a valiant and tireless leader. Amidst his numerous cares, he maintained a joyful spirit and was known for his generosity toward the poor and suffering. "He was extremely humane and very agreeable in conversation," notes Reverend Alban Butler (6). He was the devoted husband of Queen Margaret of Provence and an exemplary Christian father to their many children (7).

## **"THE GREATEST KING FRANCE EVER HAD"**

"Extraordinarily devout," remarks historian Warren H. Carroll, "a dutiful son and a loving husband and father, St. Louis was by any reasonable standard the greatest king France ever had, whose life and holiness cast a luster on the French monarchy..." (8). If Louis received great spiritual strength and divine light during his reign, it is because he sought such graces from God in prayer and strove to correspond with them. Notwithstanding the many political cares which pressed him daily, the holy king spent several hours each day in prayer and attended Holy Mass with piety and recollection (9).

Louis was particularly devoted to praying for the souls in Purgatory: of the two Masses he usually attended daily, one was a Requiem Mass (Mass for the Dead). Additionally, in private, he and a priest recited the Office of the Dead together each day (10). Although the hours Louis spent in prayer were never to the detriment of the execution of his duties as king, there were some people who nevertheless complained of the amount of time he spent in his devotions: "He only answered, that if he employed that time in hunting, tournaments, gaming, or plays, they would not take so exact an account of the time which he lost at them" (11).

## **THE RELIC OF THE CROWN OF THORNS**

It is a noteworthy detail that the history of St. Louis and his reign is intimately tied with the relics of Christ's Passion. Louis and the country under his governance were blessed with a truly extraordinary gift: the relic of Christ's crown of thorns. The relic was given to Louis by Emperor Baldwin II "in gratitude for [Louis'] great largesses to the Christians in Palestine, and other parts of the East..." (12). Entrusted to two Dominican friars for its transportation, the crown of thorns was brought to France and received by the king with great ceremony. Louis, not content with the St. Nicholas chapel of his palace as the lasting residence of this sacred gift, initiated an ambitious and costly undertaking: the construction of the famous Sainte-Chapelle, with its soaring Gothic architecture and ornate walls of stained-glass windows. It would become a suitable sanctuary in which the relic of the crown of thorns, as well as other relics of Christ's Passion, would be kept (13).

Louis, in his great reverence for the relics of the Passion and in his care to provide for them a proper and respectful place for their veneration, demonstrates what importance he held for the exterior respect and honor of holy objects, as well as for the value of frequent remembrance and meditation upon Christ's Passion and Death. The sanctuary of

Sainte-Chapelle became a favored place of prayer for Louis; thus, “the holy king, when he resided at Paris, used to spend a considerable part of his time [in Sainte-Chapelle], and sometimes to pass whole nights in it in prayer...” (14).

## **PARAGON OF THEOCENTRIC GOVERNMENT IN CHRISTENDOM**

Not only did King Louis himself serve as a model Christian, but his reign, likewise, became a paragon of theocentric government. Civil government ought to assist, rather than hinder, man in attaining his last end, which is God; thus, it is imperative that a sovereign always have this ultimate, supernatural end in view. Regarding this important truth, St. Thomas Aquinas, a friend and consultant of St. Louis, wrote the following:

Therefore, since the beatitude of heaven is the end of that virtuous life which we live at present, it pertains to the king's office to promote the good life of the multitude in such a way as to make it suitable for the attainment of heavenly happiness. That is to say, he should command those things which lead to the happiness of Heaven and, as far as possible, forbid the contrary (15).

A faithful son of Holy Mother Church, King Louis took great care to promote what things would help direct his people to heaven and to prohibit those things which would lead them away from God. He preserved and augmented Christendom in France, built numerous churches and monasteries, and always sought justice and peace in his political dealings. Louis absolutely forbade all blasphemy in his kingdom, illegalized the practice of usury, and worked to ensure justice was maintained in the relationships between lords and vassals (16).

Louis, dedicated to the cause of regaining the Holy Land for Christendom, participated in two crusades in his lifetime, the second of which would be the occasion of his death. Though his first crusade was ultimately unsuccessful, the king's courage and determination were exemplified in the countless hardships he faced during those times — not the least among them being the grave illnesses he faced, as well as his imprisonment by the Saracens (17). Such was Louis' conduct that “[t]he very sight of his devotion and piety was a moving sermon; forty Saracens at Acre were by it converted to the faith all at once...” (18).

Louis was prepared to sacrifice his life for the interests of Christendom, and, although on many occasions during his crusades he came very close to martyrdom, another kind of death was destined for him. In Africa, during Louis' second crusade, many of the soldiers in the camp of the Christians contracted fatal illnesses, and thus many deaths ensued (including the death of John Tristan, one of Louis' sons). The king himself soon fell ill with dysentery, and less than a month later, at the age of fifty-five, he received his eternal reward in heaven after a holy death (19). Moreover, as Abbot Guéranger says:

Louis's death was like his life, simple and great. God called him to Himself in the midst of sorrowful and critical circumstances, far from his own country, in that African land where he had before suffered so much; these trials were sanctifying thorns, reminding the prince of his most cherished jewel, the sacred crown of thorns which he had added to the treasures of France (20).

## A FINAL NOTE

As we consider the present state of affairs in the world — especially with regard to the failure of leaders in helping direct the people of their respective countries towards their supernatural end — we may reflect with illumining hope upon the moral uprightness and thoughtfulness by which leaders such as St. Louis governed their nations. Certainly, though, as we are experiencing what seems to be nothing less than a continual devolution of society's observance of even the most basic moral principles, we must pray and work fervently toward a return of the societal reign of Christ the King. It is only by worldwide recognition of Christ's sovereignty that order and justice can be restored.

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