

The Man Behind the Name of our Parish – St. Louis

Although a medieval figure, St. Louis is a remarkably contemporary example of what it means to be Catholic. St. Louis was born in Poissy, France on April 25, 1215 to King Louis VIII and Blanche of Castile. His father died when he was just eleven years old and he was crowned King Louis IX of France. His strong and pious mother acted as his regent and guided his career with Christian advice.

St. Louis ruled during the so-called "golden century of Saint Louis," when the kingdom of France was at its height in Europe, both politically and economically. He was the quintessential example of the Christian prince. His reputation of saintliness and fairness were well established while he was alive, and on many occasions he was chosen as an arbiter in the quarrels of the opposing rulers of Europe.



The father of 11 children - five sons and six daughters - St. Louis was a model husband from the time of his marriage at 19. He led an exemplary life, bearing constantly in mind his mother's words - *"Never forget that sin is the only great evil in the world. No mother could love her son more than I love you. But I would rather see you lying dead at my feet than know that you had offended God by one mortal sin."*

In 1230 the King forbade all forms of usury, in accordance with the teachings of the Christian religion. Where the profits of the Jewish and Lombard money-lenders had been exorbitant, and the original borrowers could not be found, St. Louis exacted from the usurers a contribution towards the crusade which Pope Gregory was then trying to launch.

His passion was for justice and his avocation charity. One famous painting shows him as a boy king giving alms to the poor, another delivering justice under the oak of Vincennes. He built many hospitals, among them the hospital known as "Quinze-vingt" ("Fifteen-Twenty") -- a hospital for the blind and

whose name comes from the fact that it could care for 300 patients. He built homes for reformed prostitutes. Every day, he met with the poor personally and saw to it that they were fed, inviting them to dine with him, and washing their feet in imitation of Christ at the Last Supper. He gave special attention to the indigent during Advent and Lent. St. Louis allowed no obscenity or profanity. His biographer, Joinville, wrote, *"I was a good 22 years in the King's company and never once did I hear him swear, either by God, or His Mother, or His saints. I did not even hear him name the Devil, except if he met the word when reading aloud, or when discussing what had been read."*

In his pursuit of justice, he eliminated the feudal method of conflict resolution through combat, replacing it with arbitration and judicial process. He eradicated his ancestors' "King's Court" and established popular courts in which he, himself, would hear his subjects' grievances.

St. Louis was a great patron of learning, the arts, and architecture, and under his patronage, the Sorbonne - the historic University of Paris, was founded; abbeys built; the choir, apse, and nave of St. Denis Basilica -- which contains the tombs of almost all French Kings -- were refurbished, etc. His crowning architectural glory, though, is Sainte-Chapelle ("Holy Chapel"), the beautiful chapel with the walls of stained glass that sits on the tiny Ile de la Cité right in the middle of Paris, in the Seine River. This chapel was built to house a part of the Crown of Thorns and a piece of the True Cross which he purchased from Emperor Baldwin II in Constantinople. Ste. Chapelle became St. Louis's personal royal chapel. Always faithful to the church, St. Louis freed many Archbishops and Bishops imprisoned by the Pisans. He then defended Innocent IV against the soldiers of the Emperor, forcing Frederick II in 1247 to cease his efforts to seize the Pontiff.

St. Louis (continued)

Louis' piety and kindness towards the poor was much celebrated. He went on two crusades, in his mid-30s in 1248 (Seventh Crusade) and then again in his mid-50s in 1270 (Eighth Crusade). In his first



Crusade, St. Louis fought nobly and with great honor, forbidding his men to kill prisoners and always expecting them to act as Christians. But he lost the battle in Mansoura, Egypt, and, weakened by dysentery, was captured. During his captivity, he sang the Divine Office every day with two chaplains and conducted himself with such honor as to impress his captors. When the Sultan was killed by his own emirs, King Louis was set free, but didn't immediately return to Europe; instead, he went to the Holy Land, and remained there in order to help fortify the Christian colonies, not returning to France until 1254.

Very dedicated to the cause of peace, he did much to curb the petty, feudal warfare that caused so much harm and made treaties with Henry VIII and James I of Aragon. Although victorious in most of the battles, St. Louis voluntarily surrendered provinces to England and Aragon, hoping to cement lasting friendship between the nations.

On his second Crusade, dysentery and other diseases broke out among the crusaders. Worn with toil, illness, and austerities, King Louis died near Tunis on August 25, 1270. A quarter of a century after his death, the process of canonization was started and quickly completed. The man who was "every inch a king" became a saint of the Church in 1297, twenty-seven years after his death.

