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---FEATURES

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Mont St. Michel:
Sunday on the Rocks!

By W. C. Fields
Director, Baptist Press

On the coast of France, where Normandy and Brittany meet, stands a solitary island of rock rising abruptly out of the sea and sand: Mont St. Michel.

Sheep gaze serenely on the surrounding flatlands. High tides completely encircle the great stone pyramid with its crown of medieval church architecture. The place seems to float. Small wonder that a spot with such a dramatic thrust heavenward should be a shrine for Christian meditations during the last fifteen centuries.

The visitor mingles with throngs of pilgrims, long-robed priests and animated Frenchmen going up and down the numberless stairs. Inside the walls are the ramparts and parapets, the turreted chateaux, the terraces and little fig gardens that suddenly transport you back into the Middle Ages. Sundays are different here mainly because of the larger crowds, forever climbing and descending. You slip and slither over the slanting cobblestones clambering up to the ancient abbey which is the centerpiece of the island.

At the top of the abbey spire, 500 feet above the sea, is the gilded figure of the Archangel Michael to whom the place was dedicated in A.D. 708. The great vaulted nave of the church, the choir lofts, the cloisters with their staggered columns, the huge supporting pillars, the refectory and monks quarters, echo now not with the ritual of worship but with the tramp of tourist feet. Today the Gothic and Romanesque architecture is officially a monument, a keepsake of a holiness that is mostly past.

Mont St. Michel is a living museum of man's struggle to relate to his maker. On its face are the scars of time and scattered over its rocky core are the chapels and battlements which attest to unending struggles between the sacred and the secular.

The place is a fortress and a good one. Often besieged, it was never taken by an assaulting army. In 1434 Henry V and the English tried to capture it and failed. Beside the main gate to the abbey city is one of the abandoned English cannons. It fired stone cannonballs. During the Wars of Religion the fort was attacked by the Huguenots, but to no avail.

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Wandering the labyrinth of chapels, dormitories, crypts, cisterns, hallways, libraries, archives and ancient workrooms, looking downward from the massive walls and glancing out narrow windows, far below the surrounding sea and tidal flats are always in view. The area has Europe's highest tides. They recede to reveal quicksand. Twice daily the water of the English Channel rushes in and out with the speed of a galloping horse. St. Aubert and the Benedictine monks knew what they were doing when they staked off this impregnable retreat site.

On the rocks of Le Mont St. Michel time telescopes and you walk back down the centuries. It is almost too much to grasp, particularly to us Americans for whom a 35-year old Coca Cola sign is quite a historic relic. But there it stands, a kind of rock of the ages, mute evidence of all the light and darkness which has attended man's search for faith through hundreds of generations.

Here was once a shrine to Belen, the Celtic god of light. Later there was one to the Roman god Mercury. Toward the end of the fifth century the mountain (once called Mt. Tombe) became a place of Christian worship. St. Aubert, the bishop of nearby Avranches (a pivotal place in the Normandy invasion of 1944) began a sanctuary here in A.D. 708.

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From then on the good monks would shake-down the tourists to add another level to the abbey, put a porch on here and there and keep the stone-carvers busy. Some of this fund-raising in the days of your went into the defense budget. One can hear the tonsured friars explaining, "C'est le guerre, monsieur!" It is the war, sir! A kind of all-purpose rationale.

They did quite well for the building fund. The present abbey (no ground breaking ceremony among these rocks) was begun in 1017. And their building program is still going on! A USA-type Baptist church building fund campaign that exceeds three years shows exceptionally rare perseverance among the saints. Not so, the little clergymen in sandals and horsehair robes. By the time William of Normandy set out to conquer England (1066) the monastery on Le Mont St. Michel was rich enough to provide six warships for him.

More ecclesiastical architecture piled up with the thirteenth and sixteenth century in excelsis. Carvings, tapestries and statuary have thinned out somewhat, following the depredations of various groups who at times controlled the site. (The place was used as a prison at one melancholy stage.) Still around and noteworthy are the bas relief sculptures of the Four Evangelists with their traditional symbols--Matthew and the angel, Mark and the winged lion, Luke and the winged calf, John and the eagle.

Today Le Mont is a treasure island of the builder's art with its great vertical buttresses and crenelated walls, its Gothic pinnacles at giddy heights, its grotesque gargoyles and petrified lacework, all relics of a long stretch of Christian history when devotion tended to turn to stone. This era was not without its excesses of zeal, but its handiwork lives on.

Descent from the mountain of St. Michael is down Le Grand Rue and by the selfsame cobblestones that tilt as well as slope and are worn smooth by the footfall of earlier visitors likewise moving back to the sea. As in olden times, the narrow walks are lined with half-timbered Norman houses, shops, inns, and hostles that fetch twice the prices of mainland establishments.

Holiday trippers today are offered a "menu gastronomique" including little oysters and cherrystone clams, omlettes and cider to fortify them for the monastic architecture.

Then there are the inevitable postcards and guidebooks. Merchants of souvenir crucifixes and synthetic cockleshells crouch like hermit crabs in every available corner. Money-changers at the temple have never been easily intimidated. And Sunday is like any other work day to the hawkers and peddlers.

Once down the steep slopes, out through the ancient fortified gate and across the causeway headed for the mainland, Mont St. Michel again gradually disappears into the sea-mists and lapses into the mystique of history.

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Texas Foundation Executive
To Return to Law Practice

12/21/72

DALLAS (BP)--George L. Shearin, associate secretary of the Baptist Foundation of Texas, has resigned to return to private law practice here, following 11 years with the foundation.

As associate secretary, Shearin helped establish numerous trusts and funds administered by the foundation for the benefit of Baptist institutions and agencies.

Shearin left his Waco law practice in 1955 to join the Texas Baptist Executive Board as endowment secretary and later as the first director of the Texas Baptist Stewardship Division. In those positions, Shearin worked closely with the foundation before being named associate secretary in 1961.

As stewardship chairman at First Baptist Church, Dallas, Shearin recently directed the church's 1973 budget campaign for \$3,027,043, which was oversubscribed. He has also spoken at Baptist conferences in several states.

Shearin is a member of several national committees majoring in tax-encouraged giving and estate planning. Recently he has devoted considerable time to a study of proposed legislation affecting philanthropy.

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