



FLAVIGNY THE SWEET

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Flavigny can pass for one of the most beautiful villages of Burgundy. Its houses of ashlar, noble, old places gnawed by lichen and moss, with the windows fashioned in the old way, surround the church at the center of the village, mounted like a crown upon a tooth. The narrow nave of the church of Saint-Genest shows vaulting of a delicate gothic style; a lace tribune connects the two lateral parts of the building. A whole battery of statues attracts the eye: the wooden monks of the stalls, the Angel of the Annunciation and the Virgin breastfeeding, with a little Jesus suckling greedily in her arms.

Downstairs, at the village gate, the seminary of the Society of St. Pius X sends out a number of young abbots who pass through the narrow streets in black cassocks, without buttons or buckles on their belts. The park where these good seminarians stroll opens onto the Alesia valley. A huge Crucifix at the end of the park dominates the view like a victory on a ship that triumphs over the horizon—the sentinel before the barbarians. We then learn that Louis de Funès participated in the renovation of part of the church and that one of the first bishops of Mosul rests in the cemetery among the sisters. At the entrance of the village, not far from the large gate of Saint Joseph, the old abbey of Saint Peter houses the confectionery, remarkable for its aniseed with exquisite perfumes: mandarin, violet, rose. The loving shepherd and the greedy shepherdess, he dowdy, she the pretty pearl, illustrate these very good sweets and never fail to charm.

There are abbeys which look like citadels in the scrubland; others are havens and border a river; the abbey of Flavigny is a castle in the countryside. These Benedictines lived happily first in Clairval, Switzerland, in the early 1970s, stemming from the Olivetan order. Then, following Dom Joly, they made their way through the peasant lands of Burgundy. No, they have not been there for a thousand years. Recently arrived, on the scale of Christianity, as if no accident of history had jostled them, they seem peaceful in their home. The abbey is housed in a former 18th century pleasure castle.

In the main street, in front of a Swiss household, owners of a black tractor, the facade of the abbey. Straight, severe, sober. A statue of Saint Joseph, another of the Holy Queen. The church is a kind of upturned ship's hold, carved in one piece. On the polished and shiny marble floor is engraved the cross of Saint Benedict. At Compline, one can only see the cuckoo clock, as you let yourself be carried off by the wave of the Psalms in the darkness, borne by the determined voices of the monks. Then the statue of the Virgin lights up for the Salve Regina. Mary dazzled replaces the moon's luminescence.

After crossing the courtyard of the Ursulines, where a crucifix is planted, bearing the words: "*Stat crux*

dum volvitur orbis," the sun turning around the cross like a dial, the main building, in the heart of the abbey, shows a classical and neat façade. The stone is round and polished, the forms majestic and masterful. From the main staircase, where a magnificent Piéta is enthroned, you arrive at the refectory of the 1950s, tiled as in a hospital. Through a door, you pass from a wooded and classical sacristy to the chapter house, a former ballroom with deep mirrors and precious moldings. From the outside, the courtyard of honor has cachet, the façade has allure; a kind of grace that a classical play of the walls and high windows, as was savored during the Regency period, gives this abbey, set on this Burgundian acropolis, the appearance of a hermitage and a hunting lodge; a place of retreat from the world without austerity or pain.

A statue of the merciful Christ rises above the building. The effigy, dipped in gold, shines. In front of this main courtyard is a terrace; from the terrace, an exquisite walk leads down to the gardens. From the fruit trees, the Mirabelle plums, one passes through an alley of narrow trees to a vegetable garden, where a brood of hens lives among fields of leeks and potatoes. Further down is a bush artfully trimmed according to the laws of topiary at the level of a remarkable belvedere. And further down still, sloping paths descend into the forests. You should see the monks dressed in white, on their monastic 31, processioning on August 15 with Mary crowned. The walls are then covered with a blue sheet printed with fleur-de-lis. Long live Mary, Protector of France, Mother of priests, Guardian of our homes!

October mornings are filled with joy: a sheet of light wool spins over the valley. Out of nowhere a polished amber stone rises, rolls into the sky and spreads its golden rays from west to east. The whole village ends up embellished in yellow gold. The trees rain their leaves in the park. The leaves die with their colors more varied, more sonorous than those of life. The splendor of autumn here results from a degradation of organs from which life has withdrawn. The singing services, the bellowing of the cows below, resounds in the cells and accompanies the awake monk in falsetto.

It was not only the delicate and powdered nobility that sought to flee the city and enjoy the relaxation of the countryside, nor even the great families of the cities to escape boredom, Schifanoia, or the monarchs of Prussia to covet without care. The Benedictines too are happy here; hermits of the pastures, dead to the world and alive in the woods. They themselves in this countryside seem carefree. They are quiet, quiescent, neither hurrying nor running. We see them getting busy and then disappearing, suddenly, going underground, we don't know; or sitting in a tractor, unloading a lot of manure and a mound of vegetables. Sometimes they wander in nature. On Thursday, day of relaxation, they go around the lakes of the region and rest. *Festina lente*. Saint Joseph de Clairval is about joy.

Life turns with the flavor of the seasons, without hardness nor fatigue. Matins, rings the hour, when Paris wakes up. The monks in cool, white robes, shine for God, who rejoices their sparkling youth. And the wise bent monk carries his thirty years in white. The church, immersed in a skillful ballet of light and shadow, draws frozen figures of monks for Lauds, one in white on his knees, the other in black prostrate among the massive stalls. They take time for the short offices, and shorten the long ones; they never dine or lunch without abundance, with little wine, little fantasy, and a proportion to contemplative reverie.

The Abbot says a *Pater noster* in the measure of a military chant, at a walk. You might have known Father Thomas leaning on his cane, explaining masterpieces of Christianity, lucid and gifted with an unimaginable energy under the plenitude and the quietude that his blue eyes illustrate. And Father Alphonse, charismatic like those actors of the 70's who have disappeared, serious and gentle, deep and slow like the rare old car engines; or Father Vianney, the pivotal tower of this chess game, prior, director of the printing house, father-hotelier, Catholic sphinx, with a face as thin as a mask, mobile gait of changeless time, measured transport of humility. These monks and others have practiced the retreats of St. Ignatius in Flavigny and everywhere in the kingdom of France.

These methodical exercises for the soul, comparable to a gymnastics of the body, are for the spirit the means of washing the soul with bleach. Alternating teachings and meditations, over five days, you passes from the underworld to the glory of the Lord, under the standard of Christ and against the standard of the devil. These exercises, which have made the merit of the saints, known and recognized in history, effervescent in consciences like a pill against stomach aches of passions and troubles, have the hardness about them, the memory of a Catholicism of combat. Everywhere one celebrates, and hell exists. While we had perhaps forgotten it, here are the meditations reminding us of it. We are not laughing. We are faced with our creaturely misery, as if we were fat, grey, bloated, in the mirror, in front of the portrait of our condition. It is with a fear mingled with love for the good God that you make your way to the end of the retreat, falling moved, after the general confession, reassured by the preacher monk as to his own discouragement. And after five days of silence, the world comes back to us, and we come back to ourselves reassured, strengthened, galvanized in the perspective of our salvation and our duty.

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