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THE CHAPELS OF THE VALAIS

By Kathleen Watts

You have only to enter the Valais for your attention to be drawn immediately to the number of churches, chapels and bell-towers silhouetted against the mountains. The river Rhône makes its way from the glacier which bears its name, high above the valley de Conches towards Lake Lemman and the road runs beside it. As you drive along, up on the Alp, white chapels can be seen. On every promontory a church or chapel seems to be perched.

If you leave the road and start walking, with each step you take you are aware of another sign of piety — oratories on a rocky mountain path; wooden crosses stuck into the earth recalling the imminence of death in the mountains; images of patron saints nailed roughly on to blocks of wood. Increasingly it is brought to mind that you are in a deeply religious country.

Images of wood and stone, but these are only manifestations of a living faith. The earliest memory of a Valaisan is the sign of the cross his mother taught him to make before putting him to sleep in his wooden bed; learning his catechism — sewing seed in already well-tilled earth.

At the very beginning of his life the child is left alone in the pastures to guard the animals, protected only by heaven and his patron saint. It is enough to ask the help of Saint Antony to find the goat which has strayed and if the saint turns a deaf ear there is always the Blessed Virgin Mary who never leaves a humble and sincere request without an answer. It is not surprising, therefore, that in later years the grown man builds a chapel in gratitude to the saint who in his youth helped him.

From birth to death success or failure is measured out on ungrateful patches of land and the peasant knows from childhood that the fight for existence is in every moment of the day. A battle against drought, against cold, illness, frost and at the worst avalanches. What would become of these people if they had not an absolute faith; faith in a better world where the rewards are more justly distributed. The church teaches them that the only true sense in living is a life completely devoted to duty.

The perfect picture of the religious Valaisan is given by the women; young girls working in the fields — making hay by hand — tending the vines; young wives kneeling before

the chapel altars praying to the Virgin to give them children; mothers who, finally tired, worn out and broken but continuing without any complaint of the terms of the journey, because every act throughout their lives has been to the glory of God.

The chapels of the Valais are generally of much the same form, built in the late seventeenth or eighteenth century of stone carried to the Alp on the back of mules. The walls are covered with stucco and painted white; a nave; a simple apse with a vaulted roof and most astonishing of all an elaborate baroque altar covered with gold. The floor is stone, the pews are of unpolished wood roughly carved and the interior walls which are also white are hung with pictures of the stations of the Cross. The roofs are covered either with heavy slabs of slate used for roofing in the Valais or with *tavillon*, small pieces of wood which are fitted into one another like a mosaic. Over the apse there is a small bell tower. There are very often ex-voto of arms and legs and hands, hanging on a cord by the altar, or sometimes very naïve drawings.

Then also in the Valais there are rock chapels such as Longeborgne and Notre Dame des Scex which is



Rarogne (Valais) by courtesy of SNTO

built in the rocky cliff above the Abbey of Saint Maurice. These chapels were inhabited by hermits and the legend says that miracles took place in them. A monk of Saint Maurice, Amé, was not satisfied with the behaviour of his brothers at the Abbey and as he was praying one day before a statue of the Virgin he was surprised to see the statue fly away before his very eyes to a cave in the cliff above the Abbey. He hastily went to retrieve her and brought her back only to find she had again disappeared and regained the place she had formerly chosen. He then felt it must be meant and consequently he made it a place of retreat. After his death the place was abandoned. One day a shepherd boy lost one of his sheep and found it lying in the chapel in front of the Virgin. The boy felt that the statue complained of being alone and so he again brought it back to the Abbey but again it disappeared. The boy then had a dream in which an angel joined him in building a chapel in the rocks to shelter the marvellous statue and to honour the Mother of God. With the help of the Abbey the chapel was built and the statue appeared satisfied and remained in place. Many miracles followed and the walls of the chapel are covered with ex-voto. The story is typical of the reasons of the construction of the chapels of the Valais but by far the most frequented pilgrimage is Longeborgne. From Sion, Sierre,

Saint Leonard, Granges and Grône the people come even today to pray to Notre Dame des Compassions to give them courage to face their everyday problems.

On a clear day you can see the church of Visperterminen from Visp but the old mule track has disappeared and now a good motor road leads to this charming village which is fast being turned into a holiday resort. A chair lift swings the visitor over the forest and up to the Alp. Leading from the village to the centre of the forest is the old Way of the Cross. It is considered to be the most beautiful in the Valais if not in Switzerland, far outshining that of Saas Grund—Saas Fee. The oratories with polychrome figures almost of life size tell the story of the Passion in an astonishingly moving way with an imagination which could well have been inspired by a Flemish painter.

The oratories, most of which have porches with double columns and steps leading up to them, border the well worn mountain path from the village to the Alp. The eleventh station is a chapel of surprising dimensions and fine architecture. Surrounded by larch trees, a large space is reserved where the people may stand and there is an outside altar so that the priest may hold mass out of doors. It must be a good prayer in the silence of the forest

when the priest raises the host amongst the branches.

The porch of the chapel has columns and the entrance door is beautifully carved but it is the magnificence of the three glittering altars which astonishes most. Behind the communion table the principal altar shines with gold, the Virgin triumphant mounting to the sky surrounded by angels. But it is the altar on the left side that is the most frequented; it is here the ex-voto hang. One of particular interest is a horse shoe with a lock of human hair. The daughter of the forge angered her father by her love for an unsuitable young man; she was turned into a horse and ran away from home. One day the father was nailing the shoes on a horse in his forge when a voice was heard to say, "Father, it is your daughter you shoe."

The chapel at Riederalp is at approximately 2,000 metres on an alp above Brigue. It was built in 1679. The chapel at Hohbitzen just below the Breithorn is even higher. To this day the only way to get to it is to climb up a rough mountain path leading from Visp up the Baltshiederstal — a six- or seven-hour climb.

Indeed these chapels are not only a sign of devotion in past centuries but of a living faith.

Kathleen Watts



Corpus Christi Celebration at Visperterminen (Valais), by courtesy of SNTO.