

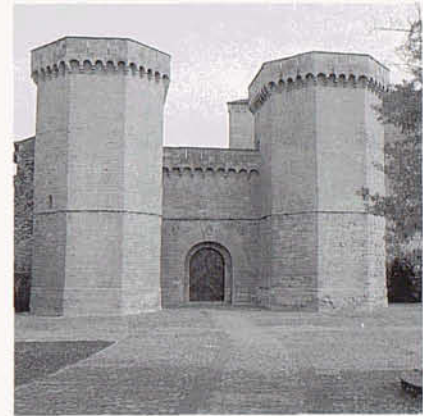
CATALAN MONASTERIES

SANTA MARIA DE MONTSERRAT, ON THE MOUNTAIN OF THE SAME NAME, THE GEOGRAPHICAL CENTRE OF CATALONIA, IS UNDOUBTEDLY THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THE COUNTRY'S MONASTERIES, NOT ONLY FROM THE RELIGIOUS POINT OF VIEW, BUT ALSO BECAUSE OF ITS CONTRIBUTIONS TO CULTURE, ART AND LITERATURE.

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The monastic life which once flourished in Catalonia is still of some importance and offers the visitor a magnificent opportunity to connect with what we could unexaggeratedly call the "soul" of the country.

Leaving aside the nunneries, the following are the principal offers amongst the monasteries that are now functioning in Catalonia.

The monastery of *Santa Maria de Montserrat*, on the mountain of the same

name, the geographical centre of Catalonia, is undoubtedly the most important of all, not only from the religious point of view, but also because of its contributions to culture, art, literature and even, especially in particular emergencies, its national and political role. The religious importance of Montserrat is increased by the devotion that all Catalans, even those who have no attachment to the Church, profess towards the Virgin that is worshipped in the basilica. This Virgin is a

twelfth century Romanesque sculpture of outstanding beauty, with black hands and face, for which reason she is given the affectionate nickname of *La Moreneta*, from the diminutive of the word for dark or brown.

The monastery belongs to the Benedictine order and is at present made up of some eighty monks, who ensure the magnificence of the worship as well as carrying out a series of quite remarkable cultural activities. Its choir school is





known all over the world. The thirty boys who belong to it take part in the celebration of the major festivals, alongside the monks, and sing the famous Montserratine Salve to the Virgin every day. It does not perform during the Christmas or Easter holidays or during July.

The most important acts of worship open to the general public are as follows: at 11.00, concelebrated conventual Mass, of special interest on Sundays and feast days, when the choir also participates; it is broadcast by radio on Sundays and by television on special occasions. At 13.00, the choir performs the Salve (except, of course, during July): this is one of the most popular events, especially amongst foreigners; before the performance of the Salve, there are Bible readings in six languages and a joint prayer session; after the choir's polyphonic performance of the Salve, everybody sings the *Virolai*, the most popular hymn in Catalonia, with words by our national poet, monsignor Jacint Verdaguer. At 18.45, Vespers, after which the choir performs the Salve and another polyphonic piece.

The religious celebrations at Christmas and Easter are especially splendid, and are attended by people from all over Catalonia, as well as other parts of Spain and even from abroad. Retreats, conferences, spiritual exercises, etc. are held regularly in the monastery's lodgings. As for culture, the visitor can contemplate the objects on display in the museum of prehistory and that of the Near East, as well as in the gallery of antique art and the gallery of contemporary Catalan art. Researchers can apply to visit the library and the archive, which

contain documents of incalculable value. The monastery of *Santa Maria de Poblet*, in the region of Conca de Barberà, 46 kilometres from Tarragona and 121 from Barcelona, is another important centre of monastic life, which once had a decisive influence over political and cultural developments in Catalonia. Now, after many years of abandonment, it has recovered its importance, thanks to the presence of a community of Cistercian monks which, though not very big, is effective and conscientious. From the point of view of tourism, Poblet is a must for all those interested in acquiring a genuine understanding of the religious, artistic, cultural and political history not only of Catalonia, but of all the territories of the Crown of Aragon. The monastery's church and other buildings, a magnificent example of Catalan Gothic, are open to the public every day, from 10.00 to 12.30 and from 15.00 to 18.00, with the exception of Christmas Day.

As regards the acts of worship open to all, the most interesting are the conventual High Mass (at 08.00 on weekdays and 10.00 on Sundays and holidays), sung Vespers (at 19.00) and Compline, the last mass of the day, at 20.40 (half an hour earlier in summer), which ends with the singing of the Cistercian Salve.

During Easter, without losing their typical Cistercian austerity, the services are particularly impressive and on Christmas Eve, before the Midnight Mass, very solemn Matins are held.

Another Cistercian monastery, founded in 1967 by monks from Poblet, is *Santa Maria de Solius*, near Santa Cristina d'Aro (Baix Empordà), some 30 kilometres from the city of Girona. The commu-

nity, which has eleven members, occupies a modern building, built along simple, functional lines, and uses the old parish church of Solius, which dates from the eighteenth century.

The principal services open to the public are: Laudes, or morning prayer (06.45 on weekdays, 07.15 on Sundays and holidays); conventual Mass (18.00 on weekdays, 10.00 on Sundays and holidays); Vespers, or evening prayer (19.15 and 19.00), and Compline, which ends with the singing of the Cistercian Salve (20.45 every day). The Easter celebrations are characterized by their extreme simplicity, and are enhanced by the monastery's harmonious, peaceful natural surroundings.

There is accommodation, for men only, where it is possible to spend a few days of retreat, silence and prayer beside the monks. A group of enthusiasts of the Gregorian chant has been formed under the monastery's wing and from time to time they sing mass in the ancient style of the Roman Church. On New Year's Day, they present a recital of Gregorian pieces. From Christmas to Lent, one can admire the artistic Nativity scene made by one of the monks of the community, which is visited by thousands of people every year.

Finally, there is *Santa Maria de Montalegre*, the only surviving Carthusian monastery in the *Països Catalans*, situated in the town of Tiana (Maresme), a few kilometres from Barcelona. Because of the particular characteristics of the strict enclosure that the Carthusians follow, there are not normally any acts open to the public. ■