Abbot Suger: ON WHAT WAS DONE IN HIS ADMINISTRATION

Suger was born in 1081 of a very minor knightly family. He was dedicated to the abbey of St. Denis at the age of nine or ten and came to see himself as its adopted child. Appointed abbot in 1122, he held that position until his death in 1155. The old abbey church of St. Denis had been completed in 775. By 1137 it was dilapidated and probably would have been viewed with extreme suspicion by a modern building inspector. Thus Suger decided improvement was in order and in that year he began work on the west end of the church, building a new facade with two towers and three doors. In 1140 he moved from the west end clear to the other end of the church and started to build a new choir. It was completed in 1144. The Book of Suger Abbot of St. Denis on What Was Done During his Administration is one of two works by Suger concerning the abbey church of St. Denis. It was probably begun shortly after the consecration of the choir in 1144 and finished no earlier than the end of 1148.

I.

In the twenty-third year of our administration, on a certain day when we sat in general chapter conferring with our brethren about common and private matters, these same dear brothers and sons began to beg me vigorously and in love that I should not remain silent about the fruit of our past labors but rather with pen and ink should preserve for future memory the additions which the munificence of almighty God bestowed upon this church during the time of our leadership in the acquisition of new things, the recovery of lost ones, the multiplication of refurbished possessions, the construction of buildings, and the accumulation of gold, silver, precious gems and quality textiles. From this one thing they promised us two in return: Through this memorial we should earn the prayers of succeeding brothers for the salvation of our soul; and through this example we should arouse in them a zealous commitment to the proper maintenance of God's church. We therefore, devoutly assenting to their devout and reasonable requests, without hungering for empty glory or demanding the reward of human praise or impermanent earthly reward, lest after our passing the revenues of the church should be diminished by someone's fraud, lest the abundant additions conferred upon the church by God's munificence during the time of our administration should be quietly lost by unworthy successors, we thought it proper and useful to inform present and future readers of the increase in revenues, construction of buildings and multiplication of treasures in the church of the most blessed martyrs Denis, Rusticus and Eleutherius, a church that tenderly fostered us from mothers breast to old age

XXVII. Concerning the Cast and Gilded Doors

Having summoned bronze casters and chosen sculptors, we erected the main doors, on which are represented the passion and resurrection or ascension of Christ, with great expense and heavy outlay for their gilding as befits such a noble portico. We also set up new ones on the right, and old ones on the left beneath the mosaic which, contrary to modern custom, we had placed in the tympanum. We also arranged to have the towers and upper crenelations of the front altered with an eye to beauty and, should circumstances require, to utility. We also ordered that, lest it be forgotten, the year of the consecration should be inscribed in copper-gilt letters in this way:
For the glory of the church which nurtured and raised him, Suger strove for the glory of the church, Sharing with you what is yours, oh martyr Denis. He prays that by your prayers he should become a sharer in Paradise. The year when it was consecrated was the one thousand, one hundred and fortieth year of the Word. Furthermore, the verses on the doors are these:

All you who seek to honor these doors, Marvel not at the gold and expense but at the craftsmanship of the work. The noble work is bright, but, being nobly bright, the work Should brighten the minds, allowing them to travel through the lights To the true light, where Christ is the true door. The golden door defines how it is imminent in these things. The dull mind rises to the truth through material things, And is resurrected from its former submersion when the light is seen. And on the lintel was written,

Receive, stern Judge, the prayers of your Suger, Let me be mercifully numbered among your sheep.

…

Thus sometimes when, because of my delight in the beauty of the house of God, the multicolor loveliness of the gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation, transporting me from material to immaterial things, has persuaded me to examine the diversity of holy virtues, then I seem to see myself existing on some level, as it were, beyond our earthly one, neither completely in the slime of earth nor completely in the purity of heaven. By the gift of God I can be transported in an anagogical manner from this inferior level to that superior one.

I used to confer with Jerusalemites, and I was eager to learn from those who had seen the treasures of Constantinople and decorations of Hagia Sophia whether these here were worth anything in comparison. When some considered these here to be greater, it seemed to us that, through fear of the Franks, those marvelous objects of which we had once heard had been prudently put away lest by the impetuous greed of a few stupid people the friendship nurtured between Greek and Latin should suddenly change to sedition and warfare; for cunning is a preeminently Greek characteristic. Thus it may be that there is more displayed here, where it is safe, than there, where it is unsafe because of disorders. From many trustworthy men, and from Archbishop Hugh of Laon, we have heard wonderful and nearly incredible reports concerning the superior ornamentation of Hagia Sophia and other churches. If these reports are true - or more precisely, because we believe their testimony is indeed true - then such inestimable and incomparable treasures should be set out for the judgment of many people. "Let every man abound in his own sense" (Rom. 14:5).

To me, I confess, it always has seemed right that the most expensive things should be used above all for the administration of the holy eucharist. If golden vessels, vials and mortars were used to collect "the blood of goats or calves or the red heifer, how much more" should gold vases, precious stones and whatever is most valuable among created things be set out
with continual reverence and full devotion "to receive the blood of Jesus Christ" (Heb. 9:13f). Certainly neither we nor our possessions are fit to perform this function. Even if by a new creation our substance should be changed into that of the holy cherubim and seraphim it would still offer an insufficient and unworthy service for so great and ineffable a victim. Nevertheless, we have such a great propitiation for our sins.

To be sure, those who criticize us argue that holy mind, pure heart and faithful intention should suffice for this task. These are, we agree, the things that matter most; yet we profess that we should also serve God with the external ornaments of sacred vessels, in all internal purity and in all external nobility, and nowhere is this to be done as much as in the service of the holy sacrifice. For it is incumbent upon us in every case to serve our redeemer in the most fitting way for in all things, without exception, he has not refused to provide for us, has united our nature with his in a single, admirable individual, and "setting us on his right hand" he has promised "that we will truly possess his kingdom" (Matt. 25:33f.) He is our lord who "lives and reigns forever" (Tobit 9:11; Rev. 1:18, etc.).

... Moreover, with the devotion due to the blessed Denis, we acquired vessels of gold and precious stones for the service of the Lord's table, in addition to the ones already donated for this purpose by kings of the Franks and those devoted to the church. To be specific, we ordered a big gold chalice containing one hundred forty ounces of gold and decorated with precious gems (hyacinths and topazes) as a substitute for another which had been pawned during the time of our predecessor.

Suger's chalice. Now in the National Gallery in Washington D.C.