

February 25

Robert d'Arbrissel (ca. 1045-1116) monk

In 1116 Robert d'Arbrissel, a hermit, itinerant preacher, and founder of the Order of Fontevraud, died in France. Born in the mid-eleventh century in Arbrissel, in the Breton diocese of Rennes, Robert was involved in the contradictions to the Gospel that characterized the Church of his time. While studying in Paris, he took to heart the need for reform that was becoming increasingly evident in the church, and began an authentic personal journey of conversion. When he returned to his diocese, changed as he was, he was no longer welcome and was forced to go into solitude. Thus began the 'desert period' of Robert's life. He was an erudite theologian, gifted with rare eloquence, and many disciples gathered around him. Among them were marginalized members of society and the Church, such as lepers and priests' wives who had been abandoned by their husbands at the beginning of the Gregorian reform. After some time, Robert began a ministry of itinerant preaching. He was followed by crowds of men and women of every social class and condition who were willing to become poor for Christ's sake. In 1101 Robert, who was considered a lunatic by many of the bishops and powerful figures of his time, decided that the moment had come to give his disciples a permanent home. He chose the forest of Fontevraud, and divided his new community into four groups: women, monks, penitents, and lepers. The mixed Order that resulted was predominantly female. The men in each community had the task of protecting the women, but leadership was entrusted to the women. Robert spent the last years of his life preaching and defending victims of exploitation and injustice everywhere.

A READING

Robert summoned the archbishop of Bourges and said to him, "My lord, you are my dear father, my archbishop. You know that I have always loved and obeyed you. As you also know, it was out of love for you that I came to live in this region. I want to show you my heart's will. I do not wish to be buried in Bethlehem, in Jerusalem, or in Cluny. I desire no other place than the cemetery of Fontevraud. I ask you not to bury me in the monastery or in the cloisters, but among my poor brothers in the cemetery. That is where my good priests and clerics are buried, together with my beloved lay people and my holy virgins. There rest my poor lepers; there repose the companions of my earthly pilgrimage, those who followed me for the love of God, those who bore hardships and privations, destitution and calamities with me, those who gave away all of their belongings upon hearing my preaching. If I am buried in the cemetery, the living will cherish it more, and will come to invoke the Lord's mercy upon it.

(from the Life of Robert d'Arbrissel)

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (amsir/yakkatit):

Menna di Al-Asmunayn (7th cent.), monk and martyr (Coptic Church)

LUTHERANS:

Walburga (d. 779), abbess in France

MARONITES:

Felix III (d. 492), pope

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND GREEK CATHOLICS:

Tarasius (d. 806), archbishop of Constantinople

Alexis (d. 1378), metropolitan of Russia (Russian Church)

Prochorus the Georgian (d. 1066), monk (Georgian Church)