

Easter Moon – The Harmony of Heaven, Earth and Faith

One of the most beautiful sights of the year, is the harmony of the Heavens, the Earth and our Christian Faith above Boppard.

by Paul Gregory Dolan

Jesus Christ's resurrection, His victory over death, has been celebrated every Easter for 800 years from St. Severus' Basilica. Easter is signaled from the heavens. At Easter the moon rises out of the eastern sky to a central point between the bell towers of Boppard's Saint Severus basilica. A triad of harmony between heaven, earth and faith radiates peace and tranquility over the most important day of the Christian calendar. Despite years, even generations, of neglect, this phenomenon remains a safe anchor for faith and humanity during chaotic times.

We remember that Constantine the Great, the sole emperor of the Roman Empire from 324 to 337 A.D., was the first of Rome's emperors to accept Christianity. His council of Nicaea in 325 was most important for Christianity. Not only was the Nicene Creed adopted, but the bishops resolved a longstanding dispute between the churches in Rome and Alexandria, related to when Easter should be celebrated. They agreed to set the date for Easter's celebration on the first Sunday following the full moon appearing after March 21. Easter Sunday is preceded by the Holy Week: Palm Sunday through Easter night. Faithful Christians follow Christ's suffering during the Holy Week with strict fasting, ceremonies and Holy Mass. In the Rhineland, where Boppard is located, even weddings are prohibited during Holy Week.

Because Holy Week is and was so important, the architects of the Basilica of St. Severus, in the 12th century, apparently considered very carefully how Boppard's primary church



should be built. From the volume, ***Stadt Boppard, Die Kunstdenkmäler von Rheinland-Pfalz, Deutsche Kunstverlag, 1988***, (pages 203-212) it is pointed out that, because of the sandy earth on the River Rhein's shoreline, it was not an easy task to build the mighty towers. The towers were the first to be erected, long before its nave. Architects carefully studied the position of the moon during Holy Week and constructed the towers, in the sacred eastern direction. In those days, literacy was low; most people could not read. The belfries were designed to signal to Boppard both Holy Week and Easter Sunday. According to a report about the St. Severus church by the French architect, Johann Claudius Lassaulx, in 1842, "The mere fact that no external bracing was used speaks for a great constructive understanding of the designers of Boppard's basilica."

Observing the moon phases, down through the ages, even from the Sumerians and Egyptians, has helped to measure time, determining planting and harvest seasons and configure calendars. The oldest European lunar calendar is over 30,000 years and comes down to us from Ice Age hunters. Boppard's St. Severus bell-towers were designed to regulate the rhythm of life with bells for holy mass, the noonday, the hour, and warning of fire, as well as, for deaths. Yet also, to signal the holiest day of the year at Eastertide.

For us today, the enormous efforts of Boppard's architects and church builders has been all but forgotten. Nonetheless, because the unique phenomena of belfies and moon, can best be viewed from the west end of St. Severus, better known as the Ritter-Beyer-Neighborhood, Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa's selected Mayor of Boppard established his residence here within sight of the divine signal for Eastertide. His name is recorded in history as Royal Knight Conrad Beyer. (Friedrich I, Barbarossa, meaning in Italian, "red beard" lived from 1122-1190.) Nobility in Boppard during the middle ages, such as Baron of Eltz, or von der Leyen or the monks from the Mountains of Carmel in Israel, all established their residences in sight of the Easter moon. About 1200 the Knights Templar established their central meeting place in Boppard within the same proximity to the St. Severus basilica also in the Ritter-Beyer-Neighborhood and across the lane from today's Winegrower, Rolf Bach.

Our basilica is a splendid example of late Romanesque architecture with a double tower concept, popular in the Rheinlands at that time (see Cathedral of Cologne). The belfries were built between 1160 and 1190. Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa's well-documented visit to Boppard in 1180, brings out the significance the Emperor's influence on Boppard's basilica. The gateway to the baptismal font is in the south tower. To prevent evil spirits from entering, one can see the typical knotted pillar or "Lombard pillars" on both sides of the entrance. The Emperor and Staufer nobility liked to use them as a demonstration of their power. Such pillars were inspired by similar knotted pillars at the entrance Solomon's Holy Temple of Jerusalem. Only with the blessing of the Pope and the Emperor, was Boppard's basilica built. As the main house of God, in a Free Imperial City of the Holy Roman Empire, Saint Severus was one of the most expensive and revered buildings north of the Alps. Pope Francis, who studied German in Boppard in 1985 and held mass there, elevated St. Severus to the status of basilica in December 2014.

With amazement and delight, we are filled with wonder that the bell towers remain beautifully erect after 800 years, as they continue to fulfill their sacred functions. May they stand another 800 years and longer to chime in the Holy Week, Easter Sunday, Christmas and the New Year.

(Picture taken by Paul Dolan, 6 April 2020 at 7 P.M. during the Holy Week.)