TWENTY-EIGHT

Te Deum

After returning to Paris in January 1785, Lafayette saw little of Jefferson—likely to the surprise of both men—over the coming months. When the marquis wasn't traveling, his work in Paris, along with family and social obligations, consumed most of his time. Jefferson, for his part during that period, was similarly unavailable—dogged by ailments that kept him inside the Hôtel Tetebout.

By spring Lafayette and the Adamses were worried. In April, after visiting the Hôtel Tetebout, the marquis shared his concerns with James Madison—writing on the sixteenth: "Mr. Jefferson's Health is Recovering," he reported. "But He Keeps Himself too Closely Confined."

Days later, to coax him out, Adrienne and Lafayette asked Jefferson to join them and the Adamses for a *Te Deum*, the mass that takes its name from the singing of that praiseful hymn, at Notre Dame Cathedral. The ceremony was to celebrate the birth, days earlier, of Prince Louis-Charles. Upon his first breath, the prince—for whom the title Duke of Normandy, after a century of disuse, was revived—became, after his older brother, Louis-Joseph, second in line to the Bourbon throne.

Queen Marie Antoinette—Adrienne's friend—remained at Versailles with

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her newborn son. But the child's father, King Louis XVI, was expected to attend the *Te Deum*. And so on April 1, the appointed day of the service, Nabby Adams recalled, her family had an early meal and left for Paris. Having been asked by Madame Lafayette to meet at 2:00 at her family's residence, the Adamses took their carriage from Auteil to the rue de Bourbon. There, inside the Hôtel de Lafayette, after being welcomed by Lafayette and Adrienne, they found a clutch of other already arrived guests—including Thomas Jefferson.

An hour and a half later Jefferson joined the Adamses in their carriage for the final three miles of the day's trip, from the rue de Bourbon to the Île de la Cité, the snug bridge-hemmed island in the Seine from which the larger city grew and on whose southeastern corner the great cathedral sat. So crowded with celebrants were Paris's streets and sidewalks that afternoon that only the mass presence of soldiers kept traffic moving. As Nabby recalled: "Mr. Jefferson" speculated that "there were as many people in the streets as there were in the State of Massachusetts, or any other of the States."

Crossing the Pont Neuf to the Île de la Cité, the travelers eventually reached the cathedral—its marbled Gothic facade and two soaring towers agleam in the spring-afternoon sun. "It is the most beautiful building I have seen," Nabby recalled. Inside, the Lafayette entourage was soon seated, "in as good a place as any in the Church, which we owed to the Politeness of Mme. de la Fayette," Nabby's younger brother, John Quincy, wrote in his diary. "In the middle of the choir below us were several rows of benches, upon which the king's train sat when he came, while he and his two brothers were before all the benches, and directly opposite the altar."

However, before (or perhaps after) the Lafayette party took their seats, reported Nabby, one of its members quietly slipped away: "The marquis was with the king." Meanwhile other congregants continued to pour into the cathedral—its deep, otherwise shadowy recesses illuminated by its stained-glass windows and hundreds of flickering candles. Ministers, military officers, court officials, and other nobility, seated in chairs, filled the spaces closest to the altar; peasants stood distantly in the nave, closer to the edifice's three front entrances.

"Soon after we got there," John Quincy recorded, "the bishops arrived two by two. There were about twenty five of them. They had black Robes on, with a white muslin skirt which descended from the waste, down two thirds of the

way to the ground; and a purple kind of a mantle over their shoulders." Then came the main event: Following the archbishop of Paris, Louis XVI entered the cathedral.

> The Archbishop of Paris had a mitre upon his head. When the king came, he went out to the Door of the Church to receive him: and as soon as his Majesty had got to his place and fallen upon his knees, they began to sing the Te Deum, which lasted about half an hour, and in which we heard some exceeding fine music. The voices were admirable. The Archbishop of Paris sung for about a Couple of Minutes, near the end, that it might be said, he had sung the Te Deum. His voice seems to be much broken. As soon as the singing was over the king and the Court immediately went away.

That evening fireworks exploded in Paris's sky. The Adams family, accustomed to New England Congregationalism's bare-bones austerity, found themselves taken aback by the day's pageantry—the pyrotechnics, unfamiliar Catholic rituals, Latin liturgy, exquisite stained-glass windows, ghostly white statues, tolling bells, clerical costumes, soaring organ cadences, incense, and opulently ornamental Gothic architecture—indeed the sheer *oldness* of the medieval cathedral. "What a charming sight," John Quincy exclaimed. "An absolutist king of one of the most powerful Empires on earth, and perhaps a thousand of the first personages in that Empire, adoring the divinity who created them, and acknowledging that he can in a moment reduce them to the Dust from which they sprung."

To Adrienne, meanwhile, according to her biographer, the Adamses' mere presence at the *Te Deum* marked for her a personal success: "It was nothing less than a triumph to have introduced so fanatically Protestant a family into Notre-Dame." Even to Adrienne's tastes, however, though she was accustomed to such pomp, the festivities erred on the side of excess: "It was too magnificent, and there was too much noise and bustle," she complained to Nabby.

Jefferson was similarly awestruck. Writing hours later to William Short—who, though invited, had failed to attend—Jefferson found himself at a loss to describe the event: "You lost much by not attending the Te deum at Notre dame yesterday," he wrote:

> It bids defiance to description. I will only observe to you in general that there were more judges, ecclesiastics and Grands seigneurs present, than Genl. Washington had of simple souldiers in his army, when he took the Hessians at Trenton, beat the British at Princeton, and hemmed up the British army at Brunswick a whole winter.

But what did Jefferson, the reliable republican, otherwise think—perhaps politically—of what he had witnessed? Unfortunately no other words describing his reaction survive. Perhaps, however, in their absence, the reaction of another articulate American republican—Nabby Adams—fairly approximates Jefferson's:

> It was impossible not to make many reflections upon this august and superb ceremony, and upon the sentiments people discovered for their King. But in this government I should think it was right and necessary. If the man who has the whole kingdom at his disposal, is not respected, and thought of as next to their God, he will not long sustain his power. And however wrong it may be, it is unavoidable.[1]