

France's ancient burial brotherhood adapts to COVID-19

The Confrérie des Charitables de Saint-Éloi continues the duties it has performed since 1188

➔ In Béthune, France, the Charitable Brothers of Saint-Éloi were founded in the 12th Century to help families bury their loved ones during another pandemic - the plague - when gravediggers found themselves overwhelmed by the number of deaths. More than 800 years later, the brotherhood remains a core part of the city's approach to caring for bereaved people in financial hardship or without loved ones - including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wearing capes, white gloves and bicorne (two-cornered) hats, and known as "the Charitables," the brothers of the Confrérie des Charitables de Saint-Éloi quietly perform their work, transporting coffins using a wooden cart, bearing them to the graveside and lowering them into the ground. To the sound of a single bell tolling, they traditionally remove their hats, murmur "requiescat in pace" (rest in

peace) in unison and bow their heads. Any member who does not fulfil the ritual correctly, or in time, pays a small fine.

Despite coronavirus, the 40 members of the brotherhood continue their work in Bethune, but now wear masks and maintain France's required one-metre distance. Members of the brotherhood include doctors, restaurateurs, lawyers, insurance salesmen and factory workers, and they normally bury between 200-300 people a year.

According to folklore, two blacksmiths - Gauthier de Béthune and Germon de Beuvry - saw Saint-Éloi, the patron saint of iron and steel workers, in their dreams, and were ordered to found a charity together to help out with the need to carry out burials during the plague.

The brotherhood is a secular organisation. Having originally been a religious one, it left the church in 1853 and has operated continuously across 800 years, other than a brief period



when it was banned during the French Revolution. Reinstated soon afterwards, by Napoleon Bonaparte, the hats worn by the brotherhood remain a tribute to him.

“Our role is to be present to ensure the dead are given a correct, dignified burial, whoever they are. It is a role of paying respect to the deceased that the brotherhood has carried out for more than 830 years,” the chief brother, Robert Guenot, told the media in a recent interview. “We are a charitable organisation so what we do is done for free to anyone no matter their religion. We have buried Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, evangelicals, Christians and atheists.”

During the pandemic, the brotherhood is also collecting and distributing food for families in need. In an interview with a local website, Robert Guenot added: “We’ve reduced our activities because there are no longer any religious ceremonies, but we’ve also reduced our presence: there are now only five volunteers per service, as opposed to the usual 11, because we don’t want to penalise families.”

“We try to protect ourselves as much as possible. Anyone who feels ill, of course, refuses to be in the service. There’s no taking risks,” added Patrick Tijeras, a recent recruit to the brotherhood. “We feel that we have a social value, just as a sick person has the right to be cared for, the dead person has the right to this dignified treatment.”

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