

# ÉTROUBLES

**Santa Maria Assunta Parish**

**Titular Saint:** Our Lady of the Assumption, celebrated on 15<sup>th</sup> August

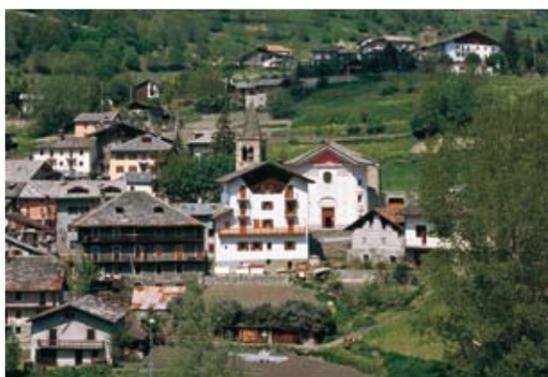
**Altitude:** 1280 m – **Inhabitants:** 491

Étroubles, already inhabited in Roman times, is located on the road to the Great Saint Bernard Pass, which has been a way across the Alps since ancient times. The importance of the trail in the Middle Ages, because of it being part of the *Via Francigena*, led to the development of the small village where a hospice for pilgrims and wayfarers existed back in 1317. At that time, on the eastern tip of the village next to the parish church stood the ancient tower of the local noble family named De La Tour of Étroubles, who also bore the title of Lords of Bosses. A famous member of the family was Pierre of Étroubles, Bishop of Aosta in 1258. The family died out at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and its possessions were purchased by the Vachéry family, whose tower still today rises in the centre of the namesake hamlet located uphill of what used to be the main village in the valley.

The road has always been part of the life of the village and has conditioned its development in the past and in the present. In 2005 a permanent exhibition was mounted in Étroubles along the village streets and on the walls of the houses. International artists created sculptures, paintings and frescos on the topic of "road and travel" for what was to become an open-air museum.

## The Parish

The first mention of Étroubles' parish dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century: in fact it is mentioned in the papal bull by Pope Alexander III issued on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1177 listing the properties and the churches under the jurisdiction of the Great Saint Bernard Canon Regulars. It was up to them to appoint the parish priest, whereas canonical institution, on the basis of an agreement signed in 1208, was conferred to the Bishop of Aosta. With the exception of three commenda-



Two large pointed arch portals open to the east and to the west and used to be the entrances to the ancient church. The present day portal on the west side, made of richly carved wood and dated 1783 is a copy of the original which is preserved in a safe place. The bell cell has four double lancet windows with pointed arches inscribed in a round arch, and paintings of the coat of arms of the Savoy family, of the Lords of Bosses and of the Bishop of Aosta François de Prez.



Echevennoz chapel

## The Chapels

Five rural chapels testify the religiousness and devoutness of the inhabitants of the Étroubles villages. The **Sant'Antonio da Padova** and **Santa Barbara chapel in Eternod** was founded in 1653. The **chapel in Bezet** is assumed to have been built in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was founded in 1772; it is devoted to Our Lady of Oropa.

Here the transfer of the bodies of the Holy Saints Benedict and Germanus is celebrated in the month of July, together with the blessing of the children. The **cappella della Vergine Addolorata e di San Giovanni facing the Porta Latina in Vachéry**, founded by Guillaume and Georges Grange in 1506, was partially rebuilt and expanded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The fresco decorated façade was damaged by the fire which burst out on 3rd October 1944 in the course of a Nazi reprisal and which burnt down the nearby village houses. Next to the entrance there is a memorial tablet of Mario Angeli, Céleste Dalmar and Victor Munier, who were shot by the Nazi on that same day. The **Paquier chapel** (the cemetery chapel) was founded around 1620. It was initially dedicated to Saint Michael and the Holy Trinity but was later dedicated to Saint Rocco following a vow made by the inhabitants of Étroubles in 1867 to escape a cholera epidemic. The **chapel in Échevennoz** dedicated to Our Lady of the Snow and to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is the most ancient chapel in the parish. It was founded in 1440 by the Étroubles notary public Pierre Bertin. It originally stood on the opposite side of the road cutting across the hamlet; in 1733 it was rebuilt where it now stands and in 1836 it was restored and expanded. The façade decorations depicting the Virgin and Child with the Holy Saints Peter and Joseph and worshippers in prayer date to the latter period.

tory parish priests appointed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Saint Bernard Canon Regulars remained in charge of the Étroubles parish until 1752 when Pope Benedict XIV decreed the appropriation by the Order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus of all the Great Saint Bernard's properties south of the Alps, including the right of patronage over parish churches. Since 1929 the parish has been in the free collation of the bishop.



15<sup>th</sup> century astylar cross

## The Church

Following ancient liturgical rules, the entrance of the ancient parish church looked west whilst the apse looked east. The church was demolished at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The bell tower used to stand over the main entrance, above the pointed arch portal and is still visible today. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the building was neglected and in disrepair, hence the decision was made to pull it down and build

a new church which was designed by architect Francesco Natta. Works started in 1814 and proceeded speedily with the help of the entire community, so much so that the parish priest, Father Jean-François Dandrès was able to celebrate the first mass in December that same year. The new church was consecrated on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1847 and dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption. It has a North-South orientation and rises nearby the ancient bell tower, the only remains of the pre-existing building. The façade is characterized by Ionic pilasters which frame the central portal surmounted by an ellipse-shaped oculus, and its neo-classic style triangular gable. Obvious connections with late Baroque and Rococo architecture are to be seen in the Greek-cross plan and the rounded elongated chancel with overlooking stalls and women's gallery. The figure of Our Lady of the Assumption stands out from the vaulted ceiling, whilst the Holy Cross and musical angels are painted on the ceiling of the presbytery; on the walls of the choir there are panels depicting the Nativity and the shepherds to the right, and

the Resurrection from the Holy Sepulchre to the left. The church's interior decoration was made in 1847-1848 by a painter from Valsesia, Paolo Gianoli, but was mostly remade, as it presents itself today, in the '60s by painter Ermanno Politi and by decorator Dante Fredda.

The high altar made by stucco decorators Giuseppe and Domenico Pagani from Como, dates 1816. The wooden chandeliers placed on the altar steps were made in 1865 by Giovanni Comoletti from Valsesia; a few years later he carved the statue of St. Joseph and Child placed on the left side chapel altar. To another wood-carver from Valsesia we owe the wooden pulpit made in 1840, now positioned to the left of the exit from the choir but which originally stood on the right hand side of the nave. Nearby the altar on the right hand side, devoted to the Virgin, there is the large canvas titled *Sur Étroubles avant tous Marie est passée* by the Italian-French painter Evelyne Otis Bacchi; this painting is part of the Open-air Museum exhibition in the village.



15<sup>th</sup> century chalice

## The Parish Museum

To the right of the entrance in the space below the women's gallery, a small sacred arts museum has been set up. Two *Pieties* made of polychrome wood, a number of silver chalices fashioned with six-sided foot and collet knot, a gold and silver-gilded copper reliquary and an astylar cross are dated 15<sup>th</sup> century. Of interest are a few objects finely crafted by goldsmiths in baroque style, such as a German made pyx and a large astylar cross dated mid 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Bell Tower

The bell tower was designed and built around 1480 by Yolli de Vuetto a master stone-cutter originally from the Gressoney Valley, who in later years (1481-1485) also built the bell tower of the church in Gignod. The solidly built, slender windowless tower with an overhanging stringcourse is built upon a slightly sloping embankment.



Dear Friends,  
If a love of art, or faith or merely curiosity have prompted you to enter this church, please feel welcome!

For centuries, a Christian community has gathered here to remember the resurrection of Christ every Sunday, to listen to his Word, to celebrate the important moments of his life and to pray; it is therefore a living place, where past and present are in contact, and where the images recall events and figures from both the Bible and the religious history of the Christian people.

Through the figures of Christ on the cross, the Virgin Mary or the Saints, this church tells its own story of the faith of those who built and preserved it.

The heart of the building is the altar. Every Sunday Christ appears when the priest celebrates holy communion: an oil lamp or a lighted candle in front of the tabernacle are the sign of a presence that remains in the consecrated bread, in remembrance of our Lord's Easter, and invites all believers to approach with due respect.

If you are staying with us for some time, please do not hesitate to regard this as your church; you are warmly invited to the Sunday services, to our community prayers or even just for a moment of silence or prayer.

Take advantage of this occasion to make new acquaintances and, if you wish, to talk to a priest.

Have a good holiday!

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CON IL CONTRIBUTO DELLA  
FONDAZIONE COMUNITARIA  
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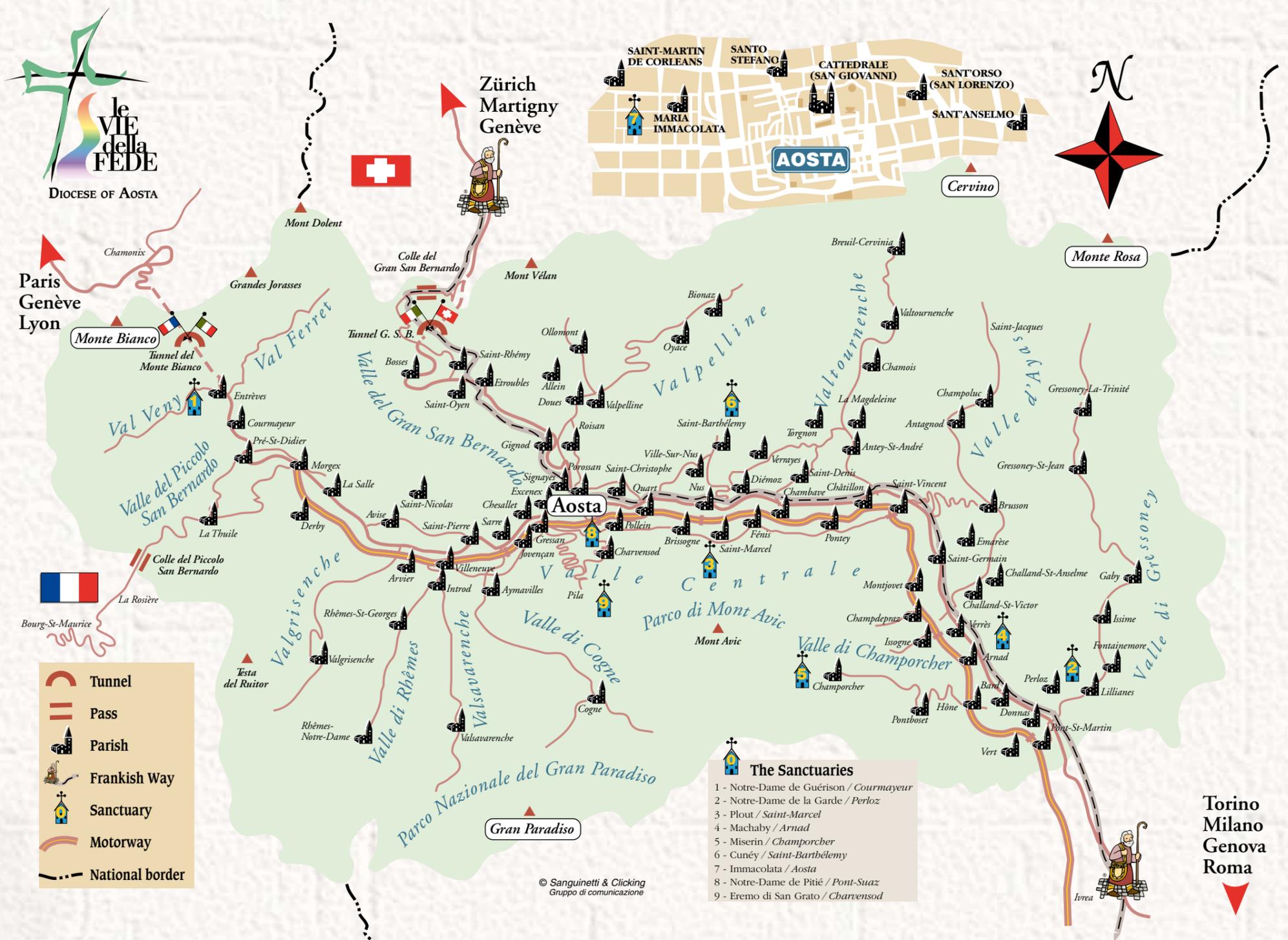
## Religious Tourism in Aosta Valley THE PATHWAYS OF FAITH



**ÉTROUBLES**  
**SANTA MARIA ASSUNTA**  
**PARISH**

AOSTA VALLEY





## THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE AOSTA VALLEY

One of the key dates in the history of the Aosta Valley is the foundation of Augusta Praetoria in 25 B.C. It was probably along the famous Roman road of Gaul that the first news of the Gospel reached Aosta, from the area around Milan and Vercelli. The role played in this context by Eusebio of Vercelli, first bishop of Piedmont, and promoter of the spread of Christianity in north-west Italy, is now beyond doubt.

The foundation of the diocese of Aosta dates back to the end of the 4th and the early 5th century. Reliable information regarding the Christian presence (451 A.D.) exists in relation to the first bishops, Eustasio, Grato (patron saint of the diocese whose feast day is celebrated on 7 September) and Giocondo. Our knowledge of the paleochristian era would not be complete without the wealth of archaeological findings (two monumental complexes, the early cathedral and the burial church outside the town walls).

The organisation of the diocese probably took shape during the late middle ages following the creation of the parishes. The famous figure of Orso, a parish priest, who is venerated above all by the collegiate church and district named after him, can be dated back to this period (7th-8th century).

Given that it was included in the political territory of Gaul, the diocese of Aosta became part of the new ecclesiastical province of Tarantasia towards the end of the 8th century, to which it would belong for over a millennium (it only became a suffragan of Turin in 1862), preserving its special "transalpine" character over the centuries, for example in its worship of the saints. With regard to liturgical customs, it is worth noting that until 1828 the diocese of Aosta followed its own special rite of which over 450 manuscript codices have survived as a precious testimonial.

The romanesque features of many rural churches reached the height of their expression in the monumental reconstruction of the Cathedral and Collegiate church of Sant'Orso during the episcopacy of Bishop Anselmo (994-1025). This was the period of the apostolate of Saint Bernardo (+1081), founder of the famous hospices, whose message of welcome was put into practice, long after the medieval period, by the numerous "hospitals" open to travellers and passing pilgrims along the roads in the valley. But the name who brought the greatest honour to the valley was that of Saint Anselm (+1109), abbot of Bec, archbishop of Canterbury and doctor of the Church.

The piety of the medieval period led to the development of several institutes within the diocese: the Benedictines of Fruttuaria, the monks of Great Saint Bernard, the Augustinians of the Provostship of Verrès, the Canons Regular of the Collegiate church of Sant'Orso, the Friars Minor and, the only female order of the 13th century, the convent of Santa Caterina.

Just before the middle of the 16th century, a few leading figures of the city and several parishes became involved with the new Lutheran and Calvinist teachings; these were fought against by the Aostan bishops of the time, in particular Cardinal Marc'Antonio Bobba, who played an active role in the Council of Trent.

The 17th century represents the apogee of the local religious life, as is borne out by the hundreds of rural chapels, most of which were built during this century, after the terrible plague of 1630. In the fervent atmosphere of this period other convents were set up: the "Visitazione" and the sisters of Lorena, as well as the Capuchin order, while the spirituality of Saint Francesco of Sales spread through some groups of the clergy and lay population in the Aosta Valley.

The second half of the century was dominated by the long episcopacy of monsignor Alberto Bailly (+1691), during which the Gallic tendencies and austerity came most clearly to the fore. Bailly left a deep mark on the cultural formation of the clergy for which he himself set an example through his activities as a man of letters, poet and orator.

The episcopacy of Pietro Francesco of Sales (+1783), nephew of Saint Francesco, was marked by an overwhelming move towards spirituality, of which the protagonists included Pierre Bréan and Jean-Antoine Pellissier. The numbers of hermits multiplied and new forms of popular piety also appeared (processions, pilgrimages, confraternities) that were to last until the first half of the 20th century.

The events following the French revolution led to the suppression of the diocese in 1803 and its aggregation to the diocese of Ivrea. After its restoration in 1817, and throughout the 19th century, the Aostan church gradually began to lose its traditional form.

In the years bridging the 19th and 20th century the imposing presence of Bishop Augusto Duc dominated the cultural world of the Valley, above all in the field of local historiography. During this period the first signs of social catholicism also became evident and were keenly supported by the young priests in the diocesan presbytery. Right from the late 18th century, the Church made a decisive contribution to education, as is shown by the creation of numerous village schools run by the clergy. In the field of higher education, the College of Saint-Bénin was set up as early as 1597 by the Lorensian order and later by the Barnabites. It continued to educate the valley's upper classes until the late 19th century.

The religious history of the 20th century cannot be separated from



the changes that have taken place following industrialisation, immigration and secularisation that have profoundly altered the face of the Valley's society. In particular, the local church was radically changed by events in the period between



the two World Wars and the aftermath of the Second World War, when it attempted to overcome, albeit from a different point of view, the various conflicts and differences that arose in civil society, in the spirit of absolute fidelity to the Church. Among the most important religious events of the past few years it is worth mentioning the celebration of the Diocesan Synod (1988-1993) which oriented the Aostan Church towards pastoral prospects.

*Picturesque mountain scenery, valleys rich in history and evocative traces of the social and religious ferment that have marked the passing centuries and led to today's reality: this is how the Aosta Valley is seen by the passing tourist.*

*A region that appears to be closed between the highest peaks in the Alps; yet, since the third millennium before Christ it has been a crossroads between central and western Europe and the Po Valley, a privileged axis for trade and at the same time the custodian of some of the oldest traditions of the Christian faith.*

*The religious history of the Valley is anchored fast to an ancient heritage of values that have helped to keep the roots of a society in evolution firmly embedded over the centuries. Despite these changes, the society is still aware of the urgent challenges facing Christianity in the Alpine civilisation, whose physiognomy and rhythms have been so radically transformed.*

*We now wish to invite the tourist who passes through the valley in search of cultural starting points and spiritual suggestions to look at it with new eyes and to discover, together with the beauty of its natural surroundings and works of art, its ancient "Pathways of Faith".*

The Bishop of Aosta  
✠ Monseigneur Giuseppe Anfossi