

## Evangelisation in Sacred Space

“Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet; for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5). The episode of the burning bush is perhaps one of the most ancient narrative theologies on sacred space<sup>1</sup>. Beyond exegetical attribution of biblical geography<sup>2</sup>, the text presents a paradigm for entering into sacred places. Plastaras explains: “In this way, the story of the burning bush present Moses as the model to the Israelites who were about to enter into the sanctuary of God. When man encounters God, he must be open to receive the word of revelation.”<sup>3</sup> This function of the text is the proposition from which begin our reflection and actualisation. We seek to perform a “fusion of the horizons” between the “Sitz im Leben” of the biblical text and the contemporary context of the New Evangelisation.

Moses approaches rather randomly, while he is pasturing the flock. The text describes a sacred space which bursts into daily life, in the work of the pastor, in the reachable geography. It is exactly the experience that the man of the modern city can live on the threshold of the sacred spaces which mark the centres of European cities.<sup>4</sup> More than an “aetiological saga” to legitimise the sanctity of a place<sup>5</sup> the story of Exodus is an act of communication which reveals to the Israelite historical-theological and spiritual significance of the gesture he makes in going to the Temple. As Childs underlines wondering on the “Sitz im Leben” of the story<sup>6</sup> it is about the “hieros logos” of a sacred place which has much of the prophetic vocation. It is the story of a revelation-vocation which draws its power from the identification between the sacred space of the story and the sacred space where the act of communication of the story takes place. It is exactly in this way that the contemporary evangeliser operates within the sacred places of the post-secular city.<sup>7</sup>

In the text of the exodus the sacred space “appears to him,” that is, it takes the initiative. And Moses finds himself at once inside the sacred. For Moses, the discovery of the sacred space coincides with the discovery that the space is sacred, that his very own space is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. B. S. CHILDS, *Il libro dell'Esodo. Commentario critico-teologico*, Casale Monferrato 1995, 63. And B Jacob, *Das Buch Exodus*, Stuttgart 1997, 42.

<sup>2</sup> For an accurate description of the place the text refers to, see P. WIMAR, *Die Berufung des Mose*, Goettingen 1980.

<sup>3</sup> J. PLASTARAS, *Il Dio dell'esodo*, Torino 1976, 51.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.P. HERNANDEZ, “Nuevos caminos que expresan la belleza y acercan a la belleza”, *Sal Terrae* 100/2(2012)117-130.

<sup>5</sup> Thesis of H. GRESSMAN, *Mose un seine Zeit. Ein Kommentar zu den Mose Sageb*, Goettingen 1913, 23.

<sup>6</sup> B. S. CHILDS, *The book of Exodus...*, op. cit. 65. See also: E. LEVINE, *The Burning Bush. Jewish Symbolism and Mysticism*, New York 1981; and A. NEHER, “Moses and the Burning Bush,” in *DorleDor* 4(1975)159-67.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J.P. HERNANDEZ “El arte de ver: la experiencia de piedras vivas”, *Sal terrae* 100/11(2012)1043-1050, M.-L. SIMONATO, *Dar vita alle pietre*, (Tesi di Laura in “Economia e gestione dell'arte e delle attività culturali”), Venezia 2013, N. SUNDA, “Piedras Vivas y Nueva Evangelización”, *Razòn y Fe* 1377(2013).

sacred: "The place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Ex. 3:5). In 1913, Gressman thus comments on this verse: "The discoverer becomes the discovered."<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, a first role of the sacred space of our anthropological topography is that of sacralising the profane which only happens from within the sacred. Or better: the revelation of the profane as sacred.<sup>9</sup> From within the religious edifice, man discovers that everything is religious and thus he himself is religious. In the biblical tradition the stories of creation have been approximated to the stories of the construction of the temple because all of creation is the temple of God. Thus, in the medieval city, the central religious edifice is conceived as the "sancta sanctorum" of a temple which coincides with the entire city, as in the description of Revelation 21.<sup>10</sup>

But in Exodus 3, "the appearance" of the sacred space does not come by without a previous walk by Moses "beyond the desert." It is evident that we have a literary transposition of the entire adventure of the exodus of Israel across the desert until it reaches the promised land.<sup>11</sup> Moses is already living in the smallness of his daily life that which will become the vocation of his life: guiding the flock of Israel across the desert. The desert is that stage of total dispossession which precedes the gift. The desert is the distance which separates the profane from the sacred. It is the widening of the threshold. It can be said that the desert is the boundary that has become a space. Thus, the experience of the desert is the experience of the limit, indeed of one's own boundary. With the desire to get to the holy land, Israel goes into the desert, but it gets lost in this desert for forty years until it understands that the holy land is a gift. Man goes all the way to the threshold, all the way to the desert. The rest is gift. The rest "appears to him."

This experience of the limit consists in verifying the insufficiency of one's own desire. In the desert the battle of desires is unleashed. The desire of the promised land is contrasted with the temptation to go back. Today's man also lives a battle of every time he crosses the threshold of a sacred space. The arid "desert of the threshold" is the decisive moment – there are the forty years to learn to trust, the forty days of temptations among the beasts. Thus, Christian architecture adopts the theme of the initiatory lion at the sides of the portals. Thus, every door is a passage, a passion, marked by great cosmic battles. The door fascinates, it attracts and simultaneously causes fear. The door, indeed, as a limit, is the definition of the sacred. The apostolate "of the door" is today once more in many historical churches the place to encounter the man who desires to enter but who risks remaining in the labyrinth of the desert, a labyrinth precisely represented in many medieval thresholds (Lucca, Chartres, ...). At this point within the threshold, the sacred space where we give ourselves, must "appear." It must "speak." A look, a song, a greeting, a praying community, a welcoming... and profane man finds himself within the sacred.

It is important to note that Moses approaches as a resigned, alienated man. Forty years of routine separate him from his great desires of liberation. Great failed desires. He now

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<sup>8</sup> H. GRESSMAN, *Mose und seine Zeit. Ein Kommentar zu den Mose Sagen*, Goettingen 1913, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J.P. HERNANDEZ, "Lo spazio sacro come kerygma e mistagogia", RTE XIV(2010)28, 353-380.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. U. CASSUTO, *A Commentary on the book of Exodus*, Jerusalem 1967, 30. And L. ALONSO SCHOEKEL, *Salvezza e liberazione: l'esodo*, Bologna 1996, passim.

labours “for another.” And his life seems as if it could end like this.<sup>12</sup> The sacred space awaits the failure, the resigned, the man of the “ennui.” Moses does not address his desire for the sacred before discovering himself within the sacred. Man of calm nihilism will never confess his desire for the sacred, if not exactly entering the sacred space “out of curiosity.” Every entry by a tourist, or a simple passer-by into a sacred edifice is the confession of the boredom. It is the search outside of daily life for something which helps in living daily life. Something “different”, and deep down, “someone different,” the Holy.

In this respect, tourism, and in particular, religious tourism most speaks today of the “signs of the time.” It is the ever-renewed attempt to leave the shapeless desert of boredom. To leave the radical solitude which is rendered more acute because it is parallel to many more solitudes. In what way will lonely man encounter the “other” which he has so much desired and which, at the same time, is so afraid of? The biblical mediation of encounter with the other is the memory. In exercising his memory man remains himself all while becoming estranged. He encounters himself as another, and he thus discovers that he can encounter the other. He discovers within himself a radical difference which qualifies him to encounter every difference. This indeed renders the space “sacred,” the encounter with the “sacred,” which means with the different. The sacred place is thus first and foremost the place of memory which becomes a relationship. It is the “momentum.”<sup>13</sup>

Today, the city searches for its monuments. The great monuments of the systemic ideologies are no more. Thus, it is once more in the religious “momentum: that man searches for his memory. The religious edifice has always been a “memorial” that reveals the divine in making the memory. Thus, a sacred space is “consecrated” almost as the eucharistic bread and wine are consecrated. As the liturgy which it hosts, the sacred space gives back to man the completeness of his own story. The completeness of his own self. Gaudi had understood this synecdochic equivalence between liturgy and sacred edifice, when he was underlining that the construction of his basilica is already in itself a “litourgeia,” that is, “a work of the people.”<sup>14</sup> But in the mosaic of San Vitale in Ravenna we see how the bishop Ecclesius, builder of the edifice which he holds in his hand, and is put in comparison with the martyr Vitale. Building the church becomes a “Realsymbol” of the edification of the ecclesia, made equal to martyrdom.<sup>15</sup> In chapter 31 and the subsequent chapters of the book of Exodus the construction of the sanctuary is tied to the gift of “wisdom,” which is the technical ability of the artisan.

The construction of the sacred space is thus the most formidable “living metaphor” of the construction of that sacred space that is man himself. As John Paul II reaffirmed in his “Letter to Artists,” art reveals the life of man as the principal masterpiece where man is himself called to collaborate with the Creator. In the book of Exodus, God gives man art for a single purpose: the construction of the sanctuary, that is, of himself as sacred space. But the first thing that man does as soon as he has received this technical ability is the opposite of the sanctuary, the idol, the golden calf (Ex. 32).

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. SPREAFICO, *Il libro dell'esodo*, Roma 1992, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J.P. HERNANDEZ, “Lo spazio sacro come kerygma e mistagogia”, RTE XIV(2010)28, 353-380.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J.P. HERNANDEZ, *Antonio Gaudi. La Parola nella pietra*, Bologna 2007, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. F.W. DEICHMANN, *Ravenna. Geschichte und Monumente*, Wiesbaden 1969, 234-256.

In his studies on the idol and the icon, and on the trail of Nicaea II, Jean-Luc Marion highlights the dichotomy between the sacred space which is empty and the idol which is full of itself, "of solid gold."<sup>16</sup> The idol attracts only to itself, and is exhausted unto itself. The icon is that difficult art of "kenosis" which refers to the relationship. As Flornskij says, the icon is only "the frame of an encounter."<sup>17</sup> In current urbanism, it is interesting to study the typography of free time where the fluxes and refluxes oscillate between "filled" spaces and "empty" spaces. At both extremes we find the visual and acoustic redundancy of the big shopping malls and the silence of a dark church. The idol kills the memory (the story of the golden calf begins with the affirmation: they "were not mindful"), while the emptiness of the sacred space is nothing but a wait, as says Francesco Dal Co<sup>18</sup>, a wait of that memory which is man.

Man can regain his memory, that is regain himself, thanks to the void which awaits him. The man who enters in a sacred space perceives that space which was always awaiting him. In this being awaited, he can be himself; because "waiting is the endlessness of love." The "void-wait" which are the sacred spaces, are a sign of love in the heart of the city. A place where man is no longer ashamed of being himself, he is not ashamed to "remember."

The "mnemonic" dimension of "momentum" makes of it today the coveted aim of man who is in a desperate search for identity. Man rushes to the sacred space in search of himself, that is, for his own lost memory. Lost, or stolen, from the absence of the story, from the crises of the structures of narrative transmission (family, school, ...). To the dead stones which man goes to see in a monument, he asks for the story of his own self. Indeed, he is searching almost physically for the liquid identity in these solid stones which give it a shape, limit it, and contain it. The confrontation with the stones of his own story gives an identity back to man.

Thus, it is indeed around the central religious edifice of every city that the most violent conflicts of interpretation are unleashed. The narration concerning the sacred space becomes the interpretation of the whole city. The stones tell you who you are. But the stones are symbol, always "to be interpreted." They "give thought." It is natural that the ideological reductionism always seeks to reduce the narration of the sacred space to a purely human level. But to say, "purely human" is to say "below-human." It is not rare to note in reductionist interpretations of religious monuments the exasperation of the stories which present the vilest aspects concerning the monument. On the other hand, finding the theological depth of the sacred space means to find the memory, to find the theological dimension of the whole city and of every citizen.

But what does Moses see in this sacred space? He sees a bush. It is not, at all, a coincidence. In all literature, the tree or the bush is an image of man.<sup>19</sup> In the sacred space, indeed because it is empty, man finds that he is faced with himself. Himself, beyond the boundary of the desert. Himself as another.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. J.-L. MARION, *L'idole et la distance*, Paris 1977, and J.-L. Marion, *Il visibile e il rivelato*, Milano 1997.

<sup>17</sup> P. FLORNSKIJ, *Le porte regali*, Firenze 1987, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. F. DAL CO, *Abitare nel modern*, Roma-Bari 1982.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. G. DE CHAMPEAUX, *Introduction au monde des symbols*, Paris 1989.

In this bush, that which speaks to Moses is not the bush itself, but a flame. It is not man who speaks to man, but the other of man which is within him. The flame is the radical otherness within man. It is a primordial and archaic symbol of divinity. In the sacred space man discovers himself as a container of the sacred, as a sacred place. Thus, all of Christian architecture is an enormous three-dimensional projection of the internal spiritual process, of the encounter with God. This affirmation must remain at the foundation of every pastoral and theological approach to the sacred space. The hermeneutical key of every sacred art is the encounter with God, in other word: prayer. A hermeneutic of sacred architecture that would ignore prayer and especially the prayer of the community, that is the liturgy, is not a scientifically acceptable hermeneutic. The liturgy is that horizon of meaning which carries out the “fusion of horizons” when we want to interpret Christian art with “truth and method.”

The text of Exodus adds immediately, however, that this “flame was not consumed.” We are faced with an oxymoron. The flame is the very emblem of the law of nature: it provides light and heat only if it is fed. It is the law of “do ut des.” To say the “flame was not consumed” is to coin a surprise that is the surprise of gratuitousness. Only gratuitousness “speaks.” God speaks to man from within his experiences of gratuitousness. In the current hyper-chrematistic context, sacred space will either be an encounter with gratuitousness, or it will not be “sacred.” As the urbanist Claudia Manenti underlines, today, only sacred space speaks of gratuitousness to our cities, and indeed because of this they still remain an indelible point of reference and often the only possible “centre” because the centre cannot be but a mystery.

It is indeed this “spectacle” of gratuitousness which ignites the desire of Moses. Gratuitousness creates this unbalance, this marvel which remains at the foundation of research and which is the re-actualisation of the radical gratuitousness of being. Things “exist,” “they are gifted,” and it is this gratuitousness, which from Aristotle to Otto, that arouses fear and attraction – marvel. The experience of the sacred is the primordial experience facing the created. Indeed, because this gratuitousness is radically “other,” that is, “out of control,” that Moses fears it, and wants to understand it, control it. But gratuitousness is elusive, it irresistibly places one in front of the mystery. Thus, many interpretations of sacred space desperately attempt to reduce to the maximum the dimension of gratuitousness. On the theoretical level they try to say that the motivations for this edifice were not, at all, free. On the practical level (e.g. by paying for entrance) that place is made not free. That is, not different. Not sacred. Today, to make entry to a church “payable” is not only to give a pretext to the superficial criticisms of the “wealth of the Church” but it is most of all, to remove the sacredness of that space.

In the story of exodus, God escapes this “onto-theological” reduction by changing the communicative code. Moses approached “to see.” God makes him approach, but to “speak to him.” And he thus remains consigned and at the same time “not expendable.” The sacred space is thus a place of change in the code of communication with God: from seeing to listening.<sup>20</sup> From wanting to control to accept the priority of the other. Only when he begins to listen, does Moses recognise that there is an “other.”

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<sup>20</sup> Interesting analysis regarding this in U. CASSUTO, *A commentary on the book of Exodus*, Jerusalem 1967, 32.

A dead person can be seen, an idol “that has a mouth and does not speak.” Whoever speaks, however, is alive. The passage from seeing to listening is the encounter with a living God. Whoever speaks takes initiative. The passing from seeing to listening is the acceptance of God’s initiative, the encounter where I accept to not be “the Lord.” Here then is the finality of the sacred space: recognising another to myself as “the Lord.” And the mediation of this recognition is the Word.

The first thing that God says is the name of Moses himself. Twice. The sacred space is the place to listen to one’s own name be pronounced by God. Submitting himself in one word, God “pronounces Moses.” Man is the “Word of God.” Thus, the Word of God became man. Moses then discovers himself as this particular modulation of the breath of God. Evangelisation in the sacred space consists in allowing men to recognise their own identity in the voice of God. Preaching, *lectio divina*, the service of the Word, consist in this. A sacred space where the Word no longer resounds would no longer be sacred.

When God asks Moses to take off his sandals, he is asking him to feel at home, but also, not to fear the direct, skin to skin, physical contact. Sacred space thus creates that miracle which is the oxymoron of every real encounter: to be at home in the contact with radical otherness. And this oxymoron, passes through physicality. The praying communities which succeed in making one “feel at home” are not the ones which make the sacred space a place like “any other” which can remind of “home,” but those which know how to speak through the physicality while maintaining the radical difference of the sacred space. The chants, the gestures, the incense, etc. go in this direction. The failure of the “functional” places of prayer, the “prayer rooms”, the “multifaith spaces” of religious architecture which merges with civil architecture, corresponds with the failure of the oxymoron.

When Moses “touches” the holy ground, God reveals his own name. This revelation of the identity of God, however, is a name formed of the names of men: the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob. As if God needed the names of men to say who He is. We are used to the pointing out of this name as the emblem of the biblical revelation which is a revelation in history. The identity of God is not a fixed definition, and it is not tied a magical place, but is revealed in the history of men. The application of this “name” to the theology of evangelisation is interesting. In the sacred space, the Name of God is said in the stories of many “men of God.” It is the role of the saints in evangelisation. The tourist who enters into a church does not only seek aesthetic keys but stories of real life. One need only think of the power of attraction of figures such as Saint Anthony or Padre Pio. We need only remind that one of the first forms of sacred Christian edifices is the “martyrium,” where the space is made sacred by the remains of the witness who has revealed with his life who God is.

In front of this revealed face of God, Moses covers his own face. Of course, it is a conventional sign of respect, but which expresses here, all its anthropological and theological value. Covering one’s own face means to accept not seeing, accept not controlling the situation. Indeed it is because of this, that God can begin to speak. Moses, by covering his face, finally accepts to listen. We can imagine this gesture as an “Islam,” that is, a bow with the face on the ground, and covered with the cloth that Moses wore on his head, and which now falls forward as a sort of tent. This gesture is actually the primordial

archetype of the tent in the desert, the tent of the sanctuary, which will then become the temple. The sanctuary is thus the place where one accepts not to see in order to be able to listen. Thus, just as it can be said that an icon “is written,” it can also be said that a sacred place “is listened to.”

God, however, begins his long speech with the verb “I have seen.” Only He can observe, “comprehend.” But what does He comprehend, what does He watch? The look of God is irresistibly drawn to the “affliction of my people.” A sacred space where this identification between God and the most afflicted is not lived, is not a sacred space. The story of God is the story of the last of the slaves. Thus, evangelisation in the sacred space begins precisely from the slave. This is “the descent of God.” It is not a matter of helping “the poor” in a ‘welfarist’ way, but rather, to recognise in their “lament” the highest of prayers.

A central part of God’s speech is the promise: “to a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8). There is no sacred space if there is no promise. The terms with which this promise is expressed recall the first pleasures of man: the milk of the unweaned, and the sweetness of honey. The promise is a promise if it begins from the search for pleasure. An evangelisation that does not begin from *eros* ignores all of man. But the milk and the honey recall a solipsistic, egocentric pleasure. The unweaned does not want anyone next to him receiving the mother’s milk. Thus, the text of the Exodus completes a prodigious jump in educating this search for pleasure. The country where milk and honey flow is a country to share with the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorites, etc... that is, with the sworn enemies of Israel. As if to say that the primordial pleasure is a real pleasure if it is fulfilled by being shared with the enemy. The pleasure of all pleasures, the pleasure which the bottom of the heart and the flesh seek is the pleasure of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of sharing. A community evangelises in a sacred place if that sacred place is capable of expressing forgiveness, reconciliation and sharing.

Finally, sacred space is the place where one’s own vocation is heard: “go to Pharaoh.” An impossible request. The vocation is that impossible which God asks for. And yet, it corresponds to that which Moses had always desired and had not yet managed to do on his own: the liberation of the people. Now, the impossible becomes possible because it becomes the common story of God and Moses. A place becomes sacred when one begins to perceive that it has a strong vocational value. There is no evangelisation without a vocational approach.

Faced with the impossible, Moses asks the fundamental question of anthropology: “Who am I?” (Ex 3:11). The question for which, deep down, he got to the sacred place. God’s answer is not a definition. It is a disconcerting answer, where the subject changes: “I will be with you.” The subject of human identity is God. The definition of man is a promise of God’s faithfulness. It is a radical unbalance.

The closing of this episode speaks of a “sign” which God will give to Moses. One could expect a previous sign to make firm the conviction of Moses. However, we read: “when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.” It is a

sign after the event; as are sometimes the signs in the Bible.<sup>21</sup> But this sign brings the reader back to his present, to the very act of reading or listening. This text thus reveals itself as a great catechesis on sacred space. "Serving God" here, has a value, that is evidently worshipful, and which recalls the presence of the temple.<sup>22</sup> The whole episode of the burning bush is thus suddenly set in the same place of the temple in Jerusalem. Hence, the sandals, the "holy ground," the veil which covers the eyes. The sacred author is the first brilliant evangeliser in this sacred space for which this text is composed.

We are faced with a very strong example of the creative tension which exists between Text and Temple, between Word and space. Only the Word illuminates the space. But without the space, the Word is inaudible. The space is the "condition of audibility" of the Word. The space of a sacred edifice is firstly the metaphor of that space between speaker and listener in which the Word passes. The sacred space is the image of a Word which "passes." It is the "sign" of the Passion of the Word.

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Abstract:

Through a worshipful interpretation of the episode of the burning bush (Ex: 3), the author reviews the different theological and anthropological dimensions of the sacred space with respect to the "new evangelisation." Themes such as the threshold, curiosity, memory, the void, the wait, identity, gratuitousness, physicality, silence, pleasure, and vocation are of particular importance. Religious tourism as a "sign of the times" reveals the quest for identity of contemporary man which makes "momentum" the emblem and privileged place of the new evangelisation, the space where the Word "returns man to himself."

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Detailed discussion in B. S. CHILDS, *Il libro dell'Esodo. Commentario critic-teologico*, Casale Monferrato 1995, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. L. ALONSO SCHOEKEL, *Salvezza e liberazione, l'Esodo*, Bologna 197,66.