

# Sacred Space as Kerygma and Mystagogy\*

Jean-Paul Hernández

Saint John Damascene writes: “If a pagan comes and tells you: ‘Show me your faith!’ Bring him to church, show him the decorations with which it is adorned, and explain to him the series of religious paintings.”<sup>1</sup>

The interest in Christian artistic heritage is one of the most surprising mass phenomena of recent years. The Christian community is beginning to take this “sign of the times” as a movement of the Spirit which speaks to the Churches and renews them. The masses of tourists who enter into our churches are an unexpected occasion of proclamation, but they catch us unprepared. Thus, is born a challenge to rethink the proclamation and the accompaniment in faith. The present article is rooted in a reflection on the phenomenon and provides material for new forms of proclamation and mystagogy based on sacred space.

## 1. Religious Tourism as *Kairos*

For decades, tourism has shown itself as an escape from daily life perceived as a “non-life.” Going off the grid, even if for a few weeks a year, has become a matter of life and death in the West.

The dense daily trammel of commitments and fast communications that were promising mankind “to become God-like” have robbed mankind of man. The illusion of omnipotence has taken from man what remained of his time, of his life. Every day, man lives what no longer belongs to him, a life which is no longer his, an alienated time. The tourist is thus a man who is searching for his lost humanity. A man who searches for time that is his. Time in which he can find himself. It is the other time, the separate time, the sacred time. The time which no longer obeys the crushing logic of he who has to produce. In other words: “free” time, in the strongest sense of the word.

In this context, religious monuments are rediscovered as signs of this “other world”, or other way of practicing the world. They become compasses for the tourists because they speak of a time that is managed according to another logic. A cathedral, a monastery, speak to the man of today of the gratuitousness which we call beauty, and which is the expression of a freedom that is today lost.

In the last few years, however, tourism to religious places has been increasing in an exponential fashion and not only as an escape or nostalgia. Contemporary man is searching, outside of daily life, for a time and space to interpret daily life itself. The tourist is thus a seeker of meaning. And the religious monument is an offer strong in meaning. Or rather, it is an offer of “strong meaning.” Thus, man of “fluid meaning” is irresistibly attracted to the solidity of the secular stones which have spanned through time because they have dared to choose a meaning.

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<sup>1</sup>JOHN DAMASCENE, *Apologia Against Those who Decry Holy Images* 1,9 : PG 94,1240a-b.

The tourist who enters into one of our churches is driven consciously or unconsciously to this question: "Is it, maybe, in this place that I may find something that is new to my life, something that may give it meaning?" In a reading of faith, we could say that the Spirit is driving the tourist in this search. The tourist simultaneously desires and fears this discovery. Because if he indeed does discover something, then his life changes. "Changes?"...or "must change"... He thinks: "it must change." He is thus afraid. In reality, he indeed "changes." For when the proclamation of the Good News touches the heart of man, he can no longer remain indifferent, he is already changed. And thus, it is important that the Christian community accompanies the seeker in this decisive moment.

Tourism, and particularly religious tourism is that moment of grace, that *kairos*, where man is open to the proclamation. In fact, he seeks the proclamation with the thirst of he who seeks his own life. He seeks it as the ultimate meaning of the work of art he contemplates, where the work becomes a projection of his own existence.

As in every spiritual process, the desire for God is contrasted by a series of resistances. Firstly, tourism itself is ever more structured following the logic of the reality which it seeks to escape. The illusion of omnipotence pervades all the proposed programmes of tourist operators. Visits are rushed, enough to have seen, to bring home a photograph, or to be able to say that I have not missed anything. He who visits a city, or a country is persecuted by this ghost: not being able to see everything or missing something important. Thus, "free time" becomes itself a concentration of these enslaving logics of daily life: the extenuating race after the illusion of omnipotence, the fragmentation, the superficiality of relations, of encounters, of visits. For fear of missing something, we miss everything.

But even more noteworthy is the content of the guides to the sites of Christian art. That is, the interpretation that the economic machine of professional tourism gives to the strong sign that had attracted the tourist thirsting for meaning. It is most interesting at this point to study the contrast between the promotional moment of the touristic enterprise and the real contents which are on offer within such unique monuments. In the advertising stage, the touristic enterprise speaks to that which really moves man: finding himself, the thirst for meaning, the nostalgia for freedom and the absolute. Instead the majority of the content circulated by the tourist guides can be analysed as an attempt to defuse the very question which had driven the tourist to get to this place. The interpretation of the Christian work of art is thus reduced to a mere description or a narration of a purely human logic.

Not only do the tourist guides mostly avoid entering within the horizon of faith which animates the religious work of art, but also their discussion is often focused on the "purely human" motivations which stand behind the religious monument. Following criteria of market-journalism, the expert tourist guide speaks of the motivations which come from the more "sensitive" domains of power, sex, and money. In this way, for example, of a visit to a church, the tourist will remember, above everything else, that the tower is that high because it was built in envy towards a rival church and that the face of a bas-relief is the hidden representation of some forbidden relationship. When the tourist becomes convinced that at the heart of it, sacred space also obeys the same logic of the world, his search is interrupted. Or, he then begins to desire to seek elsewhere, maybe he will already start to think about another trip or holiday. And in this way,

religious tourism, goes from a search for the absolute to an eternally deluded consumerism.

“Mundane” motivations are certainly not absent from the history of Christian art, on the contrary! But they are certainly not the meaning of it. To stop at that would be like describing the tender embrace by a mother of her own child in terms of hormonal dysfunction or emotional imbalance on the part of the mother. Of course, emotional imbalances are part of every emotional expression and relationship, but they are not the meaning of those expressions and relationships.

The same can be said about the more descriptive analyses that stop at the artistic technique of the Christian work of art. Certainly, the work is not to be understood without a technical study of the means of expression. But, once more, this does not constitute its meaning. To stop at the technical analysis would be like describing the maternal gesture in terms of physics or mechanics which calculate the motions and forces of the various muscles in movement during the embrace. Of course, an embrace is also that, but this is not its meaning.

There is also a third reductionism to be avoided. The masterpieces of Christian art are no mere illustration of biblical episodes, or truths of faith. The term *Biblia pauperum* does not exactly respect the creative experience of the Christian artist. Seeing Christian art as an instrumental substitution of the biblical work would be like affirming that the maternal embrace is nothing but the substitute for a word of affection. Certainly, the mother can have on her lips many words of affection, but the embrace cannot be reduced to these. The embrace is an event that infinitely exceeds every concept. In this way, Christian art is first and foremost the expression of the spiritual experience. Giving visible form to biblical matter, the artist reveals his own relation to God, much beyond the original intentions. It could be said that a Christian work of art is that which remains from the intense experience of God which is the artistic creation of religious matter. As the performances of contemporary art show, what matters is the creative event; that which remains is only a memory. But this memory, as taught by the tradition of eastern icons, has an almost sacramental value. It is an invitation to return to that original experience which has created the work. It is an invitation to experience God. It is essential, therefore, to find a way of meaning for Christian art. It is essential to reinterpret it according to the context of faith which has generated it. It is essential to look at it as a “prayer made visible.” As Gadamer says, this “fusion of horizons” (fusion between the horizon of the faith communities and the horizon of today’s consumer) is the *conditio sine qua non* for an authentic hermeneutic of Christian art.

Christian art is that attempt to “throw in front of the eyes,” to “objectify,” an experience of faith that wants to help other experiences of faith. It is the bringing in common of an experience of God which wants to be shared. This objectification of the experience of faith is thus not a proclamation, but indeed a real “theology.” And it is to be read as such.

The analysis of a mosaic of the fourth century is an exercise akin to the analysis of a patristic text. The art of the great tradition, as in the theological writings of the first millennium, has the great merit of being a theology not done in university but in the course of the liturgy. It obeys the axiom “*lex orandi, lex credendi.*”

Therefore, Christian art always functions in relation to a living community, in prayer. Especially in a church, the geometric forms and the iconography are inseparable from the liturgical functions framed by them. They “embrace” the assembly, and in some way, they are part of the liturgy. Thus, it can be said that Christian art is a “mystagogy,” that is an illuminating accompaniment to he who participates in the liturgy.

This way, a circularity between the liturgy of the living and the work of art is created. The work of art explains the meaning of the liturgy and is at the same time only understood through the liturgy. In the analysis of a work of art, time is discussed as the “fourth dimension” of art (aside from the three dimensions of space). It is the “time of perception.” A masterpiece reveals its secrets after a certain time of observation. In the art of sacred spaces of Christianity, the liturgy is that “fourth dimension” of art. Only the praying community can fully enjoy the work of art.

Every work is an event just as is every embrace. And beyond the “emotional imbalances,” and the “mechanics of the skeleton,” and the “concept of love,” it is the opening to a living relationship. This is the meaning of the Christian work of art: the space for a living relationship. Or as Florenskij says of the icon: “it is the line which surrounds the vision.”<sup>2</sup> The true Christian masterpiece is that which is capable of bringing the spectator into this vision. The true Christian masterpiece is that which introduces to prayer. Thus, to explain the meaning of a Christian work of art is to introduce to prayer.

Therefore, the very way in which Christian art is visited is not irrelevant. A guided visit to a church, where the guide himself is not a witness or where there is no time for meditative listening, betrays the very essence of Christian art.

Of special interest, is the “electric arc” which is born inside a church between the tourist who is “far from the faith” and the artistic masterpiece. This encounter between the unexpressed desire for God and the possibility of a living relationship with God becomes a new theological field from which the *kerygma* and mystagogy are to be reformulated. The preconceptions of tourists who come up against the works of art, and the false images of God which strike against the reading of faith in the artistic forms, the evocative ability of art as an opening to the multiple ways of encountering God... can become the “Sitz im Leben” of a new praying and kerygmatic theology at the same time. Below, a few trails to follow are presented for a theology of Christian art which is proposed as a new mystagogy.

## 2. The Mystagogy of Sacred Space

*Sacred/Profane.* In many cultures, the distinction between “sacred” and “profane” is one of the fundamental alternations in the organisation of space and time. *Pro-fano* means “in front of the temple,” that is “outside the temple.” In ancient Greece the sacred area is the *temenos*, from *temno* (to cut). Between sacred and profane there is a “cut”, a break, to indicate an alterity. The sacred is “other,” but in the Bible the sacred is above all “another.” For Israel, to cross the sacred threshold means, first and foremost, to cross the interior threshold, “to enter” (even physically) in that “space of the heart” which is in relationship with

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<sup>2</sup> P. FLORENSKIJ, *Le porte regali*, Adelphi, Milano 2001, 53.

God. It thus becomes essential for he who enters to be able to encounter “another” that speaks to him of the Other. The people of the Bible are brought to overcome the physical break between sacred and profane: in the Old Testament, Israel and the whole of creation become the Temple of God, in the New Testament, the Temple is the body of Christ and the body of every baptised person, of every “other.”

*Created before the world.* The book of Exodus speaks of a celestial “model” of the Temple, shown to Moses on the mountain, so he could execute it on earth<sup>3</sup>. And Solomon prays to God saying: “Thou hast given command to build a temple on thy holy mountain, and an altar in the city of thy habitation, a copy of the holy tent which thou didst prepare from the beginning.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, in some rabbinical traditions the Temple exists “all the way to the beginning,” that is “in the beginning,” “as a beginning.” This way also, the Torah, the Sabbath, Wisdom and the Temple are the most profound reading key of creation – its “beginning.” In the sixth century, Cosmas Indicopleustes, sees in the binary structure of the Tabernacle of Moses (the Tent of the Congregation) is the model according to which the Creator has distinguished heaven and earth. The Alexandrian author writes: “It is according to the figure of the tabernacle constructed in the desert by Moses, that God made the whole of the universe in two spaces.”<sup>5</sup> Many exegetes emphasise how the same story of creation (in Genesis 1) supposes an architectonic structure which retraces the construction of the Temple. Today, the tourist who enters into a church, enters seeking that which is at the *origin*, that which is “in the beginning.”

In Genesis, the first story of creation concludes on Saturday, the ultimate aim of all the creative activity of God.<sup>6</sup> Finally, on Saturday, man and God can be “face to face” and “rest” (stay) together. It is the “free” day, memory of the freedom gifted by God after the slavery of Egypt. It is in the sacred space that the tourist can understand the very meaning of his “free time.” All of creation is a road of seven stages towards this free time.

*Revelation of creation.* In its structure and in its decoration, the Temple must recall the entire creation, because it is the place from which the entirety of creation is comprehended, and which “comprises” all of creation. One goes into the Temple to rediscover that all creation is the Temple, that is, the place to encounter God. When the psalmist says: “How majestic is thy name in all the earth!”<sup>7</sup>, he is describing all of the earth as the place where the Name of God can be invoked as it is invoked in the Temple.<sup>8</sup> When Ezekiel sees the open sky and “the chariot of the Lord,”<sup>9</sup> above him a very precise spatial structure opens itself: the celestial hemisphere that sets on the terrestrial cube. It is the *Merkabah*, which recalls the central plan of the Temple and which coincides with all of

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ex. 25:9-40.

<sup>4</sup> WSol. 9:8.

<sup>5</sup> COSMAS INDICOPLEUSTES, *Christian Topography*: SC 159, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Gen 2.2.

<sup>7</sup> Ps. 8:2.

<sup>8</sup> See also Psalms 29 and 104.

<sup>9</sup> Ezek. 1:1-28.

creation. Thus, already in the first century, Philo of Alexandria could write: “the reason for being of every one of the objects of the Temple is to copy and portray the cosmos.”<sup>10</sup> The same Jewish philosopher asserts: “The supreme and true temple of God, we must retain, is the cosmos as a whole.”<sup>11</sup> Analogously, Christian architecture will conceive of the church as an image of creation. In the seventh century, we read in the dedication of the cathedral of Edessa: “The temple in its smallness is similar to the vast world, not in dimensions but in type.”<sup>12</sup> For Maximus the Confessor, the rite of incensation signifies that the ecclesial edifice is the “form and image of the entire world.”<sup>13</sup>

According to biblical spirituality, sin had made man forget that all of creation was the word of God to him, that all of creation was an encounter with Him. In sin, in not living things as a relationship with God, creation becomes opaque. He who does not give thanks to God for things, loses the meaning of things. Therefore, God creates a new creation, a new garden, towards which he guides man: it is the promised land. The Temple is its essential symbol. Thus, the Temple in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is characterised by a symbology of the garden and is often decorated with fruit from the promised land.

The “garden” is one of the images which span all of Scripture and which indicates a place where standing naked, one in front of the other, is possible. To describe a church as a “garden” is to describe prayer as that “place” where I can stand “naked” in front of God, that place where I can finally be myself, without a mask, without fear of being judged. Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Ignatius of Loyola tell us that prayer is talking with the Lord as “friend talks to friend.”

*Masterpiece of the Artist.* The Temple is the place of Wisdom, that is, of the art of living. Thus, the Temple is the quintessential “work of art,” symbol of man himself who is the masterpiece of God. Therefore, the Temple is that place where man goes not only to understand creation but also to understand himself. To “complete himself” and in so doing “completing creation.”

The genius of the divine Artist consists in having wanted to conclude his work collaborating with it. The completion of creation passes through man himself, created “in the image and likeness of God.”<sup>14</sup> Creature in the image of the Creator. Thus, a creature capable of creating.

Yet the garden is not simply nature but also the product of human care. “Fruit of the earth and work of human hands,” like the bread which becomes the body of Christ. The garden is already the emblem of the collaboration between God and man to bring the creation to its maximum splendour. Analogously, that is the Temple as work of art.

Transforming materials with Wisdom to build the Temple becomes thus the metaphor of “shaping” life with Wisdom to make of it a work of art. Thus, in the Bible, the first work of art is the Temple. According to the book of Exodus, it is for the construction of the Temple that God grants artists “ability and intelligence,

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<sup>10</sup> PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA, *Antiquitates Judaicae* III, 7,7.

<sup>11</sup> PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA, *De Monarchia* II,2.

<sup>12</sup> *Sogitha* 4.

<sup>13</sup> MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Mistagogia*, 2

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gen. 1:26.

with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every craft.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Temple explains what art is: the image of how man “shapes life.”

*Story of Liberation.* The first use that Israel makes with the abilities it received for the construction of the Temple is to construct the golden calf (Ex. 32), an idol, a “god” that does not take the initiative but rather that I can manipulate (“shape”) as I wish. With the art gifted by God to shape things, man claims to shape God. In other words, he reduces God to a thing. This is the breaking of the personal relationship, the breaking of the Covenant. Moses must, therefore, reascend the mountain to receive the new tablets of the law. It is after his second descent, that Moses orders the construction of the sanctuary. The Temple is thus, from its origin, the sign of the renewed covenant, the perennial remembrance of Sinai. As if to say, the Covenant no longer exists if not always renewed since the beginning of time; already, since the beginning of time, capable of absorbing idolatry.

Therefore, the Jewish and then Christian Temple is characterised by the symbology of the “Mount of the Covenant.” “Climbing the Temple” is climbing the Sinai. In Christian churches, it is especially the altar (often raised) that is the “mount” on which the Covenant is renewed – the place of encounter with God who is always ready to renew the broken Covenant.

The very vocation of Moses (the episode of the burning bush) is situated on Mount Horeb (another name for Mount Sinai). And it is concluded with the words of God to Moses: “and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.”<sup>16</sup> The words “serving God” are a technical expression that recalls the worship at the Temple of Jerusalem. Mount Sinai is already seen here as the true identity of the Temple. To be in the Temple (“serving God”) is to be on Mount Sinai. Thus, the Temple is that “sign” which is sent by God to commemorate the exit from Egypt and the resting on the sacred mountain. Or rather, to commemorate the exit from Egypt and thus being on the sacred mountain. It could be said that the Temple is the “sacrament” of the Sinai. It is no coincidence that Moses heard these words after he “hid his face.”<sup>17</sup> This veil on the face prevents him from looking at God (as it would be blasphemy) but allows him to listen to Him. And it is the first material model of the “tent.” Prostrating on the ground and covering his head with a Bedouin veil, Moses “builds” the first “Tent of the Congregation,” prefiguration of the Temple. The place to learn to go from the restlessness of seeing to the ability of hearing.

This “sacred mountain: is the “place where heaven touches earth.” The Temple is thus the point of contact between heaven and earth. This “ladder of Jacob” where the angels ascend and descend.<sup>18</sup> It is the place where heaven is open. The rock which Jacob erects at the base of this ladder of heaven is one of the most suggestive prefigurations in every church. It is a chosen rock which Jacob

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<sup>15</sup> Ex. 31:3-5.

<sup>16</sup> Ex. 3:12.

<sup>17</sup> Ex. 3:6.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gen. 28.

anoints (consecrates) in order to become “memory” and “house of God.” “And this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house.”<sup>19</sup> Florenskij writes: “The Church is Jacob’s ladder, and from the visible she raises to the invisible; but all of the sanctuary is the place of the invisible, the ground is separated from the world, the space is not of this world. All the sanctuary is heaven.”<sup>20</sup>

The opening of heaven coincides in the history of Israel with the continuous renewal of the Covenant, of which the Temple is the memory. The opening of heaven to Jacob and his sons is the infinite alternation between betrayal and forgiveness. Thus, the Temple is announced in Jewish history already from the beginning of its pilgrimage. As soon as the Red Sea was crossed, Israel breaks into chant of victory which concludes with these words: “Thou wilt bring them in, and plant them on thy own mountain, the place, O Lord, which thy hands have established.”<sup>21</sup>

The Temple is thus not only the purpose of creation but also the purpose of history, the ultimate key of interpretation of human pilgrimage. One enters into the Temple to understand one’s own history, that is to remember that the Lord has been faithful and will always be faithful to the Covenant. In Christian architecture, the longitudinal layout of the church expresses the walk of the faithful, this human “path” which unites with the divine “path.” The bipartition between nave and presbytery (or “sanctuary”) is already underlined in the first centuries by the chancel rail that the Eastern tradition would further enrich. This demarcation ultimately expresses the importance of the “passage.” The entire edifice is a “pilgrimage to the future.”

*The void where God speaks.* On Mount Sinai, one goes from the idol to the Temple, from the “desire to see” to hearing. But the difference is not only formal. The idol is of solid gold. It is “full.” It seeks to attract the looks to itself. While the Temple is fundamentally an “empty” structure. A place where I can hear that which is “other.” A place which refers to an “Other” from oneself. Because only God is “full.”

In the Holy of Holies of the Temple of Jerusalem there is nothing similar to the monumental statue of a divine Augustus nor the chryselephantine statue of Athena, but a void, an empty space between the two cherubs situated to the sides of the *hilasterion* that acts as a lid for the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>22</sup>

In front of this void, once a year, the high priest can pronounce the Name of God, otherwise ineffable. The Name which “burns the lips like the kiss of a seraph” because it makes God present. It is this void which becomes the quintessential place of hearing. The place from which God answers, where He reveals himself, with a word as a dispatch. “There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you of all that I will give you in commandment for

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<sup>19</sup> Gen. 28:22.

<sup>20</sup> FLORENSKIJ, *Le porte regali*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Ex. 15:17.

<sup>22</sup> Cf Ex. 25:17.



the people of Israel.”<sup>23</sup> The void of the Temple is indeed a true “pro-vocation,” a call forward, a *missio*.

The revelation of the biblical God has the fragility of a word: as soon as it is pronounced it disappears in the silence. A God who passes. Elusive, ignorable. But the revelation as Word has a power that makes it unique: He who speaks is alive. He is uncontrollable. He who speaks has already taken the initiative. The God of Israel is the “living God.” Only one of his words can change life. His Word is always a vocation. A vocation that is born in the void.

The authors of the New Testament are confronted by the powerful Jewish tradition of the Temple and they use it as an important category to speak the Good News. After the year 70, the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, at the hands of the Roman army of Titus, would be reinterpreted in the Christian tradition as the definitive passage into the new understanding of the Temple.

*The body of Christ as Temple.* In the New Testament, the characteristics of the Temple of Jerusalem come to be attributed to the body of Christ. He is the completion of, and the key for interpreting, the entirety of creation. John writes: “all things were made through, and without him was not anything made that was made.”<sup>24</sup> For the Fathers of the Church, while God was creating the world, He had in front of His eyes the cross of the Son. In other words, the same love with which God created, would bring him to give his life on the cross.

All of creation “tends” to Christ, as “tents” which are to be the Temple of the Father. Saint Irenaeus explains that during mass, on the altar, we bring with the bread and wine, all of creation so that through the door of the eucharist all of it become body of Christ. Thus, in the New Testament, when Christ dies, creation is obscured. And the earth shakes when He is risen, just as the foundations of the thresholds of the Temple shook when God appeared to the prophet Isaiah.

Christ is also the quintessential masterpiece. He is Wisdom incarnate; the Master. He is the “fairest of the sons of men” (Ps. 45). He is the utmost of divine creativity because it is not separated from human creativity. Reading the gospels, one often has the impression that Jesus, as the Temple, is “shaped,” modified, and even disfigured by man. But His resurrection is the utmost manifestation of the divine ability (*hokma*). In the first Easter of the Gospel of John, Jesus addresses the Jews saying: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”<sup>25</sup> And John adds: “But he spoke of the temple of his body.”

Like the Temple, the body of Christ is also the living memory of a history. A memorial that makes God present. A history of liberation and forgiveness. He takes the sin and the divisions upon himself, to offer unity and reconciliation. The Letter to the Ephesians describes Christ as

Who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh [...] through the cross [...] the hostility.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ex. 25:22.

<sup>24</sup> Jn. 1:3.

<sup>25</sup> Jn. 2:19.

<sup>26</sup> Eph. 2:14-16.

And like the Holy of Holies, the body of Christ is the history of a void that reveals. It is the history of He who “emptied himself,”<sup>27</sup> “fragrant oil poured out”<sup>28</sup> which because it is indeed emptied that it reveals its fragrance and fills the entire space.<sup>29</sup> The life of Jesus is thus that space where the Name of God resounds once and for all, and where the Father pronounces his dispatch. Christ is the quintessential Messenger. The High Priest, in front of the void speaking of propitiation. We read in the Letter to the Hebrews:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is not, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.<sup>30</sup>

High priest and Temple become one in the story of Jesus. Further, it is striking that in the New Testament the true identity of Christ is brought into discussion, especially, in the debates that take place in the Temple. The central question is thus knowing whether Jesus is really the Temple. To answer positively, John takes a vision of the Temple by Ezekiel and writes: “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there come out blood and water.”<sup>31</sup> For Ezekiel the water that comes out from the side of the Temple will purify the whole earth.<sup>32</sup> And Germanus of Constantinople (sixth century) writes: “The church is heaven on earth, in which God who is above the heavens, dwells and walks. This is the antitype of the Crucifixion, of the Burial and of the Resurrection of Christ.”

But to enter into a church means to find oneself “in the body of Christ,” thus the body of Christ (and consequently the Temple) is formed by those who “enter into the Church,” that is by those who form the Christian community.

*The community as Temple.* Saint Paul describes the variety of charisms within the Christian community as the variety of members of a body. And he concludes: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”<sup>33</sup>

On the road to Damascus, while he was persecuting the Christians, Saul heard Christ asking him: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” And to the question “Who are you, Lord?” the answer was: I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”<sup>34</sup> The Christian community, which Saul was persecuting, is thus the body of the living Christ. We can say that that which remains of the Christian community is nothing but the body of Christ. A body which the New Testament describes as undergoing ongoing “edification.”<sup>35</sup> Almost as if the resurrection were

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<sup>27</sup> Phil. 2:7.

<sup>28</sup> S. of S. 1:3.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Jn. 12:3.

<sup>30</sup> Heb. 9:11-12.

<sup>31</sup> Jn. 19:34.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ez. 47.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Cor. 12:27; cf. also Rom. 12:4-5.

<sup>34</sup> Acts 9:4-5.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Eph. 4:12.

a process not yet concluded and which is passing through the “construction” of the “new Temple” that is the Christian community.

It is not the walls but the *ekklesia*, the assembly of those who are called (from *ek-kaleo*, “to call from”), that is for the New Testament, the “place” of God, the “sacred space.” We read in the Letter to the Ephesians: “in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”<sup>36</sup> And the first letter of Peter declares:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup>

St Paul had already called Christ “stone,” comparing him to the rock that Moses struck in the desert to make it gush out water.<sup>38</sup> But in designating every disciple of Jesus as “living stone” of the Temple, the author of the First letter of Peter revises the metaphor with an oxymoron. The stone is that which in nature appears least capable of movement, of fertility, of life. The stone is always “dead.” The contrast between the noun “stone” and the adjective “living” thus creates a surprising effect that recalls the resurrection. That which was dead is alive.

But also, this expression plays with an Aramaic or Hebrew underlayer. In Hebrew, the root “stone” (*aben*) is pronounced almost like the root “son” (*b’n*). This assonance was already known in the Old Testament and in the rabbinical tradition. For example, Isaiah tells Jerusalem: “all your wall [will be] of precious stones. All your sons shall be taught by the Lord.”<sup>39</sup> The sons are the true stones of the “House of the Father,” that is of the “lineage.” Thus, the *living stones* of the New Temple, which is the body of Christ, are the sons. Those, who with the Son (rejected by men but who became cornerstone), have rediscovered themselves infinitely loved sons of the Father. Thus, they form the “dwelling” of his presence. At the beginning of the second century, Saint Ignatius of Antioch would develop the architectonic metaphor and write to the Christians of Ephesus: “You are the stones of the temple of the Father, prepared for the construction of God the Father, elevated with the hoist of Jesus Christ who is the cross, using as rope the Holy Spirit.”<sup>40</sup>

Not much earlier, the Apocalypse of John had already completed a step ahead in making the New Temple of the living stones coincide with the entirety of the new city, the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Rev. 21). Love makes the profane sacred and eliminates the distinction between Temple and city. Thus, the entire city of men becomes the dwelling of God. Therefore, the seer of the Apocalypse no longer sees any Temples in the new Jerusalem. But its walls are made of “every sort of precious stones.” This time all the stones are precious, like Christ. All the sons are chosen, “christified,” in the only Son. Intimately united, they maintain their own

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<sup>36</sup> Eph. 2:21-22.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Pet. 2:4-5.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Cor 10:4.

<sup>39</sup> Is. 54:12-13.

<sup>40</sup> IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 9,1.

colour, their own identity. Their diversity exalts the beauty of the new city, surprisingly new.

The description of the heavenly Jerusalem in the Apocalypse is perhaps the biblical page which has most inspired the history of Christian art, from the mosaicists of the first centuries to the *Sagrada Familia* of Gaudi. For since the edict of Milan (313) onwards, every church that is built is a prayer in stone for the whole city of men.

*The body of every man as Temple.* The precious stones of the heavenly Jerusalem form another “natural oxymoron.” The gem or the precious stone has always fascinated man because it appears as a synthesis between stone and light. That is to say it brings together the heavier, “earthlier” element, which is the stone, with the more “ethereal”, more “heavenly” element which is the light. The precious stone thus acts as a “natural metaphor” of the union between heaven and earth. Each precious stone is a “container of light;” each man, each “son”, is *capax Dei*, capable of containing the divine light.

That is why Saint Paul is able to write: “for we the temple of the living God.”<sup>41</sup> It is the Spirit of God gifted to the sons which makes the stones luminous: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? [...] For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are.”<sup>42</sup> At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch, would write: “Let us do each thing in the awareness that He dwells in us, so we can be his temple and Him in us be our God.”<sup>43</sup>

Saint Paul, however, had ultimately pushed the metaphor to underline the dignity of the human body. The apostle writes: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own [...] So glorify God in your body.”<sup>44</sup> The sanctity of the body, the inviolability of the individual, the fact that he does not belong to no one but God, becomes the basis of what in Christian thought would become the dignity of every single life.

To speak, however, of the body as a Temple recalls two other dimensions. First and foremost, the body is the expression of the finitude of man, his “boundary,” his natural limit. The “perimeter” according to which he is “designed.” Not the space that he “occupies” but that he “is;” and that makes him unique. Thus, to say that the body is the Temple of God is to recognise the very “boundary” as fully willed by God. Being a limited creature is thus not an impairment but rather a being chosen and desired by God. For to choose means to limit. And God creates by choosing. Thus, the limit is the concrete memory of the choice made by the Creator. The body of man is the concrete memory of a God who has chosen. Being the “Temple of God” means to not be God and at the same time to be chosen by Him as his favourite dwelling. When man defeats the temptation “to be God” and discovers himself being “chosen by God,” he is, full of light, “precious.”

The other dimension recalled by the body is that of temporality. The body is the sedimentation of the history of everyone; its living and visible memory.

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<sup>41</sup> 2 Cor. 6:16.

<sup>42</sup> 1 Cor. 3:16.

<sup>43</sup> IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> 1 Cor. 6:19.

Therefore, to call the body “The Temple of God” means recognising the story of every individual as the place of the full presence of God. Not only is the history of Israel, or the people of God, revelation of God, but also the time lived by every individual. It is in time that truth is revealed. We can say that in the Bible, the time is the Temple. Time “says” God.

He who visits a church is aided in understanding its meaning, to the extent in which he is aided to remember his own history. The history of the visitor in dialogue with the sacred space becomes a place of revelation.

Beyond the analysis of sacred space as such, it is important to stop at some recurrent structures which articulate its geometry, and which are themselves the support to the kerygma and to the mystagogy.

### 3. Mystagogic Geometry

*The basilica.* In pagan antiquity the basilica is a civil edifice, most often overlooking the forum. This allows, in case of rain, the continuation of political and commercial activities which take place in the public square. After 313, Christians use this model for their places of worship, first and foremost, to not retake the model of the pagan Temple, that is to distance themselves from the surrounding religion.

The basilica is a rather “secular” model. It is simply the covered reproduction of the “square.” For the first Christian centuries, choosing to celebrate “*in basilica*” was akin to “celebrating in the square.” The encounter with the God incarnate takes place where talk of politics takes place and where business is conducted.

Yet the name “basilica” comes in fact from the word *basileus* which in Greek means “king,” or “judge-king.” Before being the “covered square,” the basilica is the court of justice, the seat of the “judge-king”: a simple rectangle that finds its orientation only thanks to the addition of an apse, seat of the one who presides the trial. At the height of the 1500’s, Palladio would recall how in the basilicas of the Christians of antiquity “the altar would be set with great dignity in the place of the Tribunal.”<sup>45</sup> But who is this “judge-king?” For the first Christians, he is Christ himself.

To enter into a Christian basilica, is to enter into the liturgy which takes place within it, it is to enter a trial, to be admitted to the “final judgement.” The eucharist is in fact the anticipation of the end. But the characteristic of this trial is that the condemned is the judge himself. In the gospels, the stories of the Passion highlight this shocking ambiguity of the condemned Christ. He is the judge-king, elevated on the throne which is the cross. In being condemned by men, He completes the only definitive and divine judgement (from *ius-dicere*), “says-rightly” every man. A *saying* which for God is synonymous with doing. It is thus a judgement that “does-rightly” every man. It is the justification, the salvation.

The eucharist is an admission to the presence of the crucified judge and to letting oneself be “judged,” (called “rightly”) and “justified” (made “right”) by him. It is in this sense, that mass is the most profound judgement, the “final” judgement. That judgement which brings man to his completion, to his wholeness, to his “end.”

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<sup>45</sup> A. PALLADIO, *The Four Books of Architecture*, IV, 1.

The historical trial of Jesus that is told in the gospels extends into the heart of every man. As in every trial the accusation and the defence are heard. The accuser, "Satan" does not only accuse man, but most of all, Jesus. The accuser seeks to convince man that Jesus is not the Christ, that He is not the Saviour. That his name ("God saves") is an imposture;" that it is not true that "God saves." The accuser seeks to make man lose every hope of being saved. To accuse in Greek is "diaballo" (from which "devil"), which also means to divide. The accuser divides man from God and man from man.

The other voice in the trial of every heart is the defending advocate, in Greek "Paracrito." It is the name of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Only "in the Spirit" can we say, "Jesus is the Christ," Jesus is the Saviour. Only the Spirit allows one to see in a crucifix the judge who saves. The Spirit restores the hope because He allows us to see that "God-saves" in the depth of death, on the cross." "Paracrito" also means "consoler," He who is with those that are alone, He who renews the relationship.

The eucharistic liturgy is the culmination of this trial because it is the finding of oneself in front of the crucifix. Only in front of Him can we distinguish the accuser from the consoler. Only the cross says who is the "right voice," who "speaks the right." The cross is the only judgement.

*The cross-shaped layout.* During the middle ages, the layout of the basilica would become enriched by a transept. Thus, appears the cross-shaped layout. The eucharistic liturgy is indeed a being present in front of the cross in order to become the very body of the crucifix.

The Pauline letters agree in this point with that which the liturgy of the first centuries underlines: the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ is not an end in itself but it is completed in the full transformation of the entire community into the living Body of Christ. The completion of mass is not a remaining "in front" of this "bread," but a *becoming* this "bread." "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (1 Cor. 10:17).

Saint Augustine would recall that the words pronounced by the altar server while distributing communion ("body of Christ!") not only refer to the piece of bread but also to the one receiving it. In the eucharistic liturgy "we become that which we eat" (Saint Augustine).

Therefore, designing a church in the form of a cross means exactly this: to describe the praying community as members of the body of Christ. And to describe the prayer of the assembly as participation in the only true prayer: that of Christ on the cross. It is not by chance that for centuries the liturgical gestures most represented from the time of the catacombs onwards is that of those praying with raised arms. This reproduces the gesture of man on the cross. But the prayer of the cross is first of all a prayer made by God to man.

In fact, the God of the Bible "prays" to man before man prays to God. Saint Paul quotes the expression of Isaiah who describes God who is supplicant in front of the hardness of his people, a God with the *hands raised*: "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."<sup>46</sup> Every prayer is thus a participation in the paschal feast of the Lord, an experience of "passage" and "passion."

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<sup>46</sup> Rom. 10:21; cf. Is. 65:2.

The Fathers see numerous precedents to the gesture of raised hands which inspired the cross-shaped layout. Tertullian records that the pagans themselves pray with their forearms raised vertically and, in this way, “without knowing it, they were already announcing the Passion of Christ.” Indeed, the Greek temple has been interpreted as a “forest of forearms” raised in prayer. But it is, most of all, the Old Testament which the Christian tradition scrutinises to find this gesture. The most noteworthy episode is that of the victory of Israel over Amalek (Ex. 17), made possible by the constant prayer of Moses, effective only if he kept his hands raised.

The most ancient representation of the crucifixion – a bas-relief of the fifth century on the door of Saint Sabina in Rome – represents Jesus in between the thieves on the Calvary, where the gesture of the three figures coincides in a surprising way with that of someone who is praying. Moreover, an interesting fresco of the fourth century which is found in the catacombs of Saint Gennaro in Naples, shows three figures of a deceased family that form as a group the gesture of someone who is praying, as if it were only one body that was praying.

On the other hand, the gesture of someone who is praying also recalls the exultation of the resurrection. It is the gesture of dance, as would be made explicit much later in some eastern crucifixions which Cimabue echoes. The cross-shaped layout recalls the liturgical assembly which becomes the resurrected body of the Crucifix.

*The steps of a pilgrimage.* In the symbology of a Christian Temple the number of bays which span the length of the sacred space is important. The Christian temple is conceived as a journey, a “pilgrimage” that goes from the façade to the apse, from west to east.

In the great tradition, the apse is *oriented* towards the east (precisely the “orient”), the place where the sun rises, primordial sign of God. The figure of “Christ the Sun” appears from the first Christian centuries. It is also from the east that the Messiah will enter Jerusalem and into the Temple, according to the biblical tradition.

Thus, the one who enters into the church completes a journey from darkness (the west where “the sun dies”) into the light. Yet, he discovers that his journey towards the east coincides with a journey in the opposite direction (from the East) already completed by the Messiah who enters (perfectly, from the apse). As the Apocalypse says, Christ is “the one who comes.” Walking in faith is to live his coming.

Man believes that he first walks towards God, but when he starts the journey, he discovers that God has already walked first towards him. The coincidence of these two journeys that cross each other is already present in the theology of the church of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. In the mosaics of this Ravenna church the procession of the saints (lower register) goes from the counterfacade to the apse and coincides with the story of Jesus (upper register) told in the panels placed in a sequence that goes from the apse to the counterfacade.

*The primordial geometrical forms.* That is, particularly, the square and the circle, and with their “impossible synthesis,” the octagon. Leon Battista Alberti would begin in 1450 his treatise *De re aedificatoria* with an analysis of the square and the circle as basic elements of the grammar of sacred architecture.

In the ancient and medieval tradition, the square and the rectangle symbolised the earth; the “world” as distinguished from “heaven.” Four are the cardinal points, the “angles of the earth,” the elements of the world of Greek cosmology. There is also the “four winds,” the “four columns” that rise from the earth. Four are also the seasons and rhythms of nature.

The circle, however, is the symbol of the divine. This naturally suggests fullness. It has no beginning nor end. It is the shape of the sun, of the movement of the stars around the polar star. The semicircle, or rather the vault, is then the form which archaic man attributes to heaven.

A circle which is inscribed in a square suggests the idea of the divine who enters into the human. Uniting the angles of his square, and the tangential points between the circle and the circumscribed square, we obtain an eight-sided wheel which allows us to build an octagon. The octagon is, in this way, the shape of the “union between heaven and earth.” The octagon and the star with eight beams were in antiquity the symbol of solar worship. But for the early Christians, the number eight would be the number of the resurrection.

For, in the Jewish calendar, the seventh day is Saturday. And Christ is risen “the day after the Sabbath.” This first day of the Jewish week (Sunday) is no longer called “first” but “eighth” to signify that with the resurrection we are in a new temporality. We no longer return to the eternal repetition of the Jewish week, but we are in the “last day,” which will have no end; a radically new day. The octagon is thus the union between heaven and earth which took place in the resurrection; a “squaring of the circle”, an “impossible new development” that only God can complete. In Christian art, representing the octagon is thus an announcement that in the life of man it is possible that there be a radical new development such as the resurrection. Thus, often the bays of a church are eight in number, the Paleochristian baptisteries are octagonal, this is also the case in the churches of the early centuries such as San Vitale in Ravenna. Later, eight would be the cross sections of many gothic columns and drums of many renaissance and baroque cupolas.

*Open Heaven.* A constant of Christian architecture throughout its diverse periods is the representation of the union between heaven and earth. In the Old Testament, the Temple is the quintessential place where we attend the “opening of heaven.” This way, for example in Isaiah 6, the vision of the open heaven in the Temple is not a simple vision but also “hearing”. The coincidence between seeing and hearing, between contemplation and vocation. In the Old Testament, Jacob, in his desperate escape to get away from his brother, had experienced the faithfulness of God in the form of a dream: “there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!”<sup>47</sup> For the Fathers of the Church, this ladder of Jacob is the prefiguration of the eucharistic liturgy, where the angels “bring heaven to earth and earth to heaven.”

In the New Testament “the opening of heaven” is explicitly described in the episode of the baptism of Christ, and less explicitly so in many other episodes. But “the open heaven” which will most mark the spiritual and iconographic tradition is that which is contemplated in the story of the lapidation of Stephen. The first Christian martyr fixed his eyes on heaven and exclaimed: “Behold, I see the

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<sup>47</sup> Gen. 28:12.



heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God.”<sup>48</sup> “Martyr” means “witness” in Greek, first and foremost in the sense of “eyewitness.” In the Scripture, the martyr is not in the first instance the one who dies a violent death but the one who “sees God,” or who sees “the completion of history,” the coming of the Son of man. A completion that bursts today already. For the sacred author, Stephen is thus the model of every Christian who fixes his eyes on the coming of the Son. This contemplation gives the “eyewitness,” “the martyr” a “radiant face”<sup>49</sup> and the freedom to give his life. Representing the open heaven within an ecclesial edifice is thus a manner of putting the faithful in the situation of Stephen. The liturgy, the prayer of the community, is a fixing of the eyes on the Son, a becoming a “martyr” of his coming.

The opening of heaven is in reality an iconographic and architectural theme in common with many other civilisations. In Rome, we have the example of the *Pantheon*, of which the central *oculus* is a concrete interpretation of this “door of heaven.” This corresponds to the archetype of the underground cave for which the exit is above. This primitive cave in many religious traditions is an “initiatory” place, a place of new birth. This, in fact, recalls the maternal womb, the exit from which is situated “above” (in relation to the unborn child). The “re-entering into oneself,” the experience of one’s interiority, has always been oriented towards a “rebirth from above,” such as Jesus would say to Nicodemus.<sup>50</sup> It is not by chance that the grand mystics like Benedict, Francis of Assisi, or Ignatius of Loyola chose for some period of their lives a cave as a place of intimacy with God, and of rebirth.

The first Paleochristian baptisteries reproduce this outline. They are, as says Augustine, *vulva et mater* from which the neophyte is reborn. Therefore, in the curved section of the dome the starry sky is often represented. This also reproduces the opening of heaven in the scene of the baptism of Christ, relived by the neophyte. The same open heaven is present in the basin of the apse of Sant’Apollinare in Classe, at Ravenna. It is interpreted as that which takes place during the eucharistic liturgy: heaven touches the earth and transforms it into a garden. But the open heaven of Ravenna contains in its centre a jewelled cross, that is a victorious cross. It is noteworthy, that the cross of the Resurrected is the opening of heaven. Or in other words, the death and resurrection of Christ abolish every separation between heaven and earth.

Throughout the middle ages, the vault of the nave and the apse were the privileged places for the representation of heaven. The ribs of the same gothic vault are interpreted as “the cross which holds the celestial vault.” It is not by chance that the four gothic rib vaults are often decorated with stars. It is a new way to present the cross of the Resurrected as a union of heaven and earth, with the key of the vault which recalls: “the stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.”<sup>51</sup>

The late middle ages and renaissance would see the increasing development of the cupola as a new way to “open the sky.” That which Brunelleschi achieves in

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<sup>48</sup> Acts 7:56.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Acts 6:15.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Jn. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Ps. 117 (118):22.

the 1400's would become the model for the following centuries. The "baroque heaven" would become an "opening into the infinite" as we see in the church of the Trinitarians in Rome "San Carlo Alle Quattro Fontane." In it, Borromini, from 1638 to 1641, had built an oval cupola where he played with the "infinite" repetition of the geometric forms which express the infinity of God and guide the look above "towards the light." Yet it still is a "geometric" infinity. Just like the Infinity of the famous cupola of Guarino Guarini in Turin (1667). Still in Rome, the church of the Gesù, the infinity of Baciccia is, however, a figurative infinity. An infinity of many "stories" (illustrations of saints, angels, contemporary figures, etc.) which form only one Story.

#### 4. An Example: Sacred Space as Space of the Resurrection in the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora (Istanbul)

The keys of kerygmatic and mystagogic reading highlighted so far can be applied to numerous sacred edifices of Christianity. An example, among many, is the reading of the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora (Istanbul), known mainly for its famous fresco of the *Anastasis*. The central nave of the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora, dates to the fifth century. It was built outside the walls of the city, from its name *Chōra*, in Greek, "countryside" (but also "space," "place," "recipient," "container," from that "earth"). The new walls of Theodosius II, in 414, included the church, which maintained, however, the name "Chora" as per two of the mosaics which decorate it: the mosaic of Christ *Chōra tōn zōntōn* (Christ, "earth of the living"), and the mosaic of Mary *Chōra tou Achōrētou* (Mary "container of the uncontainable"). The first epithet deals with a theme that is dear to the New Testament: the body of Christ "is" the promised Land, which is the vital and concrete space where God and man are in communion and where promises are fulfilled. The second epithet is part of the many Marian invocations with a paradoxical structure which tell the story of a God who became man so that man would "become God." The "Church of Chora" represents thus at the same time a container of God of and a promised Land which is Christ himself.

Around the structure of the fifth century, the edifice expands in successive phases until the twelfth century, especially with the construction of a double narthex and a *paracclasion*, or lateral chapel, used mostly for funerary liturgies and which contains numerous sarcophagi. It is therefore not by chance that the apse of this "place of the dead" is decorated with a splendid fresco of the descent of Christ into the kingdom of the dead: the *Anastasis*. As if to say that from the apse, that is, from the East (place from which the light comes), Christ comes to raise those who are in this place of death. In the eastern tradition, the descent into hell (Holy Saturday) is the culmination of salvation, and indeed contains the resurrection.<sup>52</sup>

This famous apsidal fresco dates to the beginning of the fourteenth century as the major part of the decoration which is visible in the Holy Saviour in Chora. At the centre, Christ is dressed in white, colour which "summarises" all the colours, symbol of the full light which is the resurrection.

He holds Adam and Eve by the wrist and brings them out of their respective tombs which recall the sarcophagi placed in the *paracclasion*. The holding by the

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. H.-U. VON BALTHASAR, *Teologia dei tre giorni*, Queriniana, Brescia 1990.

wrist (and not by the hand) underlines the initiative of Christ. It is He who holds. It is up to man only to let himself be held. This sort of holding of the forearm is particularly secure. The enlargement of the carpus and metacarpus acts as a brake to the potential slipping of the hold. The Resurrected holds with strength. His victory saves with certainty<sup>53</sup>.

Moreover, this gesture corresponds exactly to a rite well known in the imperial court of Byzantium. When a nobleman would betray and fall into disgrace, he could, after a long penitence, be rehabilitated. In the ceremony of rehabilitation, the emperor would lift up the kneeling nobleman grabbing him by the wrist. Adam is in this instance the “raised” nobleman, that is “resurrected.” The word *Anastasis* which in Greek designates the resurrection, does not mean anything but: “raising.”

Christ raises the two progenitors, and in this sense, he raises all of human history. In his descent into hell, Christ crosses all the layers of history and comes saving all the way to the first sinner. The Resurrected not only transforms the present and opens a new future, but he also transforms the past as well; of humanity, and of every man.

The Christ of the Holy Saviour in Chora does not limit himself to raising Adam, but Adam and Eve, together. Bringing them out of their tombs, he brings them once more in relationship. Christ “came to disturb the solitude of the first sinner.” In this way, he recreates the primordial relationship between man and woman, as in a new Genesis. Only as a “man-woman” relationship is the human being in the “image of God.”<sup>54</sup> The resurrection thus consists in the rebirth of the fundamental relationship, which is the sexed relationship, image of the Relationship which is God himself.

Under the figure of Christ, we see the anti-relationship, the divider. He is the victim of himself, that is of death, quintessential division in which God himself has now entered. Thus, the divider is now bound, defeated. He has lost power. Around him, we notice his weapons, symbols of his many strategies which bind, imprison and torture. But now they can no longer win.

The two shutters of the “gate of hell” are under the feet of Christ. They perfectly form an X (*Chi*); in Greek, the first letter of the name of Christ. But these two wooden shutters coincide also with the beams of the cross, the wood which allowed Christ to enter into the kingdom of the dead.

The figures behind Adam, above, are John the Baptist, and lower, David and Solomon, both with the royal crown. These are the three “forerunners” of Christ. Behind Eve, with the shepherd’s crook, we see Abel the shepherd.

Christ is surrounded by a halo of light in the shape of an almond, decorated with stars. It is the symbol of heaven which enters into hell. With the Incarnation, the Earth becomes heaven. With the Resurrection of Christ, hell becomes heaven as well.

The three concentric layers of this shape are an allusion to the trinity. As if to say that the descent into hell and the resurrection are the utmost manifestation of the Trinity. And that of the Trinity, we can only see Christ, the risen Christ.

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<sup>53</sup> Von Balthasar speaks of “forced opening of the eternally closed door, hand of the Redeemer extended to the first Adam,” cit. in G. MARCHESI, *La cristologia trinitaria di Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Querianiana, Brescia 1997, 50.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Gen. 1:27.

Maximus the Confessor says: Here is the great hidden mystery. He himself has made visible the most intimate foundation of the goodness of the Father.”<sup>55</sup>

The shape of the almond alludes to the shield of the victor, which the ancient iconography puts vertically behind the leader of the victorious army. Jesus Christ is the victor against death. And the almond is a reminder of this victory, this Good News. In pagan antiquity, the word *euangelion* was used precisely in a military context to announce a decisive victory.

The shape of the almond also recalls the almond oil with which the sovereigns of the ancient east would be anointed. And “Christ” is precisely the “Anointed.” The Fathers comment on this symbology recalling also that as hard as the skin of the almond is, its inside is exquisite. In the same way, the Christian mystery has a “skin” which is difficult to open, but once revealed it is itself the best of tastes.

A further meaning of the almond in Christian iconography is the recalling to the pupil of the eye of felines, which see in the night. And in this, it is the symbol for the eye of the faith. Thus, the fresco of the Holy Saviour in Chora is an invitation to fix the resurrected Christ on the “retina of the heart” in such a way as to be able to see through the nights of life.

The rocks depicted in the background slightly fold towards the top according to a scheme which is also common in the eastern iconography of the baptism of Christ. It recalls the primordial cave, the “belly of the earth;” ultimately, the maternal womb. The resurrection is, therefore, a new birth, a “rebirth from above” like Christ indicated to Nicodemus. The resurrection of Christ is not the return of Christ to the same life as before, but the “holding” of all of humanity in its new birth.

Finally, in the blue sky, we can read in Greek the title of the work: *H ANASTASIS* (the “resurrection”). The other four letters below correspond to the first and last letter of the words *Iesous Christos* (IS-XS). It is the proclamation of faith of the early Christians: “Jesus is the Christ.”

## 5. Further Trails

This article sought to offer some trails for a kerygmatic and mystagogic discourse within Christian sacred places. In fact, many other aspects of Christian figurative art and architecture could be deepened using the same perspective. Suffice it to think of the symbological and theological density of elements such as: the door, the altar, the cornerstone (or keystone), the cross and the Christogram, the role of the light... Without pretending to be exhaustive, these pages sought to also show how “doing theology starting from art” can open new horizons to theology itself. Especially, in having to think of the proclamation to those who visit a church, the theological thought finds itself forced to start again from the kerygma and at once emphasise both prayer and the sacraments by enjoying the same work of art.

JEAN PAUL HERNÁNDEZ s.j.  
*Faculty of Theology of Emilia-Romagna  
Bologna*

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<sup>55</sup> MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 60: PG 90,621 a-c.

hernandez.j@gesuiti.it