

THE CHRISTIAN MARTYRÍA IN RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LIVING STONES

1. THE PRO-VOCATION OF AN EPOCHAL “KAIRÓS”

Early Christian preaching, in the years immediately following the Resurrection of Jesus, is strongly linked to the interpretation of the Temple of Jerusalem.¹ This is evidenced by the many references to the Temple in the gospels, setting it as a prefiguration of Jesus.² This is also evidenced in texts as such as the *Letter to the Hebrews*, wholly built on the Christological interpretation of the entire functioning of the Temple. It is even evidenced in *Acts* in the story of the first martyr, Stephen, who stood accused that “never ceases to speak words against this holy place”³ and declaring that “Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place.”⁴ Indeed, the long speech, that Stephen pronounces in his defence, culminates with an account of the construction of the Temple as a direct connection to speak of Jesus, of his death and Resurrection.⁵ And here his speech is interrupted as his accusers drag Stephen to stone him.⁶ The first Christian martyr died because of how he spoke of the religious monument of his people. Moreover, his “martyrdom,” his testimony to Christ as he “gazed into heaven,”⁷ is transformed into the ultimate aim of the entire story of the Temple.

This initial “conflict of interpretation” over the Temple has something that is very relevant in the 21st century West. Today more than ever the kerygma of the Christian faith is at stake over the interpretation of the many sacred buildings disseminated over the geography of Europe, America, and parts of the other continents. What is, once again, setting the sacred buildings at the centre of evangelisation is no longer the religious law which requires that all Jews go the Temple of Jerusalem, but rather, a recent unprecedented social phenomenon: mass tourism.⁸

¹ Y. CONGAR, *Le mystère du Temple*, Ed. du Cerf, Paris 1958, 131-180; P. DI LUCCIO, “*Il Tempio di Gerusalemme e il Tempio Futuro*”, in A. TRUPIANO - N. SALATO (edd.), *Il Verbo si fa carne. L’umano come luogo di incontro con Dio in Gesù Cristo*, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani 2015, 117-137.

² Cf. for example, episodes such as the Presentation at the Temple (Lk 2:22-28), Jesus among the doctors at the Temple (Lk. 2:41-49), the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple (Mt. 21:12-13; Mk. 11:11-17; Lk. 19:45-48; Jn. 2:13-21); but also the traces of the interpretative contrast as in Mt. 24:1-2; Mk 13:1-2; and Lk. 21:5-6; and the prophecies on the destruction of the Temple in the background of the Passion: Mt. 26:26:61; Mk. 14:58; Mt. 27:40; Mk. 15:29). Yves Congar synthesizes as such: “Vraiment Jésus a transféré à sa Personne le privilège, longtemps détenu par le Temple, d’être l’endroit où l’on rencontrerait la Présence et le salut de Dieu” (Y. CONGAR, cit., 154).

³ Acts 6:13.

⁴ Acts 6:14.

⁵ Acts 7:44-53.

⁶ Acts 7:54ff.

⁷ Cf. Acts 7:55.

⁸ The “World Tourism Organization (WTO -UNWTO), headquartered in Madrid, estimates that 1323 million tourists have visited “another country” in 2017. It is a figure in constant increase in the last 20 years, and does not include “domestic tourism (that is those who visit their own country), nor the incalculable visits of monuments in people’s own cities or in neighbouring cities without overnight stays. Cf. <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/wtobarometeresp.2018.16.5.1>

This epochal movement, still little studied,⁹ is ever more focused on the historical-artistic monuments, which in our continents, are for the most part of a religious nature. The growing mass interest towards the signs of history and of the transcendent, has undoubtedly much to do with the search for identity increasingly making itself felt. Westerners, Europeans or Americans, do tourism, ultimately, to search for themselves.

During the recent conference “Towards an Identity of Religious Tourism,” organised in Assisi by the Italian Conference of Bishops,¹⁰ it was very clear during the presentations of the major tour operators and observers of the sector that religious tourism is no longer a special category of tourism, but a dimension across the board in every kind of tourism. On their “holidays” western tourists search for rest, pleasure but above all for “fragments of meaning,” “traces of identity.”

From the point of view of faith, this phenomenon is an extraordinary “sign of the times” and to which the Church must still learn to “listen profoundly.” It is urgent that we ask ourselves “what is the Spirit saying to the Churches” through these masses which are “knocking on the door.”

Mass tourism says much about where the heartbeat of contemporary man lies. If Renaissance man was often a humanist or a conqueror, man of the 19th century a capitalist or proletarian, Western man of this first part of the 21st century is fundamentally a “tourist.” That is a man who is on “tour.” He “goes around” and returns home. He is a tourist first and foremost as a “mindset,” for in addition to the physical movements, he visits websites, “navigates” between his contacts, but in the end, he is always alone in his home. In contrast with the pilgrim or the migrant, the tourist always returns home.

That is why today, Europeans find the migration phenomenon which in reality has always existed, so shocking. They find it difficult to support and to process, and this radically demonstrates the western incapacity to leave “one’s own home.” It can be said, that in our western cities there are fundamentally two types of people: tourists (the native inhabitants who always return home) and migrants. And between the first and the second, there is a profound envy in the deepest layers of the psyche.

Western man is a “tourist” in all the spheres of life. For instance, in eating, he “tastes” pinchos, tapas, finger food, samples, “hors-d’oeuvres,” he goes on wine-tasting tours.” He is a tourist in the way of thinking and knowing, with the many “wiki-degrees” of our academic institutions. In the way he lives his affection, with the many casual relationships, where one always returns to one’s own home, one’s own loneliness. This is the “homo turisticus” (or to avoid a “macaronism,” the “homo otiosus”) who enters into our churches.

But the “touristic” desire to visit the hidden churches is a deeper desire. It is the nostalgia of not having found oneself on so many “tours.” It is the repressed and unspeakable desire to be a “migrant,” to give a direction, a “sense,” a shape to one’s own life.

Inasmuch as its shape is the “shape of water,”¹¹ the Western tourist irresistibly flows towards the solid boundary which are the “stones of the past.” These allow him, at least for a moment, to “rest in a shape.” They are a “*monumentum*”, that is a “memory,” a “house” for a possible identity. Even if it is to position himself in an antagonistic way, man of post-Christian society desperately seeks those “stones of identity.” This is why we can say: “the less people go to Church the more people go into churches.” This paradox is surprising in the most secular societies in Europe, where the miniscule Christian communities see some of their churches invaded by unprecedented masses of visitors. Never before have so many people entered into cathedrals as do today. Never would have the Church dreamt to have so many people in its “own house.” But this move catches by surprise an unprepared Church.

⁹ Cf. B FORTE, “Turismo sostenibile. Turismo di relazione”, in E. STRACCINI (Ed.), *Il turista, il viaggio e la valorizzazione del territorio*, Chieti 2018, 7-27.

¹⁰ *Simposio Euro-Mediterraneo. Verso un’identità del Turismo religioso. Bellezza e Stupore*. I Session, Assisi 18-19 January 2019.

¹¹ Cf. The film “*The Shape of Water*” (2017) by the Mexican director Guillermo del Toro Gomez.

For decades, much before the invitation of the pope to be “a Church which goes forth,” the Christian community has sought to reach the places situated most remotely from the “explicitly religious.” To encounter non-believers, or simply “the people,” the Church has tried the most creative forms of presence in the “profane.” In a daring way, many ecclesiastical movements of the generation of “John Paul II” have gone to evangelise in nightclubs, beaches, and public squares. Though, today the “people” are the same – the “non-believers,” those “away from the Church” who paradoxically and spontaneously crowd the Christian sacred spaces as tourists and visitors. But in these sacred spaces, in these churches, they no longer find the Church.

Now that the world enters into our houses, it finds them empty, because we have “gone out.” It finds them closed or transformed into museums or abandoned altogether. And then it “occupies” them, economically, culturally, intellectually. That is, the secularised world begins to interpret and manage these signs of the faith which have come down the centuries. And in the many reductive interpretations of the Christian sacred monuments, the secular culture completely eliminates that little remaining hope which has maintained alive the search of Western man. The secular reductionism eliminates that internal tension which is born from the strong “differential” between the “liquid identity” of Western culture and the “density of identity” of the religious monuments. If some religious monuments, “neutralised” by secular interpretation (such as the Camino de Santiago or the many “musealised” cathedrals), can still attract visitors, it is only because of their intrinsic power which breaks the “cloak of secularist obscurantism.” But for how much longer?

Despite the many layers of “isolating hermeneutics,” in this silent operation of Christian art, which continues to call contemporaries, there is a hidden prayer of our ancestors who produced these works to “tell the story of the faith.” The Christian communities are victims of a complex that is typical of the 19th century when it was believed that the “scientific” interpretation of the religious monument was an interpretation that is not based on theology and spirituality. Gadamer has already taught us that there is no correct hermeneutic if our horizon is not “fused” with the horizon which has generated the work of art.¹² It is the theological, liturgical and spiritual horizon which must be “called” to scientifically interpret a work that was born for liturgy and prayer. We know that the very expression “work of art” is the result of an ideological operation done by the universities in the 19th century to remove these very works from the context of religious life in which they were born and in which they were “used,” that is, where a “living interpretation” was developed.¹³

Today many dioceses favour this “atheist reductionism” when they make entry into a church payable, transforming it into a “museum of an old disappeared religion.” They practically agree with Nietzsche’s terrible affirmation who sees in churches “the nauseating tomb of a dead God.”¹⁴ Equally damaging is the option adopted by many cathedrals which ask tourists whether they are coming “to pray” or “to visit.” By this distinction, the dramatic divorce between culture and faith is “consecrated.” Thus, it is affirmed that the “works of art” are not spiritual experiences when the first objective of the images and the forms of sacred art is indeed the prayer of those who observe it! Moreover, the sacred images of a church are prayers “presented to those looking,” shared prayers which generate other prayers.

A violence “of almost Stalinist taste” are the monumental churches which are thrown under the bus of the lucrative interests of tourism companies, whose guides seems to be the only proprietors of a space whose most intimate essence they trample on. In the interreligious dialogue with Jews and Muslims, a sincere reproach that is sometimes made to the Christian representatives is the negligence and worldliness of the sacred spaces which is brutally contrasted with those of other religious traditions. In fact, no “secularising” guide would dare enter a mosque or a synagogue in the same way they enter into Christian churches. Yet despite this abandonment on the part of the Christian community, Christian art continues to call our contemporaries one by one. The beauty generated in the faith has an intrinsic strength which ever continues to be a channel of salvation.¹⁵

¹² H.G. GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tuebingen 1960.

¹³ Facing masters of hermeneutical secularism such as the “Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte” or figures such as Giosuè Carducci or Adolfo Venturi, the discussion was of “sacred images” or “artefact”.

¹⁴ F. NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*, n. 125.

¹⁵ Cf. J. RATZINGER, *La bellezza, la Chiesa*, Itaca, Castel Bolognese 2005.

For several generations there has been a noticeable experience of conversion due to casual entry into a church. We recall the famous cases of intellectuals such as Paul Claudel or André Frossard. But a recent sociological study published by The Telegraph shows that visits to churches today are the first reason for conversion to the Christian faith in England.¹⁶ These experiences demonstrate the spiritual power that the religious monument has in a secularised society. And how this power becomes opaque when those who enter remain behind the reductionist hermeneutics, which are defences against the secret fear of “seeing” something really new and having to “leave home.” But when these “isolating” presuppositions fall away, an extraordinary “encounter” takes place between the search of today’s man and the faith of his ancestors expressed by the artist. And many times, this encounter is transformed into Encounter.

This is why it is so revealing to visit churches with children, the homeless, immigrants, and people with mental illness. It is they who are capable of connecting more deeply with the artist’s sensibilities. It is from them, that as a Christian community and historians of art, we must learn to liberate ourselves of many presuppositions. It is they who allow us to “open our eyes.” In the unprecedented *kairós* which is presented to the church by the tourism to Christian monuments, the point is not to convince anyone of the “truth of faith,” nor of “selling” faith as a “product,” but to help the visitor in entering into existential contact with the monument. Or rather, the point is to let the monument speak, reducing the “interpretative defences” of the tourist and making him discover the horizons in which the work he is visiting was born. A famous anecdote among the volunteers of “Living Stones” in Rome, is the cry of astonishment made by a francophone African woman who lived for 30 years on the streets, and upon entering for the first time into a baroque church in 2016 saying: “C’est le ciel.” She summed up in this exclamation entire libraries of art history, theology and anthropology.

The “art of seeing art” thus consists of an itinerary towards original simplicity. It is only if we “become like children” that we can truly “enter” in that which is a “communicated vision,” which make us heirs of the Easter morning.¹⁷ From the first moments of the Christian faith the proclamation of the resurrection is communicated in terms of “vision.” And the “*traditio*,” first oral, then textual, and later on, iconographic and artistic, is one enormous process to pass on the Encounter with He who “made himself be seen.” Christian art is either, as Florenskij says of the Icon, “The Frame of the Encounter,”¹⁸ (or otherwise, it loses its true reason for being. If Stephen had to die to “show Jesus” to those who were looking at the Temple, then the necessary “martyrdom” of today’s testimony is to accompany the tourist to the threshold of the Vision.

2. “CON-VOCATION” FOR A SCHOOL AT THE SERVICE OF GOD

It is not true that the church has stood completely stoic in the face of the epochal “*kairós*” of “tourism.” In the last 50 years, several initiatives were born in Europe to give contemporary man who enters into a church these “simple eyes,” and at the same time to present, in the study of the sources, the spiritual and liturgical horizon in which the Christian monument was born.

One of the first initiatives was born in France at the end of the 60’s with the acronym “CASA” (“Communautés d’Accueil dans les Sites Artistiques”) and brings together many volunteers, especially during the summer, in some of the most famous sites of French cultural tourism. For its founder, P. Alain Ponsar, it was not necessary that all the members of “CASA” be believers,¹⁹ but rather, he described the tourist as “that official of the Queen of Ethiopia” who in the Acts of the

¹⁶ The Telegraph, 17/6/2017: “One in six young people are Christian as visits to church buildings inspire them to convert.” <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/17/one-six-young-people-christian-visits-church-buildings-inspire/>

¹⁷ Cf. J.P. HERNANDEZ, “Quale arte oggi, nella bellezza della liturgia, per quale evangelizzazione”, in F. MAGNANI and V D’ADAMO (edd.), *Liturgia ed evangelizzazione*, Rubettino, Palermo 2015, 177-183 (translation in English “Transmitting a View”, *Pietre Vive. The Journal*, Oct. 2018, 52-57: <http://www.pietre-vive.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/low-res-LS-Journal-No6-October-2018.pdf>

¹⁸ P. FLORENSKIJ, *Beyond Vision. Essays on the Perception of Art*, Reaktion Books, London 2002, 54.

¹⁹ Cf. <http://www.guidecasa.com/qui-somme-nous/pourquoi-casa/>

Apostles asks for help from the deacon Philip to understand the meaning of the text he was reading.²⁰

Several decades later, other networks of Christian volunteers were born, to evangelise through art. Worth nothing is the federation “Ars et Fides” (with the work of Timothy Verdon in Florence) and the international network A.R.C. More recently, in Spain the project “Nartex” was born, which takes place during summer in the context of summer activities.²¹

Among these and other analogous initiatives, the “Living Stones” project, from which these pages are inspired, has had its first manifestations in Germany in 2004 in the Cathedral of Frankfurt, even if its first theoretical elaborations go back to 1992. In 2008 the first international “Living Stones” (hereafter referred to as “LS”) camp took place in Rome and from there various local LS groups were born with a regular service to welcome people into churches throughout the year. Today, these groups are established in 32 cities (almost all of them in Europe): from Kiev to Chicago, from Paris to Malta.

Many articles have been published, and some theses have been written specifically on LS.²² Particularly emphasised is the insistence on prayer, on community dynamics, on radical gratuitousness of service, Ignatian spirituality, the style of material sobriety during the summer camps and throughout the year, the manifold “ecclesial nesting” (in diocesan, Ignatian, Franciscan, Dehonian, Benedictine contexts). But one of the most noteworthy aspects of LS is that it is essentially a “path of formation” for the volunteers to become “adults in the faith.” Inspiring this prevalently formative dimension have been the words of the “Prologue of the *Rule* of Saint Benedict: “We have therefore to establish a school of the Lord’s service,” LS is a “school for the youth, and young adults (usually between the ages of 20 and 35) who follow the activities of formation and volunteer work during a stage of their life which usually lasts between 3 and 7 years.

It is mainly a formation of prayer. The regular encounters of the community during the year (every week or every two weeks) always include biblical meditation and silent prayer, which, during the strong moments of the year, become the “full immersion” Ignatian spiritual exercises. The same service of guided visits is framed by moments of silent prayer; the young LS volunteer thus experiences that only the words pronounced with “eyes fixed to open heavens” (cf. Acts 7:55) are the true “*martyria*,” either in the guided visits of the church or in daily life.

LS is also a theological (“intelligence in the faith”) and cultural formation (particularly, a historical-artistic formation to prepare the visits), and that brings about a slow healing from the “divorce” which the young generations live between the arena of faith (often only emotional) and university studies (which are generally “allergic” to the transcendent dimension). It is also a formation in courage in witnessing, and in the ability to listen and empathise, because during the “service” the

²⁰ Acts 8:26-40.

²¹ Cf. <https://nartex.org/>

²² Aside from a large number of articles in the daily and weekly press, it is worth mentioning the following studies: J.P. HERNANDEZ, “Lo spazio sacro come kerygma e mistagogia”, *RTE XIV* (2010) 28, 353-380; J.P. HERNANDEZ, “Nuevos caminos que expresan la belleza y acercan a la belleza”, *Sal Terrae* 100/2 (2012)117-130; 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 Laurea in “Economia e gestione dell’arte e delle attivit`a culturali”), Venezia 2013; N. SUNDA, “Piedras Vivas y la Nueva Evangelización”, *Raz`on y Fe* n. 1379 (2013) 223-226; M. L. SIMONATO, “La vita delle pietre. Arte ed evangelizzazione”, in *Parola e tempo*, Annale dell’ISSR Rimini 2013; J.P. HERNANDEZ, “L’evangelizzazione nello spazio sacro”, in *Atti del convegno FTER sulla Nuova Evangelizzazione*, Bologna 2013; T. ZORC, NOVA EVANGELIZACIJA S POMOCJO UMETNOSTI V LAISKI SKUPNOSTI PIETRE VIVE (DIPLOMSKO DELO), *Bovec* (Slovenja), 2014; J.P. HERNANDEZ, “Annunciare la bellezza della fede: le pietre vive”, in *Rogate ergo*, 2015; D. ANTONELLO, *Pietre Vive. I giovani annunciano la fede attraverso l’arte*. (Thesis, Milan 2018); G. PRIVITELLI, “Spaces of Memory and Contemporary Encounters; a case study of the Oratory of the Beheading of St John the baptist at the Conventual Church of St John the Baptist, Valletta, Malta (presented on behalf of Living Stones)”; in *Atti del Convegno delle Cattedrali Europee*, Pisa ott. 2018. Cf. Also the official website <http://www.pietre-vive.org/> with the videos and online magazine “Pietre Vive. The Journal” with the testimony and reflections on the activities of the volunteers. E the official publication of the Apostolate of Prayer in Italy, “Il messaggio del Cuore di Gesù”, which dedicates a section to LS.

young volunteers of LS have their skin in the game in going to meet every tourist who enters into the sacred edifice. It is a formation in community, because the living stones are not “individual guides,” the formation and the service are done in group in order to grow the deep spiritual communication of the community. And it is a formation in ecclesial sensibility, because it is about “taking care” of the heritage of the Church, and to be for thousands of non-practicing people the “first smile of the Church,” as many bishops have said to the living stones who do the service of visits in their cathedrals. Finally, it is a formation in vocational discernment, because the spiritual assistant of the group helps bring together that which is received in the experience of LS to orient life. Leaving LS after a few years is thus a step towards a more adult commitment in the Church. One goes from “bringing the stones to life” to “being” a “living stone” in the New Testament sense of this expression²³ – to be adult Christians who contribute to the edification of the Church.

A specific element of LS which surprises the tourist and educates the volunteer is the radical gratuitousness of the offered visits. When some tourists insist on leaving a donation, after several and decisive refusals, the living stone says: “give the donation to the first poor person you meet, or to someone you know who is in need.” It is at this point that the relationship between the tourist and the living stone takes a surprising leap. Questions begin, such as: “Who are you?” “Why do you do this?” Or confessions such as: “I have not been in a church in a long time,” “I had a negative experience many years ago,” “In reality, I have always believed in God, the problem is that...” The LS volunteer becomes for a moment a “spiritual companion.” And the tourist starts to become a pilgrim.

Another characteristic which distinguishes the visits of the LS is the animation during the service hours of a “prayer corner” inside the church. It can be a side-chapel or the same chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. The living stones stop by turn at the prayer corner either for personal prayer or to sing a Taizé canon, or to accompany the prayer with an arpeggio. The living stones stop at the prayer corner after every visit to rest for a few minutes, to give thanks to God, and to pray for every person they have accompanied. The living stones thus return into the hands of the heavenly Father those children of His that He has entrusted them with during the time of the guided visit. Moreover, in this “prayer corner” tourists who want can also stop to rest in silence, or to let settle the words they listened to, or to confide more personally in someone, or simply write their names and/or a prayer in the book that is on the altar which the volunteers will read during their communal prayer at the end of their day of service.²⁴

The large autonomy of the various local groups has allowed over the years the development of various innovative experiences such as visits for the blind and others with disabilities, interactive visits with manual dynamics, visits for children, visits for those belonging to other religions, visits for the Caritas guests and refugees, night visits with the church doors open to the “nightlife,” formation routes for catechists and teachers of religion.

All these experiences in the field (extensively described in the publications mentioned above²⁵) have given a shape to the following inspirational nuclei of biblical, patristic and hagiographic character. These nuclei were “initial theological hypotheses” which the pastoral praxis of the last 10-15 years has confirmed, and which still inspire the “*martyria*” of the living stones today.

- (i) The cross of San Damiano. The famous episode of the cross that spoke to him in the chapel of San Damiano is a central moment in the life of Francis of Assisi. Saint Bonaventure in his telling of the “*Legenda Maior*”²⁶ how the poor man of Assisi entered into this half-destroyed chapel, and while praying in front of a crucifix, heard these words: “Francis go repair my house which, as you see, is falling into ruin.” The sources tell us that Francis initially interpreted this call in the literal sense and began to repair a part of the fallen ceiling of this chapel. Only later did he do the “metaphorical translation” and begin to realise the need for a “reform” of the Church.

²³ 1 Pet. 2:4-6.

²⁴ Further details on the spiritual dynamics of the guided visits of the LS in: <http://www.pietre-vive.org/history-and-identity/>

²⁵ Cf. footnote 22.

²⁶ S. BONAVENTURA, *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*, II, 1.

This episode touches on the very essence of LS because it shows how a sacred image has been an instrument of an extraordinary vocation. Indeed, the vocational power of Christian art is one of the dimensions that LS helps to discover. But at the same time, the episode of San Damiano shows how every vocation is a vocation to edification and reform of the Church. Indeed, LS is recognised as a contribution, among many others, to “reform” the Church with regard to its great simplicity, great spirituality, and great reception. The ecclesiality of LS is an ecclesiality for the “revival” of the local Christian communities. Finally, in the episode of San Damiano, the slow internal itinerary of Francis between “repairing the church” and “repairing the Church,” shows how care for the church is a part, and the beginning, of care for the Church. The radical poverty of Francis does not enter in any way in contrast with his generous attention to the sacred edifice.

- (ii) The “tropaion” of the Resurrection. Eusebius of Caesarea in book X of his *Ecclesiastical History*, narrates the construction of the first Christian basilicas after the edict of Milan (313) as an eschatological event.²⁷ For this Christian historian, the body of Christ, “which at first was dispersed in different places” where the Christians were in hiding due to persecution, now, can be reunited in one place and thus form one living body. The “Church” brought together thanks to the “church” makes of the “church” a sign of the fulfilment of the times. This is why in this same text, Eusebius imagines a speech given in 316 on the occasion of the consecration of the Cathedral of Tyre, with the orator addressing his listeners with words such as: “What king, after his death, is capable of winning so many battles and to bring us from His victory a trophy such as this edifice?” The word “trophy” (in Greek “tropaion”) has a very precise meaning in a military context. The “tropaion” is an object and a symbol of the victorious sovereign, who extends his sovereignty wherever it is carried. It is thus a sign which “realises that which it means,” it is a “performative” sign, something which is not far removed from what in Catholic theology we call “sacrament”— affirming that the cathedral is a “tropaion” of the Resurrection of Christ to whoever is within. The fact that the Christian sacred edifice is an “effective sign” of the Resurrection can be seen either in the phenomenology, witnesses of which are the living stones who welcome thousands of visitors, or in the common thread of the major part of the iconographic programmes of the Great Tradition. The great cathedrals and basilicas are an “effective representation” of liturgy as anticipation of the final Resurrection, that is, as real encounter with the Resurrected.
- (iii) Jacob’s Ladder. The text used in all the liturgies for the consecration of churches²⁸ is the famous narration of the dream (or “ladder”) of Jacob.²⁹ In the Jewish tradition, the stone of Jacob was read as the “*aben shetiya*,” the “foundation stone” of the Temple of Jerusalem,³⁰ the entire Temple is summed up in this stone. And effectively, the text of Genesis 28 is a “aetiological narration” of the Temple. For the first time we read the expression: “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”³¹ As Ousterhout has recently demonstrated, Christian architecture of the fourth and successive centuries, has sought to restore part of the theological symbolism of the Temple of

²⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 2-4.

²⁸ Cf. PONTIFICALE ROMANUM, *De Ecclesiae Dedicazione sive Consecratione*.

²⁹ Gen. 28:10-19.

³⁰ Cf. Z. VILNAJ, *Legends of Jerusalem*, Philadelphia 1973, 10ff.

³¹ Gen. 28:17.

Jerusalem,³² in such a way, with the multiplication of places of Christian worship³³ in the “*oikoumene*” as to speak of a single “widespread temple,” of an “ecumenical temple.”³⁴ This account perfectly describes the spiritual path of those who enter into a church for a visit today. “Stone,” in Hebrew is “*aben*” which sounds a lot like “son” (“ben”), an assonance which allows for a metaphorical play on words. That which Jacob has within his hands is his “being a son”, it is the problem which torments him: if he is a blessed son or a cursed son, after having “wrested” the blessing of the first-born from his brother. It is indeed on the precipice of this deep existential doubt that God renews the covenant with Jacob, uniting heaven and earth with a ladder where the messengers ascended and descended, that is, where the words of the earth rise up to heaven and from heaven come down to earth. The service of welcoming by the living stones is indeed that of allowing those who enter into a church to “take into their hands” the ancestral doubt of being a son and, with the exchange of words between heaven and earth, rediscovering one’s own deep identity as blessed and beloved son. It is thus a union between heaven and earth, “house of God,” “gate of heaven,” as the church itself.

- (iv) The burning bush. The oldest aetiological story on the sacred space in the Bible is perhaps the famous episode of the vocation of Moses in front of the burning bush, a probable allegory to the Menorah present in the “hekal” of the Temple.³⁵ In this story the most significant turning point is when in verse 4 Moses passes from “wanting to see” to “accepting to listen.” A passage which is graphically represented shortly after with the “veil on the face in order to listen.” In the same way, the tourist who today enters into a church to “see,” discovers, thanks to the “*angelus interpres*” (the living stone), that the church is a place to “listen.” This listening is translated in the text as a dynamic of the “memory.” And from this “memory” the “promise” (“a land where milk and honey flow”) is born, and the vocation emerges (“I will send you to Pharaoh,” “I will be with you”). The guided visit of the living stone helps the tourist to “remember” his own history of salvation. Then the tourist finds himself “at home,” and can take off his “sandals” with which he

³² R. OUSTERHOUT, “New Temples and New Salomons. The Rhetoric of Byzantine Architecture”, in P. MAGDALINO and R. NELSON (ed.), *The Old Testament in Byzantium*, Dumbarton, Washington 2010, 223-254.

³³ It is not necessary to specify here that the theology of an edifice of Christian worship is radically different from the Theology of the Temple of Jerusalem. For early Christianity, the temple is the body of Christ and the Christian community. For this reason, in the first centuries, Christians did not boast about having buildings specifically for worship. Even opting for the form of the basilica in the fourth century is a way of choosing a “profane” architectonic form to mark the difference between the new Christian religion and the religions of the past. But the recent study which we present here, underlines, within the fundamental discontinuity, the continuity between the theology of the Jewish Temple and the theology of the Christian Temple.

³⁴ Cf. Y. CONGAR, *Le mystère...*, cit., : «Les églises, elles aussi, servent à la vie de nos âmes comme temples spirituels, puisqu’elles sont le lieu de la prière; elles servent à notre union en un corps communionnel, puisqu’elles sont le lieu de l’assemblée chrétienne. Et, comme l’eucharistie, plus largement qu’elle encore, elles assument les éléments du monde et le travail de l’homme. Elles sont, elles aussi, les prémices de la création offertes à Dieu et attirées à la société du corps du Christ, qui les réunira et les consacrera toutes. C’est pourquoi les riches cathédrales et, plus modestement, les églises et les chapelles dispersées sur la surface du globe, convoquent les éléments du monde et recueillent tout vestige de beauté à la louange du Créateur, en même temps qu’elles représentent le cortège glorieux des saints. Elles sont le signe et la promesse que tout sera réuni, le visible et l’invisible, le corporel et le spirituel, dans l’unique temple de Dieu et de l’Agneau».

³⁵ Cf. B.S. CHILDS. *Il libro dell’Esodo. Commentario critic-teologico*, Casale Noferrato 1995, 63ff.; B JACOB, *Das Buch Exodus*, Stuttgart 1997, 42ff.; J. PLASTARAS, *Il Dio dell’esodo*, Turin 1976, 51f; H. GRESSMANN, *Mose und ...*, cit., 23ff.; E. LEVINE, *The Burning Bush. Jewish Symbolism and Mysticism*, New York 1981; P. WEIMAR, *Die Berufung des Mose*, Goettingen 1980; A. NEHER, “Moses and the Burning Bush”, *DorleDor* 4(1975)159-67; U. CASSUTO, *A commentary on th book of Exodus*, Jerusalem 1967, 30ff; L. ALONSO SCHOEKEL, *Salvezza e liberazione: l’esodo*, Bologna 1996, passim; A. SPREAFICO, *Il libro dell’esodo*, Rome 1992, 33ff; J.D. LEVENSON, *Sinai and Zion. An entry into the Jewish Bible*, New York 1987, 90ff.

protected himself from any direct contact. Thus, the living stone can continue to accompany him in the deep listening of the promise and of the vocation, which is always a vocation at the service of liberation.

The profound and surprising adherence of these texts to the concrete experience of the volunteer work of LS is a constant stimulus to continue speaking of the Temple, like Stephen, witnessing Jesus. And if someday, the living stones get stones for having said that churches have to do with Jesus, they will know that it is because their shining “faces are like those of angels,”³⁶ and because, maybe then, churches will have reached the fulfilment of their historical mission.

Jean-Paul Hernández SJ
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³⁶ Acts 6:15.