Art, Architecture and the Theology of the Body

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Introduction: The Human Body as Mediator Between the Physical and the Spiritual

Christianity is very much a physical religion. What I mean by this statement is that our faith is very much grounded and informed by the physical reality in which we live. After all we refer to our Lord and Savior as "the Word made flesh." In the person of Jesus Christ, God, the summit of our spirituality, walked this earth in flesh and blood -- in time and in space. We have, as an example in contrast to the Church's teaching on the validity of the physical world, Manichaeism of the third century A.D., and the Albigensian heresy of the 12th and 13 centuries, both of which purported a puritanical, dualistic philosophy wherein true "goodness" could only be found in the spiritual realm while the physical (or material) realm conversely stood as the source of all that is evil. St. Thomas Aquinas, on the contrary, never disparaged the world of physical things around us. He embraced them, fully engaging the power of human sense perception to explore and understand them. He applied analogies between the things we perceive and the things of the spiritual world (the metaphysical) to begin to clarify an image of God as reflected in His creation of ourselves and the physical world we inhabit. In this way, Thomas argued for the consistency of faith and reason, with reason being an avenue to the truth precisely through what we know of the physical world around us via our sense perceptions as rational and sensual (thinking and feeling) beings.

Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body similarly relates and strongly connects the physical reality of the world and specifically our human bodies to the majesty of God's love for us. Using the biblical analogy of God's love as compared to a bridegroom's unconditional love for his bride, John Paul presents this theology in terms that seek to unify the physical nature and the spiritual reality of our human existence. It is in this respect that, in John Paul's words, "the body, in fact, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the mystery hidden since time immemorial in God, and thus to be a sign of it" (Theology of the Body - #19, General Audience 20 February, 1980). Once established, this integral relationship between human and divine love as mediated and communicated through the beauty of the human body, can be applied to all aspects of God's creation here on earth in terms of its great beauty, both physical and spiritual.

What we are confronted with in these comparisons is perhaps best illustrated through the apparent dichotomy between the material and the mystical, the physical and the spiritual (or metaphysical), the tangible and the intangible, between *eros* (erotic , sexual love) and *agape* (divine, sacrificial, unconditional love). Perhaps in no other context has this dynamic been dealt with more poignantly than

in the great cultural legacy of religious art and architecture that is so much a part of our Church's faith tradition.

The following examples illustrate some of the ways in which religious art and architecture suggest the interaction, and even interdependence, between the material world and the spiritual. I show images of the examples I wish to present to you with the caveat that photographic images *do not* do justice to the actual works as experienced in person. With that said, let's begin by examining some rather well-known works of sculptural art and then move on into works of church architecture.

Sculpture: Emotion Expressed through the Human Body

I will begin with two Romanesque sculptural reliefs decorating the Cathedral of St. Lazarus in Autun, France built in the early 12th century. Created by an unknown artist known as the "sculptor of Autun," historians have identified a man by the name of Gislebertus as the probable creator of a series of carved stone relief sculptures located throughout the church. The two images reproduced below depicting the gates of heaven and the gates of hell (*fig. 1* and *fig. 2*) convey the extreme emotions of human triumph and woe. Note that in the first image, heaven is depicted in the architectural construct of a walled city or fortress. In the second image, hell is depicted as a tomb.

fig. 1
Gates of Heaven, Gislebertus (Sculptor of Autun), Cathedral of St. Lazarus, Autun, France (c. early 12th century)
(photo from Denis Grivot, "Gislebertus, Sculptor of Autun")

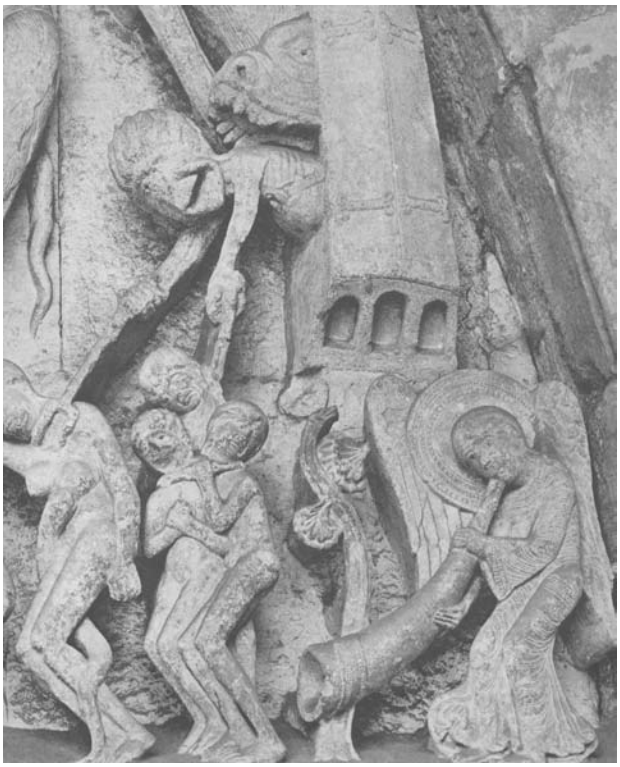

fig. 2
Gates of Hell, Gislebertus (Sculptor of Autun), Cathedral of St. Lazarus,
Autun France (c. early 12th century)
(photo from Denis Grivot, "Gislebertus, Sculptor of Autun")

Remaining for a moment longer on the subject of human suffering, we can fast-forward to the year 1499, where in the height of the Italian Renaissance, Michelangelo Buonarroti movingly expresses the sorrowful emotion of the mother of Christ as she supports the lifeless body of her son in her arms (*fig. 3*). Here, at the same time, we can sense that all is not lost, as in fact like the images of Mary swaddling her newborn son several decades earlier, there is in this depiction a strange sense of serenity as well as of expectation of greater things to come - Christ's resurrection.

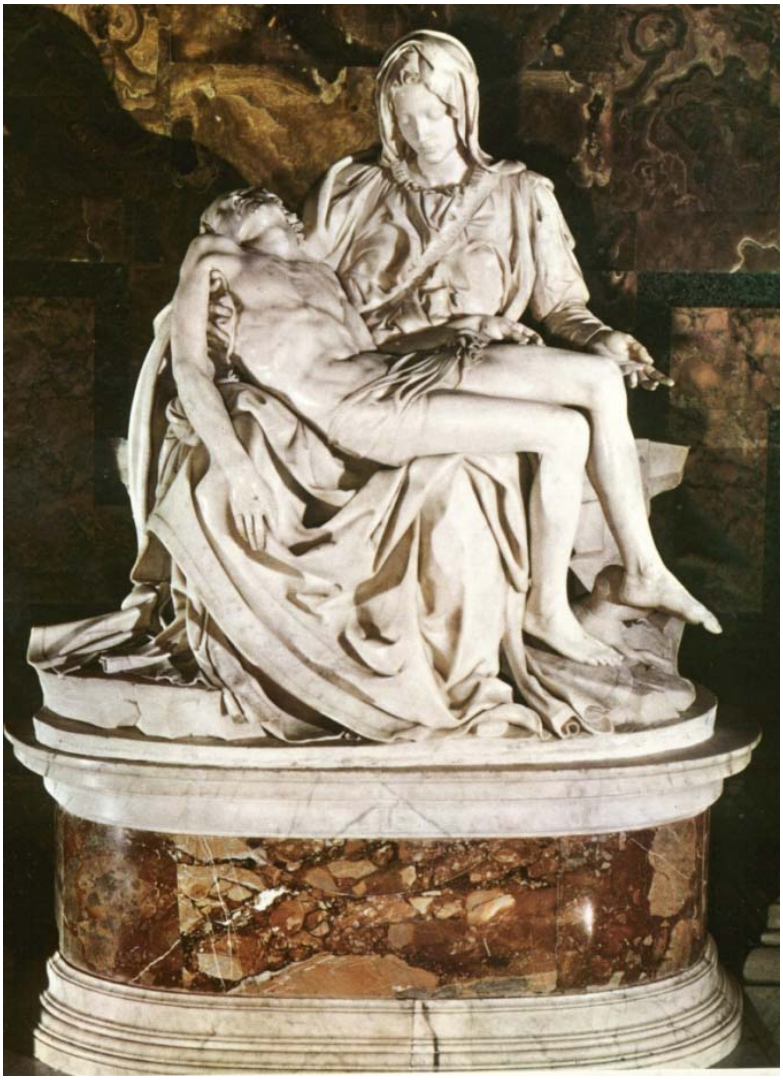

fig. 3
The Pieta, Michelangelo Buonarroti (St. Peter's Basilica, Rome)(1499)
(photo from James Lees-Milne, "Saint Peters")

Moving to the high baroque period (mid-seventeenth century) where emotional expression in painting and sculpture are at a peak, we can see in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's "The Ecstasy of St. Theresa" *(fig. 4)* an equally emotional representation, but this time not of the sorrow of separation but rather of the ecstasy of union with God. This figurative representation utilizes the corporeality and even the sexuality of man and woman as a means of suggesting what true spiritual, or heavenly, ecstasy might be like. Note the almost theatrical character of the architectural setting framing this sculpture, and its contribution to the suggestion of an other-worldly setting, here in fact inhabited by human figures.

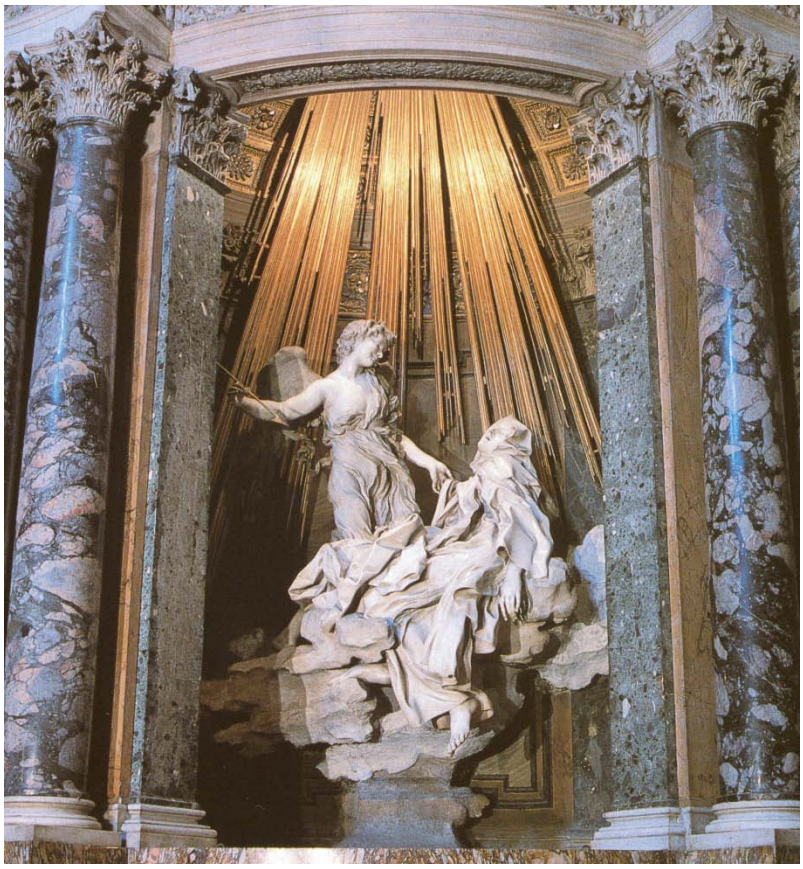

fig. 4

The ecstasy of St. Theresa, Gian Lorenzo Bernini (Cornaro Chapel, S Maria della Vittoria, Rome) (c. 1650)
(photo from Rudolf Wittkower, "Bernini")

And, of course, the quintessential figurative sculpture of the Christian tradition is of Christ himself. In representations of the Christ child we have our God portrayed in the innocence of a baby, dependent upon its mother. In representations of the crucifixion we have presented typically the suffering Christ, while in artistic representations of the risen Christ we see him triumphant and reigning over heaven and earth. All three of these typical representations evoke radically different, but equally legitimate, human, emotional responses to the historical events of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

In all of these works, the beauty of the human body is celebrated. The humanity of Christ is emphasized and is directly linked to our own life experiences. Masculinity and femininity are differentiated and expressed in the fullness of their meaning as gifts from God and sources of holiness. Sensual experience (suffering and ecstasy) is used as a metaphor for spiritual experience and illustrates in human terms the experiences of separation from God and union with God, respectively. These expressions of human emotion are not symbolic or abstract, but rather are directly and "literally" human, being communicated in corporeal, bodily terms. The subjects of these sculptural, artistic works are never anonymous, but

rather are specifically and deeply personal. The specific personalities of the artistic subjects beckon toward a personal relationship (a kind of interpersonal communion, as Pope John Paul II identifies in the Theology of the Body - #62, General Audience 29 April, 1981) *vis a vis* the meaning of the work and the person who encounters the work (i.e., "ourselves" as the viewers of the sculptural works and the co-inhabitors of their sculptural, physical space).

Church Architecture: Buildings as Repositories for Sacred Space

Constructed between 532 and 537 under the patronage of Emperor Justinian, The extant church of Holy Wisdom (St. Sophia or Haggia Sophia) in Constantinople (current-day Istanbul, Turkey) (*fig. 5* and *Fig. 6*) replaced an existing early Christian church building (probably a large basilica plan building) which was destroyed during the Nike riots of 532. This replacement church possesses a breathtaking interior, with its daring structural spans supporting a light-filled, seemingly weightless central dome. Procopius of Caesarea, the famous byzantine historian and political commentator wrote the following about Justinian's great church in the year 558:

> So the church has become a spectacle of marvelous beauty, overwhelming to those who see it, but to those who know it by hearsay altogether incredible. For it soars to a height to match the sky, and, like a ship riding at anchor, higher than the other buildings, it looks down upon the remainder of the city, adorning it, because it is a part of it, but glorying in its own beauty, because, though part of the city and dominating it, it at the same time towers above it to such a height that the whole city is viewed from there as from a watch-tower. Both its breadth and its length have been so carefully proportioned, that it may not improperly be said to be exceedingly long and at the same time unusually broad. And it exults in an indescribable beauty. For it proudly reveals its mass and the harmony of its proportions, having neither any excess nor deficiency, since it is both more pretentious than the buildings to which we are accustomed, and considerably more noble than those which are merely huge, and it abounds exceedingly in sunlight and in the reflection of the sun's rays from the marble. Indeed one might say that its interior is not illuminated from without by the sun, but that the radiance comes into being within it, such an abundance of light bathes this shrine.

The intricate geometry of the floor plan of this building is breathtaking, and even more so the loftiness and expanse of the interior spaces with, as Procopius notes, light streaming in to enliven and energize the dynamic interplay of forms.

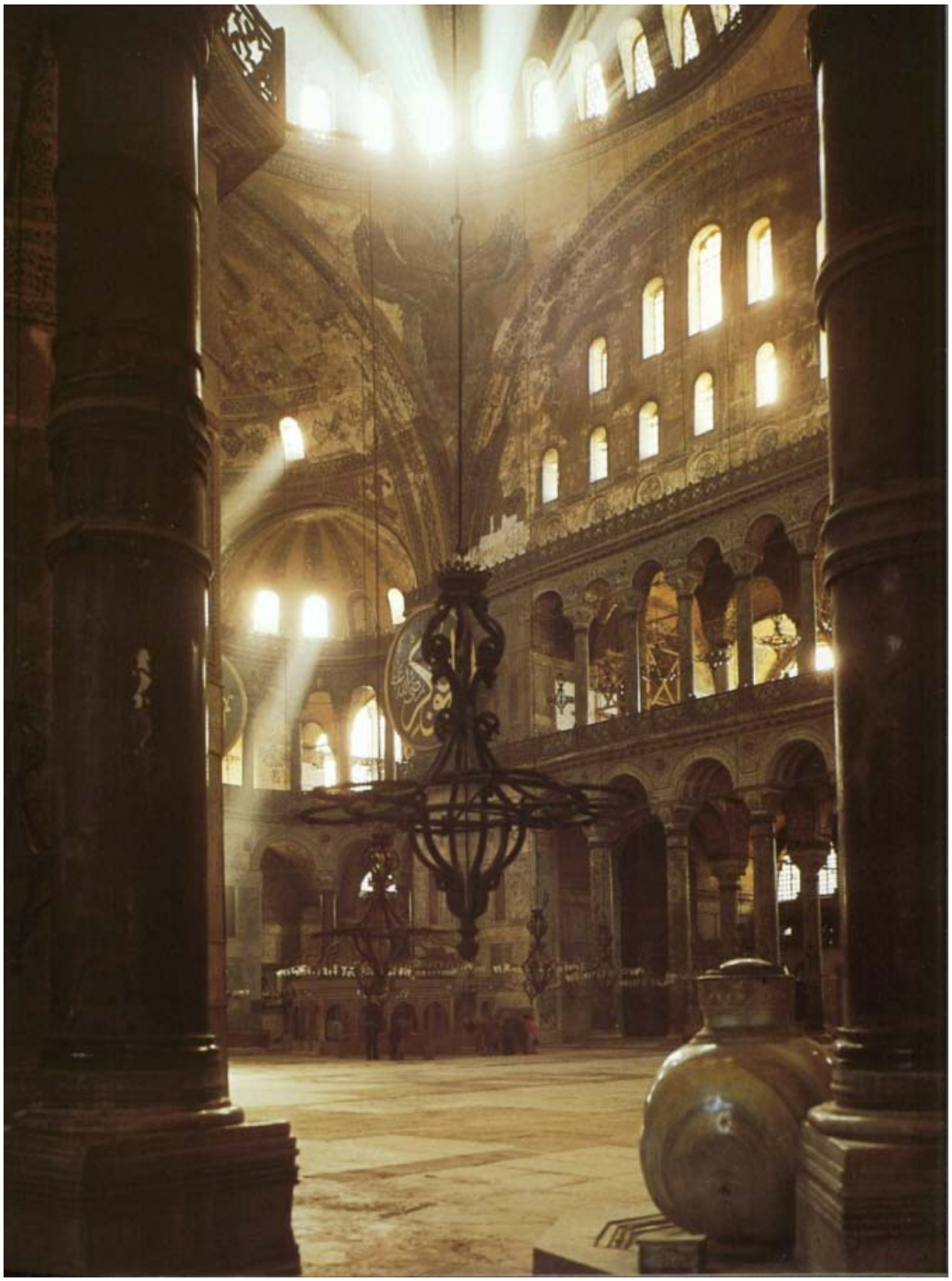

fig. 5

View of the nave of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey) (Isidore of Miletus, Anthemius of Tralles)
(photo from Edward Norman, "The House of God")

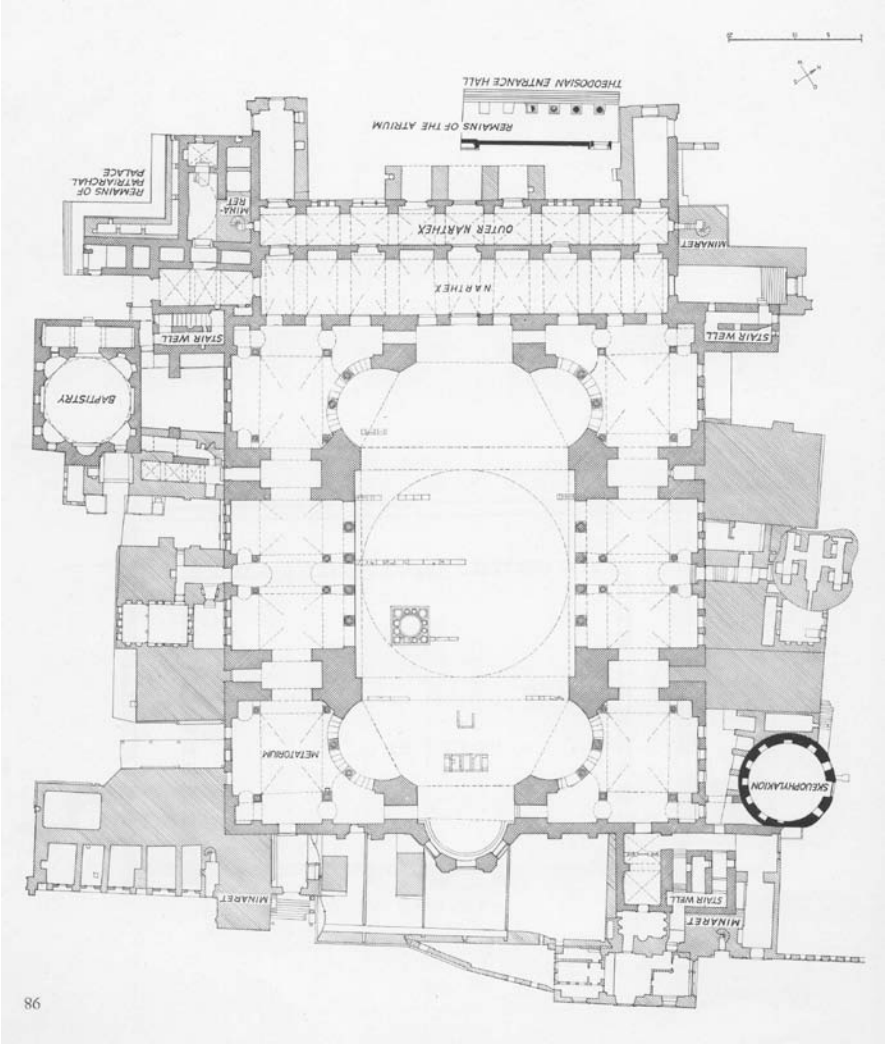

fig. 6
Floor plan of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey) (Isidore of Miletus, Anthemius of Tralles)
(floor plan from Heinz Kahler, "Hagia Sophia")

Moving now from the days of the early Church to those of the high middle ages, we can see how at Beauvais Cathedral, for example (*fig. 7*), the perpendicular gothic style of architecture uses an advanced building technology (consisting of advanced stereotomy with a renewed interest in structural statics and the behavior of the arch and vault in stone masonry construction) to maximize the verticality and lightness of material, giving the interior space an ethereal quality.

fig. 7
Beauvais Cathedral, begun 1247
(photo from Edward Norman, "The House of God")

In the mid 16th century, Michelangelo Buonarroti designed a small chapel for the Sforza family in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Michelangelo was a master at producing spaces possessing a kind of dynamic tension, a tautness created by the interrelationships between architectonic parts and yet always the sense of overall resolution or balance in the composition taken as a whole (*fig. 8*). A dynamic, theatrical space makes its impact in the experience of the interior also (*fig. 9*).

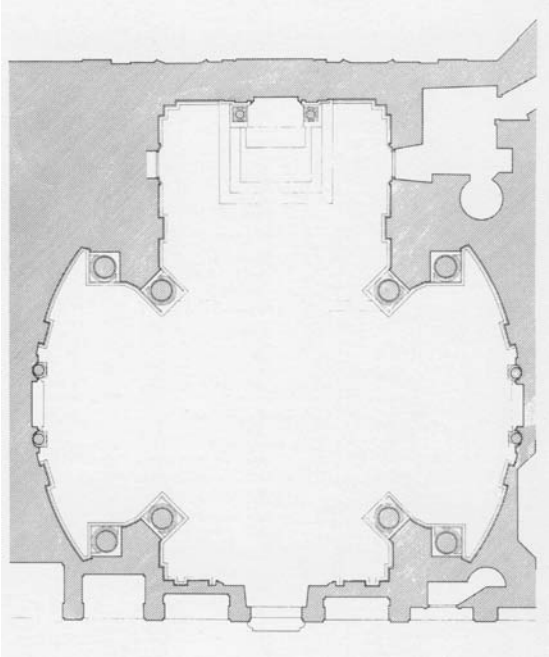

fig. 8
Sforza Chapel, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (Michelangelo) c.1560
(floor plan from Giulio Carlo Argan, "Michelangelo Architect")

fig. 9
Sforza Chapel, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (Michelangelo) c.1560
(photo from Giulio Carlo Argan, "Michelangelo Architect")

Guarino Guarini, an Italian architect of the later seventeenth century, is known for his geometrical sophistication and precision. Note in plan especially the sense of the space being "carved-out" of solid mass material; an undulating spatial effect produced by the flowing of geometrically-shaped spaces (niches, arches, vaults, chapels) one into the next without interruption (*fig. 10*). Here again the play of light from above - clerestory windows and openings in the dome above - is an important element in the way the space is experienced or "read" (*fig. 11* & *12*).

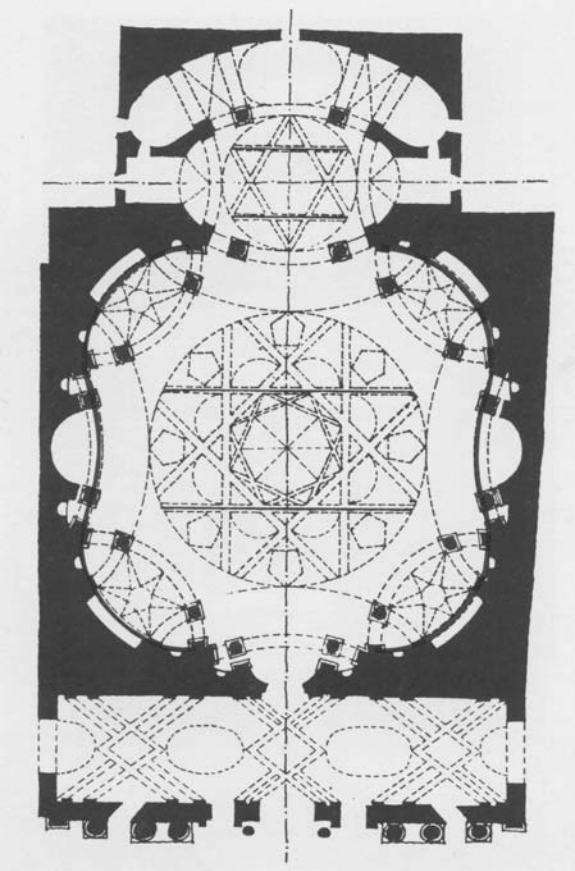

fig. 10
S. Lorenzo, Turin (Guarino Guarini) c. 1666
(floor plan from H. A. Meek "Guarino Guarini")

fig. 11
S. Lorenzo, Turin (Guarino Guarini) c. 1666
(photo from H. A. Meek "Guarino Guarini")

fig. 12
S. Lorenzo, Turin (Guarino Guarini) c. 1666
(photo from H. A. Meek "Guarino Guarini")

El Sanctuario de Chimayo, located south of Santa Fe, NM, is considered one of the truly holy places of North America. The sense of the importance of the physical place at this church is so pronounced that dirt taken from the site is known to possess miraculous curing effects. The experience of this place begins well outside of the sanctuary itself and involves passage through a sequence of two adobe-walled courtyards and a columned portico which serve as transitional spaces whereby the natural world outside is gradually left behind and a spiritual world is introduced (*fig. 13*). Inside the shrine the softened geometry of hand-worked adobe and wood create a comforting spatial setting, while the rich color and texture of the building's interior painted surfaces lend themselves to a truly prayerful atmosphere (*fig. 14*).

fig. 13
El Sanctuario de Chimayo (Chimayo, NM) 1814-16
(photo from Thomas Drain, "A Sense of Mission")

fig. 14
El Sanctuario de Chimayo (Chimayo, NM) 1814-16
(photo from Thomas Drain, "A Sense of Mission")

Carlo Scarpa was a 2oth-century architect who designed a cemetery complex for the Brion family in northern Italy. In this project, Scarpa demonstrates his complete mastery of modern materials (concrete, wood, and metal) in his handling of this small private chapel space located just north of Venice (*fig. 15*). Note how the interplay of geometric spaces and the use of natural light are in some ways reminiscent of the great tradition of Italian renaissance and Baroque architecture, albeit here translated into a modern idiom (*fig. 16*). Note that, as in the great churches of the past, the ceiling and floor play an indispensible role in shaping the space and giving it its dynamic quality. Note also a relatively new element appearing in this modern building and that is allowing the exterior to penetrate into the interior of the building, an extension of the architectural design of the building into the landscape and concomitantly, a bringing in of the exterior to the interior of the building which we do not typically see in the church architecture of the past (*fig. 17*).

fig. 15
Brion Cemetery Chapel, Treviso, Italy (Carlo Scarpa) 1969-1978
(photo from Sergio Los, "Carlo Scarpa")

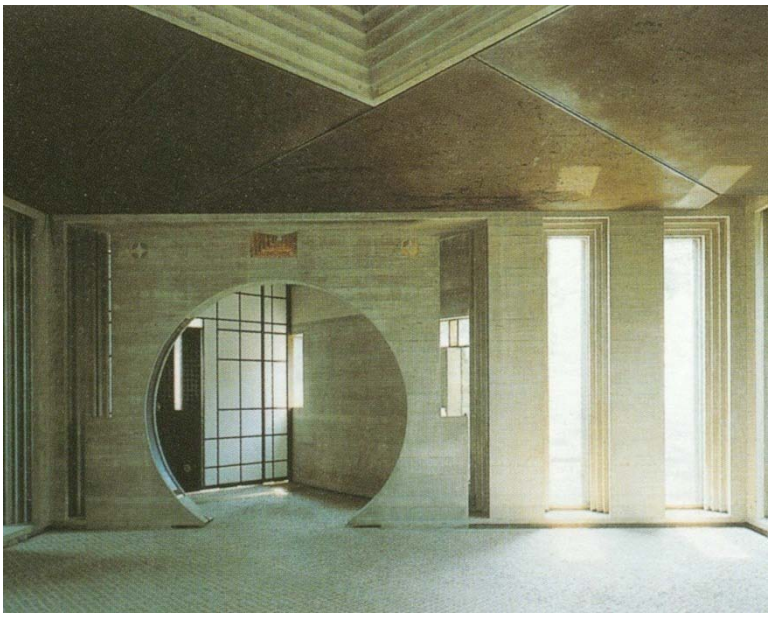

fig. 16
Brion Cemetery Chapel, Treviso, Italy (Carlo Scarpa) 1969-1978
(photo from Sergio Los, "Carlo Scarpa")

fig. 17
Brion Cemetery Chapel, Treviso, Italy (Carlo Scarpa) 1969-1978
(photo from Sergio Los, "Carlo Scarpa")

I focus on sculpture and architecture (not to exclude all other fine arts; two-dimensional visual art, music, drama, dance), because they are so directly experienced in relationship to the human body; the body of the artist and the body of the user/experiencer of the finished work. And, in fact, they celebrate the dignity and holiness of the human person. Other forms of religious art that I have not addressed here include icons, illuminated manuscripts, painting, mosaic, sacred music, sacred vessels, vestments.

How do these works help us get closer to God? What makes "sacred space" *sacred*?

Perhaps the most simplistic answer is that sacred spaces are those that support sacred functions: the liturgy, the sacraments, prayer/contemplation. And I mean this in a very practical sense: the space accommodates the function; "*form follows function*" as the architect Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe is credited with saying. This concept permeates architectural design theory across all building types (e.g., a hospital, school, office building, sports arena, etc.). Much of what archeologists know about early Christian and Byzantine architecture has been clarified by reference to our understanding of the primitive Christian liturgy. In the early fourth century A.D. (about the same time that public Christian worship become politically and legally accepted in the Roman empire), places for Christian worship moved from ad hoc spaces mostly in private homes and existing buildings to purpose-built structures designed to support the public celebration of the Eucharist. In their most simple form, these buildings contained a place of entry or vestibule, an assembly space or nave, and a sanctuary space for an altar where the breaking of the bread in reenactment of the event of Christ's last supper could occur. But we also know that from very early times, and throughout the history of church building, architectural spaces were formed by additional functional needs for places of preparation and vesting (sacristies), places for Christian initiation (baptistries), places of honor for the clergy (presider's/bishop's chairs, choirs), places for the proclaiming of the Word (ambos), places for catecumens (balconies, vestibules), places for preparation and shelter for the faithful prior to entering the church (atria), places for private devotion and auxiliary services (chapels), places for the movement of people (processional ways, aisles, doors, gates, and archways), places for veneration of saints, martyrs, and holy relics (martyria, reliquaries, crypts, tombs), and places for reservation of previously consecrated bread and wine (tabernacles, Eucharistic chapels). All of these functions require varying amounts of space depending upon the number of people they need to accommodate, and their spatial distribution, proportions, accessibility, level of artistic embellishment, cost, and decoration are all informed by their specific place, purpose, interrelationships, and relative importance within the overall structure of the institutional Church and its liturgies as they have evolved over time.

A second criterion in the identification of sacred space is its objective beauty. Humans have a natural response to beauty. We may have difficulty defining it, but we know it when we experience it. Now many in today's relativistic society would argue for the non-existence of objective beauty or of objective truth (the two are synonymous according to Thomas Aquinas), but in fact our modern culture is an exception (an aberration) within the context of the historical understanding of what is beauty and what is truth. Beautiful things are those which convey or communicate the truth. They reflect, and we can

perceive in them, the truth about God's creation, the perfection of his design. Beauty entails a harmony among the parts of an artifact, toward a sense of "wholeness" taken in their entirety. Related to the concept of objective beauty/truth is the sense of "completion" of a work or art or architecture as a kind of microcosm, model, or reflection of the "completeness" that is God, by definition.

A further characteristic of a space that is sacred is that within itself is expressed variously a sense of a journey, a movement beyond itself to another place and/or time, and also a sense of arrival or stasis at some specific point in space and time. The "journey" suggests an orientation and, more specifically, a directional relationship of the human body in relation to our journey toward God (and Pope Benedict XVI has reinforced the importance of physical directionality in addition to spiritual directionality in his book "Spirit of the Liturgy"). Since Byzantine times, processions have been a part of most liturgical celebrations. The medieval tradition of the stations of the cross also rely on a movement through space from one station to the next. Where we face in our worship and the circulation (physical movement of our bodies) through sacred space associated with the performance and experience of the liturgy are important concepts in our worship in general and in our celebration of the Mass in particular.

The concept of "arrival" conversely suggests a sense of stasis or center (the Latin term *axis mundi* has been used by architectural historians and theorists), a focus upon a special, holy place, a place to remember (martyrium),a place of commemoration, and of concentration upon God's love as it is manifested in the physical world. The guiding, ordering principles of geometry play an important role here as seen especially in the great renaissance and baroque spaces of Michelangelo, Borromini, and Guardini (see S. Lorenzo and Sforza chapel above).

Perhaps the most meaningful definition of sacred space can be stated as "that through which holiness enters the world of physical, built space." In other words, sacred space is that in which the spiritual is made visible, palpable, and tangible. Sacred space is in this sense sacramental: a visible sign or image of the invisible reality of God's love pointing to a unity (as opposed to a dichotomy) between the physical and the spiritual. In sacred space, God's heavenly realm is in some symbolic way *made present* to us in this physical world. God's salvific action is made visible in the very ordering and legibility of the physical structure - its form, proportions and orientation, the rationale expressed in its structural and constructional logic, its molding of light and the physical strength and solidity of its material. Sacred space is never random, haphazard, or disordered. It is space made by human hands and minds and yet truly *set apart* from the ordinary and conventional world in which dust and sin plays such an integral part. A sacred space is that where physical sight is transcended and becomes spiritual site, as in the miracle of the blind man in the Gospel of John, Chapter 9. We don't know how this transformation from the physical to the spiritual is made, but we do know that it is beautiful; it is true. The man born blind not only receives his physical sight, but he also, and more importantly, comes to see Jesus as the Christ. Like the man born blind, we experience in sacred space not only an appreciation of physical beauty (via our physical senses), but also we can to come to see spiritually: to recognize, as the blind man did, Jesus Christ as the savior.

In the same way that the transfiguration revealed to three apostles in time and space, the inner reality of Jesus Christ, sacred spaces can reveal to those who experience them, a glimpse of the inner reality of God's saving design while revealing our own connection to it and place within it. In this sense we are "transported" from the everyday physical world we inhabit to a world of spiritual reality. This transportation/transfiguration is made possible only through prayer and God's gift of grace, but perhaps it can be assisted by being in an environment - a sacred space - that itself suggests a physical and spiritual closeness with God.

To be sure, the brief analysis above is not meant to argue that experience of religious art or architecture - the experience of sacred space - will, in and of itself, cause a person to become more perfectly united to God, nor that these environments will necessarily elevate the person to a higher spiritual plane. The physical can be a source of holiness, but it can also be a source of sin, lust, or addiction. Physical objects (and even buildings) can tempt us to love physical comforts, wealth and riches, power and control, more than God. But what is proposed, is that these physical environments can, if we are open to their message and symbolism, inspire us to increase our faith and knowledge of the Church tradition of which they are an integral part. They can encourage us in our own personal faith journey and they can, at the very least, give us a taste of the truth of our Church, the truth of God, via the truth that is physical beauty as expressed in fine art and architecture, in material form and space, in color and light.

The great material works we've looked at above, representing perhaps the pinnacle of our human efforts at creative expression as analogous to God's creative activity, are not ends in themselves. Rather, they point to higher truths about our relationships one person with another and about Man's relationship with God. Physical space matters because we necessarily relate to it as human beings, physical bodies in space, and because we are naturally drawn to beauty in nature and in artifact. But also, and more importantly *vis-a-vis* sacred space, because via our experience of physical space we can make the connection to the spiritual reality of God's love, his saving work, and the beauty of his interaction in our lives. We can only begin to comprehend the infinite (that is God) through the finite world that we inhabit and sense. The relationship of our physical bodies to great physical sacred space (our bodies in relation to great spaces like those we investigated above) is analogous to the relationship of our bodies to God, through Christ and through the Church, and ultimately, through God's saving grace.

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